

EXTERNAL OVERSIGHT BOARD ANNUAL REVIEW OFFICE OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING CYCLE 1 (2024-2025)

THIS REVIEW

Since December 2023, the External Oversight Board (EOB) of Boston's Participatory Budgeting program has played a pivotal role in the development of program policies consistent with the program's governing ordinance. The collaborative efforts of the EOB and the Office of Participatory Budgeting (OPB) staff helped to create the practical frameworks to get the program up and running.

This review represents the fulfillment of the responsibility of EOB cited in the ordinance, section 5.1.11.7(c):

“At the end of each fiscal year, (the EOB shall) create an annual review of the Participatory Budgeting process for review by the Mayor and City Council and accessible to the Public.”

It is important to note that near the beginning of this inaugural Cycle 1, the OPB hired a consultant, Data + Soul, as evaluator. Data + Soul was commissioned to advise on the structure of the program, conduct surveys, collect data, observe and analyze each phase (idea collection, visioning forums, voting), and render a final report with recommendations for the next cycle. That comprehensive report (36 pages, plus a detailed appendix) provides survey data and insights from multiple perspectives and is available on the PB website ([Boston.gov/Participate](https://boston.gov/participate)).

The External Oversight Board's four-member annual review subcommittee examined a draft of the Data + Soul report and provided editorial input (e.g., clarifying and emphasizing that its recommendations be categorized as either *possible via improved process*, or *possible only with additional administrative resources*). In this annual review, we will occasionally direct the reader to the Data + Soul report for further detail.





EXTERNAL OVERSIGHT BOARD (EOB)

In November of 2021, Boston residents voted to approve a City Charter amendment that required the Mayor and City Council to establish by ordinance an Office of Participatory Budgeting. In the spring of 2023, the Mayor and City Council passed the ordinance, which required the appointment of a nine (9) member External Oversight Board (EOB). The Board was formed during the summer and fall of 2023, and their first meeting was held on December 4, 2023. In an effort to get the program up and running for an inaugural 2024-2025 Cycle 1, the EOB met several times per month to formulate and approve the policies and programmatic structure that are presently laid out in the program's Rulebook, a public document available on the PB website.

The Rulebook includes the following statement of the foundational values central to the program mission:

- **Civic Education & Empowerment** - educate community about local government decision making and empower them to be more involved in civic processes, testing new ways to maximize community involvement.
- **Development & Impact** - the Office's funds are spent in ways that prioritize equity issues and address the greatest needs of the community.
- **Partnerships & Trust** - build partnerships between local government, community organizations, and residents to strengthen confidence and trust in local government.
- **Accessibility** - make it easy for people to participate in the City's budgeting processes.
- **Equity & Inclusion** - ensure the Participatory Budgeting process includes and benefits groups that have been historically disenfranchised.

Initially meeting with unusual frequency, EOB members worked with program staff to get the program in place for the inaugural cycle. Now that voters have selected Cycle 1 projects, the foundational values have been clearly established, and the programmatic details have been carefully defined, the board meets once each month. It should be noted that the limited staff has shown exceptional leadership and has been instrumental in maintaining the momentum for Ideas in Action. The awards for Cycle 1 projects are in the process of being implemented, and Cycle 2 is soon to be launched in the upcoming July Idea Collection Phase.



