



Idea Collection Workshop, July 15, 2025 hosted by the Golden Age Center of Greater Boston;
Photo credit: OPB

Ideas in Action

Evaluation and Review of the FY26 Cycle (2025-2026)

FINAL REPORT

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On Behalf of: Boston's Office of Participatory
Budgeting and External Oversight Board
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Executive Summary

In the summer of 2025, Boston’s Office of Participatory Budgeting (OPB) launched the second cycle of *Ideas in Action*. Building on the Inaugural Year in FY25, the FY26 cycle expanded partnerships with community organizations and city entities, redesigned the Proposal Development phase with a two-part forum structure, and introduced paper ballots. In total, 1,203 residents submitted ideas, over 200 participated in Proposal Development Forums, and 4,919 residents voted. Residents, community partners, and city staff engaged in OPB’s evaluation of *Ideas in Action*, providing useful insights about the F26 cycle and recommendations for the future.

Who participated, and how? *Ideas in Action* engaged Boston’s diverse communities, reaching every neighborhood, a range of demographic groups, and residents who are not otherwise civically engaged. Trusted partner organizations were essential for reaching residents who have been historically underrepresented or face higher barriers to participation, particularly during Idea Collection and Proposal Development Forums, and through paper ballots at voting.

What impact did *Ideas in Action* have? Participants reported strong civic benefits — trust in city government, civic knowledge, and interest in future engagement — consistent with findings from the first cycle. The two-part Proposal Development Forum structure was particularly helpful for increasing residents’ knowledge of the budgeting process.

What was the process and how can it be improved? The FY26 Cycle was viewed positively by participants, Community Partners, and city staff. Returning participants noticed meaningful improvements from the previous cycle. Residents engaged both organically through word of mouth and thanks to OPB’s two-fold strategy of engaging trusted partners and running a citywide marketing campaign.

The two-part Proposal Development Forum structure streamlined the process and deepened engagement. Participants, stakeholders, OPB staff, and implementation partners identified opportunities for improvement, which are captured in the recommendations.

Key Recommendations

1. Continue investing in partnerships and extend Community Partner engagement through the full cycle.
2. Prioritize marketing activities that reach residents effectively and efficiently.
3. Communicate updates about awarded projects from previous cycles to build trust and engagement.
4. Maintain the two-part Proposal Development Forum structure with minor implementation updates.
5. Expand and improve the use of paper ballots.

See the [Recommendations section](#) for the complete list.

Introduction

Participatory Budgeting in Boston

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a democratic process where community members directly decide how to spend part of a public budget. Boston's Office of Participatory Budgeting (OPB) was established by ordinance in 2023 and launched *Ideas in Action*, Boston's first city-wide participatory budgeting initiative, in 2024. For background on the history and goals of OPB and *Ideas in Action*, see the [Inaugural Year Final Report \(June 2025\)](#) and the [FY26 Rulebook](#). In summer 2025, OPB launched the second cycle (FY26), building directly on the previous cycle and incorporating lessons from its evaluation. The FY26 Cycle has come to a close; this report documents its accomplishments while identifying recommendations for the future.

FY26 Cycle Timeline, by the numbers:



Rulebook Revisions + Planning: In the spring of 2025, OPB revised the Rulebook based on FY25 Cycle recommendations and with input from its External Oversight Board, and updated internal workflows for implementation and partnerships. During this time, OPB expanded its network of Contracted Community Partners from nine to nineteen, to help engage residents through trusted relationships throughout the cycle.



Idea Collection: In July 2025, residents submitted 1,203 ideas for addressing local needs through the Online PB Portal. The high number of ideas was in part due to a media campaign to publicize *Ideas in Action*, as well as 31 events hosted by Contracted Community Partners, including in-person and virtual workshops and tabling at community events. During these events, residents brainstormed and discussed project ideas in small facilitated groups and submitted them through the Online PB Portal.



Review Priorities: In late summer, 2025, OPB worked with the City's Data Analytics team and the External Oversight Board to sort eligible ideas into Community Priorities for use in the Proposal Development Forums. OPB also created an Idea Submissions Dashboard to display all submitted ideas for easy viewing by departmental staff and the public.

FY26 Cycle Timeline, by the numbers, continued:

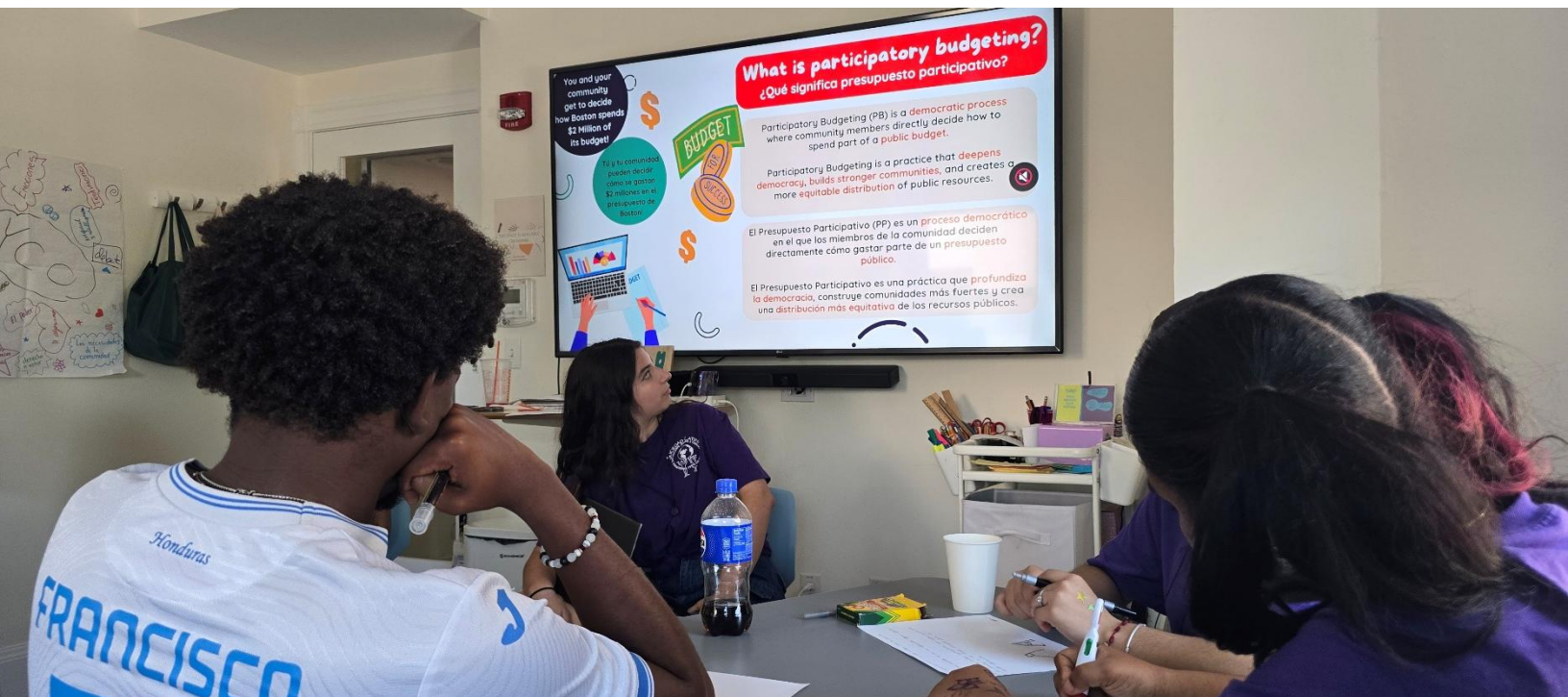


Proposal Development Forums: In October and November 2025, OPB implemented a redesigned two-part forum series. In October, OPB hosted forums in Mattapan, East Boston, and Brighton, for residents to sort ideas and prioritize potential projects for the ballot. In November, OPB hosted two forums at City Hall for residents to work with city staff on developing project proposals that would be feasible and have an equity impact. Community Partners helped mobilize residents to participate in forums, and food, interpretation, and childcare were provided. Over 200 residents engaged in five forums and worked with 25 City of Boston department staff to review ideas and develop project proposals for the ballot. After the forums, OPB continued working with departmental staff to refine proposals for feasibility and considered an additional seven (7) public comments. In the end, OPB published 13 proposals for the ballot.



Voting: In January and February 2026, 4,919¹ Boston residents voted for their preferred proposals: 4,480 online and 439 through paper ballots at City Hall, Boston Centers for Youth and Families (BCYF), and with Community Partners. Ultimately, voters selected eight (8) top projects to be funded by the \$2.2 million project cap. As with the Idea Collection phase, OPB launched a media campaign to publicize *Ideas in Action* and worked closely with city and community partners to engage residents.

Idea Collection Workshop, July 29, 2025, hosted by Sociedad Latina; **Photo credit:** OPB



¹The initial vote count announcement was 4,841. Due to ballots received after voting was tabulated, the updated and final number of ballots is 4,919. This report utilizes the updated number. These late ballots did not ultimately impact which projects were selected.

About the evaluation

The evaluation of the FY26 Cycle aimed to assess outcomes and provide actionable recommendations to improve the process and advance OPB's mission. This report addresses three evaluation questions:

1. Who **participated**, and how? To what extent did *Ideas in Action* engage residents that face higher barriers to participating in civic processes?²
2. What **impact** did *Ideas in Action* have on those who participated? How did it affect trust in city government, civic knowledge, and interest in future civic engagement?
3. What was the **process** used in the FY26 Cycle and how can it be improved, especially via changes in OPB operations and resources?

Evaluation activities were conducted by Data+Soul Research, OPB's evaluation contractor. High response rates provide confidence that findings are representative of those who participated in the process, unless otherwise indicated. See [Appendix A](#) for details.

How to use this report

The purpose of this report is to answer the above questions in a succinct and useful manner. Each section that follows answers one of the questions by sharing an overall finding and then topical sub-findings. Two key sources provide additional details about *Ideas in Action*, beyond what is presented in this report.

1. [Appendices](#) include information about evaluation methods (Appendix A) and additional data (Appendix B).
2. OPB maintains minutes and presentations from External Oversight Board meetings [on its website, under Meeting Minutes](#). Evaluation presentations are titled "Data+Soul Slides" and are structured as follows:
 - May 7, 2026: Full-Cycle Presentation. These slides include additional data from participants and city staff.
 - February 19, 2026: Voting Report
 - January 6, 2026: Proposal Development Report pt. 2
 - November 20, 2025: Proposal Development Report pt. 1
 - September 18, 2025: Idea Collection Report

This report constitutes an evaluation of the FY26 cycle as well as the annual review of the process, as conducted by the External Oversight Board. A [Note from the External Oversight Board](#), with additional reflections and ideas for sustaining and scaling *Ideas in Action*, is included at the end of the report.

² Residents that face higher barriers to participating in civic processes may live in historically underserved neighborhoods and/or identify as members of historically excluded or underrepresented groups.

Findings

Evaluation Question 1: Participation

Who participated, and how? To what extent did *Ideas in Action* engage residents that face higher barriers to participating in civic processes?³

Finding 1

Ideas in Action engaged Boston’s diverse communities, reaching every neighborhood, a range of demographic groups, and residents who are not otherwise civically engaged. Trusted partner organizations were essential for reaching residents who have been historically excluded or underrepresented, particularly during Idea Collection and Forums, and through paper ballots at voting.

Idea Collection Workshop, July 19, 2025, hosted by NUBE
Photo credit: OPB



³ Residents that face higher barriers to participating in civic processes may live in historically underserved neighborhoods and/or identify as members of historically excluded or underrepresented groups.

Neighborhood

Sub-finding 1-1: Residents from every neighborhood participated in *Ideas in Action*. OPB investments in trusted partners and advertisements played a key role in turning out residents in underserved neighborhoods.

During each phase, neighborhoods that were engaged by in-person or place-based organizational outreach, advertisements, or media, demonstrated a higher degree of participation relative to neighborhoods that did not (Table 1). These efforts were particularly effective in Allston, Brighton, Chinatown, Dorchester, East Boston, Mattapan, and Roxbury. Paper ballots during voting (see [Appendix B4](#)) proved to be a particularly important strategy to engage neighborhoods such as Chinatown and Mattapan, which were well-represented in earlier phases but had comparatively lower online voting rates.

