



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

Sumbul Siddiqui
Mayor (2020-21, 2022-23, 2026-27)

To: Cambridge City Council
From: Mayor Sumbul Siddiqui
CC: Yi-An Huang, City Manager
Melissa Peters, Assistant City Manager for Community Development
Date: September 10, 2026
Subject: City of Cambridge Participation in the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

To the Honorable, the City Council:

I am writing to update the City Council on my participation, and the City of Cambridge's involvement, in the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative.

About the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

In February, I was invited to apply and selected for the tenth cohort of the [Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative](#) – a highly competitive, nonpartisan program hosted by the Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University in partnership with Bloomberg Philanthropies. As a part of this program, which focuses on strengthening City Hall operations and improving municipal service delivery, I nominated City Manager Yi-An Huang and Assistant City Manager for Community Development Melissa Peters to participate as well.

The program began virtually in June, followed by an in-person convening in New York City from July 12–15 with 46 mayors representing cities across 15 countries. During this time, we worked with Harvard faculty and practitioners on core challenges facing city government. Following this convening, City Manager Huang and Assistant City Manager Peters attended a five-day convening in New York City in August.

A particularly valuable focus of the July convening was how governments move from ideas to action. We examined how leaders diagnose performance gaps, determine when existing approaches need improvement versus when new strategies are required, and use small-scale experimentation to learn what works before deciding whether to revise or scale an idea. Another important focus was the role of emerging technologies, including AI-enabled City services. We discussed how cities can use AI both as an avenue for innovation and as a practical tool to test ideas earlier, while safeguarding public trust, fairness, privacy, and accountability.



Streamlining the Permitting Process as a Key Priority

As a part of this program, each city was asked to identify a clearly defined challenge to prioritize in the coming year. After extensive conversations, Cambridge identified improving the City's experience, in particular the City's commercial and small business permitting, as our program's key priority.

Permitting has been a topic of staff, Council, and community discussion for many years. It directly affects our housing agenda, impacts businesses, and shapes how and how quickly our community can change. The selection of this priority builds on significant work on residential permitting already underway by Community Development, Inspectional Services, and other departments – work recently presented to the Council at the August 3, 2026 Special Summer meeting ([CMA 2026-224](#)).

CMA 2026-224 summarized early insights around residential permitting challenges identified through internal assessments and conversations with external stakeholders such as developers, architects, and other professionals. The update described persistent issues with policy requirements that can be redundant or unclear; process issues, including inconsistent forms, sequencing, and delayed reviews; and communication gaps that make it difficult for applicants to understand the process or find a consolidated source of information. The CMA also outlined a set of near-, medium-, and long-term actions. It highlighted both the immediate improvements already underway and the longer-term work ahead, including larger process improvements, more complex policy updates, and potential future uses of AI tools to support navigation and reduce repetitive administrative work.

As Cambridge continues to pursue an ambitious housing agenda, it remains essential that our permitting system supports new housing production while upholding important standards for safety, sustainability, infrastructure, and thoughtful development. The same lens is critical for commercial activity, especially for small and local businesses that often navigate a complex series of permits, inspections, and licenses. For first-time entrepreneurs or businesses without professional consultants, even understanding where to begin can be challenging. Mapping a business owner's full experience can help improve clarity, coordinate departmental reviews, identify issues earlier, provide more predictable timelines, and establish a clearer point of contact.

Bringing our Key Priority to the City Leadership Initiative

The Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative provides a timely opportunity to deepen and extend this work, especially around commercial and small business permitting. Over the next eight months, participating city teams will receive targeted programming, coaching, and resources designed to help build new skills and practices while advancing their selected priority.

Each city is placed into one of three specialized tracks – cross-boundary collaboration, data, or innovation. Cambridge was placed in the data track, and a small internal team has begun meeting to develop a more rigorous understanding of the permitting challenge.



The Initiative guides cities through three phases. In the first phase, running from now through October, cities establish a shared understanding of the permitting challenge by examining relevant data sources and defining the problem clearly. The second phase, from November through March, focuses on measuring the problem by developing consistent routines for collecting and reviewing key indicators that show the scope and trends of the issue. The third phase, from April through May, emphasizes solving the problem by testing operational interventions or data- and AI-enabled solutions in real conditions, learning from those efforts, and refining approaches to achieve lasting improvements.

Throughout the program, cities receive virtual classes taught by Harvard faculty, tailored coaching beginning immediately after onboarding – including an in-person site visit – and opportunities for peer learning with other participating cities. The Initiative also provides technical assistance to strengthen the skills of data analysts and subject matter experts, dedicated analytics support to accelerate data exploration and visualization, and group coaching sessions held separately for mayors and for senior leaders.

Building Longer-Term City Capacity

The value of the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative extends beyond permitting. The program has encouraged us to rethink how we organize teams around difficult problems, measure success, structure engagement, experiment more effectively, and maintain accountability. A central theme has been moving from assumptions to evidence and approaching implementation as an opportunity to learn, adjust, and improve.

Once the coursework ends, Cambridge will be eligible for further support, including professional education for senior officials in economic development, human resources, procurement, and civic engagement; a Bloomberg Harvard City Hall Fellow placed for up to two years on a priority selected by the mayor; and access to research and instructional materials developed throughout the program's first decade.

I look forward to keeping the Council updated as we apply these lessons and continue working to make the City of Cambridge a more effective, transparent, and impactful organization. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions or requests for additional information.

Sincerely,

Sumbul Siddiqui
Mayor of Cambridge (2020-21, 2022-23, 2026-27)