

# CITY OF BOSTON PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING RULEBOOK



CITY OF BOSTON  
OFFICE OF  
PARTICIPATORY  
BUDGETING

MARCH 2024

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a democratic process where community members directly decide how to spend part of a public budget. Participatory Budgeting is a practice that deepens democracy, builds stronger communities, and creates a more equitable distribution of public resources.

The City of Boston's Office of Participatory Budgeting (OPB) was established to provide an official point of entry for Boston residents to contribute to the City's budget process. The Office works to empower constituents and elevate community centered project ideas with an emphasis on advancing social and racial equity. Through yearly PB cycles, residents will be able to propose creative new ideas to address local needs, and as well as to help inform priorities for the City's annual budget process.

For this first pilot year, OPB and its External Oversight Board (EOB) have created a "Participatory Budgeting Rulebook" to provide a set of rules and operations for participatory budgeting in Boston. A description of phases and timeline is summarized below:



**RULEBOOK  
DEVELOPMENT  
& PLANNING FOR  
IMPLEMENTATION**  
*(Jan. - Mar. 2024)*

The Office of Participatory Budgeting and its External Oversight Board determine the parameters and procedures that will guide the implementation of participatory budgeting in Boston.



**IDEA  
COLLECTION**  
*(Apr. - Jun. 2024)*

There are multiple opportunities for residents to share project ideas that can be considered for funding through the City's Office of Participatory Budgeting. Ideas can be submitted through an online PB Portal, a PB phone line, in-person at Public Library branches and at City Hall, and at events hosted in partnership with community organizations.



**REVIEW OF  
COMMUNITY  
PRIORITIES**  
*(Aug. - Sep. 2024)*

OPB reviews all collected project ideas to determine eligibility, and working closely with its Board in meetings open to the public, will identify the top 15 Community Priorities emerging across the City.

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**VISIONING FORUMS & ONLINE ENGAGEMENT**  
*(Oct. - Nov. 2024)*

At Visioning Forums, residents will engage with relevant City Departments to review, discuss, and assess feasibility and impact of the ideas nested under community priorities. Through this process, the public will help identify a short list of ideas that best address each community priority. Residents will also be able to provide recommendations for the development of ballot proposals online.



**PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT**  
*(Dec. 2024)*

Based on resident priorities and feedback collected in-person and online, the Office and its External Oversight Board will draft ballot proposals for each of the 15 Community Priorities. OPB and relevant City Departments will conduct a final feasibility assessment and determine estimated costs for each ballot proposal. A ballot with the 15 proposals will be created for online and in-person voting.



**VOTE**  
*(Jan. 2025)*

Residents will vote for five (5) out of the 15 ballot proposals. Voting will occur online and at in-person sites at City Hall and Public Library branches. Ballot proposals with the most votes will be awarded up to the funding cap for the particular PB Cycle.



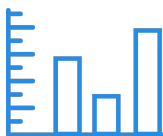
**FUND PROJECTS**  
*(Feb. - Apr. 2025)*

OPB will work with City Departments to determine the most appropriate avenue to implement winning proposals. Implementation can happen via City Departments doing the work, or by offering contracts or grants to community groups.



**IMPLEMENTATION MONITORING**  
*(May 2025)*

The Office will track and report on the progress of PB funded projects on its website and annual reports.



**EVALUATION**  
*(Jul. - Apr. 2025)*

OPB and the Board will assess the outcomes of the pilot year, monitoring and tracking the implementation progress of PB-funded projects to ensure accountability and successful results.

# 1. PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

## ABOUT THIS RULEBOOK

The purpose of this Rulebook is to outline the overall policies and procedures of the Participatory Budgeting (PB) process in Boston, including measures that align 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. This Rulebook serves as a standalone document meant to provide a framework and standard set of rules and operations for PB in Boston. Any supplemental materials produced, including but not limited to [OPB's website](#) and outreach and engagement materials, follow the guidelines outlined by this document. Some programmatic details not included in the Rulebook, such as agendas and format of community meetings, will be developed during the Planning for Implementation Phase.