Many participants engaged in the process independently of place-based efforts; for example, residents from Jamaica Plain contributed a large share of ideas (8.5%) as well as votes (19.5%).

Table 1. Boston’s top 12 most active neighborhoods for each phase of *Ideas in Action*.

Neighborhood	Population	# Ideas	Ideas as % of Total	# Forum attendees	Forums as % of Total	# Votes	Votes as % of Total	OPB investments
Allston	24,904	61	5.1%	15	10.2%	302	8.0%	TTTT*
Brighton	52,047	78	6.5%	12	8.2%	456	12.1%	TTTT*F
Charlestown	19,120	12	1.0%		0.0%	63	1.7%	
Chinatown	6,211	96	8.0%		0.0%	32	0.8%	WWA
Dorchester	122,191	178	14.8%	22	15.0%	463	12.3%	WWA
Downtown	13,768	30	2.5%	3	2.0%	27	0.7%	F
East Boston	43,066	267	22.2%	37	25.2%	267	7.1%	TTTTWWFA
Hyde Park	34,172	43	3.6%	7	4.8%	85	2.3%	A
Jamaica Plain	40,015	102	8.5%	7	4.8%	734	19.5%	
Mattapan	23,840	32	2.7%	5	3.4%	50	1.3%	FA
North End	10,805	8	0.7%		0.0%	87	2.3%	
Roslindale	29,586	53	4.4%	7	4.8%	242	6.4%	
Roxbury	54,533	89	7.4%	10	6.8%	152	4.0%	TWWA

Notes: Bolded numbers = top two neighborhoods by % for that phase.

Shaded blue cells = neighborhood participation rates that exceeded Boston’s overall participation rate for that phase.

OPB investments are as follows: T = Idea Collection Tabling; W = Idea Collection Workshop; F = Proposal Development Forum; A = social media ads during Voting.

*The Brighton Farmers Market serves Allston and Brighton

Source: FY26 Idea Collection Survey (2025); FY26 Forum Survey (2025); FY26 Voting Survey (2026); Boston Neighborhood Data (2021)

See [Appendix B1](#) for a full neighborhood breakdown, and [Appendix B2](#) for documentation of outreach efforts.

Demographics

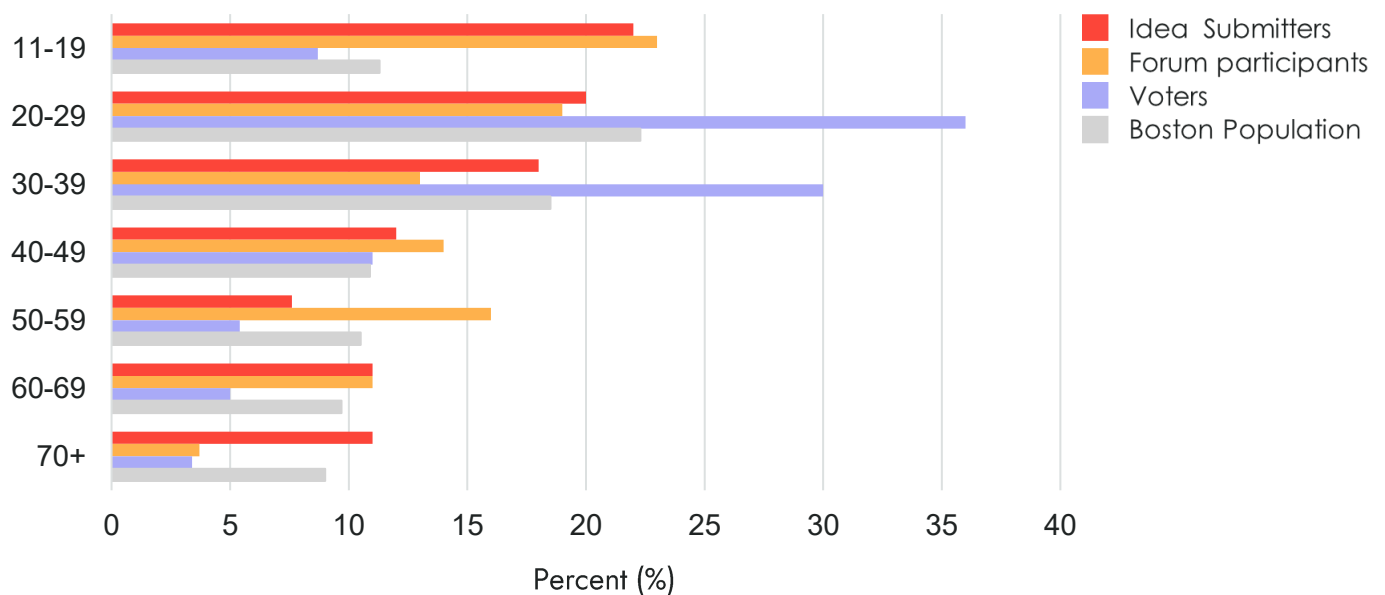
Sub-finding 1-2: Efforts that included high-touch or in-person components were effective at engaging residents from historically excluded or underrepresented groups.

Idea Collection and Proposal Development Forums engaged more Latinx, Black, Asian, and lower-income residents, as well as youth (ages 11–19), relative to Boston’s population. (See Figure 1 for participation by age and [Appendix B1](#) for participation by race/ethnicity and income.) For example, youth participated at twice the rate of their population during these two phases (22% of participants were 11-19 years old; 11% of Boston’s population is 11-19 years old). The first two phases included major high-touch activities delivered by Community Partners: almost half of ideas were collected through Community Partners (46%) and all five Forums took place in person with recruitment support from Community Partners.

Most voters (91%) engaged online, and the majority were white (64%, compared to 45% of the Boston population), concentrated in their 20s and 30s, and reported incomes skewed higher than the Boston population’s income distribution. Paper ballots⁴, collected by the City and Community Partners, reached a different population: Haitian, Chinese, and Brazilian residents; lower-income residents; and youth and older adults (see [Appendix B4](#)).

For detailed demographic charts and data by phase, see [Appendix B1](#).

Figure 1. Age of *Ideas in Action* participants for each phase (red, orange, and blue) relative to the Boston population (gray).



