



City of Melrose
City Council - School Committee
Meeting with the School Committee

Monday, May 11, 2026, 7:15 PM
562 Main Street, Melrose, MA 02176

AGENDA

NOTE:

To watch this meeting live visit mmtv3.org or local cable station MMTV (Channels 3, 15, 22 on Comcast or Channels 37, 38, 39 on Verizon)

Some Board and Commission meetings meet via zoom. Information on how to enable closed captioning for online commission meetings can be found by clicking [here](#).

I. CALL TO ORDER

City Council

Jason Chen
Cal Finocchiaro
Maya Jamaledine
Manjula Karamcheti
Elizabeth Kowal
John Obremski
Christopher Park
Devin Romanul
Kimberly Vandiver
Ryan Williams
Brad Freeman

School Committee

Margaret Raymond Driscoll, Member
Jen Grigoraitis, Mayor
Matt Hartman, Vice Chair
Melissa Holleran, Member
Seamus Kelley, Chair
Sheri Leo, Member
Jennifer Razi-Thomas, Member
Cari Berman, Superintendent

Pledge of Allegiance

II. NEW BUSINESS

a. Informational Item

(ID # 2026-1167):

Joint Meeting of the City Council and the School Committee to be held at 7:15 pm on Monday, May 11, 2026 for the submission of the FY 27 proposed operating budget in accordance with section 6-3 of the City charter.

III. ADJOURNMENT

City of Melrose, Office of Mayor Jennifer Grigoraitis
Media Contact: Thomas F. Dalton
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May 11, 2026
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

REMARKS ON THE FY 27 BUDGET FROM THE GRIGORAITIS ADMINISTRATION

MELROSE, Mass. — *Mayor Jen Grigoraitis presented the following remarks before a joint meeting of the Melrose City Council and School Committee:*

Good evening, President Freeman, Chair Kelley, and the honorable members of the City Council and School Committee. Thank you for being here and for your service to our shared community.

Before I begin, it is with a heavy heart that I first acknowledge the tragedy that occurred in our community last week. There are no words to describe such a profound and painful loss, and our hearts are and will remain with the student's family, with his friends, classmates, and educators, and with the wider Winthrop School community. I do want to thank the first responders, school personnel, city staff, parents, and community members who responded on the scene, and I know in the very challenging days since last Monday, I have been so heartened by and grateful for the continued outpouring of care and support for one another I've seen across our community. May we continue to take care of one another in the days and weeks ahead.

It is my honor to join members of the City Council and the School Committee in service to the people of Melrose, and my duty tonight is to present my proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2027, which begins July 1st. For those of you who are keeping track, this is my third budget, and the first one without cuts—thanks to the override, which Melrose residents resoundingly supported this past November. Thank you to my fellow Melrosians for choosing to invest in our community.

While I am before you tonight as your Mayor, I do not do this role alone. I would like to take a moment to thank several staff, including:

- CFO Kerri Golden – now in her second budget as CFO, and her 11th budget during her service to the City of Melrose, she continues to bring her deep understanding of municipal finance and her commitment to Melrose to the work of stewarding the city's financial resources
- My incredible executive team: Lauren Grymek, Chief of Staff; Tom Dalton, Communications & Events Manager; Shannon Phillips, City Solicitor; and Polly Latta, HR Director, for the leadership and support they provide to me and the city every day.
- Our city department heads and senior staff, who, no matter what the budget has looked like, have continued to show up and work hard for Melrose.

- MPS Superintendent Cari Berman, Deputy Superintendent Ken Kelley, and the school business office staff, who develop and manage the school budget.
- Thank you to all of our employees, in City departments and the public schools, who are working hard every day for our community, and bringing their expertise, knowledge and care for Melrose to their work.
- Thank you to my fellow School Committee members, and the members of the public who have joined in thoughtful engagement for the school budget process over the past several months.
- Thank you to every resident who has shared their thoughts, concerns, ideas, and priorities for our city's resources with me or with any of you.
- And thanks again to you, members of the City Council, for your continued active and thoughtful stewardship of our City and our City funds.

