

Opportunities and Considerations as Boston looks to implement Participatory Budgeting for Residents

Testimony of the Boston Municipal Research Bureau

Before the

Boston City Council's Committee on Government Operations

January 30, 2023

Regarding: Docket #0100, Ordinance establishing the Office of Participatory Budgeting, amending the City of Boston Code, Chapter V.

As the Administration looks to move forward with implementing participatory budgeting in Boston that includes engagement opportunities for all residents, I offer several considerations:

The Mayor's proposed ordinance tasks the Office of Participatory budgeting to study best practices for creating an inclusive and equitable participatory budgeting process and publish a Rule Book outlining policies and procedures for implementation. The process and Rule Book, as well as a straight-forward, easily accessible presentation of the process and opportunity for all residents, should serve as resources for the community and city officials alike as we implement participatory budgeting in Boston.

The proposed ordinance includes several important requirements to assist the City in managing a participatory process not intended to establish ongoing, enduring programs:

1. Participatory budgeting proposals are to include cost estimates for implementation
2. Funded projects will be limited to:
 - One-time, non-recurring programs;
 - Not include creation of new permanent positions; and
 - Be feasible for the relevant city department(s) or agency/jurisdiction to implement.

The proposal indicates a program could be implemented and executed over multiple years. More specifics are needed regarding multi-year programs, including criteria for a multi-year program to be approved and reporting requirements for multi-year programs.

Community Engagement and Managing Expectations

The Participatory Budgeting engagement process comes with challenges and opportunities:

We certainly want to provide a strong community outreach and engagement effort to encourage all residents to participate in this initiative.

At the same time, there is a need to manage expectations about the program without dampening enthusiasm.

Reporting & Accountability

The proposed ordinance includes language on the Office of Participatory Budgeting's responsibility to report on the use of funds, including the geographic distribution of funded projects and economic and demographic breakdowns of neighborhoods benefitting from funded projects.

We encourage the Office to ALSO identify neighborhoods NOT benefitting from any Participatory Budgeting projects or programs in a particular year.

The Office should make its analysis and underlying data available on the city's website and on at least an annual basis in a public hearing held by the Oversight Board.

Funding

The FY23 budget included \$2 million to fund the Office of Participatory Budgeting, including staff, and begin programming efforts prior to the required start date.

The Administration's FY24 funding proposal for the program is expected to be included in the Mayor's FY24 budget proposal.