Source: FY26 Idea Collection Survey (2025); FY26 Forum Survey (2025); FY26 Voting Survey (2026); American Community Survey (2023)

⁴The majority of paper ballots were collected without demographic surveys; as such, inferences about who voted on paper comes from the partners involved with engaging those residents.

Civic Participation and First-Time Engagement

Sub-finding 1-3: The FY26 Cycle reached a higher share of residents who were less civically engaged⁵ compared with the previous cycle, and showed the potential to keep residents engaged in the process.

The Idea Collection phase primarily engaged first-time participants (92%), and close to half (48%) did not identify as civically engaged, according to survey respondents (see [Appendix B1](#)). This is a significant shift from the previous cycle (FY25), where only 15% of survey respondents across the cycle did not identify as civically engaged. The stronger engagement of residents who are less civically engaged in the FY26 Cycle may reflect the expanded Community Partner network, the specific community engagement tactics partners used, or both.

The majority of October Forum attendees were first-time participants (61%) but that number decreased to 20% in November, in part because 39 participants stayed engaged and attended both October and November forums. Participants who self-identified as civically engaged rose from 66% during October Forums to 86% in November Forums, perhaps showing the potential for the two-part forum structure to help participants see themselves as civically engaged.

Relevant insights from voting come exclusively from BCYF centers Leahy-Holloran and Quincy, located in Dorchester and Chinatown, respectively. Along with paper ballots, these two sites collected evaluation surveys that asked about civic engagement and past participation in *Ideas in Action*. Almost all respondents were youth (98%), and most (77%) did not identify as civically engaged. More than one third (40%) said they had participated in the past, mostly from BCYF Leahy-Holloran, who had engaged their youth during the Idea Collection phase.

Note: Response rates (RR) for civic engagement and first-time participation varied across the cycle based on how surveys were distributed and completed. Idea Collection asked these questions in an optional survey (25% RR). Forums asked these questions in a survey participants took before leaving (80% RR). During Voting, surveys were only completed at two BCYF centers (1.2% RR). Lower response rates suggest that findings may apply to all participants.

What is working well with *Ideas in Action*?

“愿意倾听不同语言人群的声音”

Translation: “Willing to listen to the voices of people speaking different languages.”

- Idea Collection participant, on what is working well with *Ideas in Action*

Source: FY26 Idea Collection Survey (2025)

⁵ Participants were asked, “In the past 12 months, have you attended public meetings, advocated for a local issue or candidate, or worked with others to improve your neighborhood or city?” Participants who answered “Yes” were considered civically engaged. Participants who answered “No” or “Not sure” were considered not civically engaged. .10

Evaluation Question 2: Impact

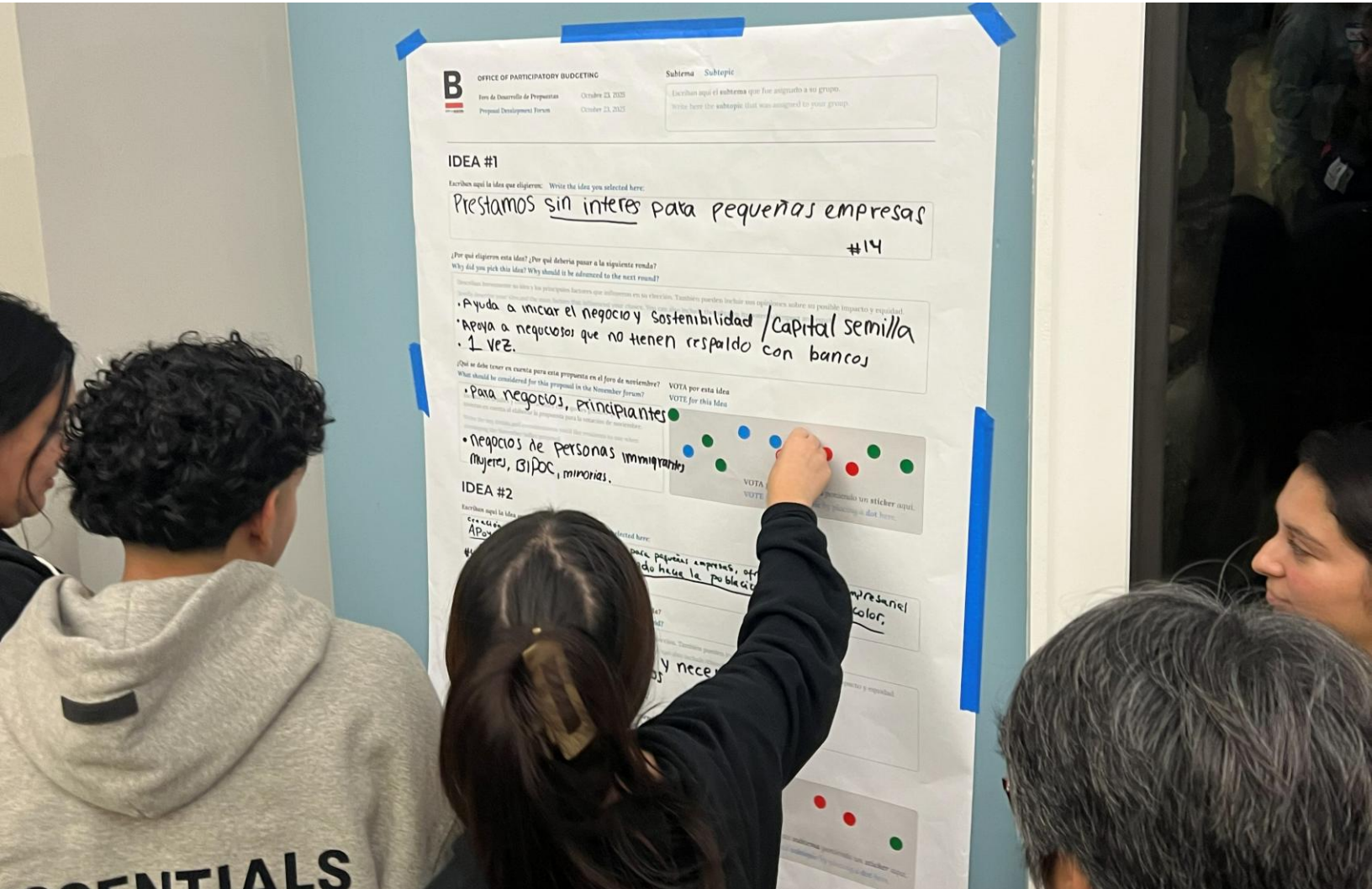
What impact did *Ideas in Action* have on participants? How did it affect:

- Trust in local government
- Civic knowledge
- Interest in future civic engagement

Finding 2

Participants reported strong civic benefits, consistent with findings from the previous cycle. The two-part Proposal Development Forum structure was particularly helpful for increasing knowledge of the budgeting process.

