



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & UNIVERSITY RELATIONS COMMITTEE

COMMITTEE MEETINGS

~ MINUTES ~

Monday, June 23, 2025

1:00 PM

Sullivan Chamber

That the Economic Development and University Relations Committee hereby is requested to schedule a hearing to invite representatives from the 23 long term vacant properties (defined as has been vacant for more than five years) on the record, to share updates on their tenancy efforts, short and long-term plans, and to provide the community with an opportunity to weigh in on this important discussion. POR 2025 #49

Attendee Name	Present	Absent	Late	Arrived
Marc C. McGovern	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Sumbul Siddiqui	<input type="checkbox"/> Remote	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	1:12 PM
Jivan Sobrinho-Wheeler	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Paul F. Toner	<input type="checkbox"/> Remote	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Ayesha M. Wilson	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

A public meeting of the Cambridge City Council’s Economic Development and University Relations Committee was held on Monday, June 23, 2025. The meeting was Called to Order at 3:00 p.m. by the Chair, Councillor Wilson. Pursuant to Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2025 adopted by Massachusetts General Court and approved by the Governor, the City is authorized to use remote participation. This public meeting was hybrid, allowing participation in person, in the Sullivan Chamber, 2nd Floor, City Hall, 795 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA and by remote participation via Zoom.

At the request of the Chair, Clerk of Committees Erwin called the roll.

Vice Mayor McGovern – Present/In Sullivan Chamber

Councillor Siddiqui – Absent*

Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Present/In Sullivan Chamber

Councillor Toner – Present/Remote

Councillor Wilson – Present/In Sullivan Chamber

Present – 4, Absent – 1. Quorum established.

*Councillor Siddiqui was present and remote at 1:12p.m.

The Chair, Councillor Wilson offered opening remarks and noted that the Call of the meeting was to schedule a hearing to invite representatives from the 23 long term vacant properties (defined as has been vacant for more than five years) on the record, to share updates on their tenancy efforts, short and long-term plans, and to provide the community with an opportunity to weigh in on this important discussion, Policy Order 2025 #49. Present at the meeting were Pardis Saffari, Director of Economic Development, Allyson Allen, Senior Economic Development Manager, Sarah Jane Huber, Associate Economic Development Specialist, and Megan Bayer, City Solicitor. Also present were Councillor Nolan and Councillor Zusy. Panelists that were present at the meeting via Zoom were Patricia Birchen from Parismanagement.com and David Notter from Urban Spaces, LLC. Tan Lawpistkul and Piyanuch from PK&H Properties LLC were present in person.

Chair Wilson recognized Pardis Saffari who shared that she looks forward to the conversation and receiving updates from property owners. Pardis Saffari shared that there have been updates throughout the engagement process with property owners and discussions with Councillor Wilson and Councillor Toner. Councillor Wilson provided a document which shared a list of properties and their vacancy status. (Attachment A).

Chair Wilson recognized Tan Lawpistkul, Patricia Birchen, and David Notter who provided brief updates on the status and future plans of their properties.

Chair Wilson noted that the focus of this discussion is to inform the City Council and the community of the store front vacancies and what can be done to help support businesses and property owners.

Councillor Wilson opened Public Comment.

Allen May, 411 Franklin Street, Cambridge, MA, shared concerns and suggestions related to vacant storefront properties.

Theodore Francis, 411 Franklin Street, Cambridge, MA, shared concerns about storefronts in Central Square and a petition that was signed by residents related to storefronts and stressed the importance of addressing the issues associated with them.

David Orilio, 4 Washington Avenue, Cambridge, MA, spoke in support of having vibrant storefront properties for the community.

Chair Wilson recognized Vice Mayor McGovern who shared his disappointment and frustration that about only three out of the twenty-seven property owners attending the meeting. The Vice Mayor thanked the three that did join and their willingness to discuss problems related to vacant storefronts. The Vice Mayor pointed out that this was an opportunity for property owners to share their challenges and for the City to think of creative ways to provide support to them.

Chair Wilson recognized Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler who shared his frustration about the City having limited authority when trying to make impactful changes to the community related to vacant storefronts. Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler provided suggestions, such as exploring the idea of petitions, to address concerns. Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler asked if there was additional information related to the ownership of vacant properties and the history related to the properties being vacant. Councillor Toner explained that during outreach efforts some of the property owners shared that they had sold their properties or they were under agreement to sell. Councillor Toner noted that the list of properties that were provided (Attachment A) may not be completely up to date as far as the statuses of businesses. Pardis Safari added that many of the properties are owned by regional or family trusts that are not based in Massachusetts and shared the challenges that the City face that make outreach efforts difficult.

