



City of Cambridge

Executive Department

YI-AN HUANG
City Manager

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To the Honorable, the City Council:

Introduction

My first day as City Manager was September 6 and after 90 days, I continue to be full of energy, optimism, and excitement over this amazing city and the possibilities in front of us. It's an honor and privilege to serve as City Manager, and I'm committed to working with the City Council, City departments, community leaders, and residents to achieve the ambitious goals that we have set out.

Cambridge is incredible for the passion, innovation, and sheer activity of work that is happening across the city. An important first priority has been to listen and learn. In this report, I'll share my initial observations on our strengths and areas for growth. I'll also share examples of what we have been able to deliver in these first three months. Finally, I'll provide early thoughts on the direction and the important work ahead.

One of the themes I hear from residents is a desire for greater transparency and accountability. People want to better understand what the City is working on, how decisions are made, and how they can have a voice in shaping their community. I hope that this report is a beginning and reflects my desire for City Hall to be more accessible and open. I'm also committing with the City Council to an annual performance review for the City Manager that will start in 2023. This will be an opportunity for reflection and feedback, and I see it as an important opportunity for me to learn and be accountable. This report will follow the performance categories identified in the initial template proposed for the City Manager Annual Performance Review, which will be finalized in early-2023.

We are facing significant opportunities and challenges in the years ahead, including a growing housing and homelessness crisis, worsening climate change, evolving transportation challenges, and making progress on anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion - all while running day-to-day operations in one of the densest urban landscapes in the country. My hope is for our diverse and beautiful community to be on this journey together and to build trust that the City of Cambridge is listening to each voice and being shaped by each perspective that is brought to City Hall.



Leadership

Effectively carry out the vision and direction set by the City Council including through development of goals and strategies

Cambridge is special for the scale of our ambition to make a better city and a better world. I made it a priority to begin onboarding early and started meeting with Councillors, City staff, and community leaders in the summer. My desire has been to hit the ground running and in the first 90 days, we have prioritized action on several long-standing Council priorities, including:

- A comprehensive plan for making appointments to boards and commission in response to a June 2021 policy order. This reflects the City's commitment to increasing diversity on these important bodies and establishes a process for appointments and seeking Council approval.
- A vacant properties inventory of City-owned properties in response to a March 2018 policy order. This begins a process where we are committed to more openly sharing City data and discussing together how we will meet the many needs in our community.
- An interim update on municipal broadband, a process that began with a September 2016 task force recommendation. Significant work has been completed and while the final report is behind schedule, I support this important priority and we are committed to sharing concrete numbers, recommendations, and next steps in early-2023.

I have also worked to respond quickly to new issues. Concerns about the quality of our softball fields were raised over the summer and we moved quickly to meet with the softball community, hear their concerns, and identify immediate actions to improve conditions for the upcoming Spring season, including a significant free cash appropriation for upgrades. We have also recently brought forward a comprehensive update on the unhoused and substance use in Central Square. We must recognize the dignity and humanity in our unhoused community and continue to provide them with support and services, while also ensuring safe and welcoming streets for residents and businesses. This is an incredibly complex and difficult challenge and I see an important role for the City to help coordinate efforts across our community and prioritize actions that have been identified in prior reports.

As I reflect on this first quarter, I see tremendous strength in the expertise and experience on our teams. We have great leaders and the work we have done is a reflection of their dedication and capabilities. I see three areas where we can grow and where I will be focused on. First, we need to be more strategic - setting clear goals, developing a plan of action across our teams, aligning on workplan and timing, and providing regular status updates. Second, we need to prioritize. There is no shortage of great ideas and important problems, but the reality is that we cannot do everything at once. I hope to be more clear on how we are allocating our time and resources, and that we will be able to make these decisions transparently and together. Finally, many of our greatest challenges are fundamentally regional issues - housing, homelessness, climate change, and transportation. We often view our work within our 6.4 square miles, but there is a need for greater coordination with our neighbors and state government. As we enter 2023 and welcome a new Healey administration, I'm looking forward to Cambridge having a greater voice to advocate for and collaborate to find solutions that match the scale of our challenges.

It has been a busy 90 days and I recognize that the real work lies ahead. I started with excitement to act with greater ambition and urgency, and I continue to be confident that together, we can meet our goals and live up to our highest values.

City Council Relationship

Establish a collaborative and transparent working relationship with the City Council

A healthy relationship between the City and the Council is a critical part of what makes our local government work, and it has been an early priority to strengthen this relationship. The Mayor and I hosted a day of training in October with Councillors and senior City leaders to discuss values and build greater trust, collaboration, and communication. In addition, I have held regular one-on-ones with each Councillor and I have worked to improve coordination with the Council on how the City is setting priorities and making decisions.