Between January and March of 2024, the Office of Participatory Budgeting (OPB) and the External Oversight Board (EOB) worked collectively to create this Rulebook in meetings open to the public. The content and overall framework described in this document was developed by researching best practices on participatory budgeting and incorporating comments and feedback from the Board and the public. OPB will annually review, amend, and update the Rulebook as needed, in consultation and with the majority approval of the Board.

## WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING?

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a democratic process where community members directly decide how to spend part of a public budget. Participatory Budgeting started in 1989 as an anti-poverty measure in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Since then, it has spread to over 7,000 cities around the world. PB is a practice that deepens democracy, builds stronger communities, and creates a more equitable distribution of public resources. Several cities in the United States, such as New York, Chicago, Durham, Cambridge and Somerville have adopted and implemented PB processes to increase the civic and budget engagement among its residents. For more information about participatory budgeting, visit [participatorybudgeting.org](https://participatorybudgeting.org).

While the basic concept remains the same across cities, the process for implementation of participatory budgeting may vary due to local factors. Municipalities often go through several iterations of process improvements to enhance the program's effectiveness, efficiency, and impact over time.

## **PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN BOSTON**

In Boston, [Youth Lead the Change \(YLC\)](#) was established in 2014 as the City's first youth-led participatory budgeting initiative. The process is currently led by the Office of Youth Engagement and Advancement and invests one million dollars of the City's [capital budget](#) to give young people the power to decide how to spend it for the benefit of their communities. Youth aged 12 to 22, who live, work, or go to school in the City of Boston are able to participate in the process by submitting ideas and voting on the finalists. The YLC process runs from October through June and includes:

- Evaluation and Updates (October)
- Idea Collection (November - January)
- Idea Sorting and Ballot Creation (February - March)
- Voting (April - May)
- Votefest- Winning Projects Announcement (June)

## **THE OFFICE OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING**

In the 2021 Municipal Election, Boston voters approved a ballot measure to create the Office of Participatory Budgeting. As a result, an [Ordinance](#) establishing the Office was approved by the City Council in the Spring of 2023.

The mission of the Office of Participatory Budgeting is to provide an official point of entry for Boston residents to contribute to the City's budget process. OPB advances this mission by:

- Furthering public engagement and direct democratic involvement
- Building collective capacity on issues of racial and social justice
- Aligning with the City's goals of achieving and embedding equity and inclusion into the City practices

### **OPB plans to host yearly participatory budgeting cycles to allow for continuous public engagement in order to:**

1. Offer opportunities for the public to propose creative new ideas to address local needs;
2. Gauge resident priorities to inform the City's annual budget process.

## GUIDING PRINCIPALS

- **Civic Education & Empowerment** - educate community about local government decision making and empower them to be more involved in civic processes, testing new ways to maximize community involvement.
- **Development & Impact** - the Office's funds are spent in ways that prioritize equity issues and address the greatest needs of the community.
- **Partnerships & Trust** - build partnerships between local government, community organizations, and residents to strengthen confidence and trust in local government.
- **Accessibility** - make it easy for people to participate in the City's budgeting processes.
- **Equity & Inclusion** - ensure the participatory budgeting process includes and benefits groups that have been historically disenfranchised.

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

**The Office of Participatory Budgeting (OPB):** The Office is responsible for designing the process, establishing policies and procedures, implementing, and evaluating participatory budgeting in the City of Boston. OPB's role is to execute the City's mission and goals outlined in the PB Ordinance. Additionally, the Office is responsible for facilitating partnerships and relationship building between City Departments, residents, community groups, and other stakeholders to contribute in the PB process and City budget at large. The Office is also charged with creating and amending the Rulebook on an annual basis in consultation with members of the External Oversight Board.

**External Oversight Board:** Nine board members oversee and support the Office of Participatory Budgeting in the development and implementation of the PB process. Board term appointments last for two-years.

**Community Members:** City of Boston residents are encouraged to participate in the PB process by submitting project ideas, reviewing and evaluating Community Priorities and ideas, and voting for their top proposals on the final ballot.

**City Departments:** Departments work collaboratively with OPB and the External Oversight Board to assess feasibility, cost estimates, and support with the implementation of PB projects.

**Community Partners:** Community organizations can partner with the Office of Participatory Budgeting throughout the PB cycle to engage and assist residents in generating project ideas, reviewing and evaluating Community Priorities, and help promote voting for project proposals.