Chair Wilson recognized Councillor Siddiqui who asked for an update on a recent vacant storefront Policy Order that the City Council passed and an update on outreach efforts. Pardis Saffari shared that the City has been creating a database of vacant storefronts and will be sending out letters related to the new policy as well as creating flyers that have related information. Pardis Saffari added that the letters will be mailed out within the next few months and will include both long-term and newly identified vacancies. Councillor Siddiqui shared that it will be important to monitor the responses to see how effective outreach efforts are.

Chair Wilson asked Megan Bayer to clarify what type of jurisdiction the City does have as it relates to vacancies and the possibility of eminent domain, noting that eminent domain has been brought up by Councillors and speakers during public comment, she pointed out that the process of eminent domain can be very complex. Megan Bayer explained that the City's ability to enforce ordinances is limited due to State law and reviewed what and how the City can enforce. Megan Bayer shared that the process of using

eminent domain as a tool should be used with caution and shared the challenges the City could face if eminent domain taking of a property were to happen.

Chair Wilson recognized Councillor Nolan who asked city staff for more information on why many properties are remaining vacant and asked how the City can effectively support and address the vacancy issues. Pardis Saffari explained that vacancies can be caused by multiple factors, such as the costs of bringing properties up to code, delays in construction, and inflation. Pardis Saffari added that some property owners are waiting to bring in a specific type of tenant, which due to zoning restrictions, does not always work out. Allyson Allen pointed out that many property owners are trying to lease their spaces and shared challenges renters can face, such as financing. Councillor Nolan thanked staff for their efforts and pointed out that a challenge some owners may be facing are due to internal city processes, such as zoning. Councillor Nolan stressed that it is important for City Councillors and staff to reach out to owners to see how the City can help.

Chair Wilson recognized Councillor Zusy who asked why Cambridge has a higher storefront vacancy rate (4%) than Boston (2.9%) with the national average being 10%, suggesting that higher rental rates could be a contributor. Councillor Zusy noted that she received this data from Google AI. Pardis Saffari questioned the accuracy of the vacancy data from Google AI, adding that Cambridge is below the national average of vacancies. Pardis Saffari pointed out the differences between Cambridge and Boston, noting that Boston has neighborhoods with lower rents and higher population density, which could make it more attractive. Pardis Saffari provided additional examples of why Boston's rate may be lower, such as being able to provide larger spaces for entertainment venues and chain stores. Councillor Zusy shared concerns about the national trend of increasing vacant storefronts since COVID. Pardis Saffari acknowledged that COVID had lasting effects on many businesses and that the online shopping and food delivery services have increased since 2017. Councillor Zusy shared information related to an article about making storefronts vibrant with art and asked if the City has any programs similar to that. Chair Wilson pointed out that there was a recent roundtable hearing where the discussion was based around using art in vacant storefront. Pardis Saffari provided additional information on how Cambridge and other partners collaborate with local artists and property owners to help with better appearances. Allyson Allen added how underrepresented business owners are continuing to face problems due to the decrease in loan programs.

Chair Wilson recognized Vice Mayor McGovern who noted how important it is to focus on all the good things that the City is doing and not always focus on the negative, pointing out that Cambridge is doing more than many other communities. The Vice Mayor shared that he is not as concerned with vacant properties that have been empty for a year, but with the long-term vacancies. Vice Mayor McGovern highlighted the importance of supporting local businesses.

Chair Wilson noted that this will be an ongoing conversation with continued outreach to have a better understanding of the goals of property owners and how the City can support them. Councillor Wilson asked if there was a way for the City to help bring buildings up to code without putting a huge financial burden on owners. Pardis Saffari responded by sharing the City is restricted from providing funding towards certain structural upgrades, but provided programs that the City does have available to assist owners and shared other resources that could be available, such as reaching out to local banks. Councillor Wilson asked for more information regarding Arlington's vacancy ordinance. Pardis Saffari provided a brief overview of the ordinance and shared how Arlington and Cambridge approach vacancies differently. Chair Wilson recognized Tan Lawpistkul who shared concerns about the ongoing safety issues as well as infrastructure issues around his property. Tan Lawpistkul added that safety concerns include trespassing, drug use, and camping behind the property, which have led to property damage and hazards for tenants. Tan Lawpistkul shared that he has requested an increase in police presence and outreach teams to help address the problems. Tan Lawpistkul noted that there are also deteriorating structures owned by the MBTA that are affecting the property and asked for the City to help coordinate with the MBTA to help address the infrastructure problem.

