



Credit: Courtesy of Sumbul Siddiqui.

Mayor Sumbul Siddiqui immigrated to the United States from Karachi, Pakistan, at age two, along with her parents and twin brother. Raised in affordable housing in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and educated in the city's public schools, she graduated from Brown University and served as an AmeriCorps fellow at New Profit, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving social mobility for families. After earning a law degree from Northwestern University, Siddiqui returned to Massachusetts to work as an attorney with Northeast Legal Aid, serving the postindustrial cities of Lawrence, Lynn, and Lowell. Siddiqui was elected to the Cambridge City Council in 2017 and elected mayor in 2020. She is an advocate for the city's most vulnerable residents, striving to create affordable housing, prevent displacement, and promote equitable access to education. During the pandemic, she helped increase Internet access for low-income families and expanded free COVID testing for all Cambridge residents. Her agenda includes the promotion of clean and climate-resilient streets, parks, and infrastructure as part of making Cambridge a more equitable and civically engaged community.

## Affordability and Equity in Cambridge, Massachusetts

Mayor Siddiqui recently spoke with Anthony Flint for a series of interviews with mayors of cities that have played an especially significant role in the 75-year history of the Lincoln Institute. An edited transcript of their conversation follows; the full interview is available as a *Land Matters* podcast at [www.lincolninst.edu/publications/podcasts-videos](http://www.lincolninst.edu/publications/podcasts-videos).

**ANTHONY FLINT:** Cambridge has been gaining quite a lot of attention lately for a new policy that allows for some increases in height and density at appropriate locations—if the projects are 100 percent affordable. Can you tell us about that initiative and how it's playing out?

**SUMBUL SIDDIQUI:** The passing of the affordable housing overlay was an important moment for me and for many on the city council. The proposal was to create a citywide zoning overlay to enable 100 percent affordable housing developments in order to better compete with market-rate development . . . the goal is to have multifamily and townhouse development in areas where they are not currently allowed . . . We have a city that has a widening gap between high- and low-income earners, and we always talk about diversity as well, as a value, and how do we maintain that diversity? For me and others it's all about creating additional affordable housing

options so more people can stay in the city. So far we're seeing many of our affordable housing developers, like our housing authority and our other community development corporations, doing community meetings around proposals where they are in some cases able to add over 100 units to the affordable housing that they were already going to build.

**AF:** Changes like this really do seem to percolate up at the local level. I'm thinking, for example, of Minneapolis banning single-family-only zoning to allow more multifamily housing in more places, and several other cities followed suit. Is the 100 percent affordable overlay something that other cities might adopt, and did you anticipate that this might become a model for other cities?

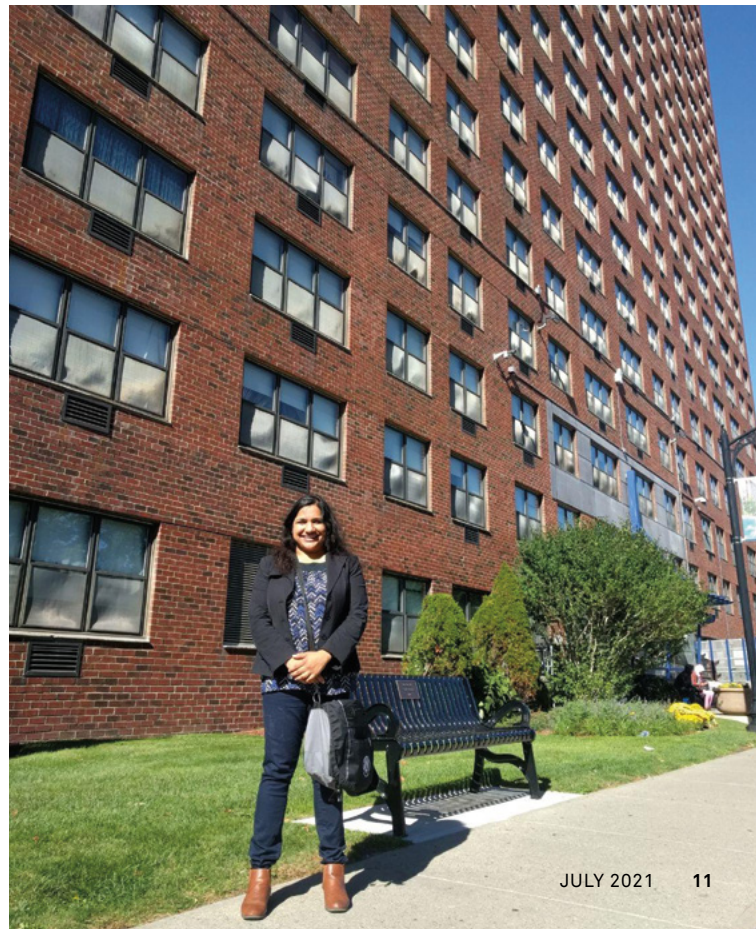
**SS:** We certainly think that this can be a model. We know that our neighboring sister city, Somerville, is looking at it . . . I think it's all part of the overall mission for many cities to make sure that they are offering and creating more affordable housing options. You know, this is housing that's affordable to your teachers, to your custodians, to your public servants, legal aid attorneys—you name it, to stay in the city that they maybe have grown up in, and maybe they've moved out and want to come back, and we want there to be that opportunity. I think we still see such stark inequality in our city, and as someone who's grown up in affordable housing in Cambridge . . . I would not be here without it. This is an important initiative and policy, and I do hope it [serves] as a model for other cities across the country.