Community partners and local groups may have the opportunity to implement voted project proposals by way of grants or contracts. Local organizations can tailor proposal responses to meet the needs and priorities of their particular communities. The City will monitor progress of implementation with awarded partners.

## **OPB'S EXTERNAL OVERSIGHT BOARD**

The Office of Participatory Budgeting has an External Oversight Board of nine Boston residents with experience and expertise in various topics relevant to participatory budgeting, including but not limited to community investment and development, public finance, open space, urban planning, community organizing, affordable housing, public education, public health, environmental protection, historic preservation, and a demonstrated history of civic involvement in their communities.

External Oversight Board members oversee and support the Office of Participatory Budgeting in the development and implementation of PB in the City.

### **Members of the External Oversight Board for the 2024 and 2025 PB Cycles are:**

- **Betsy Cowan Neptune**, Executive Director, BUILD
- **Carla Stovell**, Board Member, New England United 4 Justice
- **Carolline de Paula**, Director of Adult Education, Jackson Mann Community School
- **Esther Chong Weathers**, Associate Director of Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging at the Harvard Graduate School of Design
- **Jarret Wright**, Director of Cybersecurity, Massachusetts Port Authority
- **Jim Kennedy**, Retired member of the Office of Budget Management, City of Boston
- **Khalid Mustafa**, Coaching Supervisor, Fathers' Uplift
- **Lisa Hy**, Program Manager, Tufts Medical Center Community Benefits and Health Initiatives
- **Marilyn Forman**, Director of Community Organizing and Resident Engagement, Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation

**NOTE:** Board members will be reimbursed for transportation expenses incurred in the performance of their duties, such as parking and transit tickets.

## 2. PROJECT ELIGIBILITY

### CRITERIA FOR ELIGIBLE PROJECTS

The PB process prioritizes project ideas that build collective capacity on issues of social and racial justice. Project ideas must meet the the following eligibility criteria:

- Projects are limited to a one-time expense, and do not create new permanent positions.
- Project ideas must be feasible to implement, and be consistent with existing City policies, laws, regulations, and the Participatory Budgeting Ordinance.
- Projects must be implemented or managed by the appropriate City Department or agency receiving direct budget appropriations.
- Project proposals may include programs and services, as well as physical infrastructure, technological improvements, and community enhancements on City-owned public property.
  - *Infrastructure projects on private, state or federal property are not eligible, such as projects concerning the Department of Conservation & Recreation (DCR) or the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA).*
  - *Project ideas related to programs and services in non-City owned facilities are eligible.*

### Project examples that are eligible for funding:

- Programming to strengthen mental health among Boston youth
- Workforce training programs for residents re-entering society after incarceration
- Parenting education programs for single and teen parents
- Digital literacy classes for senior citizens to learn new skills and promote social connections
- Vocational training and financial literacy for low-income residents
- Expand the City's Wicked Free WiFi network to reach more low-income areas
- Enhancing public spaces through infrastructure projects (public art, street trees, benches, etc.)
- Invest and equip community centers with computer hardware and software programs that enable residents to access job search resources
- Increase resident access to fresh and healthy food through community garden programs or community fridges administered through local organizations.