I was happy to have the opportunity to meet with every Councilor to hear your feedback and your priorities for this year's budget. Though our roles in City government are different, as elected officials we all share the responsibility of serving our constituents' needs and allocating finite resources across countless important priorities, and I am grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with you during this important process. But as you all know, the Council's legal and legislative role in the budget process is to approve, reject, or reduce budget lines, and we now enter the phase of the budget season in which you will exercise that chartered authority.

In November, based on extensive advocacy by residents, discussion and deliberation by elected officials, and many months of public engagement, Melrose voters approved a \$13.5 million Proposition 2 ½ tax override. This election was notable for the turnout of over half of all Melrose registered voters, marking an extraordinary rate of participation in a municipal election. A clear majority of these voters favored the override ballot question, entrusting City Hall with sorely needed funds to meet our community's needs and priorities.

Despite this accomplishment, we must remember that just two years ago, the city was using \$2.5 million in free cash (half of the City's free cash allocation!) to close that year's school budget gap. And it was not a one-off situation. This past practice had become a necessary part of balancing the operating budget for several years. I am proud to say that we have come a long way since then and I am grateful to everyone who helped get us to this point. We no longer rely on free cash to bridge our budget gaps and close deficits, and our continued commitment to this sound fiscal management practice will help to keep our community on the strongest possible financial footing.

During my first two years as Mayor, we made a lot of hard decisions, we earned the support of the public, and now we are bringing back some of what was lost (as outlined in the ballot question and approved by voters). We are also continuing to be judicious and measured in our use of public funds to ensure that every tax dollar collected is spent on our greatest identified needs without waste or unnecessary delay.

Also, last fall, Standard and Poor's reaffirmed Melrose's AA+ bond rating, the second-highest rating available to a municipality. S&P cited the City's good management practices, history of

strong financial operations, robust local economy, and improved tax levy (particularly as a result of the November override) as positive credit factors. These factors tell lenders that Melrose maintains a strong and stable financial outlook and a quality reputation as a borrower. A high bond rating, much like a personal credit rating, gives us access to more favorable rates when borrowing funds, which will be vital as we continue to finance the debt approved by voters in 2023 to fund improvements to our police and fire stations, as well as prepare to bond for the costs of roof repairs to Melrose High School and the Franklin School in partnership with the Massachusetts School Building Authority.

Our top-notch bond rating keeps borrowing costs low and gives Melrose the best possible financial position, and our careful and methodical budget management means that our tax dollars are in safe and capable hands. I'm grateful to our CFO Kerri Golden, Treasurer-Collector Kathryn Armata, and all of the City's budget and finance officials for continuing to demonstrate exemplary budget management and best practices.

The Fiscal Year 2027 budget restores many of the cuts made in recent years, stabilizes our city workforce and the important public services on which our residents rely, and builds a sustainable funding structure for forecasted increases in the costs of employee benefits, public infrastructure, and contractual obligations.

I am proud to share with you some of the things we have restored, and the stability we have in the FY 2027 budget, as we continue to work through uncertain financial headwinds.

First and foremost, I want to highlight the significant investment that this budget makes in our largest budget category, the Melrose Public Schools operating budget, which was approved by the School Committee last month after its own public process. The supplemental budget passed by your two bodies at the end of 2025 increased the school operating budget by nearly 9%, and the FY 27 appropriation adds an additional 6.5% increase to Melrose Public Schools. This year's city appropriation to the school operating line represents the largest ever allocation to schools in the city's history, and the MPS operating budget has increased by over 27% since I took office. Thanks to the passage of the override, this year's school budget returns 17 positions to the schools, enabling us to reduce class sizes, restore the team model at the middle school, and implement high quality instructional materials districtwide. We continue to invest in our schools both within the MPS budget line as well as through school costs housed in our IT, HR, employee health insurance, municipal debt, employee pension, DPW, police, and health department lines.