I have been encouraged throughout these early months and I have greatly appreciated working with the Mayor, Vice-Mayor, and Councillors. My role as the City Manager is to carry out the goals, direction, and priorities set by the City Council, and I've valued their leadership, passion, and advocacy. The Council is the elected body that acts as both our legislative branch and governance over the executive branch. I'm committed to living out this structure, both following the voice of the Council, responding to their priorities and concerns, and bringing forward the experience, expertise, and perspectives of City staff.

As with all relationships, I believe the relationship between the City and Council is not a static arrangement that can be written down or governed through contract provisions. Relationships are interactions between people over time and built on mutual respect, shared norms, communication, and trust. There will be mistakes and areas for improvement, and we won't agree on every issue, but I'm committed to creating a government that works and where we are increasing alignment and trust between the City, Council, and community.

Management

Develop a strong City organization that has the people, processes, and systems to deliver on day-to-day operations and existing and new initiatives

Strengthening the City organization is critical to achieving our goals. During the summer, I helped set up the process and interview candidates to appoint a new acting Fire Chief. This was important to ensure that we made the right decision and to demonstrate a rigorous and transparent process. I also appreciated the opportunity to get to know leaders in the Fire Department and hear about the major priorities and challenges they are facing.

The City's strength is in our people, and an important step I've taken is to create a new Chief People Officer position that will provide important leadership for our Personnel team and build a modern Human Resources department. My experience with the team has been very positive, and I've been impressed with the team's dedication, hard work, and judgment. However, we have a long agenda that includes new staff onboarding, performance reviews, talent management, recruiting, IT system upgrades, adapting to telework, and supporting anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. This new role will help provide important leadership to design new initiatives, strengthen critical functions, and better support the people doing the work across the City.

I also want to acknowledge that there are many outdated systems that need to be upgraded. There is some irony that as a City at the hub of the innovation economy, we are still running on many paper processes. We are implementing some new systems, but it will be important that we prioritize key upgrades over the coming years to provide our staff with the tools they need to be efficient and effective.

Finally, I'm committed to building better processes for the organization. This has already included better tracking of upcoming Council agenda items, awaiting reports, and committee meetings. We are also working toward a better system for responding to resident requests and questions. There is more work to be done here to ensure that the City is running effectively and also being responsive to both the Council

and residents.

Much of this work is the nuts and bolts of good management practice and creating the foundation for a strong organization. I'm committed to getting these basics right and I believe that it will be a key building block for our overall agenda.

Community Engagement

Proactively communicate with the community, and create a range of opportunities for all stakeholders and residents to provide input and feedback, particularly communities whose voices are not typically heard by City Hall

I have made it a priority to get out of City Hall and hear more directly from residents. I held my first Coffee with the Manager in November that was open to all residents. I heard from a diverse set of voices and it was great to have honest conversations about what the City was doing well and feedback on areas for improvement. This will be a regular series that we will experiment with and evolve. We will hold events across the city and virtually, and conduct outreach to specific communities going forward. I've also started meeting with groups such as seniors and small business owners, and a next step is re-establishing the advisory groups that have been an important voice in City Hall.

Improving how the City engages with the community on important decisions is an area of focus. We have dedicated and hard-working staff in each department who are doing communications and community engagement, but there is a need to create greater coordination and consistency across the organization. Therefore, I have created a Director of Community Engagement position that will be part of the City Manager's Office and be responsible for leading our efforts, identifying best practices, and supporting each of department. An important note is also the work that the City has done on language justice coming out of the Family Policy Council. We have made investments in computer-assisted translation technology, greater translation and interpretation services, and hired a full-time Language Access Manager to coordinate this work across the City. I'm excited about this commitment and continued improvements in how we create an accessible local government.

I also recognize that many people in our community feel like their voices are not being heard in City Hall. We need to do better. As a first step, I held a working session with City leaders and community engagement staff, and we discussed and brainstormed:

- How to reach out to communities who are not typically heard, particularly groups that are marginalized or may not speak English as a first language
- How to hear the different voices in our community and be shaped by feedback
- How to better outreach and engage people on important decisions that will affect them
- How to better engage with multiple voices that may disagree, find common ground, and facilitate honest and productive discussions

There is more work to be done here. I'm looking forward to continued conversations, and I'm also focused on how we can improve.