### **Project examples that are ineligible for funding**

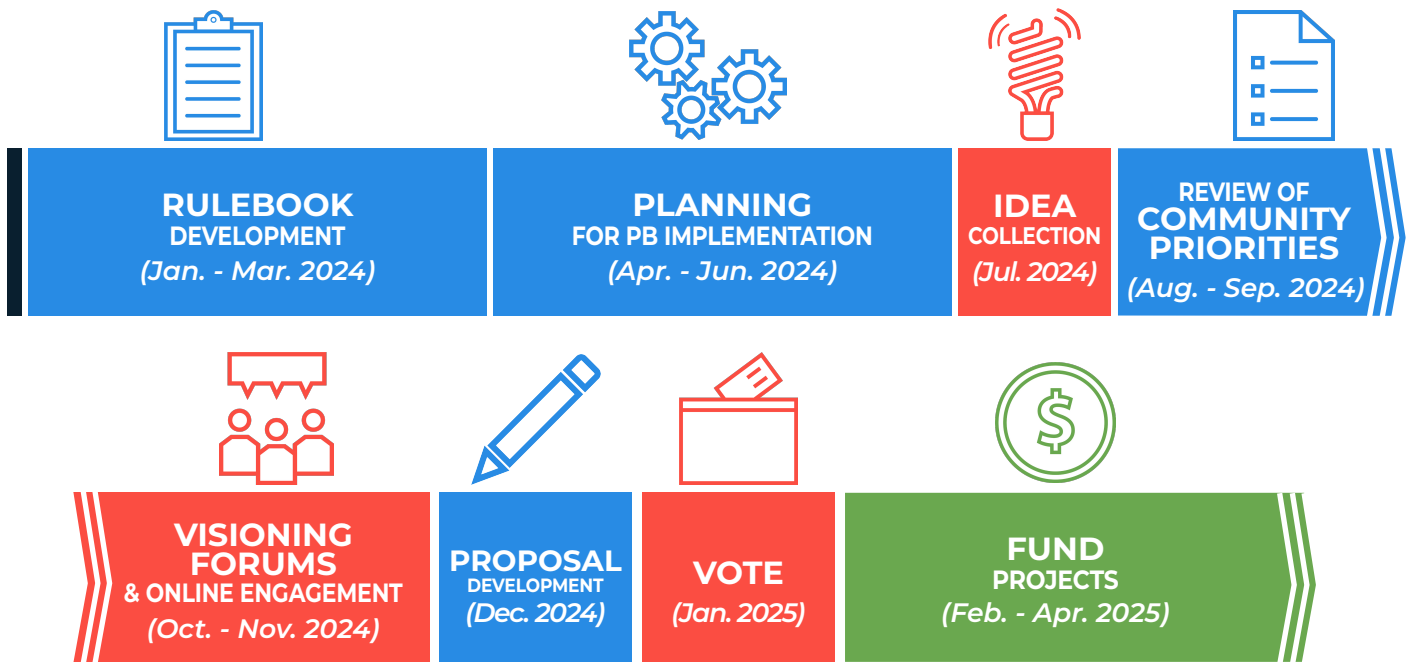
- Paying for the salary of a public employee to provide services
- Repairing a privately owned building
- Helping an organization renovate a space that it rents from a private landlord
- Helping a religious institution repair its sanctuary
- Increase the frequency of MBTA buses or trains

**NOTE:** Before being submitted for public vote, project proposals with estimated costs will be reviewed in advance by the appropriate City department or agency, and must be certified by the City's Chief Financial Officer.

# 3. TIMELINE

The Office of Participatory Budgeting proposes the following timeline for the various PB phases in Cycle One. Phase durations and the overall timeline may change slightly due to process refinements during the pilot year.

**FIGURE 1: PB PROCESS TIMELINE AND DATES**



## PHASES OF PB AND ESTIMATED DURATION

Phase	Estimated Duration
Rulebook Development & Planning for PB Implementation	6 months
Idea Collection	1 month
Review of Community Priorities	2 months
Visioning Forums & Online Engagement	2 months
Proposal Development	1 month
PB Voting	1 month
Awarding PB Projects & Implementation Monitoring	3 months +
Evaluation	Entire PB Cycle 1