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**AF:** Cambridge has been such a boomtown for the last several years, and there has been a lot of higher-end housing development. Can you tell us about a few other policies that are effective in maintaining more of that economic diversity?

**SS:** One of the ways we've been able to have the affordable housing stock that we do is through the city's inclusionary housing program . . . under these provisions, developments of 10 and more units are required to allocate 20 percent of the residential floor area for low- and moderate-income tenants, or moderate- and middle-income home buyers. So it really has been an important way to produce housing under these hot market conditions . . . the more people we bring to the city, the more we'll have that insatiable housing demand.

Mayor Siddiqui at Rindge Towers, the affordable housing development in Cambridge where she grew up. Credit: Courtesy of City of Cambridge.





Cambridge and the Charles River. Credit: Amy Li via iStock/Getty Images Plus.

Another thing we really want to focus on is how we use city-owned public property that is available for disposition to develop housing . . . . We've done a lot of work around home ownership options for the city and making sure that we have a robust home ownership program for residents to apply to . . . . Preservation is also a big part of the policy around affordability. We this year have been working on the affordability of about 500 units in North Cambridge near the buildings I grew up in, and we've put in—probably it's going to be over \$15 million to help preserve these market-rate buildings. Essentially these are expiring use properties. So it's a little technical, but there's so many tools—and there's a long way to go.

**AF:** How did the pandemic reveal the disparities and racial justice issues that seem to be ingrained, in a way, in the economic outcomes of the city and the region?

**SS:** The pandemic has revealed a lot of the fault lines . . . and we saw firsthand the disproportionate impact COVID has had on the Black and brown community. It's highlighted longstanding issues around health care equity, and we've seen how so many of our low-income families have been unable to make ends meet. Many of them lost their jobs because of the public health crisis, but still needed to pay rent, [pay] utilities, and purchase food for themselves and their

families. A lot of the issues we saw during the pandemic have been issues all along, but as I've said, the pandemic has revealed those ugly truths even in our city . . . and you know, we can't turn a blind eye anymore.

And we have to do things in a manner that is much more urgent. I always use the example of schools that had to close. We quickly got kids laptops and hotspots. Before the pandemic, we knew kids didn't have Internet at home, we knew kids didn't have computers, but we said, 'Oh, you know, we're going to study that' . . . . We should have been doing these things all along. And so I think the one good part of it has just been [that] we've been able to figure out solutions really quickly . . . . We can make our city more accessible and affordable and we have to really call out the injustices when we see them.

**AF:** The pandemic also arguably has been an opportunity to do some things with regard to sustainability, reconfiguring the public space. I wondered if you could talk about that and other ways you're helping to reduce carbon emissions and build resilience.

**SS:** This is an area of work where there's so much going on, and yet sometimes it feels like we're not moving fast enough, given what we know. We are committed to accelerating the transition to net zero greenhouse gas emissions for all our buildings in the city. We have a goal of net zero



There's a big push to incorporate green infrastructure into city parks and open spaces and street reconstruction projects. It's all hands on deck.

emissions by 2050. There are various types of incentives, regulations, and various working groups that are looking at how do we procure 100 percent of our municipal electricity from renewable sources; how do we streamline existing efforts to expand access to energy efficiency funding and technical assistance.

We're revising our zoning ordinance to make sure that the sustainable design [standards] require higher levels of green building design and energy efficiency for new construction and major renovations. We're a city that loves our trees, right? So we are constantly looking at ways to preserve our tree canopy. We have a tree protection ordinance on the books that we are going to continue to strengthen this term. We continue to install high-visibility electric vehicle charging stations at publicly accessible locations. There's . . . a big push to incorporate green infrastructure into city parks and open spaces and street reconstruction projects. It's all hands on deck.

**AF:** The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy has called Cambridge home since 1974, when David C. Lincoln, son of our founder, chose to locate in a place with world-famous universities and other nonprofit organizations. Can you reflect on that distinctive feature of Cambridge—that is, the nonprofit, educational, medical, and other institutions being such a big part of the community?

**SS:** I think the universities in particular play a huge role. With the pandemic, I've seen a really

The current construction boom in Cambridge includes parks, streetscapes, and commercial, residential, and institutional buildings. Credit: City of Cambridge.

important collaboration between our educational institutions, community organizations, small businesses, and residents to work collaboratively to address some of the most pressing issues . . . . The Broad Institute of Harvard and MIT, working with the City of Cambridge Public Health Department, was the first in the state to offer COVID testing for residents and workers and all of Cambridge's elder facilities. Now, we have seven-day-a-week testing in Cambridge. So that's the direct result of this partnership and having them here in our space. Both have made contributions to the Mayor's Disaster Relief Fund . . . we were setting up an emergency shelter for unhoused individuals and each of the universities contributed funding toward that; they gave rent relief to their retail and restaurant tenants; [and] they do a lot in the schools. So I think the partnership has strengthened this year as the pandemic's hit, and they've been a key partner in the work that we've done in the city. They are such a big part of the community . . . and they have risen to the occasion whenever I've called on them. □

**Anthony Flint** is a senior fellow at the Lincoln Institute and a contributing editor to *Land Lines*.

