

CITY OF BOSTON
Office of Participatory Budgeting External Oversight Board
One City Hall Square, Boston, MA 02201

Meeting Minutes
Thursday, February 22, 2024

EOB members present:

Carolline Pontoppidan, Jim Kennedy, Esther Weathers, Betsy Neptune, Carla Stovell, Khalid Mustafa, Jarret Wright.

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

Director Castelo called to order the External Oversight Board meeting, did a roll call, and shared an overview of the agenda. He then asked if there were any comments or corrections on last week's meeting minutes. With no comments from the Board, Director Castelo called for a motion and Board members approved to adopt the minutes.

Director Castelo shared an update on the timeline for the rulebook process and shared that a meeting for public comment will now take place tentatively on March 21st. The Director also provided a brief overview of the following weekly board meeting schedule and the overlap with the Rulebook adoption process. Board member Carla Stovell noted that the week of March 25th is a holiday week and may conflict with proposed meeting dates.

Director Castelo reviewed the set of discussion norms that were set at the beginning of the PB process with the Board. This review served as a reminder on how to engage with each other during meetings and help facilitate discussions for the Rulebook which is nearing completion.

OPB's Chief of Staff, Cynthia Lin, discussed the PB process and timeline with specific months associated with the various phases of the PB process from the Rulebook, Planning for PB Implementation, Idea Collection, Data Analysis, Idea Selection, Proposal Development, Voting, and Funding Projects. Director Castelo summarized that the PB process, which runs from July to January, will inform the City's larger budget process, which starts in January and ends in June. Board member Carla Stovell shared that she is comfortable with the PB process timeline and Board member Betsy Neptune seconded.

Director Castelo revisited the mission and purpose of OPB to set the context for discussing the general feedback and themes garnered from last week's public comment period. He outlined the considerations for the PB process, including project types, eligibility, approval processes, and other additional considerations.

Director Castelo discussed four (4) main themes from last week's public comment period and then welcomed discussion from the board regarding these themes. The first theme was to have explicit equity criteria to assess collected ideas, ballot proposals, and awarding projects. He noted that equity, social, and racial justice is embedded in the mission of the OPB and explicitly

included at key points throughout the PB process, such as Idea Selection, Proposal Development, and Evaluation of Proposals.

The second theme focused on offering opportunities for residents to discuss and debate project ideas. Director Castelo provided more detail on workshop activities and discussions that would take part during the Idea Collection Workshops and Idea Selection Forums that would allow residents to engage directly with one another to assess ideas and prioritize themes.

The third theme focused on ensuring community involvement and input that empowers residents in the PB process and beyond. He outlined the various community touchpoints such as Idea Collection, Idea Selection, Voting, and Implementation phases with the community organizations as well as the weekly EOB meetings which are open to the public for feedback.

The fourth theme highlighted the need to retain original ideas from the Idea Collection phase through Implementation. The PB process in every municipality is different and tailored to meet the needs of the community and Boston's PB process will be refined overtime as needed.

Board member Carla also asked if OPB will be coordinating with other departments to ensure there is no duplication of projects and resources. Director Castelo stated that OPB will be engaging with City Departments through the idea collection and proposal development stages to ensure there is coordination.

Board member Carla Stovell and Board member Jim Kennedy asked for clarity on the location specific and city-wide project ideas. Director Castelo elaborated how ideas would be elevated to city-wide priority themes and then developed into more specific neighborhood proposals and implementation with community partners. Board member Jarrett Wright provided an example of an idea trajectory- outlining how an original idea would be grouped into a broader theme, evaluated with equity guidelines, voted on, and then granted to community partners in neighborhoods that are most impacted.

Board member Betsy Neptune appreciated the thoughtfulness of thinking through equity guidelines and considerations with peer cities research, and the transparency needed in idea trajectories to build community trust.

Board member Esther Weathers provided feedback regarding automated intelligence (AI) for data analysis, stating it will inherently be biased and the analytics process will need to be considerate parameters that will help to mitigate this. Director Castelo acknowledged this point and OPB will try to develop a model to leverage technology and will work closely with the Board on this.

Several Board members suggested that OPB look into tagging projects for the community to see the trajectory of project ideas, helping to provide transparency and empowerment for residents. Director Castelo noted that the office will be focused on achieving these goals through several engagement touchpoints for residents and a key element will be communicating the process clearly during this pilot year. OPB can explore this further for future cycles with the assistance of the Board.

Director Castelo opened up the meeting for public comments at 7:20 for 15 minutes. Two (2) attendees from the public provided comments. Director Castelo suggested that the Board and OPB take time to process the comments and provide sufficient feedback at the next meeting as part of the protocol.

A member of the public provided comments regarding idea collection and recommended a longer period than the one-month proposed for engagement. He noted concerns about the PB process timeline, highlighting that OPB is spending only six months on the PB process. A representative of the Better Budget Alliance (BBA) acknowledged OPB's efforts to create more discussion based forums in the PB process and address BBA's prior public comments. The commenter did note specific concerns about maintaining initial ideas based around equity for specific neighborhoods and ensuring they benefit from the PB process.

Board member Jarrett Wright noted that during the proposal evaluation phase, equity guidelines would help to screen and assess neighborhoods that would benefit the most from themed proposals.

Board member Betsy expressed interest in hearing more about the public commenter's concern about the six month PB process timeframe. The commenter suggested running a city-wide process for about eight to nine months city-wide PB cycle and about two to three months of evaluation and planning, based on experience from other cities.

Director Castelo adjourned the meeting at 7:37PM

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