Culture

Define and establish a healthy culture across the City that fosters collaboration, trust, empathy, and effective and efficient decision making.

Over many conversations and interactions in the City, I have observed many strengths in our culture - a

dedication to serving residents, a work ethic to get the job done, and a willingness to collaborate and help each other out in both big and small ways. The City has achieved an incredible amount, particularly over these last pandemic years.

There are also parts of our culture that need to be worked on. An important area is greater empowerment for leaders and staff, where there is an existing lean toward strong hierarchy, deferring to centralized decisions, and not taking big risks. I have shared with the organization that my hope is to evolve toward:

- Focusing on the right answer - I trust our teams to be experts and have a point of view, and we should be honest and transparent about our perspective
- Setting realistic goals and delivering on them - We should commit to what we believe we can accomplish, and then we need to be accountable to deliver on those targets
- Asking for resources and elevating risks - Our leaders should expect to be set up to succeed and request the resources needed to meet their goals. If there are challenges, they should be escalated for discussion and support.
- Believing in possibility - We are working on really tough problems, but our tone should be positive, creative, and focused on how we can make an impact

In both my messages and actions, I hope to model these principles and give our leaders and teams permission to take greater initiative, ownership, and accountability. While my role is important, our success as a City will require many leaders to step up, pitch a new idea, execute on an initiative, or raise a critical concern. We have named our monthly department head meeting “Leadership Together,” which reflects my belief that we will need all of us working together to reach our goals.

I have also heard from the organization that there is a desire for greater communication and connection to the City Manager. I have made this a priority and I met individually with every department head and have begun meetings with department leaders and conducting walk-throughs to meet our staff. I’ve organized regular senior leadership team meetings as well as monthly department head meetings to both coordinate major work and receive feedback on decisions and direction. I’ve also held monthly staff meet-and-greet events open to all City employees, where we can have an open conversation about any topic. This has been a valuable forum to get to know staff and to hear their concerns directly. Finally, I have sent out regular all staff emails to share what I’m learning, celebrate the good work that we are seeing, and communicate about where we are going.

A final observation is that I have heard from many staff that our culture has lost a sense of work/life balance, particularly as people were stretched through the pandemic. I am working to create healthier expectations, clarify priorities, and model a balance where we can get the job done with aggressive goals but also recognize that we are humans with lives beyond the workplace. There is more to be done here, and I hope that we can provide a better environment for staff including more appropriate physical space, support for new parents particularly mothers, and greater recognition and appreciation for the good work that is being done.

Anti-racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Advance anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts across the City, including strategy, organizational culture, HR, policy development, and service delivery

The City has made significant investments in anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion. We have signaled the values that are important to us and devoted significant resources to seminars, learning and development opportunities, and major initiatives focused on revamping policies and procedures from an equity lens. Departments have also begun examining their core work and some have made significant

changes as a result.

However, there is still substantial work to be done. Based on the 2021 Working Ideal Report, we know that Black employees have a significantly worse experience in the organization, and our overall environment needs to be strengthened across many dimensions. If we believe systemic and structural racism is real, then we shouldn't be surprised to find it in our organization, our teams, and ourselves. I've spent time with our DEI team and consultants to better understand our current initiatives, and I'm looking forward to advocating for, supporting, and participating in this work. Our work on anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion is not a box to be checked but a journey to be pursued. My experience has been that this work has required me to question my assumptions, confront my biases, and do real work understanding the lived experiences and history of others. The difficult, uncomfortable, and honest conversations are the ones that change us, how we work, and our ability to better serve our diverse community.

I'm looking forward to renewing our strategies and approaches, clarifying our goals, and continuing this good work. We will look to build a stronger central role for our DEI team which has recently expanded, and to bring a more comprehensive update in the new year.

City Operations

Oversee effective delivery of resident services including day-to-day operations, maintaining city infrastructure, and major capital projects

The City's core day-to-day operations are a critical part of how we serve residents, and in these first 90 days, I have observed our performance on several issues. The Water Department has overseen a switch to Massachusetts Water Resource Authority (MWRA) water in response to elevated PFAS levels over the summer and managed the technically complex process of installing new granular activated carbon filter media while running the plant. This showcased the expertise of City staff to successfully implement a challenging project many weeks ahead of schedule. I also saw potential for improvement in how we communicated in advance with the Council and public. Knowing the high cost of MWRA water, we should have set expectations that the City would confirm the success of the new filters, release water quality test data publicly, and immediately switch back to City water. This would have made for a smoother announcement and transition.