# 4. PHASES



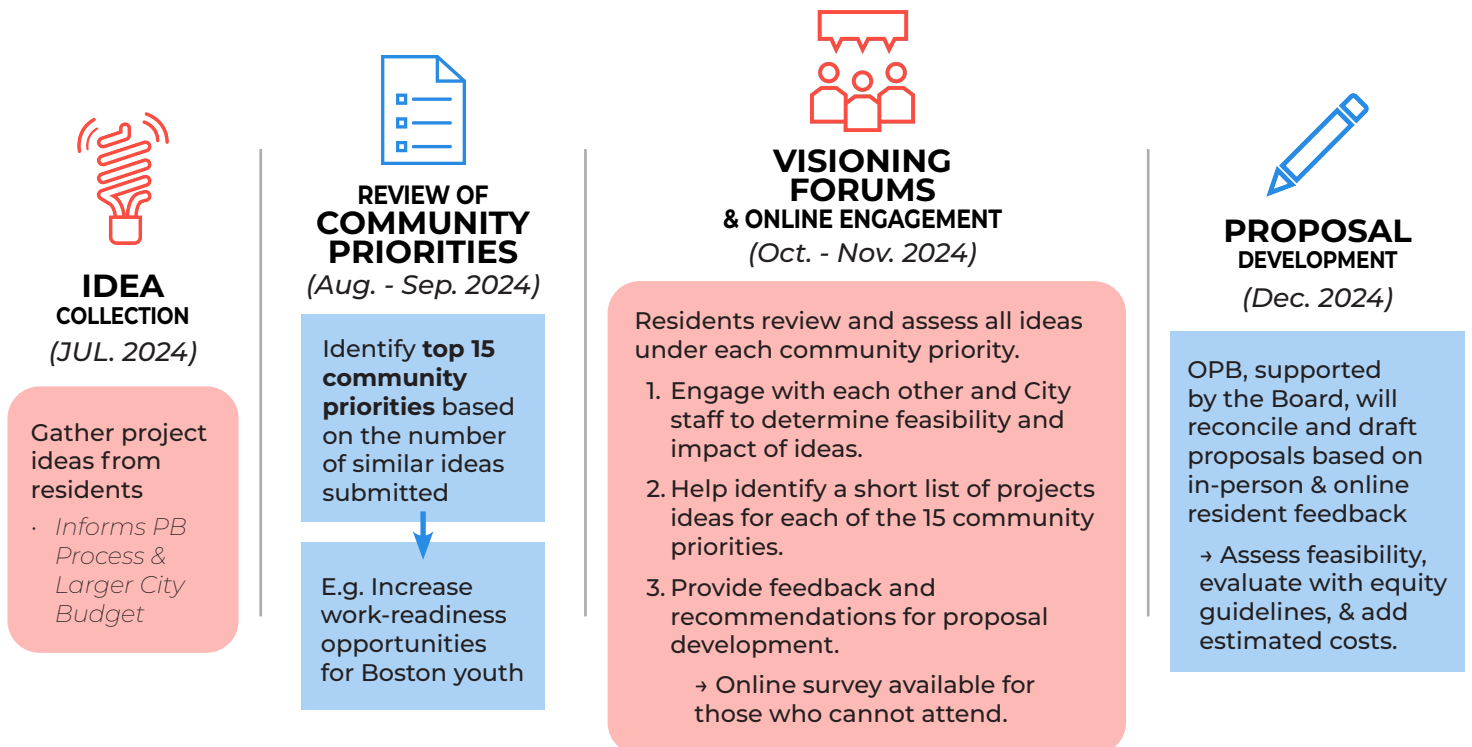
## RULEBOOK DEVELOPMENT & PLANNING FOR PB IMPLEMENTATION (JANUARY - JUNE 2024)

The Office of Participatory Budgeting and the nine members of the External Oversight Board met on a weekly basis from January through March 2024 to establish the parameters and procedures that will guide the implementation of Participatory Budgeting in Boston. During these meetings, OPB and the Board defined the overall framework and timeline for PB implementation. Meetings were open to the public and resident feedback was solicited, considered, and incorporated into the planning process.

From April to June 2024, the Office will begin planning for PB implementation, ensuring that all the details will be ready for launching this City-wide initiative.

The following image provides a high-level overview and example of the PB process from Idea Collection through Proposal Development.

**FIGURE 2: PB PROCESS EXAMPLE (FROM IDEA TO BALLOT PROPOSAL)**





**IDEA  
COLLECTION**  
(JULY 2024)

The Office of Participatory Budgeting will leverage technology and community partnerships to ensure that Boston residents are able to submit project ideas to the City. The public engagement strategies below will allow OPB to connect with residents online and in their communities:

- **Online “PB Portal”:** Similar to Cambridge, Somerville, and other municipalities across the nation, OPB is creating a website for the public to learn about participatory budgeting, submit their project ideas, and follow each step of the process. Boston residents will be able to submit their ideas and see what other project proposals have been submitted across the City. Through the online PB Portal, residents will be able to review project eligibility criteria before submitting an idea. The site will be mobile friendly, easy to navigate, and accessible in Boston’s top languages.
- **In-Person Idea Collection Workshops:** To ensure participation and engagement of hard-to-reach populations, OPB will contract with community organizations to assist with public education and collect resident ideas. During this pilot year, OPB will host Idea Collection Workshops in partnership with contracted community organizations that will be open to the public in various neighborhoods across the City. The selection of organizations will be determined in consultation with the External Oversight Board.

