

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

Meeting Minutes
Thursday, January 25, 2024

EOB members present: Carolline Pontoppidan, Jim Kennedy, Khalid Mustafa, Lisa Hy, Jarret Wright, Carla Stovell.

Absent: Esther Weathers, Betsy Neptune, Marilyn Forman

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.

Director Castelo called to order the External Oversight Board meeting, did a roll call, and shared an overview of the agenda. Castelo then asked if there were any comments or corrections on last week's meeting minutes. There were no comments, and a motion was passed to approve last week's meeting minutes.

Director Castelo shared a couple of updates with Board members. The first, how to better balance the amount of content and decisions that Board members need to make with the frequency of meetings. The second, a Board member suggested the idea of inviting staff and youth leaders from Youth Lead The Change (YLC), the City's youth-focused participatory budgeting initiative, to one of our meetings. Director Castelo shared that he has been meeting with the director and program manager of YLC to discuss potential ways to collaborate and support each other's efforts.

Director Castelo reminded Board members that Evan Kuras from MXM Research will be leading a discussion about evaluation for the first cycle of participatory budgeting.

Evan Kuras explained that his goal is to hear from all the Board members and stakeholders about what their priorities are and how an evaluation partner can support Board members and the City. Evan mentioned that there are three major uses of evaluation: 1. Decision making, 2. Accountability, and 3. Dissemination. He added that participatory budgeting evaluation can be used to pay attention to public participation (who's participating, why, and what it means to them in terms of their understanding of City processes, government, and the City's budget).

Evan shared that he met with members of Better Budget Alliance, Tufts University, and that this month he plans to meet with other members of City Hall to hear what they want to pay attention to help understand how participatory budgeting is happening. Evan continued by saying that OPB's pilot year will help set up the process for success in the future. We will not be able to

evaluate everything, but we need to figure out the most important things to pay attention to when we start our second year.

Evan asked the Board members a series of questions about their interest in the participatory budgeting process. Board members shared their perspectives. A few comments that stood out were about being “behind the curtain” to help the community and wanting residents to work through the process to select projects that work for the community as a whole. Another point shared was that when new Board members are appointed two years from now, they can see the process that the current Board members built with the hopes of carrying it forward. Additionally, board members expressed that they want communication to reach beyond the typical proactive residents, and mentioned outreach a few times, making it a priority to get the correct communication out to communities.

Evan wanted to hear what Board members felt are some of the strengths in Boston communities that will help this process go well. Generally, Board members mentioned the City’s rich cultural diversity as a strength, and that we need to ensure the correct communications methods for all the diverse groups within the City to hear the same message. Board members also mentioned that Boston is an organized city, with accessibility to higher education partnerships. Board members shared their hope that residents give this process an opportunity to succeed, even if their ideas or votes are not popular among the various communities.

Evan continued by asking Board members what data would be useful to get in order to help them in their oversight capacity. A Board member mentioned that it would be helpful to understand the different needs and priorities in different areas of the City. Also, if an idea did not make it through the proposal stage, that idea could still be shared with another City department where it could be considered for implementation.

The last question Evan asked was about what Board members wanted in an evaluation partner. Board members shared that they want to have a standard in how data is collected, keeping it simple, and having regular status updates from evaluators (good or bad). Not to rush the process, measure impact, and gather feedback. Evan closed out by saying that what we need to focus on in this pilot year is to build trust, pay attention, provide constructive feedback, improve engagement, and outcomes. Evan was grateful to hear from everyone and closed by saying what Board member Carla Stovel shared during one of her interventions: “We will not live forever and we want to make things better for the people that come behind us.”

For the next session, Director Castelo shared that we will have a conversation about our proposed approach for our idea selection and share a timeline for our planning phase.

A motion was passed to adjourn the meeting at 7:15pm.

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