Chair Wilson responded by acknowledging the concerns and challenges that have been raised by panelists and speakers and echoed comments made by the Vice Mayor related to the vibrancy of Squares. Councillor Wilson added that safety concerns and infrastructure problems need to be addressed.

Chair Wilson recognized Councillor Nolan who offered comments related to potential delays on the City's end and stressed that there needs to be more supportive and efficient systems, adding how delays can cost owners time and more money. Councillor Wilson agreed and highlighted that it is important for all stakeholders to come together to make the process easier for local businesses, especially on the City's end. Vice Mayor McGovern addressed similar concerns related to delays and how they put a burden on small businesses. Vice Mayor McGovern added that better internal coordination with Departments can help owners in the process. Councillor Zusy agreed and offered suggestions on how Departments could be more efficient.

Chair Wilson recognized Pardis Saffari who provided a brief overview of the role the Economic Development team has, sharing that it is to help guide owners earlier in the process by connecting them with the Departments they need to work with.

Chair Wilson opened Public Comment.

Unknown Speaker addressed concerns about parking, specifically in Porter Square, and how parking issues can be related to vacant storefronts.

Chair Wilson recognized Allyson Allen who offered comments related to equity issues and shared that small business owners will sometimes struggle to even get leasing agents to return phone calls due to bias around accents. Allyson Allen shared an example of a coffee shop owner who had a similar issue. Allyson Allen added that to address this problem, she suggests that the City work with leasing agents who specifically work with underrepresented business owners.

Chair Wilson offered closing remarks and thanked City staff, Councillor Toner, and property owners for their input. Chair Wilson highlighted that the City is committed to ongoing partnerships with local businesses and continued communication and engagement.

Chair Wilson recognized Vice Mayor McGovern who made a motion to adjourn the meeting.

Clerk of Committees Erwin called the roll.

Vice Mayor McGovern – Yes

Councillor Siddiqui – Absent

Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Yes

Councillor Toner – Absent

Councillor Wilson – Yes

Yes – 3, No – 0, Absent – 2. Motion passed.

The Economic Development and University Relations Committee adjourned at approximately 2:45p.m.

Attachment A – Document from Councillor Wilson

Clerk's Note: The City of Cambridge/22 City View records every City Council meeting and every City Council Committee meeting. The video for this meeting can be viewed at:

https://cambridgema.granicus.com/player/clip/1048?view_id=1&redirect=true

That the City Council send a formal invitation to Mr. Gerald Chan to come before the Economic Development and University Relations Committee to answer questions and present his plans for the Harvard Square Movie Theater, as well as his other vacant properties in the City.

Attachment A

Property Address	Owner Name	LLC Name	Leassor	Reply	Attending Y/N - Zoom?
86 Kirkland Street	Patricia Birchem patricia@parismanagement.com	Parismanagement.com			Zoom Y
44-48 Brattle St.	Jonathan Poorvu jpoorvu@5761010.com	Brattle Sq. Office Building Company	44 - Book store open 48 - leased/open in fall	See written response	N
1906 Mass Ave	Piyanuch (Tan Lawpistkul tan@mdteccconstruction.com	PK&H Properties LLC			Y
93 Windsor St	Lorraine Davis	MG Group		Sold - email	N
(93 Windsor St.) New contact	William Senne'	93 Windsor LLC			
174 Alewife Brook Prks		The Fresh Pond Mall Limited Partnership			
1033 Mass Ave		Harvard University, Harvard Realty			
596 Mass Ave		Cifrino-Massachusetts Avenue Realty LLC			
1691 Mass Ave		1685 Mass Ave LLC			
1420-1430 Mass Ave		GH Holdings LP			
675 Mass Ave		U.S. REIF Central Plaza Mass LLC c/o Intercontinentine(Mgmt			
117 First Street	David Notter dnotter@urbanspacesllc.com	Urban Spaces LLC		Email-late	Y zoom
1000 Cambridge St		1000 Cambridge St. Realty LLC	Fully occupied	See written response	N
291-291 Cambridge St	John & Mary Alberts				
171 Huron Ave		RyeCroft LLC			
1674 Mass Ave		Stone Investment Holding			

10 Church St	Gerald Chan	Kirche LLC c/o Prague & Company		
121 Hampshire St	Leonidas Perez (Josefa Perez) josefaeperez@gmail.com>	The Johnson Group		Y
253 Walden St		Observatory Hill Development LLC		
4 Hudson Street	Nathaniel and Isa Swartz	Swartz 1995 Revoc. Trust		
1003 Mass Ave	Richard Simon & William Kaplan	East Port Real Estate		
727 Mass Ave		Gas Light Building LLC		