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Somerville residents will decide how \$1M of city's budget gets spent. How it works

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SOMERVILLE — The city has launched its second cycle of "participatory budgeting," [a program that sets aside \\$1 million in the city budget](#) for residents to propose and vote on hand-picked projects.

Designed to empower community members and promote equitable decision-making, the initiative has garnered strong participation in its second year.

This year, [the program received 710 budget proposals from residents](#). Volunteers are now tasked with reviewing those ideas, scoring them based on feasibility and community impact, and selecting the top 20 to appear on the public ballot in April. Projects that receive the most votes will move forward, with implementation set to begin in fiscal 2026, which begins next July 1.

'See projects come to life': [Cambridge, Somerville provide residents with voice in how city money gets spent](#)

“Participatory budgeting aims to bring more members of the community into the decision-making process and give them a direct say on how government funds are spent,” Mayor Katjana Ballantyne told Wicked Local. “By empowering residents to decide what projects they want to prioritize, we can ensure their needs and voices are heard.”

First year projects include stocking community refrigerators

The program's first cycle, completed last year, drew more than 900 submissions and more than 3,500 votes. Winning projects included stocking community fridges with fresh produce to improve food access; installing additional BigBelly trash cans for better cleanliness; and creating shade structures in parks to combat urban heat.

"People tend to be selfless and compassionate with their choices," Ballantyne said. "It says a lot about Somerville that one of the most popular winning projects was focused on increasing food access. We also took feedback from the large number of requests in Cycle 1 for road repairs and added additional funding in our operating budget."

'Boston's coolest cousin': [Somerville neighborhood named one of the coolest in the world](#)

The city does its best to ensure the process is inclusive and accessible. Outreach is conducted in six languages and includes flyers, posters, direct mailers and partnerships with local organizations. Public meetings attract a diverse range of participants, including youth as young as 12 who are eligible to submit ideas and vote.

"We're always striving to reach historically marginalized communities," Ballantyne said. "This means meeting people where they are — at parks, local events or online — and ensuring everyone has a chance to contribute to Somerville's future."

Somerville's participatory budgeting process has drawn inspiration from models in Cambridge; Greensboro, North Carolina; and Vallejo, California, adapting these frameworks to suit the city's needs. This year's adjustments include timeline changes to allow more time for project planning and expanded outreach during the voting phase.

Program aims to maximize community engagement

The program aligns with the city's broader vision of equitable growth and community engagement.

“My vision for Somerville is one of 'progress for all,' where equity and inclusion are at the center,” Ballantyne said. “Participatory budgeting is a perfect example of how we put these values into action.”

'So glad she's doing it': [Somerville artist's home is surrounded by year-round exhibits](#)

Residents can track the progress of the initiative through city communication channels, including newsletters and social media. Those interested in participating or volunteering can learn more through [Somerville's official website, somervillema.gov](#).

With projects set to begin next summer, city officials and residents alike are eager to see how this year's process will shape the city's future.

“Participatory budgeting isn't just about funding — it's about building community and making Somerville a place where everyone feels they belong,” Ballantyne said.