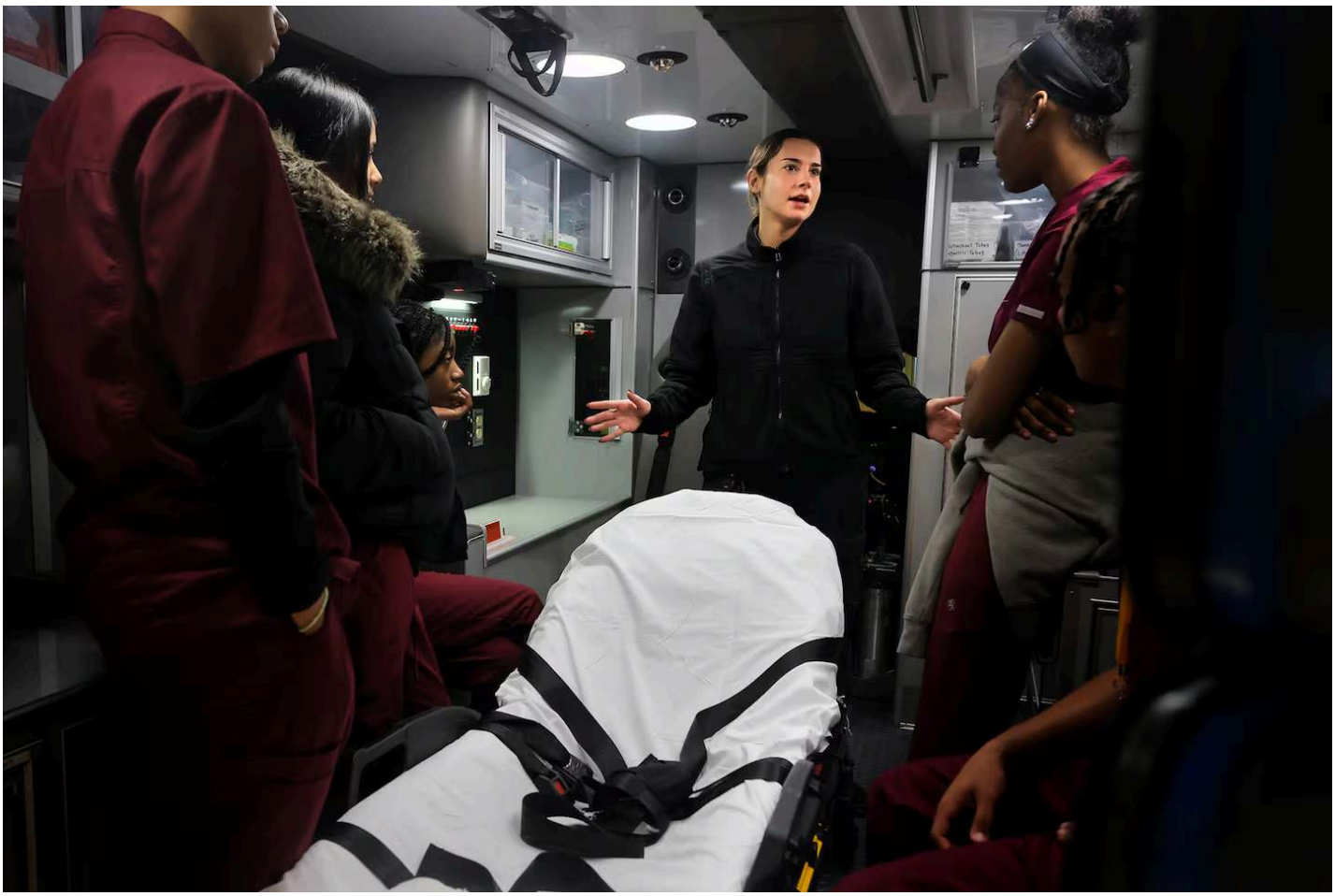
COMMENTARY

Mayor Wu has focused on jobs, not real estate, to grow the city's economy. It's paying off.

Amid real estate slowdown, City Hall is pouring resources into workforce development.

By Shirley Leung Globe Columnist, Updated December 1, 2025, 6:00 a.m.



Paramedic Sara Chlastawa spoke to students of the Edward M. Kennedy Academy for Health Careers inside an ambulance during a tour at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston on Nov. 18. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

For decades, one way that Boston mayors measured success was by the number of construction cranes in the sky. Michelle Wu has been trumpeting another metric: The number of residents with good-paying jobs.

Wu's approach to growing the economy has been a departure from her predecessors.

It's one that has alienated real estate developers accustomed to having the mayor's ear and can come across as anti-business with policies that drive up the cost of development. Yet as unpopular as she has been in parts of the real estate community, Wu has endeared herself with another crucial segment of Boston's business world: companies hungry for skilled employees.

"It is clearly a driver of where she spends her time and focus," said Dr. Elsie Taveras, chief community health and health equity officer at Mass General Brigham, the state's largest employer.