Proposal Development Forum, October 23, 2025 hosted by Maverick Landing Community Services in East Boston; **Photo credit:** OPB



Trust in local government

Residents who submitted ideas and participated in forums agreed that *Ideas in Action* allowed their voice to be heard by the City of Boston (Figure 2; also see [Appendix B1](#)). As another indicator of trust in the process, most forum participants agreed that *Ideas in Action* had the ability to address community inequities (91%) and to make the community better (95%). In their debriefs, forum implementers suggested possible drivers of this trust in the process: that participants contributed directly to proposals and engaged with city staff first-hand.

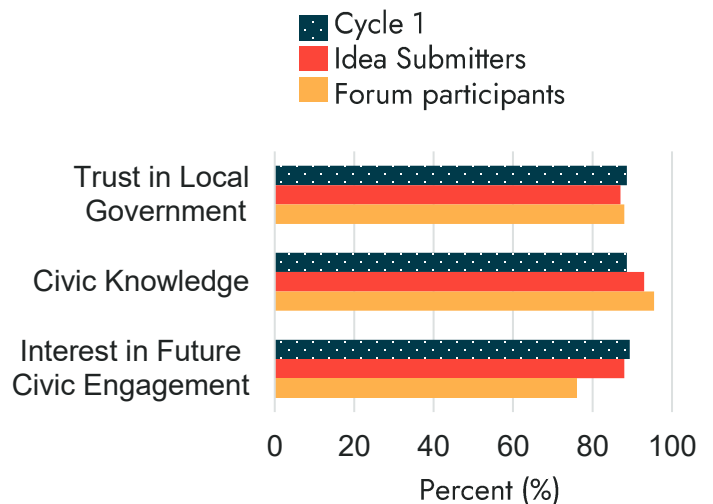
Civic knowledge

Participants reported gains in civic knowledge relevant to each phase, be it thinking of relevant issues during idea submission, or considering other viewpoints during October forums (Figure 2; also see [Appendix B1](#)). Almost all participants (91%) said November Forums helped them understand how the budget process works, likely due to the two-part structure that allowed participants to devote more attention to feasibility and implementation when shaping proposals.

Interest in future engagement

Majorities of participants during the earlier phases of *Ideas in Action* said they planned to participate in the future (Figure 2; also see [Appendix B1](#)). Less than 1% (3/453) said they did **not** plan to participate again - the rest were “neutral” or “not sure,” suggesting that some participants may be reserving judgment while they wait to see how the process unfolds over time.

Figure 2. Proportions of *Ideas in Action* participants who reported the civic benefits described below, compared with the previous cycle (FY25) and displayed by phase.



Statements from the survey that participants responded to:

Trust in Local Government: Participating allows my voice to be heard by the City of Boston

Civic Knowledge: Submitting an idea helped me think about issues that affect me and my community; October Forum helped me consider other viewpoints; November Forum helped me better understand how Boston’s budgeting process works

Interest in Future Civic Engagement: I plan to participate in *Ideas in Action* in the future

Note: Response rates (RR) for civic benefits varied across the cycle based on how surveys were distributed and completed. Idea Collection asked these questions in an optional survey (25% RR). Forums asked these questions in a survey participants took before leaving (80% RR). Lower response rates suggest that findings may not apply to all participants.

Source: FY26 Idea Collection Survey (2025); FY26 Forum Survey (2025)

Evaluation Question 3: Process

What was the process used in the FY26 Cycle and how can it be improved?

Finding 3

The FY26 Cycle was viewed positively by participants, Community Partners, and city staff. Returning participants noticed meaningful improvements from the previous cycle. Residents engaged organically and thanks to OPB’s strategy of engaging trusted partners and running a citywide marketing campaign. The new two-part Proposal Development Forum was successful in streamlining the process and deepening engagement. Participants, stakeholders, OPB staff, and implementation partners identified opportunities for improvement, which are captured in the recommendations.

The Participant Experience: The FY26 Cycle and the Longer View

Sub-finding 3-1: Overall, participants were enthusiastic about *Ideas in Action* and eager to continue their involvement in the process.

Participants valued the welcoming, inclusive environments at in-person workshops and forums and the diversity of fellow participants. Returning participants noted specific improvements during the FY26 Cycle, including clearer activity structures and better logistics during events. Suggestions from both returning and new participants included increasing the visibility of *Ideas in Action* overall, providing more advance notice of events, following-up between phases, and sharing updates on what happened to ideas and projects from the previous cycle.

For detailed open-response themes from each phase, see the Idea Collection Report (September 2025) pgs. 16-17, Proposal Development Report pt. 1 (November 2025) pgs. 11-12, Proposal Development Report pt. 2 (January 2026) pgs. 17-19, and Full-Cycle Presentation (May 2026) pgs. 20-26. [All reports can be accessed on the OBP website, see Data+Soul Slides.](#) See [Appendix A1](#) for details about how participant feedback was collected.

“More communication and visibility so people know what phase this is, and who was rewarded in the past. More of a conversation.”

– Idea Collection participant, on what could be improved with *Ideas in Action*

Source: FY26 Idea Collection Survey (2025)

Two-fold Engagement: Trusted Partners and the Media Campaign

Sub-finding 3-2: OPB deployed two complementary engagement tracks across *Ideas in Action*: working with trusted partners and running a media campaign. These strategies were effective for reaching specific populations and a wide audience, respectively, but were also time- and resource-intensive.