**NOTE:** An Idea Collection Toolkit will be available online for any community group to host their own Idea Collection Workshops. Attendees will be encouraged to submit their ideas via the online PB Portal.

- **PB Phone Line:** A designated phone number will be available for residents to call to submit their project ideas. When calling, a multilingual message will instruct the public on how to share their ideas verbally with the Office. If residents call the City’s 311 Constituent Services Center, the Center will be able to direct them to the PB Phone Line.
- **PB Corners at Boston Public Libraries & City Hall:** In partnership with the Boston Public Library, branch locations across the City will have “Participatory Budgeting Corners,” where residents will be able to submit their ideas. Participatory Budgeting Corners will also be available at Boston City Hall.

## IDEA COLLECTION GUIDELINES

The following guidelines will be used at the onset of the PB process during the Idea Collection Phase:

### Who can submit project ideas?

- Only City of Boston residents, regardless of age.
- Members of the External Oversight Board cannot submit project ideas.

### What type of information will be required from residents to submit ideas?

- First & Last Name
- Neighborhood of residence
- Zip Code
- *Optional:* Email address
- *Optional:* Preferred language

### How should project ideas be described?

- Name or title of the project idea
- A short description of the idea (50 words or less recommended)
- If the idea serves the entire City or a specific neighborhood or location
- The positive impact of the project idea to the community (50 words or less recommended)
- The category the idea belongs to (**Drop down menu**)
  - **Arts & Culture:** Project ideas focused on arts and cultural programming that promote cultural spaces in the City.
  - **Community Resources:** Project ideas that provide assistance or services to residents in need, such as programs at community centers, financial or digital literacy, English as a second language, or GED classes.
  - **Local Economy & Worker Empowerment:** Project ideas that improve access to quality jobs, skills training, career pipelines, and other resources for workers, small business owners, and entrepreneurs.
  - **Education, Youth & Families:** Project ideas related to education for all ages, as well as proposals that meet the needs of Boston's youth, senior citizens, and families.
  - **Environment, Sustainability, and Food Access:** Project ideas that help increase access to healthy and affordable food, promote environmental justice, and help increase the quality of life in Boston.
  - **Facilities, Parks & Recreation:** Project ideas that Invest in clean, green, safe and accessible open space, facilities, and programming for residents and neighborhoods.



- **Health and Well-being:** Project ideas that promote the physical and mental health of Boston residents of all ages.
- **Public Safety:** Project ideas that advance safety and increase justice in the City, such as community violence prevention programs and initiatives for healing and recovering from trauma and substance abuse.
- **Streets & Sidewalks:** Project ideas to improve City streets and sidewalks and promote safety and accessibility.
- **Transportation:** Project ideas that promote transportation options that are safe and accessible for people walking, biking, riding transit, or driving vehicles in the City.
- **Other / Not Sure:** Other community centered ideas that may not fit in the previous categories.

