

**RECEIVED**

**By City Clerk at 3:46 pm, Apr 02, 2024**

**APRIL 2, 2024**

**OFFICE OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING**

**PUBLIC COMMENTS RECEIVED ON THE DRAFT RULEBOOK**

**Public Comments Received via email on 3/1/2024**

Kendra Patterson (she/hers)  
Field Director  
Massachusetts Voter Table  
(702) 340-4804

I'm Kendra Patterson, Field Director of the Massachusetts Voter Table, writing in partnership with the Better Budget Alliance regarding the development of Boston's participatory budgeting process and proposed Rulebook.

Residents deserve the City of Boston to lead an inclusive process that is:

- 1) Rooted in racial & economic justice
- 2) Easy and accessible for engagement
- 3) Empowers residents with full decision-making power
- 4) Clear and transparent throughout the entire process in this inaugural participatory budgeting phase.

These can be further advanced by:

- 1) Solidifying equity through the definition of clear goals for participatory budgeting to advance racial and economic justice with prioritizing historically divested communities suffering from the harms of racist and discriminatory policies and practices.
- 2) The Rulebook in its current state, is overly complex and not easy to understand at each stage of the proposed process. This poses challenges to residents' learning of the process and can hinder their engagement within it. Defining key terms such as 'community priority,' 'forum,' 'workshop,' 'idea,' and 'community partner' would enhance clarity and continuity. To equip residents with the necessary information to ideate in the first stage, it is important to share clear expectations of what is considered feasible with disclosing any budget limits for proposed projects.
- 3) Clarify in the Rulebook whether residents will directly decide on the 15 ideas that make it to the ballot or if the Oversight Board will make the selection. Also, specify available participation methods (in person, online, etc).
- 4) Ensure transparency by outlining the criteria used by the Oversight Board to narrow down ideas and identify the decision-makers for RFP awards in the final stage. and how will RFP

decisions be made? Additionally, if original project ideas lack implementation details, how will the Office work with the original composers to preserve the projects' vision and intent?

Thank you for consideration in striving to make this participatory budgeting process the best for residents to participate in.

---

Eliza Parad  
Director of Municipal Democracy  
Center for Economic Democracy  
Cell: (857) 719-2004

Hi Renato and Oversight Board Members,

I am sending this feedback on behalf of the team at CED. We have tried to be as specific as possible in our feedback, knowing that you are trying to finalize the process and not change it completely. If there is any further clarification needed on the points below, please let us know. Thank you!

**1. We suggest adding questions for further clarity and specificity to the idea submission stage.** To your concern around the length of the idea submission form, people can enter N/A if they don't have answers to questions. We have found in our workshops when we ask people "what would you do with up to \$1M", they often say things like "more trees", "more parks", "we need more affordable housing". When we ask our full [solutions worksheet](#) question, people are able to answer most of the questions in 10-20 minutes. Asking more questions will produce more specific ideas, and likely less ideas over all, both of which are helpful! It will be much easier for residents to prioritize and discuss ideas in the visioning forums if the ideas are more flushed out and the Oversight Board will do less interpretation of ideas in the proposal development stage. 3 specific questions we suggest adding are:

- a. *How do you see residents involved in designing or implementing this project?*
- b. *Should this project be implemented by the city or should an outside organization implement it? What qualifications should an organization have to have to get the contract for this idea? Do you have specific city departments or organizations in mind to implement the project?*
- c. *How will this project advance racial or economic equity in the city of Boston?*

\*racial equity was named in the ordinance and feels important when we think about city investment. Economic equity is also another way to address communities with greater needs or fewer resources. We have asked this question in community workshops and participants are able to answer. This answer is important for the Oversight Board to consider during the equity criteria screening process. The current question of "what positive impact will this have on your community" does not address equity.

2. Betsy mentioned this in a previous meeting and we'd like to see this added to the rulebook during the proposal development stage: "The Oversight Board and Office of PB will not change

the content of ideas during the proposal development stage. If the original idea is lacking details or unclear, the OB and/or OPB will work with residents during the visioning forums to add specificity and get in touch with the original idea proposer.