And while we are making investments, we are not losing sight of efficiencies and cost effectiveness. Stability does not mean complacency with taxpayer dollars.

City departments continue to actively research and apply for grants. In FY 26 we will have applied for \$12 million in grant funding with approximately half of that already being awarded to the city for important projects and initiatives such as climate readiness, improvements to water and sewer infrastructure, public safety, elder and youth services, public works, and public health.

I will be asking the Council to again allocate a portion of free cash into stabilization accounts, to help us prepare for the uncertainties and risks of the future, particularly in light of a shaky and unpredictable global and national economy.

With the FY 27 budget, we are providing better services to employees, which helps them serve better serve residents.

We've centralized all Human Resources operations, including school HR, to City Hall to avoid redundancies and make sure that our hundreds of city and school employees have a one-stop shop for their payroll, benefits and other HR needs. The school budget is held harmless by this change, but the increased efficiency in our HR and benefits operations will ensure that we deliver employment obligations to every municipal employee consistently, fairly, and without waste.

After several years cutting back, we're finally restoring funding for professional development across municipal departments, to ensure that our employees are equipped with up-to-date knowledge and relevant best practices as they serve our residents.

Last year, we worked closely with our city unions to settle outstanding contracts and to negotiate one-year extensions with unions whose contracts were set to expire in 2026. We are grateful to our unions for collaborating with us and recognizing the city's challenging financial situation while advocating for their members. But we can only ask our dedicated employees to wait for so long, and FY 27 will include settled contracts with several bargaining units, including the Melrose Educators Union; Melrose Firefighters Union; and our laborers; librarians, and clerical unions. These unions represent over 80% of our city workforce.

We are providing better services to all residents by restoring and adding needed positions and services.

In a direct response to a priority identified by many city councilors, the city is increasing code enforcement in a cost-effective manner, with an increase in the Health Department's budget to account for overtime for targeted enforcement of noise, dumpsters, and other code violations.

We're committing resources to Animal Control while utilizing regional partnerships to save costs. Thank you to the City Council for voting last week to authorize me to enter an Intermunicipal Agreement with the Towns of Wakefield and Stoneham to establish a regional Animal Control Officer position. This shared position will strengthen public health and safety by ensuring timely responses to domestic animal-related incidents, and promote consistent enforcement of regulations such as licensing, vaccination compliance, and leash laws. By distributing this cost across three municipalities, the regional model offers a cost-effective approach that enhances service quality without duplicating resources.

We're adding a Full Time School Nurse to the health department. This additional nurse will act as a float nurse between all of our public-school buildings and fill in for leaves, enabling us to continue to prioritize student health and safety within our school buildings and recognizing the critical role that school nurses play in meeting the needs of students.

The city will join the state contract for Language Line for all city departments. Over the years, as our community has grown, so too has the demand for multilingual services from City Hall. By joining the state contract for Language Line, we will provide access to a vetted, proven, and cost-effective, on-demand translation service over the phone for when residents need help, delivered in the language in which they are most comfortable.

We're creating a dedicated budget line for ADA public accommodations. Thanks to the leadership and advocacy of our Commission on Disability, we're working actively to improve accessibility across city facilities and programs, including impactful access improvements at the main entrances to several of our schools this year. By setting funds aside for access and public accommodations, we will have resources on hand to ensure meaningful and comprehensive access for residents with disabilities.

We're continuing to support tax assistance and exemption programs in our Assessors' Office. After this Council graciously expanded access and limits to tax work-off opportunities and other exemptions and abatements, we're increasing the Assessors Head Clerk position by 5 hours per week in order to make a full-time position to provide more staff availability to assist residents, especially our veterans and residents over age 60, seeking to avail themselves of these important programs.

