

CITY OF BOSTON
Office of Participatory Budgeting External Oversight Board

Thursday, September 19, 2024

EOB members present:

Jim Kennedy, Betsy Neptune, Jarret Wright, Marilyn Forman, Esther Weathers

OPB 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. He shared an overview of the agenda and asked if there were any comments or corrections on last week's meeting minutes. Mr. Kennedy suggested a correction to a typo in the third paragraph: "Housing support initiatives" should read "Housing support initiatives". He then called for a motion and Board members approved to adopt the minutes. Director Castelo provided an overview of the agenda.

Director Castelo opened up responses to last meeting's public comments. Jeff Lambart provided a response to the first public comment about the data analysis modeling for selecting topics. He mentioned that ideas were grouped into clusters based on their semantic similarities. Board member Betsy Neptune noted her appreciation of having human review of the model outputs to ensure transparency of the process. Board member Jarrett Wright asked if it's clear when a category was changed by a human. Jeff reminded the Board that none of the ideas are being changed and the full text for each submission is being preserved and it will be shown in the Visioning Forums.

Chief of Staff Cynthia Lin proceeded to go through the remaining public comments. One question was how other cities selected ideas to develop into proposals. She noted that Boston's PB process does not use budget delegates to determine proposals. Instead, OPB is working with residents through Visioning Forums to identify ballot proposals. The next question inquired about next steps for ideas that were not selected as community priorities. Ideas that are outside of the City's jurisdiction will be shared with the 311 department to communicate with the appropriate external agency. Board member Neptune asked if all and ineligible ideas would be available for viewing and Ms.Lin stated that ideas will continue to be available on the PB portal.

Ms.Lin continued to the next question about reporting statistics for workshops. In the next Board meeting, Data & Soul (evaluation consultant) will provide some of the statistics from the workshop that were held. She noted that externally organized community meetings were not coordinated with OPB, and that attendance for those events was self-reported when residents submitted their ideas on the PB Portal. The next question concerned the number of ineligible ideas. She noted that about 140 ideas out of the 1,238 submissions were ineligible, most of which originated from online submissions while a few originated from in-person meetings where there was likely more instruction and context for residents. The team will consider more clarity in future instructions.

Board member Neptune asked about the prior meeting's public comments regarding the budget and if it would be addressed.. Director Castelo shared that like many other budget items, conversations about funding for projects happened between the Finance Cabinet and the Administration. The decision to use \$2M for Cycle One was made to guarantee a sustained level of funding of at least 2M for projects for the next 3 Cycles. Co-chair Kennedy asked to share statistics for ideas per capita in neighborhoods and the ability to incorporate into Data & Soul's report. Director Castelo shared that it will be incorporated.

As Board update, Director Castelo shared that Carolline De Paula had stepped down from her role in the Board and that the Office will work with the Boards of Commissions team to try to fill the two vacant seats as soon as possible.

Director Castelo provided brief workflow updates about data analytics, coordination with City Departments, evaluation, and the voting platform. He also shared that the office will be contracting with Decision 21 for the online voting platform and that the in person voting component will be managed by OPB. Ms. Lin then introduced the draft nine (9) community priorities and noted that subtopics would be shared at the next meeting. Board member Neptune had a question about topics that spanned across multiple priorities. Ms. Lin shared that the team will manually review ideas and house ideas in subtopics under each priority.

Director Castelo then presented an update on the Visioning Forums. He noted that OPB will host three (3) Visioning forums in October instead of five (5), a decision made based on the current workload and capacity of the team. Several Board members expressed support for this decision. He noted that after the forums, OPB will host a virtual meeting to present the 15 drafted proposals to the public, allowing for a week of written public comment. OPB will work with City Departments and the Board in meetings open to the public to review and finalize proposals for the PB ballot.

Board member Neptune asked for opportunities to increase engagement from residents since there will be only three in person meetings. Director Castelo responded that given the capacity constraints, the three forums and one public meeting would be the best option for residents to provide feedback; however, this is something the Office will consider Cycle 2. Board member Esther Weathers suggested that the office advertise the forums creatively and consider weekend dates to host the meetings. Director Castelo acknowledged the comment, and added that the Office is being strategic in engaging a smaller group of residents in order to have more constructive conversations to develop ballot proposals.

For the Visioning Forums, Ms. Lin mentioned that the Equity Guidelines will be operationalized during small group discussions to prioritize ideas. Board member Wright suggested scoring the ideas based on equity criteria and Director Castelo agreed to look into this. Director Castelo shared that each forum will focus on 3 community priorities, assigning one priority per small group to review all subtopics and their associated ideas.

There will be a minimum of 3 small groups per Visioning Forum to allow for the discussion of the 3 community priorities. Each small table will draft two (2) ballot proposals, which will then be shared with the larger group and voted on to define 5 ballot proposals per event. At the end of the 3 Visioning Forums, OPB will have collected 15 ballot proposals. The following stage will be the online engagement and written public comment period.

Co-chair Kennedy suggested that the office consider being flexible with the number of subtopic proposals developed by each table, as it requires strong facilitation and consensus, which can be difficult. Board member Weathers mentioned that a three hour meeting is long, and that childcare and food be considered to ensure community participation. She suggested providing people with examples of draft proposals and parameters that residents would respond to, to which Board member Neptune agreed and suggested ways to inform residents without biasing proposals.

Co-Chair Kennedy opened up for public comment. A member of the Better Budget Alliance (BBA) asked about the timeline to fill the vacant Board seats. Director Castelo responded that the Boards and Commissions team will work with the Office to identify potential members. Additionally, the BBA representative shared their experience with ranking proposals during meetings, and suggested having people during the online engagement phase vote on a short list of proposals. Director Castelo acknowledged the comment and talked about potential complications with that approach. Another member of the BBA shared similar concerns to Board member Wright's equity comment, and the need to develop guidelines into rubrics for forums. Having an equity rubric can help build the consensus by allowing residents to rank ideas. Director Castelo acknowledged this concern and suggested setting up a meeting between the BBA and OPB to further discuss the implementation of equity guidelines.

Another member of the BBA echoed Board member Neptune's suggestions of allowing ideas to be available for the public to review. They requested to see the summary report with all ideas that would be shared with the Mayor and City Council. The commenter asked if residents attending the Visioning Forums would be given stipends for their participation. Director Castelo responded that it's up to community partners hosting these meetings to decide if it makes sense of them to use their funds for stipends; however, contracted organizations plan to provide childcare and refreshments.

Co Chair Jim Kennedy adjourned the meeting at 8:03PM

###