### Demographic Data

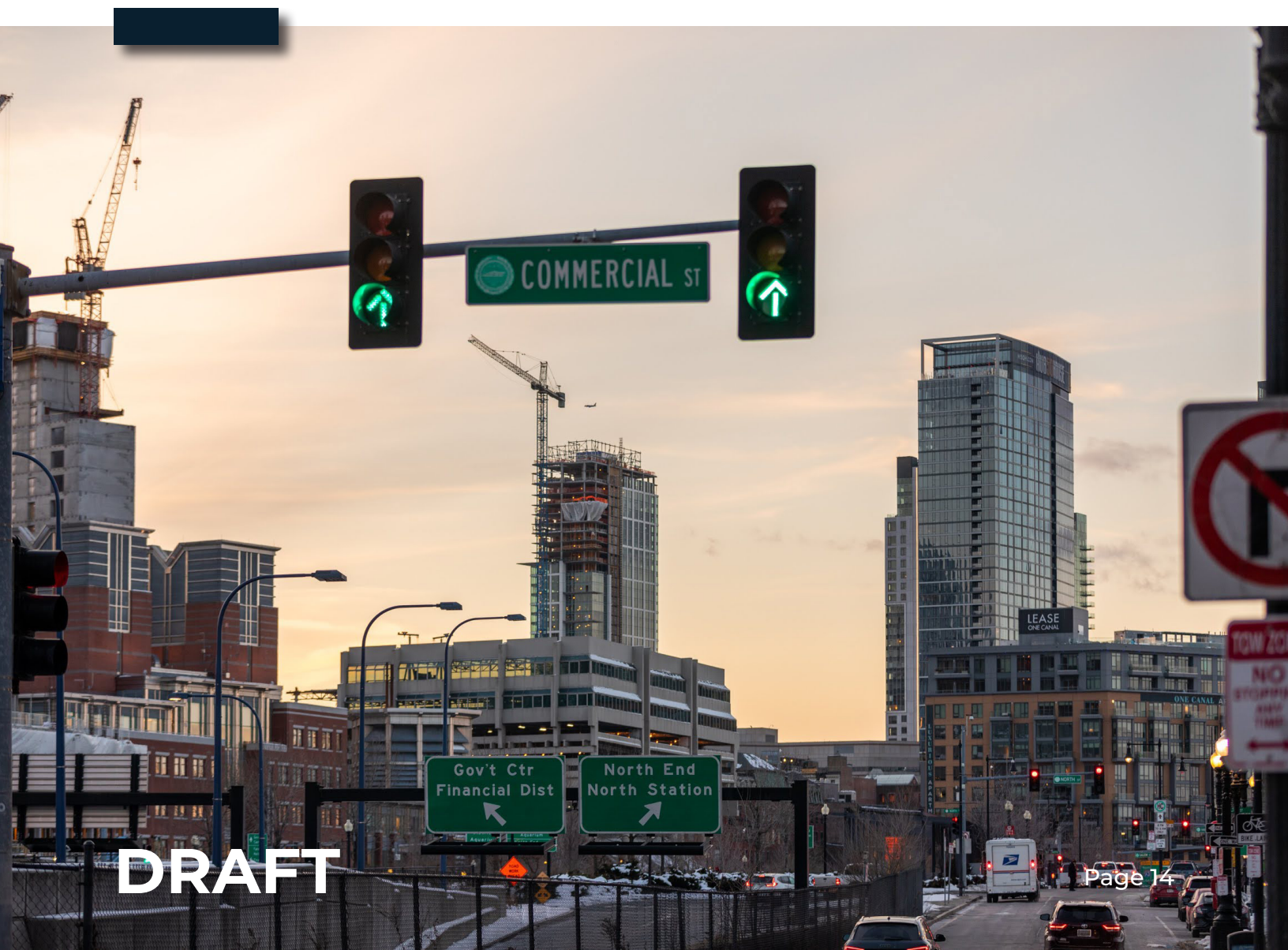
- The Office of Participatory Budgeting will prompt residents to respond to an optional demographic survey during public engagement phases (Idea Collection, Visioning Forums and Voting.)



## REVIEW OF COMMUNITY PRIORITIES (AUGUST - SEPTEMBER 2024)

The Office of Participatory Budgeting will review the comprehensive list of project ideas received during the Idea Collection Phase and conduct an initial screening to ensure proposed projects meet PB eligibility criteria. In partnership with the City's Data Analytics team, and working closely with its Board, OPB will identify the top 15 Community Priorities emerging across the City based on the number of similar ideas submitted by residents.

Eligible, original resident ideas will be nested under each of the 15 Community Priorities and be carried through for consideration in the next Visioning Forums phase. All the project ideas submitted for the current cycle will be visible online via the PB Portal and meetings held with the Board during this phase will be open to the public.





## VISIONING FORUMS & ONLINE ENGAGEMENT (OCTOBER - NOVEMBER 2024)

During this phase, residents will engage with relevant City Departments to review, discuss, and assess feasibility and impact of the ideas nested under community priorities. Through this process, the public will help identify a short list of ideas that best address each community priority. Residents will also be able to provide recommendations for the development of ballot proposals online.