We are exploring and piloting better social services pipelines for our residents by deploying a property tax work-off staff person with professional expertise to connect residents with assistance programs and other safety net resources when they contact City Hall. The outcomes of this pilot may inform future staffing priorities to continue or expand upon this work.

Our Community Services team, which includes the Council on Aging, Library, Memorial Hall, Parks, Recreation, and Veterans Departments, are providing support services to residents such as administering the Emergency Fund and connecting veterans and older residents with benefits, programs and services. The newly renovated Library is not just a place to borrow books but a place where students are doing schoolwork and volunteering; and residents are participating in English language learner services and gaining access to technology and information. Our Parks and Recreation Departments are ensuring that everyone in the community has a way to stay healthy, active and engaged.

Thanks to the override, the city has been able to restore previously cut positions, services and programs that Melrose residents rely on including:

- Two police officers, who are currently in training at the police academy to join our department.
- DPW overtime to support community priorities like Saturday hours at the City Yard for residents to drop off yard waste and recycling, and summertime Flower Baskets in the busiest commercial corridors.
- Adding a municipal and school building repairs line item of \$500,000 to allow the city to address a list of necessary safety improvements to the places where our employees work and our children learn.

- Increased funding for road paving and sidewalk repairs.
- Sunday hours at the Melrose Public Library and partial restoration of lost library staff.
- Restoration of the Recreation Department’s operating budget appropriation so they are not fully reliant on their revolving fund and can keep fees reasonable for residents and families.
- Restored funding to the boards and commissions who lost their budgets– namely the Human Rights Commission, the Women’s Commission, and the Commission on Disability– to allow them to continue their important work in the community and offer residents opportunities to engage on issues and initiatives that are important to them.

For the first time, there is a Capital Budget for the city and schools! And thanks to the hard work of the Capital Improvement Program Committee, the city has an up-to-date Capital Improvement Plan so we can begin to make investments in much needed roads, buildings, and equipment that have gone under funded or in some cases completely unfunded for years. Some of the one-time costs for investing in capital needs from the current CIP, which are not part of a departmental budget, include:

- EMS Equipment and Fire Turnout Gear for our Fire Department,
- Replacement of a police cruiser,
- A new gas pump at the City Yard, which City vehicles access daily,
- Masonry and electrical work in our city and school buildings, and
- IT work to enhance school building security.

Over the past year, we have made significant progress on our Public Safety Buildings Project, led by our project manager and former Planning Director, Denise Gaffey. As this council knows, we have secured the line of funding needed for the first phase of this project, which includes Engine 2 on Tremont Street and the new Melrose Police Station on West Foster Street. These projects are under construction and currently under budget—by over \$5.7 million. Thank you to the councilors serving on the public safety facilities committee for working with our chiefs and architects to deliver savings to taxpayers on these critical infrastructure improvements.

Our School Facilities Master Planning committee, led by Melrose Public Schools leadership with support from the city’s planning staff, is evaluating all of our school buildings, which are as much as 100 years old, to assess and plan for the future of our public school district and what our needs will be in five years, ten years, and beyond. At the same time, thanks to capital funds made available by the override and applications for matching support from the Massachusetts School Building Authority, we’ll continue to maintain, improve and restore the existing facilities to ensure that our schools are safe, healthy, comfortable and usable for all of our students and educators.

It is always hard to forecast the future, especially in government, and neither the federal nor state government provides financial forecasts. We do notice trends and we use that information to budget. Melrose is continuing to feel the pullback of the federal administration, which will have ripple effects. For example, I am grateful to the supporters of the Melrose Emergency Fund which has afforded us flexibility to quickly and directly assist Melrose residents when SNAP benefits were frozen earlier this year. And while Melrose was able to benefit from federal ARPA funds

during the pandemic, we can no longer anticipate any meaningful assistance from Washington, D.C. The ripples of federal withdrawal have affected many parts of our social and economic safety nets, including our non-profit sector partners like Housing Families, Inc., and we are actively partnering with our neighboring communities to develop a shared response to the anticipated impacts.

