

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

Meeting Minutes
Thursday, March 28, 2024

EOB members present:

Carolline Pontoppidan, Jim Kennedy, Betsy Neptune, Esther Weathers, Carla Stovell, Lisa Hy, Jarret Wright, Khalid Mustafa, Marilyn Forman

Staff present: Ashley Groffenberger, Chief Financial Officer, Renato Castelo, Director, Office of Participatory Budgeting, Cynthia Lin, Chief of Staff

Director Castelo called to order the External Oversight Board meeting. He introduced the two (2) spanish language interpreters assisting with the meeting and outlined the zoom instructions for interpretation channel access for meeting attendees. The Director then conducted 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, Director Castelo called for a motion and Board members approved to adopt the minutes.

Director Castelo shared an update on the timeline for the rulebook development. He noted that tonight's meeting will focus on a presentation of the draft rulebook and public comment. The deadline for public comment is on Monday, April 1st end of day and comments can be sent to the office via email. The April 4th meeting will focus on discussing and assessing feedback for the Rulebook and the subsequent April 11th meeting will be held to adopt the Rulebook. Meetings held April through June 2024 will focus on planning for PB implementation.

Chief of Staff, Cynthia Lin, discussed Participatory Budgeting and the context of implementing PB for the City of Boston. She provided a brief background of the 2023 PB Ordinance, which established the Office of Participatory Budgeting. She discussed the overarching mission and strategy for PB in Boston and the local context considerations that are unique for implementation in the City.

Next, a brief overview of background and key highlights of the Rulebook were presented, including the purpose of the Rulebook, the process to date. Ms. Lin discussed the guiding principles of the PB process, project eligibility criteria, and timeline and phases. Director Castelo provided an overview of the PB process and walked through an example of an idea from "Idea Collection" through "Proposal Development."

Director Castelo led a comprehensive review of each of the PB phases. He discussed details of all phases starting with the Rulebook Development and Planning for PB Implementation, Idea Collection, Review of Community Priorities, Visioning Forums and Online Engagement, Proposal Development, Voting, Funding Projects, and Monitoring, Evaluation, and Planning phases.

Director Castelo opened up the meeting for public comments at 6:35PM. Director Castelo suggested that the Board and OPB take time to process the comments and provide sufficient feedback at the next meeting as part of the protocol. Seven (7) attendees provided comments during the meeting with clarifying questions from the EOB.

The first commenter asked a clarifying question about ideas that do not make it to the 15 community priority list. Director Castelo clarified that all ideas will help to inform the larger city budget conversation. The Office plans to release a “summary of findings” document in the fall as part of Review of Community Priorities, which will be accessible to the public and can provide insight to City leaders and Departments about future budget investments. Additionally, ideas not included in the 15 Community Priorities can be resubmitted for future cycles of PB, where that idea or priority may become more relevant for residents. The commenter asked for more detail regarding the incorporation of equity criteria, and if they could be added to the Rulebook. Director Castelo clarified that the Office is currently doing research on this topic and plans to incorporate equity guidelines during the planning phase. It was clarified that equity guidelines will be incorporated into the rulebook.

Another commenter asked for clarity about the identification of top 15 community priorities and how this list is generated. They commented that the process should be democratically decided and resident led. Board Member Jim Kennedy clarified that the Visioning Forums would be an avenue for resident led discussions and development of proposals.

The next commenter provided context on the need for a needs assessment. Board Member Jarret Wright asked some clarifying questions regarding building consensus in the context of the PB process. The commenter provided case study examples for context and how equity and a needs assessment would help to facilitate this process.

Another commenter asked clarifying questions regarding submission of ideas during idea collection and specifically how voting would be conducted in the community. Director Castelo clarified the multiple channels for the community to submit input during the Idea Collection phase. He clarified that voting would take place online and in person and that specific details would be outlined during the planning phase.

The next meeting commenter asked about the project awarding phase during the RFP proposal selection process. They specifically asked how community groups would be evaluated, suggesting they want to ensure that community groups considered for project award should not only be qualified to execute projects, but also be trusted and have good rapport with residents in the community. Board Member Betsy Neptune asked if getting letters of recommendations from residents could be a potential avenue to assist with this, and the commenter suggested organized feedback would be helpful and it would also provide participatory procurement within the PB process.

The next meeting commenter suggested adding more specificity to the PB Idea Collection phase to assist in the proposal development stage. They also suggested providing a specific equity question during this phase and being specific about creating goals, guidelines, and criteria in the process to address equity. Director Castelo clarified that the challenge with

including more questions is the ability to balance the length and depth of questions in the survey, while keeping it accessible for the public. Board Member Jim Kennedy commented that the process currently builds in equity, specifically during Visioning Forums where PB is targeting community groups that have equity goals and are holding meetings in their communities. Board Member Betsy Neptune suggested that a needs assessment could be explored specifically utilizing prior studies and research in the City that has already identified needs. Another commenter supported this approach as it would hone in specific priorities that have already been identified. Director Castelo suggested concerns with this approach. Providing predefined issues at the beginning of the process may limit the ability for people to engage fully in PB. Allowing Idea Collection to help define priorities allows for buy-in and trust from the community and supports the ability to garner broader ideas and suggestions that inform conversations about the larger city budget. Board Member Jarrett Wright seconded this approach and suggested it was the most democratic and inclusive approach.

The last meeting commenter echoed the approach of incorporating equity and defining criteria as part of the PB process. They noted the need for clarification on how ideas that do not make it to the ballot would be communicated to the City officials, elected, and to the public.

Director Castelo adjourned the meeting at 7:32PM

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