It's not as splashy as groundbreakings and ribbon cuttings, but the shift has defined the economic development strategy of Wu's first term. That work begins in Boston Public Schools with a push to guarantee a summer job for every student, and it extends into training and placing thousands of adults in skilled jobs. Administration officials say Wu has poured more city dollars into workforce development and secured more than $100 million in public and private grants to support it.

That focus has served Wu well, with Hasbro and other marquee companies drawn by Boston's ability to attract, retain, and develop talented people. From early 2022, when Wu took office, through early 2025, the number of jobs in the city grew 2.7 percent, according to the most recent data from US Bureau of Labor Statistics, a pace that is faster than the rest of Massachusetts if slower than the US as a whole.

"It's a recognition that human capital is the bedrock on which urban success in the 21st century rests, and it is also the most plausible path to make sure that we have a more economically inclusive city," said Harvard economist Edward Glaeser, who is known for

his research on urban economies. “We don’t just want people who have PhDs from MIT or Harvard or Stanford to be able to thrive in those places. We want these to be places where lots of other people can work.”

Mayor Michelle Wu greeted her campaign volunteers during a Labor Day rally at City Hall Plaza on Sept. 1. DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/GLOBE STAFF

Perhaps the emphasis on workforce development comes out of economic necessity: High office and lab vacancy rates, coupled with high interest rates, have stalled new construction. Jumpstarting development would likely require giving out more tax breaks, which Wu is not apt to do. Instead she leaned into her comfort zone: building an equitable economy, one resident and one family at a time.

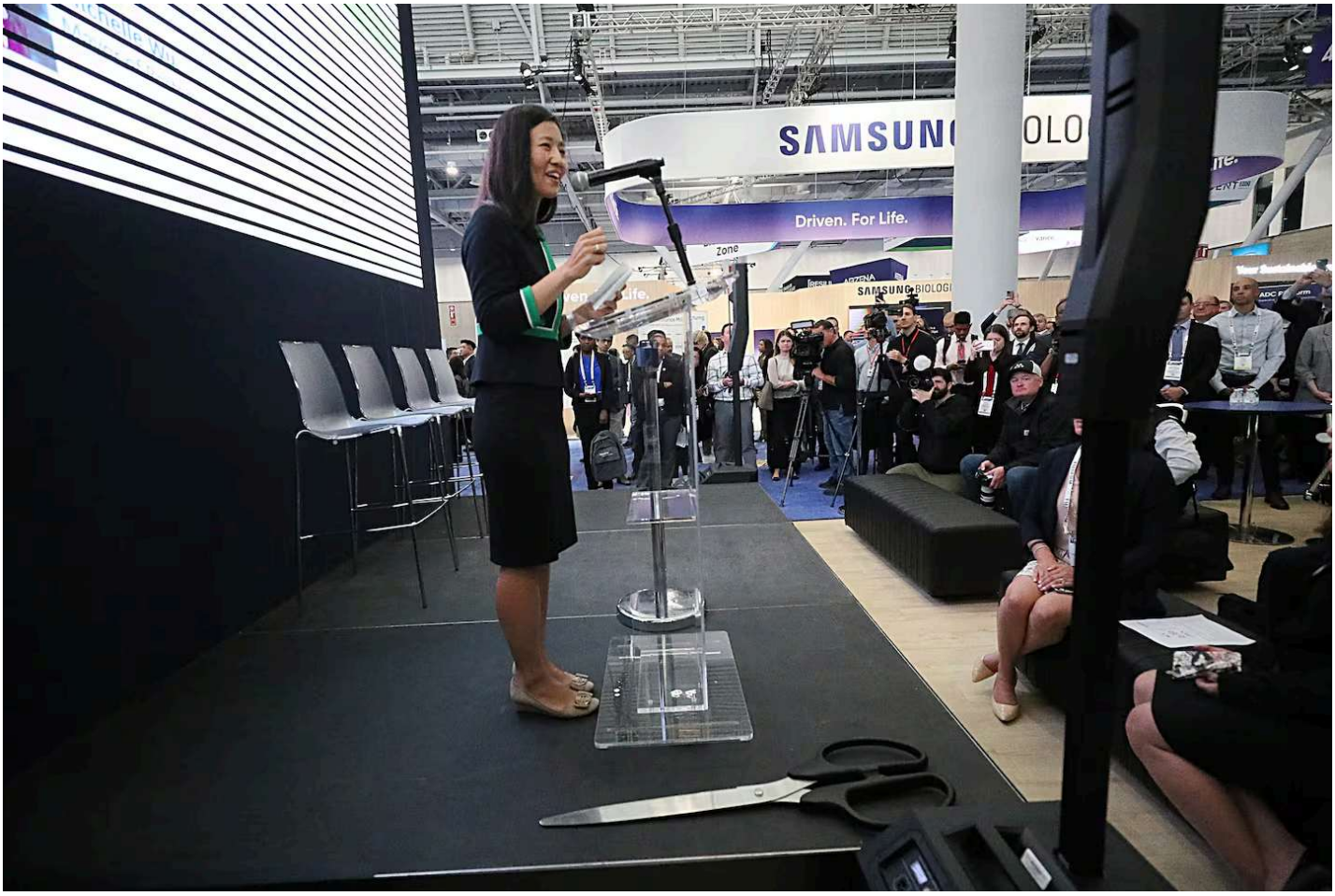
While Wu’s predecessors have championed youth jobs and offered workforce training, she has gone bigger — creating a record number of summer jobs and devoting more resources to help 20- and 30-somethings who’ve felt shut out of growing industries

including health care, life sciences, and clean energy. That's led to two new signature programs: Good Jobs Metro Boston Coalition and the Life Sciences Workforce Development Initiative.