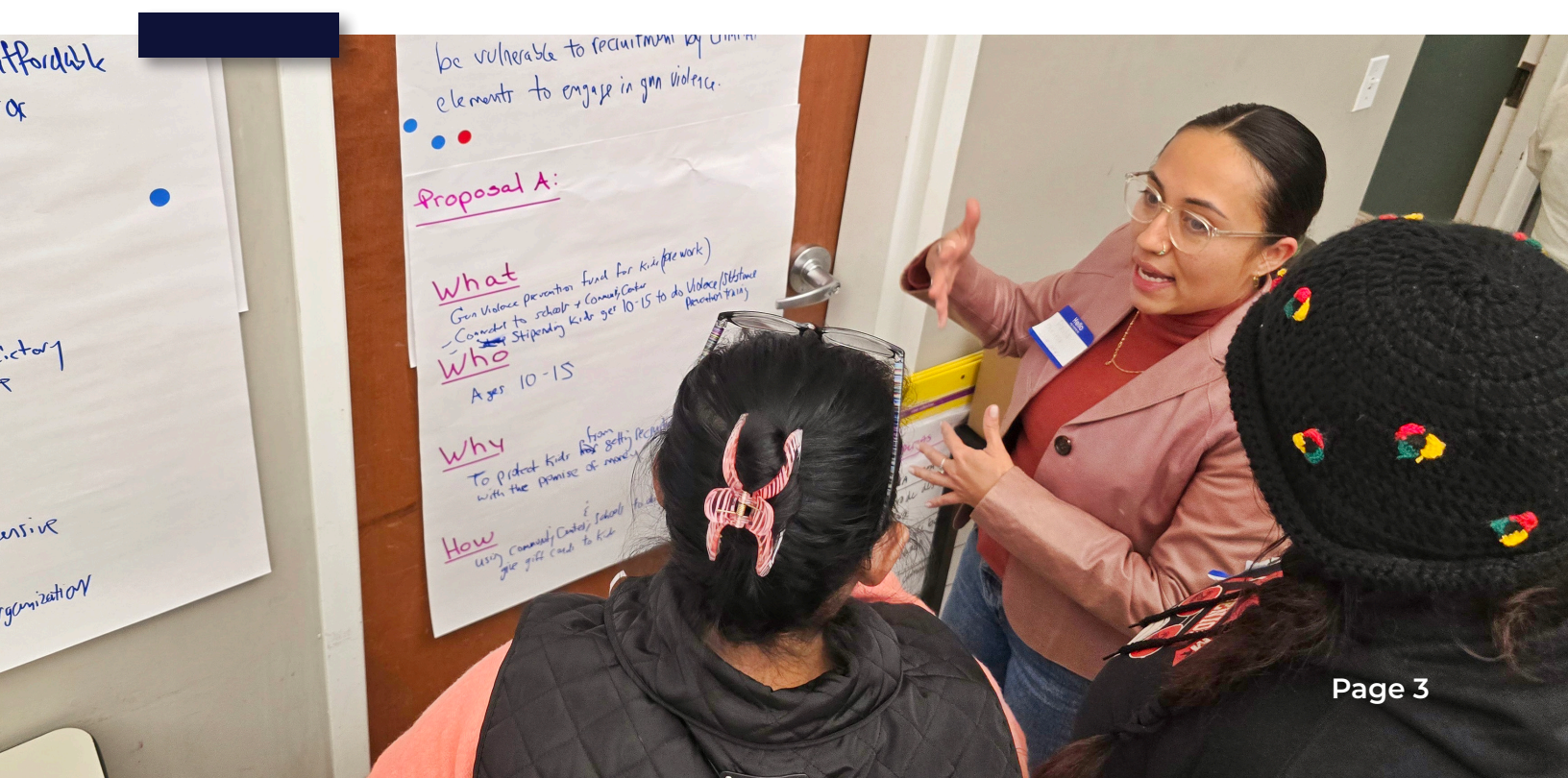
THE PROCESS

Participatory Budgeting in Boston, also called Ideas in Action, is an outreach program under which Boston residents are included in budgeting choices involving a portion of the City's resources (\$2 million of the City's \$4+ billion general fund budget during Cycle 1).

In this inaugural (2024-2025) Cycle 1 of the program, over 1,200 ideas were submitted by residents. Most ideas were submitted through the Office's online portal; some of the ideas were gathered at idea collection workshops hosted by community partners. (For detailed descriptions of these workshops, see the Data + Soul report.) Independent community organization gatherings also facilitated the submission of ideas. (A listing of these organization gatherings appears in the appendix of the Data + Soul report.) There were opportunities for idea submissions at public libraries and at City Hall. (Students as young as eleven were eligible to submit ideas and to vote.)

Various City departments and the OPB staff helped to organize the ideas into nine priority areas. In three resident visioning forums, over 100 participants whittled down those ideas, drawing on their own lived experience, the service needs of their communities, and each idea's potential contribution to equity in City services. Ideas could be operational or capital, local or citywide. Funding for operational services was limited to a one-time implementation cost.

Several subgroups at each of the three visioning forums reviewed the ideas for a particular subject area; by consensus, the subgroups decided on a limited selection to consider for citywide ballot eligibility. Those ideas were written up on poster sheets; participants in each visioning forum were invited to examine the proposals from each subgroup and vote for the five most deserving ideas. In this democratic manner, each of the visioning forums finalized five ideas for placement on the ballot. Through this process, a set of over 1,200 ideas was winnowed to fourteen ballot proposals for a citywide vote. This penultimate selection was daunting for the one hundred plus participants; OPB is revising this approach to dedicate additional time and resources to support this phase in the selection process in future cycles.