**3. Stage 2 of the PB process needs further clarification.** You mentioned that all ideas collected in stage 1 will be shared with the administration and city departments and that original ideas will be retained in stage 3 (visioning forums). Given that, the purpose of stage 2, "community priorities", is still not clear, and does not seem to really add anything to the process. Please add specifics about how an idea becomes a "community priority". For ex, does a similar idea have to be proposed by several (how many?) people to be considered a priority? What if one idea is LIKED several times but there are no "similar" ideas -- will it be a community priority? Or will all ideas make it into some community priority because there will be an "other" category? It seems like most ideas will fall under the 11 issue areas named in idea submission, and that then all ideas would make it to the visioning round with 15 community priorities. If that is the case and there is no need to eliminate any ideas in stage 2, then we would suggest removing it to make the process clearer. Alternatively, instead of doing the feasibility and equity criteria screen after the visioning forums, you could do those in stage 2 and then have a more manageable number of ideas for residents to prioritize during the visioning forums.

4. We know we have asked for **clear and specific equity goals** many times. We have reviewed rulebooks from many other PB processes and heard from other PB practitioners around the country that they have specific equity goals including specific populations and neighborhoods that have been disinvested, under-invested or left out of decision-making. We know this is a challenging moment for DEI in the country, however, these racial and economic equity-focused PB processes are not encountering legal challenges, so suggest Boston not shy away from explicit equity language either. One such example is [Marin County's PB rulebook](#), and of course the language in our equity criteria we've sent before.

5. We continue to think that **a needs assessment phase of the PB process** during which people are asked to identify issues that they and their community are facing will be helpful for several reasons:

- The needs assessment phase could still be used to inform the overall budget, sharing all the needs with city departments and OBM.
- Adding in this step will encourage residents to work together to solve the collectively-identified problems, rather than just bringing an idea that is specific to their local context or a pet project, and will help get people out of their silos.
- One of the main pieces of feedback we receive when leading mock PB workshops in Boston is: "it's \$3M across all neighborhoods and all issues? this is a set up to pit great ideas against each other". Focusing each PB cycle on a few themes will help increase the impact of limited funds.

Example: [NYC participatory needs assessment](#)

If it's not possible to adjust the process this year to add a needs assessment, we hope this idea stays on the table for the next cycle.

---

George Lee,  
Youth Justice and Power Union

I am writing to share Youth Justice and Power Union's feedback about the participatory budgeting rulebook. The ordinance creating the Office of Participatory Budgeting states that the Office's purpose includes aligning with "the City's goals of achieving and embedding equity and inclusion into City practices, and building collective capacity on issues of racial and social justice." The rulebook must be strengthened to ensure the process is rooted in racial, economic, and social justice.

Three key ways this should happen are:

- \* Actively prioritizing projects that invest in communities that have been harmed by racism and discrimination, and reverse those harms.

- \* Prioritize ideas that center and/or serve Black, Indigenous, immigrants and refugees, youth, unhoused people, formerly incarcerated people, and LGTBQ+ residents.

- \* On page 8 under "Projects that are ineligible for funding" add: ideas that increase surveillance or policing, because these do not meet the goals of Boston's PB process of advancing racial and social justice. State what ideas are ineligible on the idea collection website so people are clear on the guidelines.

When people submit ideas, they should provide an answer for how their idea furthers racial and social justice. During the proposal development phase, proposals should be screened according to clear equity criteria. After proposals are developed, they should be shared back out to the public alongside an analysis of how they further equity..

Explicitly building equity more into the process is of the utmost importance, especially when the current funding for the process is only \$3.5 million without any way to prioritize neighborhoods that have been most impacted by racial, economic, and social injustice.

In addition, the process must ensure that resident decision-making is central. Currently, it is extremely unclear how the 15 community priorities are determined and whether this will truly be grounded in resident decision-making. Nor is resident decision-making and participation during the proposal development or the awarding phases clear. Other cities have created much clearer processes for residents to be deeply involved at many phases of participatory budgeting, and the rulebook does not do so.

It is positive that the rulebook allows voting from young people who are either at least 11 years old or in at least sixth grade. It is also positive that it does not require people to be citizens to vote, although it should be named explicitly that residents who are not citizens can vote.

Also, it is critical that the City fund participatory budgeting with at least \$40 million so that residents know that they will have meaningful participation in the process and be able to fund projects with real impact in their neighborhoods. Having only \$3.5 million means that only a small number of projects will be funded and falls short of the vision of the vast majority of voters who decided to change the City Charter to create participatory budgeting.