Trusted partners, specifically Community Partners and City entities like Boston Centers for Youth and Families (BCYF), engaged residents directly during Idea Collection, recruited participants for Proposal Development Forums, and spread the word and collected paper ballots during Voting. During Idea Collection, partners hosted in-person and virtual workshops, as they did in the previous cycle, and also experimented with new tactics for broadening reach: tabling during community events, collecting ideas during community classes, and door-to-door canvassing (see [Appendix B2](#)).

Our analysis of participant demographics suggests that high-touch efforts by trusted partners early on were important for engaging specific groups. Indeed, partner activities were most concentrated during Idea Collection and Proposal Development Forums. As a result, nearly half (46%) of all Idea Collection ideas came through Community Partner activities, neighborhoods with the highest partner activity had the highest submission rates (Table 1), and demographics reported by participants during Idea Collection and Forums map onto the groups that Community Partners sought to engage.

Equipping partners with paper ballots was a new feature of the FY26 Cycle. At first, OPB identified concerns about verifying paper ballots to ensure one vote per person, as well the additional resources required to print, distribute, gather, and process paper ballots.

However, partners consistently requested, and appreciated, paper ballots and OPB decided it

would be a worthwhile method for including specific populations and neighborhoods. Indeed, paper ballots were used by 9% of all voters, particularly residents from Mattapan and Chinatown; Haitian, Chinese, and Brazilian residents; lower-income households; and youth and older adults (see [Appendix B4](#)). As the Case Illustration below suggests, expanding the use of paper ballots with partners that engage residents throughout the full cycle shows potential for retention and building community buy-in.

Case Illustration: BCYF Leahy-Holloran, located in Dorchester, involved youth in both the Idea Collection and voting phases. During Idea Collection, the center hosted a PB Corner at the front desk. During summer camp drop-off, a greeter would encourage youth and their parents/guardians to brainstorm and submit ideas together. During voting, staff placed a ballot box in the same location and encouraged youth to vote on proposals during after school programs. Staff collected 31 paper ballots, in which 60% of respondents said they had participated in the past. Positive feedback from Leahy-Holloran voters suggested enthusiasm for *Ideas in Action*, pointing to the value of continuous and accessible engagement across phases.

“Voting for people under 18”

”Working with youth’s”

- BCYF Leahy-Holloran voters, on what is working well with *Ideas in Action*

Source: FY26 Voting Survey (2026)

“We primarily sought to engage Chinese-speaking residents, including both older adults and caregivers, many of whom are immigrants and face language and cultural barriers when accessing resources. The community is largely made up of working-class families and seniors, with a mix of Mandarin and Cantonese speakers. By focusing on this group, we aimed to ensure their voices and ideas were represented in the process, especially since they are often underrepresented in mainstream outreach efforts.”

– Greater Boston Chinese Golden Age Center description of their outreach efforts during Idea Collection

Source: FY26 Community Partner Debriefs (2025)



Voting Workshop, February 4, 2026 hosted by the Golden Age Center of Greater Boston;

Photo credit: Data+Soul

OPB’s media campaign used various mass and local channels to engage residents for Idea Collection and Voting. The campaign included:

- Earned media placements (14 during Idea Collection, 20 during Voting; see [Appendix B3](#))
- Print and digital ads in four Boston-focused ethnic newspapers (Dorchester Reporter / Haitian Reporter, Sampan, Bay State Banner, El Mundo Boston)
- Ads on buses in English and Spanish and digital billboards on subway platforms in English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, Brazilian Portuguese, Simplified Chinese
- Geo-targeted Meta campaigns and Spotify ads in specific zip codes including Chinatown, Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, East Boston, and Hyde Park

How participants heard about *Ideas in Action* reflect OPB strategies as well as organic engagement. Importantly, differences across phases reflect adjustments in OPB’s marketing strategy. During Idea Collection, for example, Community Partners were more active and there was a higher spend on paid media and ads, compared to the Voting phase. These differences bear out in how people heard about *Ideas in Action*, with fewer participants citing community organizations and ads during Voting compared with Idea Collection (Table 2)⁶. Meanwhile, OPB invested more in city partnerships during voting. BCYF centers collected paper ballots, the Press Office pushed out content on social media, and the OPB team attended Coffee Hours across the city. As a result, a higher portion of participants cited the city of Boston for how they heard about *Ideas in Action* during Voting compared to Idea Collection (Table 2).

Table 2. How participants heard about *Ideas in Action* during Idea Collection and Voting.

Method	Idea Collection	Voting
Ad/Billboards (incl. bus and billboard ads)	16%	8%
City of Boston (incl. city outreach and elected officials)	17%	26%
Community Organizations	75%	20%
Friends and family; word of mouth	12%	34%
Social Media	11%	9%*

Note: Bolded numbers indicate key differences between phases. See [Appendix B1](#) for additional data. *Social Media was not included as a standalone category in the Voting survey.

Source: FY26 Idea Collection Survey (2025); FY26 Voting Survey (2026)

