

CITY OF BOSTON
Office of Participatory Budgeting External Oversight Board

One City Hall Square, Boston, MA 02201

Tuesday, July 16, 2024

EOB members present:

Carolline de Paula, Jim Kennedy, Carla Stovell, Lisa Hy, Jarret Wright, Marilyn Forman

Staff present: Renato Castelo, Director, Office of Participatory Budgeting; Cynthia Lin, Chief of Staff

Board co-chair Jim Kennedy called to order the External Oversight Board meeting and conducted a roll call. Board co-chair Carolline De Paula shared an overview of the agenda for the evening. Co-chair Kennedy then asked if there were any comments or corrections on last week's meeting minutes. He then called for a motion and Board members approved to adopt the minutes.

Director Castelo shared an update on the upcoming board meeting schedule. Tonight's meeting will focus on the City's Data Analytics team presentation on the proposed data analysis approach for identifying community priorities. OPB will also share their observations and reflections on the Idea Collection workshops attended to date. The next meeting will be held on August 1st which will primarily focus on a debrief of Idea Collection month. The subsequent meeting will be held on September 5th which will focus on idea collection review, initial findings for community priorities, and visioning forums.

Director Castelo provided an update on July's idea collection month and provided a preliminary number of ideas collected through the pb portal, pb corners, and phone line. He noted the ongoing and upcoming media advertisements and interviews will happen during the month of July. Board member Jarrett Wright asked if there was a goal for the number of ideas to be collected. Director Castelo stated that there wasn't a specific goal for the pilot year, but ideally the higher number of ideas the better. He stated that there are still a number of workshops happening during the remainder of the month and there will be opportunities to increase these numbers. A member of the Board stated that Cambridge had around 300 ideas for their first cycle, for context.

Director Castelo then shared his observations from the Maverick Landing and NUBE community workshop and Chief of Staff Cynthia Lin and Board member Jarret Wright shared their thoughts from the Mass Senior Action Council workshop. Ms. Lin then provided some overall reflections from the workshops attended to date including thoughts on how the workshops were structured, the importance of flexibility during the meetings, and the reinforcing the significance of the contract partner model in helping to gather residents for community conversations and idea generation for the process. Co-Chair Kennedy asked if there were any process improvements that could be implemented based on the reflections and Director Castelo noted the flexibility for contract partners to assist with submitting ideas during the workshops and there are other recommendations that we will build in future cycles. Board member Jarret Wright asked about "liking" an idea on the PB portal and Director Castelo clarified that this was not included because it would create a potential barrier to entry, requiring participants to register online in order to "like" an idea.

Director Castelo provided a quick intro to the City's Data Analytics team, noting that OPB's work with the team has been to develop a way to analyze and organize the data so OPB can better work with

residents on defining priorities in the fall during community visioning workshops. Julia Vasta from the City of Boston's Department of Innovation and Technology then presented an overview of the data analytics process for analyzing the ideas collected as part of July's Idea Collection month. She provided an overview of the concept of topic modeling and the considerations that her team is currently working on to hone the analysis for the Boston data sets. She emphasized that the model will be used as a method to help tag and categorize ideas and noted that this model is not "generative" and that no idea would be changed. Ms. Vasta illustrated findings from their analysis on the City of Cambridge's data set and the outputs of their model, noting that they will be also conducting a run of New York's data set which is more aligned with ideas that have programs and service recommendations. She reinforced the merit of having manual review in parallel with the topic modeling, and her team and OPB will be working closely to ensure that the community priority topics generated accurately reflect the ideas submitted by residents to the greatest extent possible.

Co-Chair Kennedy asked how a unique and specific idea that doesn't fit within a specific topic category would be elevated. Ms. Vasta responded that unique ideas may often fit in an "Other" category generated by the model and likely will have "low probability score", where the model produces numerical outputs that will help the team find errors, so it would be flagged for manual review by the team to ensure that the idea is accurately categorized. Board member Lisa Hy asked for clarification on what would happen if two ideas were included in one submission. Ms. Vasta stated that the format of the idea would be identified by the model if it had bullets or numbers denoted more than one idea, or it would likely be categorized in the "other" category for manual review. Ms. Hy also asked if ideas in other languages would be translated into English, and Director Castelo agreed that they would.

There were no members from the public available during the meeting for public comment.

Co-Chair De Paula adjourned the meeting at 7:17PM

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