At the same time, our federal delegation continues to advocate for Melrose, and we have seized on every opportunity to secure congressionally directed spending (often referred to as earmarks). I am grateful to Congresswoman Katherine Clark for working with my administration to secure federal funding for school building safety improvements, flood mitigation efforts, and continued work to restore Memorial Hall.

At the state level, we are grateful to our state legislators, Kate Lipper-Garabedian and Jason Lewis, for continuing to advocate in the state budget for increased funding to Melrose and securing earmarks for one-time projects such as fencing for playing fields, and funding for a new Council on Aging accessible van. However, the state is also preparing a challenging budget, anticipating the need to plug significant financial holes across Massachusetts as the federal government continues to pull away from funding things like Medicaid and special education. The State's financial future is also uncertain given several ballot questions that will appear before Massachusetts voters in November, including a potentially seismic referendum that proposes reducing the state income tax, a change which would have massive and devastating impacts to the state budget, and by extension, to local aid, public school funding, and other funds conveyed from Beacon Hill to our community.

Melrose is not immune to the rising costs that we are seeing across municipalities, but thanks to the override, the city can meet those costs. Some of the biggest cost drivers for our budget continue to be employee benefits (both health and pension); collective bargaining agreements (over 90% of City and School employees are in unionized roles); vocational and charter school assessments; and utility costs.

Health insurance is one of the city's largest expenses and one for which we have almost no control. Due to a variety of factors, health insurance costs have increased significantly over the past few budget cycles. The city is a member of the Commonwealth's Group Insurance Commission (GIC), and health insurance rates are set by the GIC.

For FY27, the city will pay 80% of health insurance premiums for active employees, 85% of health insurance premiums for retirees, and 70% reimbursement of Medicare Part B, as negotiated with the City's Public Employee Committee (PEC). The city contribution of 85% towards retiree health insurance was also approved by the legislature in 2005. Health insurance is the second largest budget category after the school budget. Our existing PEC agreement will expire on June 30, 2027.

Most of all, I want to make this message clear: because of the override, Melrose is stable and prepared to handle these continued rising costs. We are prepared to weather cost pressures and continue to provide the high-quality municipal government that our community expects. This financial stability means we can create plans and prepare for the future such as:

- School building master plan
- Municipal Surplus property plan
- Housing production plan
- Downtown Parking plan
- Ell Pond Park and playing fields design plan

One of my guiding principles is: plan the work and work the plan. When we have a plan in place, we can better leverage state and federal money for projects by providing detailed project plans and proposals in grant and earmark applications, we can make informed and thoughtful decisions on how to best move forward, and we can anticipate and prepare for what lies ahead of us versus merely reacting to it when it arrives.

In the year ahead and beyond this budget, we'll continue to focus on the most effective and impactful ways to improve local service delivery. We're speaking with peer communities about the benefits they access through a dedicated municipal procurement officer, who can work across departments to ensure legally compliant and cost-effective purchasing and bid-based procurement for a variety of projects and initiatives. And as I mentioned earlier, we're continuing to assess the ongoing need for a social services coordinator—one "clearinghouse" and advocate position who can work to make connections between our residents in need and the services that are available to make their lives better.

We'll also engage in the work needed to ensure stable and reliable revenue for our community to fund the services we need, including in economic development, city planning and community development. Building our next Housing Production Plan and supporting our local business community will help us sustain our current successes into the future.

Good planning is the first step towards successful outcomes, and we know that this Council and our residents rightly expect well-considered and well-planned proposals before providing their support. Our residents expect high-quality, professional government, and we work each day to deliver it to them. Thank you for your careful consideration of this important budget. My administration and I look forward to working with you in the weeks ahead to finalize and enact this plan for Melrose's future.

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