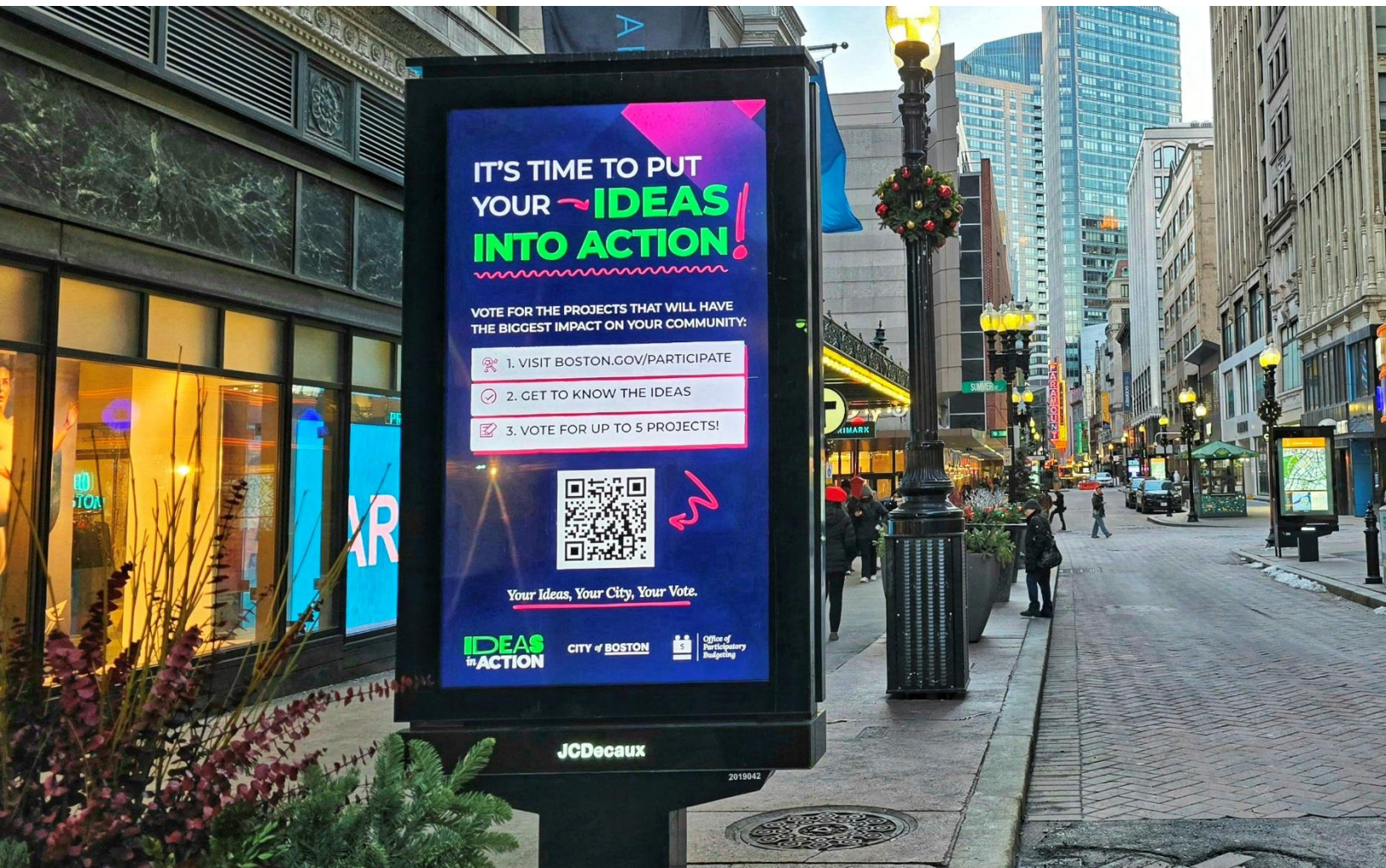
Residents engaged organically during voting as well, demonstrated by the 34% of voters who heard about *Ideas in Action* through word of mouth. It is likely that many individuals and organizations were originally motivated by specific issues on the ballot. In an extreme example, the Better Budget Alliance’s [viral social media post](#) generated over 130,000 views and mobilized approximately 400 additional votes in a single day. In the end, voters selected an average of 4.5 out of 5 projects per ballot, indicating that most voters engaged fully with all the proposals instead of focusing on a single issue.

⁶Response rates (RR) for how participants heard about *Ideas in Action* varied across the cycle. Idea Collection asked this question in an optional survey (25% RR). During Voting, this question was part of the online voting platform (77% RR). Lower response rates suggest that findings may not apply to all participants.

As residents continue to hear about *Ideas in Action* year after year and from multiple sources, many may continue participating organically. However, other residents may be harder to engage without trusted partners acting as facilitators. Findings from the FY26 Cycle suggest that youth and older adults, non-English-language speakers, lower-income residents, and those who aren't already civically engaged, would continue to benefit from partnerships with community organizations.

OPB's two-fold strategy pushed the office's **capacity and resources** and necessitated creative solutions, for example, creating and hosting a Community Engagement & Outreach Specialist Fellowship with Merrimack College. The team also initiated workflows for each phase earlier compared with the previous cycle, building off established protocols that allowed for more efficient implementation. Continuing and improving the engagement strategies above will require staff capacity and financial resources; as such, the Recommendation section accounts for which items could be implemented within existing capacity or would require additional investment.

Street advertisement for *Ideas in Action* in Downtown Crossing
Photo credit: OPB



Two-Part Forum Structure and Departmental Staff Involvement

Sub-finding 3-3: The successful redesign of Proposal Development Forums improved participant retention and deepened civic knowledge and engagement. City Staff found November Forums insightful and effective for proposal development.

For the FY26 Cycle, *Ideas in Action* adopted a two-part Proposal Development Forum model in which residents sorted and prioritized ideas in October Forums and drafted proposals alongside City Staff during November forums. In their debriefs, Forum implementers observed that the two-part model motivated residents to return between October and November and gave participants a stronger sense of ownership in the process. Indeed, 39 of 93 October participants (42%) returned in November, and almost all participants (91%) said November forums helped them understand how the budget process works. Participants who identified as civically engaged rose 20% between the two months.

See Recommendation 8 for ideas about improving Forums, sourced as part of the feedback process from Forum implementers and participants.

City staff who participated in November Forums felt the process was supportive of *Ideas in Action* goals to produce feasible proposals that advance equity and will have an impact in Boston communities. In their debriefs, staff said they felt sufficiently supported by OPB during Forum preparation. They expressed interest in being involved earlier in the process and offered to share ideas for expanding outreach. Staff appreciated the opportunity to collaborate directly with residents and found that the collaboration was especially supportive of developing feasible proposals that aligned with resident priorities and existing programs.

In the future, staff would like to have written guidelines for how the awarded funds can be used and they'd like residents to have greater clarity around the restrictions and parameters of the process.

What advice would you give other departments as they prepare to be involved in *Ideas in Action*?

“Residents are very receptive when you explain the ‘why’ behind things and how they work. This helps them refine their ideas and get closer to something that can realistically be implemented.”

- City staff response

Source: FY26 City Staff Debriefs (2026)

What is working well with *Ideas in Action*?

“Esta funcionando que se esta tomando en cuenta las ideas de las personas para que haya mas claridad.”

Translation: “What’s working is that people’s ideas are being taken into account to create more clarity.”

