

An Open letter to the People of Seattle from the Participatory Budgeting Interdepartmental Team (IDT):

On March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Mayor Durkan transmitted a letter to Seattle City Council offering options for proceeding with the Participatory Budgeting (PB) process. This letter references the work of Executive Departments on the PB IDT in the crafting of these recommendations. As the employees from those departments, we're writing this letter for three reasons:

- 1) To clarify that **the contents of that letter do not represent or reflect the work of the staff,**
- 2) To call attention to the ways in which this process has **harmed BIPOC and particularly the Black community and staff.**
- 3) Set forth terms in which we will be willing to continue supporting the PB work so that it **upholds RSJ principles** and begins to correct the harm that this process has caused.

As public servants, our role is to demonstrate fidelity to the democratic tradition of separation of powers and adhere to the established processes for policy making and budgeting. However, as residents of the City, you should all be able to expect that your government will operate with integrity and that the employees of the City will defend and uphold that trust.

The PB process here is about advancing racial justice and to carry forward the conversation without that acknowledgement is to actively perpetuate injustice.

- 1) PB was envisioned and advocated for explicitly as a way to begin to address decades of material divestment from the Black community and as a result of the exhaustive research by the Black Brilliance Research Project redefine community safety within and for the Black community.
- 2) Funding for PB was allocated from the \$100 million set aside for investments in the Black Community.
- 3) The Black Brilliance Research Project was conducted specifically with the goal of identifying solutions to the ways in which the City's previous participatory budgeting program, *Your Voice Your Choice*, failed the Black community.
- 4) PB is about shifting power to re-envision the long-term relationship between the City's budget and structural process and communities, and particularly acknowledging the racialized ways that time and money resource distribution has affected communities' ability to advocate for their needs.

And yet...

- 1) The City has continually made Black staff the face of the conversation, when decision-making has rested with white leadership. BIPOC staff's relationships and credibility with the community should never be sacrificed.
- 2) The media outlets that have been favored to carry stories about the project have been white-owned and white reporters have used their own cultural lens to provide "objective

analysis.” The City should be able to engage in policy disagreements without relying on creating media narratives that rely on the stereotypes that women of color, particularly Black women, need to be reined in by white dominant institutions.

- 3) The values and priorities that have been used to analyze the proposals have elevated the standards of white culture and ignored and devalued the goals and needs articulated by the research project. Prioritizing making the project understandable and palatable to white analysis by ignoring nuance and complexity is a reflection of how unconscious biases perpetuates white supremacy culture.
- 4) The conversation has continually devalued the capability, competency, and resilience of the Black community and the researchers.
- 5) The City of Seattle has frequently relied on the colonial practice of dividing communities of color in order to minimize the resources required to maintain their rule. The implication that the City can only have one pathway for investment, and that the Mayor’s Equitable Communities Taskforce is in conflict with the PB process devalues the work of BIPOC leaders at both tables and serves only to allow the City to reduce the resources going to the Black community.
- 6) Continuing to create budget conversations that assume that investment in BIPOC communities is a zero-sum game, where a) the Black community should have monolithic needs and b) that investments in other BIPOC communities necessarily must come out of resources promised to the Black community.
- 7) Holding onto resources that were promised to the Black community means that the very real and disproportionate need for investment in BIPOC communities are only valued in so much as they correspond to their utility for individuals to achieve political power.

We as staff are not interested in supporting political bickering over this issue, whether it is interdepartmental politics within the City, nor fighting between branches of government. Our priority is to help set up the PB program to be the most effective it can be in addressing Seattle’s needs. This means that everyone involved in this process needs to center less on their own agenda to control decision-making and power and instead allow for an honest and open conversation about the best way for the project to proceed.

With these truths and goals in mind, we commit to engage in a transparent process that begins to repair harms and moves forward while upholding race and social justice principles.

Our next steps include:

- 1) Including members of the IDT to brief the City Council on the process thus far, and provide guidance and recommendations without censorship and interference from the Mayor’s Office.
- 2) Revisiting with Council and the Mayor’s Office the decision to have DON continue leading this work.
- 3) If the IDT continues, including City Council representation on the IDT to build better communication and transparency between the legislative and executive branches.

4) Ensuring that any future recommendations regarding the PB process shared with the Mayor or City council are reviewed with a racial equity analysis that considers and corrects for historical inequities with institutional funding processes.