

CITY OF BOSTON
Office of Participatory Budgeting External Oversight Board
One City Hall Square, Boston, MA 02201

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, January 18, 2024

EOB members present: Carolline Pontoppidan, Jim Kennedy, Esther Weathers, Betsy Neptune, Khalid Mustafa, Lisa Hy, Marilyn Forman, Jarret Wright.

Absent: Carla Stovell

Staff present: Ashley Groffenberger, Chief Financial Officer, Renato Castelo, Director, Office of Participatory Budgeting, Blanca Teixeira, Finance Manager & Grants Manager/Contracts Manager, and Mark Araujo, Mayor's Office New Urban Mechanics.

Director Castelo opened the meeting by introducing himself, Blanca Texeira, and Evan Kuras, the consultant working to develop a framework for PB evaluation. Castelo shared that Evan will be joining next week's meeting to facilitate a conversation with the Board.

Director Castelo called to order the External Oversight Board meeting, did a roll call, and shared an overview of the agenda. He then asked if there were any comments or corrections on last week's meeting minutes. With no comments from the Board, Jim Kennedy called for a motion and the minutes were approved.

Mr. Kennedy shared with the public that when a draft of the Rulebook is completed, the document will be shared on OPB's website and a public meeting will be held for public comment. Once public input is incorporated, the Rulebook will be adopted. Director Castelo added that at any point members of the public can email questions or concerns at pb@boston.gov.

Director Castelo reintroduced the last question of the survey about categories considered for idea submission. Based on the Board's feedback, Director Castelo put together a recommendation where Education was separated from Community Resources, and Economic and Workforce were combined. "Youth and Families" was also added to Education. For internal purposes only, Director Castelo underlined the cabinets that fall under each of the categories.

Board member Jarett Wright suggested that an option for "Other" be added in case residents feel that their project ideas do not fit with the given categories. The group agreed on adding "Other / Not Sure" as a category.

Board member Marilyn Forman had a question about where projects relating to "resident community engagement" would fall under the categories. Director Castelo mentioned the "Community Resources" category, and that City Departments such as the Office of Neighborhood Services or Civic Organizing could be lead partners for these projects.

Member of the audience, Eliza Parad, had a question about whether “food accessibility” should be categorized, as this has been an increasing concern among residents. Director Castelo suggested adding “food access” to the “Environment and Sustainability” category.

Director Castelo provided background on the expanded mission of the Office of Participatory Budgeting, which in addition to creating a process to fund resident-led project ideas, aims to help inform the larger City budget through resident engagement and interdepartmental collaboration.

Director Castelo introduced the Office’s approach for Idea Collection, mentioning that OPB will leverage technology and community partnerships to engage residents online and on the ground. Similar to Cambridge, Somerville, and other municipalities across the U.S, OPB is building an online portal that will allow the public to learn about participatory budgeting, submit their project ideas, and follow each step of the process. The site will be easy to use and offer language accessibility.

For in-person community engagement, Director Castelo shared that OPB plans to contract with community organizations to assist with public education and idea collection. Community groups can apply to become contract partners with the office to support the participatory budgeting efforts under OPB’s guidelines.

Board member Lisa Hy had a question about how residents could submit ideas if they do not have access to a computer or a smartphone. Ms. Hy suggested that contracted community partners could support these residents, to which the Board agreed.

Director Castelo mentioned that for this first year, the Office can test the “Contract Partner” approach by enlisting seven community groups that could host up to 21 combined meetings across the city. Board member Jarret Wright mentioned being aware of (1) community groups’ doing outreach to residents that would tend to support their own agenda; and (2) sessions with residents could be scoped to one single issue. Director Castelo pointed out that through the Idea Collection Toolkit, the Office will ask contracted groups to engage residents on a broad discussion of community issues and topics.

After some suggestions on potential additional partnerships and outreach methods, Director Castelo shared that he wants to be careful on how much the Office can stretch in terms of partnerships and coordination during this first pilot year.

For the next session, Director Castelo will share the questions that Evan Kuras will be asking Board members to discuss the evaluation framework, as well as additional thoughts/recommendations for a criteria to prioritize project ideas.

A motion was passed to adjourn the meeting at 7:00pm.

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