- Forum participant

Source: FY26 Forum Survey (2025)

Participating in Forums influenced how staff think and work, informing and affirming their understanding of resident needs. Staff reported thinking creatively about how to address those needs and/or adjusting services accordingly. Staff recommended that future departments engaged in the process should be familiar with resident priorities, forthcoming about department capabilities, and cognizant of the balance between capacity, innovation, and resident expectations.

Recommendations

Recommendations were generated by the evaluation team as a way to operationalize findings, with a focus on sustaining what made the FY26 Cycle effective and making the most of partnerships and City resources. The OPB team and members of the External Oversight Board reviewed recommendations, provided input, and approved the final versions. Recommendations requiring additional resources are marked with an asterisk (*).

- 1. Continue investing in partnerships and extend Community Partner engagement through the full cycle.*** Continue investing in relationships with Community Partners, including current highly engaged partners and new partners that may reach groups underrepresented in *Ideas in Action* to date. Extend contracts for the full cycle, so the same partners that host idea collection workshops can help recruit participants for Forums and expand access to voting through paper ballots.
- 2. Grow and deepen partnerships with City of Boston entities.** Boston Centers for Youth and Families (BCYF), Boston Public Schools, and the Boston Public Library each offer trusted, place-based relationships with specific populations; meanwhile, City of Boston channels were the second most-cited way voters heard about *Ideas in Action*. Leverage the successful BCYF Leahy-Holloran model, in which youth submitted ideas and then cast paper ballots, to work with other BCYF centers, schools, and libraries to build cycle-long engagement strategies.
- 3. Actively support partners in their communications about *Ideas in Action*.** Share media assets, translations, and social media toolkits earlier. Encourage partner organizations to promote *Ideas in Action* with their networks and constituencies and provide training and talking points for partners to use. Celebrate and amplify partner posts through the OPB newsletter.
- 4. Prioritize marketing activities that reach residents effectively and efficiently.*** Sustain marketing strategies that continue to support organic earned media coverage and ethnic media focus (e.g., the Boston Globe’s B-Side Newsletter was the most-mentioned advertising source during Voting with 47 mentions), and outlets that may reach new audiences. Focus on efforts that offer more flexibility (e.g., digital subway platform ads rather than bus ads) and yield sufficient saturation to drive action.
- 5. Communicate updates about awarded projects from previous cycles to build trust and engagement.** Community Partners found that referencing winning projects from previous cycles generated enthusiasm and made the process feel real to participants. At each stage in the process, provide progress updates through partner networks and activities, City channels, and the OPB newsletter, to build trust in the process by sharing evidence of its accomplishments and to motivate participation.

“People were truly intrigued that this is something Boston does, and then talking about last year's success in [Allston Brighton] and how the Rat Remediation could impact our community opened up lots of discussion... Truly having a conversation about being able to make a difference and pointing at examples gave people HOPE/belief they could make a difference.”

– Community partner reflections after Idea Collection

Source: FY26 Community Partner Debriefs (2025)

- 6. Strengthen the throughline between phases and across cycles.** Continue sending post-event follow-ups, end-of-phase summaries, and newsletter communications that connect participants to the full cycle without introducing significant new infrastructure. Leverage newsletter functionality and analytics to engage residents who have not opened emails. Position OPB staff as the “face” of *Ideas in Action*, so participants can build trust and relationships with team members over time.
- 7. Start planning and partner contracting earlier.** Spring contracting gives organizations time to integrate Idea Collection into existing summer programming and reach less civically engaged residents.

- 8. Maintain the two-part Proposal Development Forum structure with minor implementation updates.** The October–November Forum split had high retention and benefits for participants, staff, and the process overall. Strengthen implementation by sending agendas to participants in advance, improving and standardizing facilitator training, preparing templates for proposal drafting, allowing more intentionality and choice in table discussions, and building contingency plans for interpretation, childcare, and turnout variability.
- 9. Expand and improve the use of paper ballots.*** Paper ballots reached residents who were not engaged through online voting. Build out and refine logistics for collecting, storing, and processing ballots, and explore mechanisms to ensure each resident votes only once. Consider opportunities for residents to complete short evaluation surveys along with their paper ballots.
- 10. Continue embedding evaluation into *Ideas in Action* infrastructure.** Embedding survey questions about demographics into the Idea Submission portal and online voting platform raised response rates significantly, as opposed to having an optional additional survey (for voting, the rate increased from 3% in the FY25 Cycle to 83% in the FY26 Cycle). In future cycles, pare down survey questions further to avoid survey fatigue while continuing to monitor the process.

Note from the External Oversight Board (EOB)

The External Oversight Board applauds the Office of Participatory Budgeting (OPB) team for executing a highly successful cycle of *Ideas in Action*, maximizing impact within current fiscal and staffing parameters. To build on this momentum, the Board recommends that the City of Boston take strategic steps to institutionalize participatory budgeting, ensuring its long-term viability and sustainability.

At a high level, *Ideas in Action* will achieve the greatest longevity by delivering substantial, high-impact projects that allow Boston residents to clearly experience the value of participatory budgeting as a vital component of city government. To scale this impact and deepen community investment, the Board proposes the following avenues for growth:

Expand Funding Through Strategic Partnerships: Explore opportunities with community-focused philanthropic foundations and pursue competitive federal, state, or private grant options to supplement existing resources.

Leverage Internal Municipal Resources: Conduct an assessment of the City's special funds, trust funds, and eligible transferable balances to identify potential avenues for enhanced project funding.

Explore a Dedicated Revenue Stream: Investigate mechanisms to secure a recurring, dedicated revenue source specifically for *Ideas in Action* to ensure predictable, long-term planning.

Enhance Operational Efficiencies: Evaluate opportunities to better align or integrate the City's two participatory budgeting programs (*Ideas in Action* and *Youth Lead the Change*) to streamline administrative costs, maximize staff capacity, and create a more cohesive experience for residents.

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Congratulations to the City of Boston, all the residents and organizations that participated in *Ideas in Action*, and the movement that advocated for Participatory Budgeting in Boston in the first place. The FY26 Cycle is complete!

About Data+Soul

Data+Soul is a research and evaluation consulting firm based in Boston specialising in design, strategy, and evaluation for social impact. This project was led by Evan Kuras, Min Ma, and Bobbie D Norman, with support from Kayla Benitez Alvarez and Outlaw.

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