"She sees education and workforce development as a continuum," said Neil Sullivan, the longtime executive director of the Boston Private Industry Council who has worked with six mayors. "It's grounded in the public schools, but the commitment has to extend beyond."

Her administration has been able to deftly tap federal money and philanthropy to create workforce development programs. In 2022, during Wu's first full year in office, the city won a three-year, $23 million federal grant to train and place people in about 4,600 jobs in Greater Boston. The city expects to meet that goal by August; some 3,250 individuals have already trained or landed jobs as child care teachers, HVAC technicians, and EMTs, with many earning anywhere from $18 to $36 an hour.

Then in June 2023, during the BIO convention that brought thousands of biotech executives and investors to Boston, Wu unveiled a life sciences initiative to get 1,000 city residents trained and hired at area research labs by the end of 2025.



Boston Mayor Michelle Wu announced a workforce training program at the BIO 2023 convention. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Since then, the city has invested over $5.7 million in that effort, including a new collaboration with the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council, the state's life sciences trade association. But the life sciences slowdown means Wu won't meet her goal this year. Only 126 residents have completed training, with 73 placed in jobs; the city is now retooling the program to offer additional training and educational opportunities so that residents can find similar roles in health care, where labor shortages still exist.

"We have to make sure that all Bostonians have access to those jobs up and down the pipelines," said Trinh Nguyen, the city's chief of worker empowerment, a Cabinet-level position Wu created. "And if they don't, we have to create ramps for them."

Still, the heart of the mayor's workforce development will always be with BPS students.

Since coming into office, Wu has tripled the amount of money for youth summer jobs to about $21 million annually and raised another $10 million from philanthropy. In her

2024 State of the City address, Wu promised to "guarantee a summer job offer to every BPS student who wants one." And this past summer, a record 10,511 students enrolled in the program, up from 6,455 in in 2022.

Summer jobs are a start, but the goal is to help young people build careers. That's why the city has been working to develop stronger partnerships between employers and schools like Roxbury Community College, Bunker Hill Community College, and University of Massachusetts Boston.

Perhaps the best example has been the expansion of EMK Academy for Health Careers, a BPS vocational high school that prepares students for health care jobs. Early last year, the city won a $37.8 million grant from Bloomberg Philanthropies that will pay to double the number of students it enrolls to 800. It is the largest philanthropic donation ever to BPS, and the money will allow EMK Academy to expand career pathways to include medical imaging and biotech lab sciences in roles that earn upwards of $100,000 annually.

Some students, in their EMK maroon scrubs, are already a regular presence at hospitals like Brigham and Women's and Massachusetts General, where they have paid internships. A few times a year, students visit the hospitals for hands-on training from how to insert intravenous lines to how to deal with patient falls.

Imaging technologist Courtney Sullivan performed an ultrasound of student volunteer Kedly Thime, 16, during an EMK school tour at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston on Nov. 18. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

To Taveras, the MGB executive whose community health portfolio includes working with EMK Academy, the expanded partnership "is a perfect coming together of solving a pain point" that addresses labor shortages for hospitals and helps "some students see themselves in a career that can break the cycle of poverty."

Whether Wu can maintain momentum on her workforce development initiatives remains to be seen.

Hiring has started to slow, a trend that is expected to continue amid economic headwinds. Grant money for some programs are running out, even as commercial property taxes — a key source of revenue for the city budget — slump. That may ultimately force Wu to reckon with her rocky relationship with developers.

"With housing starts slowing, cranes scarce, and too many local businesses expanding in places other than Boston, it is not clear that the right balance has been found yet," said

Dan Dain, a Boston attorney whose firm focuses on the commercial real estate industry.

The through line for Wu has been creating a city that is a desirable place to live and work not just for the best and brightest but for everyone. Companies will need talent at all levels to grow, and it's that growth that ultimately will fuel the need for more office towers and housing.

That's the case she made in victory-lap speech at a Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce forum shortly after winning the September primary.

"They're choosing Boston because of our people," Wu said. "Competitiveness in this economy and in this moment means working together to nurture, recruit, and promote top talent, building up the community and workforce that any company would want to consider relocating to join," she added. "So when I say I'm fighting to make Boston a home for everyone. I'm talking about making Boston the human capital of the world, the talent capital of the world."

Do that, she believes, and the cranes will follow.

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