Volunteers from relevant City departments answered questions at the visioning forum tables and later helped with cost estimates for the fourteen ballot questions. City staff also advised on whether projects were legally in the purview of City services. A fifteenth ballot proposal approved at one of the visioning forums had to be sidelined because the idea was already stipulated in an approved collective bargaining contract and thus was already in the process of implementation.

Over 4,000 residents then voted, selecting the inaugural Cycle 1 funded projects. Approved projects were the top idea vote-getters until the funding limit of \$2 million was reached.

The Data + Soul report provides a cornucopia of data on participants at each stage: their neighborhood, their demography, their relationship to civic engagement, and additional answers on workshop and forum surveys.

WINNING PROPOSALS

Rank	Votes	Proposal	Funding	Lead Department
#1	1834	Expand Access to Fresh Foods in Boston	\$400,000	Office of Food Justice
#2	1761	Rat Prevention Initiatives in Dense Residential Areas	\$500,000	Inspectional Services
#3	1707	Programs to Support Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Youth	\$250,000	Office of Returning Citizens
#4	1638	Rental Assistance for Boston Youth Ages 16-24	\$200,000	Office of Housing Stability
#5	1571	Support Community Gardens in Boston's Neighborhoods with Limited Access to Affordable Food	\$500,000	GrowBoston
#6	1505	Install Benches at High-Ridership Public Transit Bus Stops in Boston	\$150,000	Boston Transportation Department

CONCLUSION

During the May 27, 2025, City Council Hearing for the Office of Participatory Budgeting regarding funding, City Councilors generated a number of suggestions:

1. Explore the City's many special funds and trust funds for potential additional funding;



2. Explore the interest for community-focused foundations to provide additional funding; and,
3. If the Mayor and City Council consider the program a welcome asset to the City's budgeting process, consider, even in a challenging budget year, providing incremental growth in the funding for ideas.

The EOB feels the first two suggestions deserve timely exploration. On the last suggestion, the board defers to the Mayor, the City Council, and City finance officials. After their careful examination of a) the City's future revenue stream; b) its debt, pension, and other existing commitments; and c) the City's current ability to maintain quality City services while addressing policy priorities, those public officials will determine whether Ideas in Action is a sufficiently valuable mode of engaging residents in the City's budget process to warrant incremental program growth. A continued \$2 million funding limit for new ideas would likely challenge Ideas in Action's ability to achieve its mission in the long term.

One issue discussed by this subcommittee was the filling of board seats. Since January 2025, three of the seats have been unfilled; for a board of nine that requires a quorum of five to take votes, this represents a serious handicap. The ordinance establishes the role of the Mayor and the City Council in naming board members for two-year terms on the EOB. The two-year terms for the current six board members end in fall 2025. *(Members can be reappointed for a second two-year term.)*

With that deadline approaching, we make the following recommendations:

1. The board should be invited to provide the Mayor and City Council with a list of board candidates for consideration.
2. As authorities consider future board candidates for the EOB, one factor should be added in weighing the nomination: a willingness, albeit not a requirement, to occasionally volunteer to participate in on-the-ground operations such as idea collection workshops and visioning forums hosted by community partners.

We conclude with the schedule for Cycle 2, and we encourage readers to both spread the word and participate!

IDEAS IN ACTION TIMELINE AND PROCESS



FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The Data + Soul report made 19 final recommendations. As a final note on this forward-looking annual review by EOB, here is a summary version of 7 of the 19 recommendations that we would most like to see happen. It is a testimony of the OPB staff of three dedicated individuals that they have gotten started on implementing some of these recommendations. Full implementation, however, would almost certainly require additional administrative resources:

- A. Continue and expand partnerships with community organizations to ensure representation of historically excluded or underrepresented groups and historically underserved neighborhoods in Boston.
- B. Initiate implementation processes and workflows earlier.
- C. Provide more clarity on External Oversight Board commitment and contribution.
- D. Build more scaffolding into Visioning Forums so residents can engage more deeply; more time and support around understanding feasibility of projects will help residents provide more substantive input on equity and impact.
- E. Improve training sessions for facilitators by providing training further in advance and increase the depth of the training so facilitators can build their understanding of the proposal development process.
- F. Identify opportunities to simplify the Proposal Development phase such as idea feasibility checks prior to forums to help create a more manageable list of ideas for residents to review.
- G. Provide more context about proposals on the ballot via links to additional background information such as similar initiatives already in place and how implementation might unfold.

Sincerely,
Participatory Budgeting External Oversight Board

Members:

Jim Kennedy, Board Chair
Marilyn Forman
Lisa Hy
Carla Pantaleon-Stovell
Esther Weathers
Jarret Wright