### OPB will provide several engagement touchpoints:

- **In-Person Forums:** In partnership with community organizations, OPB will host five (5) Visioning Forums across the City. Each forum will focus on three (3) Community Priorities, for a total of 15 priorities in five (5) forums. Forums are structured in this manner to ensure residents are able to focus on a manageable number of Community Priorities and engage in in-depth and meaningful discussions with each other..

Visioning Forums will be centered around facilitated table discussions, which will allow attendees to review, discuss, and assess feasibility and impact of individual ideas under each Community Priority. Relevant City Department staff will engage with residents in these discussions. Based on equity guidelines, preferences, and their lived experiences, forum participants will produce a short list of ideas and recommendations to be considered in the development of ballot proposals.

- **Online Engagement:** As residents attend in-person forums, Bostonians who cannot attend these meetings, or those who chose to engage virtually, will be asked to provide feedback on the top ideas in each community priority via an online survey.

Based on resident priorities and feedback collected in-person and online, the Office and its External Oversight Board will draft ballot proposals for each of the 15 Community Priorities. OPB and relevant City Departments will conduct a final feasibility assessment and determine estimated costs for each ballot proposal. A ballot with the 15 proposals will be created for online and in-person voting.



## PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT

& BALLOT DESIGN

(DECEMBER 2024)

Of note, preparation for Proposal Development will occur throughout the Visioning Phase, as residents provide feedback on each of the community priorities via in-person forums and online. Draft proposals will be finalized in December for in-person and online voting in January.

A ballot with 15 proposals will be available for voting in January. Residents will be able to vote online and at in-person sites in City Hall and Public Libraries Branches across the City. OPB will leverage existing City events and explore partnerships with community groups for voting outreach.

# DRAFT



## VOTE

(JANUARY 2025)

On the ballot, residents will be able to select up to five (5) of a total of 15 proposals, each with an estimated dollar amount. Proposals with the most votes will be awarded, up to the funding cap for the particular PB Cycle. For voting assistance, the public will be able to email [pb@boston.gov](mailto:pb@boston.gov) or call the PB Phone Line.

- **Resident information needed to submit their vote:**

- Name, Last Name
- Neighborhood
- Zip Code
- Email address
- Short affidavit stating that individuals must meet Boston residency requirements to be able to vote

**NOTE:** Voting is limited to Boston residents who are at least 11 years of age or in 6th grade.

When the voting period closes, the City and OPB will announce the winning proposals, with the final voting results published in OPB's website. In the event of a tie, OPB in collaboration with its External Oversight Board will resolve the tie.





## AWARDING PB PROJECTS & IMPLEMENTATION MONITORING (MAY 2025 - ONWARD)

The Office of Participatory Budgeting will work with its Board and relevant City Departments to determine which avenue is the most appropriate for implementation:

- **Partner with City departments to implement projects**
  - OPB will work with City Departments to define a timeline and create an implementation plan.
- **Contracts or grants to community organizations;**
  - OPB, in collaboration with relevant City Departments, may release grant/contract opportunities for local organizations to propose projects that address the voted proposals, and are tailored to the needs and priorities of their particular communities.
  - OPB and its External Oversight Board will create an application review process to assess the projects received, ensuring that grant/contract applications meet the purpose and values of the PB Ordinance.
  - The implementation of projects will be monitored by OPB and the relevant City Departments.
- **Monitoring the Implementation of PB Projects**

The Office of Participatory Budgeting will track and report on the progress of PB funded projects on its website and annual reports.

- **For PB Projects Funded via Grants or Contracts to Community Groups:** *OPB will create monitoring and reporting protocols to ensure that community groups that receive PB funding have the necessary guidelines and support to deliver successful outcomes.*
- **For PB Projects Implemented by City Departments:** *The Office of Participatory Budgeting will partner and coordinate with City Departments that receive PB funding to determine project timelines and milestones.*



# EVALUATE

PB CYCLE 1

(JULY 2024 - APRIL 2025)

Evaluation is a critical part of improving the Participatory Budgeting process for future cycles. As such, OPB will contract with an evaluation consultant to assess the outcomes of this pilot year from Idea Collection through Project Award. OPB and the Board will review the final evaluation report and identify opportunities to enhance the program's effectiveness, efficiency, and impact.



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