

CITY OF BOSTON
Office of Participatory Budgeting External Oversight Board

Thursday, January 9th, 2025

EOB members present:

Jim Kennedy, Lisa Hy, Carla Stovell, Betsy Neptune, Marilyn Forman, Esther Weathers, Jarrett Wright

OPB Staff present: Renato Castelo, Director; Cynthia Lin, Chief of Staff

Board co-chair Jim Kennedy called to order the External Oversight Board meeting and conducted a roll call. Co-Chair Kennedy then called for a motion and Board members approved to adopt the minutes. Director Castelo provided an overview of the agenda and the proposed schedule for the next two Board meetings. He then provided responses to the public comments from the previous board meeting. Board member Neptune thanked Director Castelo for providing responses to the public comments and she wanted to reflect in the meeting minutes that there is a lot of community support for a higher pay range for youth jobs.

Director Castelo continued providing an overview of the department's budget. He started by mentioning that every year the Budget office at the City shares budget guidelines to every department. These are guidelines that departments need to follow. Director Castelo explained operational expenses and PB process expenses in fiscal years for 2024-2026. He pointed out cost savings or increases in each area. Co-Chair Jim Kennedy asked if there was an accurate budget estimate of what the Office would end the fiscal year with. Director Castelo responded that the team cannot confirm beyond the current estimate as preparations for Cycle 2 have not begun yet.

Co-Chair Jim Kennedy shared a comment about the Visioning Forums being challenging and that he is happy to see resources for the next cycles. He asked if the attendance of City Department staff were part of OPB's budget. Director Castelo responded that City staff volunteered on behalf of their department. Board member Hy questioned the actuals for FY24 and how closely the original estimated amounts matched. Director Castelo responded that the team did not have estimates for FY24 because the budget was discussed before his time in the role. Board member Wright shared an observation to separate the office operational budget from the grant funding. Mr. Kennedy provided some context about the special fund approach. The City Audit has the authority to take any unspent funds and transfer it to the general fund and in order to reserve it for the program, the money needs to be moved into a special funds account. He confirmed that if the fund does not get replenished, the office will run out of money but acknowledges that it's a good practice to have the administrative funds to come out of the special funds account.

Board member Weathers shared that the team is being financially responsible; however, the campaign of \$2 million dollars to fund the projects may be an over promise and the Office may want to reframe some marketing. Board member Neptune shared that she believes that budgets are a reflection of

priorities and it is very difficult to see that project funding is not being prioritized. She pointed out that this is not a reflection of the work Director Castelo and the team is doing but all the work and enthusiasm for such a small pool of money makes her rethink about the return on investment for the program. Board member Stovell shared that she was under the impression that there was \$2 million, to which Director Castelo confirmed that there is \$2 million for projects. He shared that in that previous meeting it was discussed that we need to fund projects at \$2 million to ensure the office has sustainability of project funds over time.

Board member Wright mentioned advocacy efforts to spend all of the project funds; however, he acknowledged the risk that this could be a one time process. Mr. Wright mentioned the guidelines that the office was given and the long term fiscal responsibility. He continued by saying that the community should continue to advocate for additional funding. Board member Neptune shared that the City Council passed a nonbinding resolution to use the available funds. Mr. Kennedy shared that March is an important month for budgets being finalized for the next fiscal year. Director Castelo appreciated the comments and feedback on the Office's budget and mentioned that the conversation will continue.

Chief of Staff Cynthia Lin proceeded to present the voting logistics and shared that next Wednesday the office is preparing to launch the voting phase. Ms. Lin communicated voting logistics for the online voting platform and in-person voting. She presented a walk through of the voting online website. She then asked Evan Kuras from Data + Soul to review the voting evaluation survey process. Board member Neptune asked if it would be possible to make the survey links text more visible.

Co-Chair Jim Kennedy opened the meeting for public comments. A member of the public expressed disappointment that the pay rate for youth jobs was not increased. They continued asking the Board to have conversations about how much money should be put towards the department. Another member of the public expressed disappointment about the input and timeframe for submitting next year's budget. They shared a comment about their preference to have demographic information collected before votes are submitted.

Another member of the public inquired about how the Office was taking learnings from the pilot year and incorporating it in the next cycle of PB. They noted it was important to instill value and goals and use data to make informed design process decisions. A member had a comment about if it is possible for community organizations to assist with voting, or residents can only vote at City Hall, library branches and online. Director Castelo commented that people can vote in person at City Hall and if they need assistance they can visit a library branch and a librarian can assist them with voting. Board member Neptune inquired about the demographics survey during voting, and Director Castelo stated that residents can take an optional survey after casting their votes (both online and in-person.)

Co Chair Jim Kennedy adjourned the meeting at 7:50 PM

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