---

## **Public comments received during External Oversight Board meeting on 3/28/2024**

### **Rulebook and PB Process Clarifications**

- **Clarify what happens to ideas that don't fall under the top 15 community priorities?**
  - Director Castelo Clarification- Idea collection serves two purposes. Identified projects that can be funded through the PB process but also inform larger city budget conversation. There are future cycles of PB where that idea or priority may become more relevant for residents and the City.
- **Clarify resident input process. How are priorities identified and who is responsible for decision making?**
  - It is unclear who is developing this list for final options. If there is a short list of 15- who is deciding what projects are cut? This process should be democratically decided and resident led. Residents should be producing the list of ideas to go onto the ballot and the process of the final fifteen is how the residents are identifying priorities vs. EOB having full discretion. EOB should be applying equity criteria and consolidating things that are the same. Democratically decided. This is more of a comment but I want clarity on who is making decisions.
- **Clarify idea proposal/ voting phases**
  - Will there be a template that people will use to submit idea proposals? Have you looked at community partners?
    - Director Castelo- There will be multiple channels to submit ideas- online, PB corners, idea collection workshops, and PB phone line. Work in partnership with community groups to connect with hard to reach populations to assist residents submit ideas. Will explore with partners in the planning phase.
  - How do we conduct voting- serving multiple populations?
    - Director Castlo- Envisioning online and in person. The details will be explored during the planning phase.

- **Clarify Project Awarding Phase and evaluating RFPs**
  - Once the project ideas get voted on. Community groups can apply to do the work. Community feedback loops. Want to ensure that community groups that are implementing projects are trusted by residents.
    - Director Castelo- As organizations apply for funding, there is an evaluation process for each of the proposals that include equity guidelines. Conversations and decisions will be open to the public as we assess community organizations. This will add a layer of transparency on decisions.
    - Board Member Betsy Neptune - letters of recommendation from community organizations could be considered as part of the proposal submission
- **Clarify how ideas are being communicated to other parts of the City for the larger City budget process.**
  - Question about communication of ideas that don't make it to the ballot. How will they shape the budget in the future?
  - Director Castelo - The Office will explore creating a short report highlighting key findings from the idea collection process. This will be designed for City leadership and departments and accessible to the public. This will be explored in the planning phase.

### Equity

- **Create specific equity goals and guidelines. Embed equity criteria in the PB process.**
  - Curious about what the equity criteria are - they should be incorporated into the rulebook. Make sure projects and ideas are being done by criteria.
  - Director Castelo- Will be doing more research in the planning phase. Can be included in the rulebook when it's ready.
- **Incorporate a specific equity question in the Idea Collection Phase.**
  - How will this project advance racial equity in the City?

### Needs Assessment

- **Create a needs assessment utilizing prior studies and research as a baseline to inform PB process**
  - Can we review prior needs assessments to inform the PB process for needs assessment framing/ inform PB priorities. Because PB has limited funding, starting narrow makes more sense. Focus on needs rather than random ideas that would be categorized. Needs will be similar across research done so far. Starting narrow with needs can be more empowering for people to show up and be realistic on focusing priorities.
  - Director Castelo
    - Idea collection is to inform the process and larger city budget. If issues are pre-identified, there is a possibility we are limiting ideas and are silencing those concerns at the beginning. There are concerns about narrowing from the start. If we have a more open approach that allow for more ideas this helps inform the PB process and the larger conversations about distribution for city budget resources. We can evaluate how this goes and discuss and explore in future cycles.

- **Incorporate more targeted questions in the Idea Collection Phase.**
  - Suggestion to incorporate additional questions during the idea selection phase. This will help to provide more specificity to help create proposals. There is also the option when writing the proposals, to go back to the original proposer to clarify.
  - If the concern is about length of questions during Idea Collection- this is why the community sessions will be helpful. People to guide residents and help think about ideas in-depth. When you ask questions in workshops people do have answers.
  - Questions
    - How should residents be involved in designing or implementing this project?
    - Should this project be implemented by the city or outside vendor or contractor?
    - Who are you thinking of- that is already doing similar work in the city?
    - How will this project advance racial equity in the City?
  - Director Castelo: One of the challenges is keeping this survey short and accessible. We can consider these further.
- **Building Consensus and Needs Assessment.**
  - Board Member Jarret Wright- one of the challenges on building consensus on a project that appeals to a small group of people. What are your suggestions to get a cross section of PB to support an idea that might only benefit a small group of people?
  - Underscores the need for equity criteria. Starting with identifying needs and direction of priorities rather than prescriptions. Then once you have an understanding of priorities you're able to assess and apply rubric and objectively assess which idea achieves this priority. Needs assessment is raising awareness of where the gaps are.