I was also excited to bring an update from the Department of Public Works and Inspectional Services regarding rodent control. Rats are a tangible part of how people experience the city and while this is a battle that humanity has waged for millennia, we can and should do more. I'm looking forward to bringing on a dedicated rat liaison to explore new techniques, bring greater data to track our performance, and increase our responsiveness to requests and concerns.

We will also continue to work closely with the Public Health Department as we enter the winter to provide regular updates on COVID-19, flu, and RSV to ensure that we have the right information to take care of ourselves and each other. It is a relief to be emerging from the pandemic, but we must remain cautious and diligent. I'm grateful for the dedication and efforts of our public health team and the incredible work they have done over these past years.

City infrastructure and major capital projects are a key part of how we deliver basic services. Cambridge is facing similar challenges as towns and cities across the country. We have aging buildings that were built decades ago and need renovation, with major projects ongoing at the Tobin Montessori & Vassal Lane Upper Schools and the Fire Department Headquarters in Harvard Square. The Fire Headquarters is a particularly good example where despite heroic efforts, the roof continues to have water challenges.

During my walk-through, I saw the innovative make-shift tube that runs from a ceiling leak out a nearby window. This project is certainly overdue. These investments are necessary, and a goal will be to ensure that we are investing in appropriate regular maintenance to extend the life of our buildings and efficiently managing construction expenses during a time of rapidly rising costs.

I also want to call out some of the incredible work that the City has done regarding sewer and stormwater infrastructure. This is some of the highly technical and long-term engineering work that is so critical to our future. As a City, we are working to ensure our core infrastructure is maintained, renewed, and can deliver services and also protect against climate change vulnerabilities that will only increase in the years to come.

We are also looking ahead to the significant capital portfolio that we need to tackle. Operational space for the Department of Public Works, renovation of vacant properties, school renovations, electrification of City buildings, and a potential municipal broadband build-out are all major investments that are on the horizon. We are planning to bring a more comprehensive update on capital planning and the City's bonding schedule to the Council in early 2023, and this will be a chance to see the full portfolio and collectively prioritize our resources and efforts.

A final note is on our transportation infrastructure. I want to recognize that the City's landscape is changing rapidly and that this has had a real impact on people's day-to-day lives. Our streets are becoming more complex and crowded as we move from optimizing car travel to also prioritizing cyclist and pedestrian safety. Because we are such a dense urban landscape, this has meant difficult trade-offs. Our staff is dedicated, talented, professional, and seeking to respond to community concerns and input to the best of their ability. We certainly have areas for improvement, and I know the team is focused on learning, getting better, and investing in mitigation and improvements for affected communities. I'm committed to continued engagement and honest conversation, as well as following the direction the Council has laid out for our community.

Fiscal Management

Provide effective financial management and oversight of the budget, ensuring fiscal stability while allocating resources to meet community needs

Cambridge has long had a reputation for excellent fiscal management and I have been continuously impressed by the strength of our Finance Department. I've spent significant time with the team to understand our financials, from sources of revenues, major operating costs, and underlying liabilities such as pension obligations and bond schedules. Our financial strength has been one of the most important assets in the City and allowed us to make key investments during the pandemic while avoiding painful cuts or service reductions. We have been blessed not only with significant resources, but also a team that has managed and planned well over the years.

I know there is a strong desire both within the Council and the community to do more. We have made significant investments, including greater contributions to affordable housing than our surrounding communities, a robust human services landscape, and much more. I deeply share the desire for Cambridge to act with greater urgency and ambition, but I also know that our resources are not unlimited. My commitment is to pursue our goals with a passion and dedication that reflects our community, but also to prioritize, plan, operationalize, and finance the complex work ahead to ensure that we can be successful.

Working with the Finance Department, I will also work to create a more transparent budget process as we enter planning for FY24. How we spend money reflects our priorities and values, and that is a conversation we should be having together as a community. Are we getting the outcomes that we desire?

How do we benchmark against other communities? Where are opportunities for greater efficiency? How is our vision for equity built into our decisions and shaping our policies? My desire is that we will be able to have more of these conversations in the coming year.

Conclusion and Next Steps

It has been a busy 90 days, and there is much work ahead. I continue to feel a deep sense of humility and privilege to be in this position. Like many of you, I have often walked our streets and thought about what we should be doing to make the City better. These days, I smile a little when the thought pops in my mind, "Someone should really fix that!" In the months to come, I will continue to deepen my relationship with the Council, strengthen ties to the community and seek to build a more transparent and responsive local government. And I'm looking forward to continued conversations and feedback.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Yi-An Huang', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Yi-An Huang
City Manager