Growing Our Community

Neighborhood connection, civic participation, and public spaces where people truly belong.

400+
PEOPLE WHO SOUGHT PORTLAND'S HOMELESSNESS SERVICES CENTER THIS YEAR CAME FROM OTHER MAINE TOWNS

5
CITY COUNCIL DISTRICTS — A PARTICIPATORY-BUDGETING PILOT STARTS IN ONE

$40M+
ALLOCATED BY RESIDENT VOTE, NYC PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING SINCE 2011

25
PRACTITIONERS FROM 13 BUREAUS TRAINED IN PORTLAND, OR'S ENGAGEMENT PROJECT

A city isn't just its institutions — it's the moments between them. The neighbor who knows your name. The block where kids play. The gathering place that makes you feel like you belong here. I believe in building Portland with people, not for them: investing in public gathering spaces that activate neighborhoods from the West End to Woodfords, from Deering to Stroudwater; supporting civic participation infrastructure that makes it easier for working families, immigrants, elders, and young people to engage; and creating monthly opportunities for neighbors to meet — because a city that knows itself is a city that can govern itself. Connection is not a soft issue. It is the foundation of everything else.

More than 400 people who sought Portland's Homelessness Services Center this year came from other Maine towns — that's connection at the systems level, not just the neighborhood level.

WHAT'S WORKING IN PORTLAND, MAINE RIGHT NOW

Portland's neighborhood association network — West End, Munjoy Hill, Deering, Woodfords, Libbytown — is a civic foundation most cities lack, active but under-resourced. First Friday Art Walk draws thousands monthly, proving recurring free programming activates civic life without major investment. Porchfest on Peaks Island and in Deering has become beloved tradition — informal, artist-led street activation building neighborhood identity. Maine Initiatives' Immigrant-Led Organizations Fund and the League of Women Voters' Neighbor-to-Neighbor canvassing are grassroots civic infrastructure already operating.

MODELS FROM OTHER CITIES — COPY, PASTE, TAILOR

1. OPEN STREETS / CICLOVIA — BOGOTÁ, MINNEAPOLIS, SF

Closing streets to cars on scheduled days for community gathering — born in Bogotá, adopted across the U.S. Monthly open-streets events rotating through Portland's districts would give every neighborhood a recurring public moment that builds identity and cross-community connection. No new infrastructure — permits and coordination are the only investment.

2. NEIGHBORHOOD VITALITY INDEX — EQUITABLE ENGAGEMENT

Portland, Oregon's Engagement Project built data-rich neighborhood profiles to pinpoint root causes of civic disconnection, with 25 practitioners from 13 bureaus learning equitable engagement tools together. Portland, Maine should commission a Neighborhood Vitality Index — mapping participation rates, language access needs, and service gaps across all five districts — and target resources where connection is weakest.

3. NEW MAINER CIVIC INTEGRATION — ALREADY A LEADER

Portland's New Mainer communities — Somali, East African, Central American, Southeast Asian — represent one of the city's greatest civic opportunities. Opportunity Alliance, Indigo Arts Alliance, and Chance to Advance are already doing the work; the council's role is to resource and formalize these partnerships, ensuring New Mainer leaders have seats at every civic table — neighborhood associations, planning board hearings, budget processes.

4. PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING — NYC, CAMBRIDGE

Participatory budgeting gives residents direct control over a portion of the city budget. NYC has run it in council districts since 2011 — $40+ million allocated by resident vote; Cambridge, MA launched citywide in 2022. Portland should pilot it in one district in year one — giving residents in Deering or Woodfords direct ownership over a neighborhood improvement budget line.

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What This Would Actually Take

A campaign promise is easy. Passing something is not. Portlanders deserve to know which of these a city councilor can deliver alone, which require partners who must agree, and which require the Legislature in Augusta — along with what could go wrong.

COUNCIL ACTS ALONE

Directing staff to commission a Neighborhood Vitality Index; authorizing an open-streets series; piloting participatory budgeting with a defined dollar amount in one district. What it takes: council direction plus a modest budget line. The real obstacle: Portland operates under a council-manager charter, which means implementation belongs to staff — none of this happens well without the City Manager's genuine buy-in and departmental capacity to carry it.

THE COSTS PEOPLE FORGET

Open streets are not free: they require traffic control, police or contracted detail hours, barricades, and staff coordination for every event. Participatory budgeting requires sustained facilitation — outreach, translation, proposal development, and a vote — and programs that launch without dedicated staff tend to collapse after their first year. Naming these costs up front is what separates a proposal from a press release.

PARTNERS WHO MUST BE AT THE TABLE

Neighborhood associations, whose volunteers absorb much of this work; business districts along any closed street, engaged before the decision rather than after; New Mainer community organizations and immigrant-led groups, whose participation cannot be an afterthought if the index is meant to change resource allocation rather than merely describe a gap; and the library system, which is already the city's most-used civic space.

> **The honest risks:** A vitality index that measures disconnection without directing resources becomes a report on a shelf. Participatory budgeting can be captured by the already-organized, delivering the appearance of inclusion while the least-engaged stay least-engaged — the design must actively reach them, which costs money and time. And street closures generate real business opposition; the answer is early partnership and honest scheduling, not dismissal.
>
> **The commitment:** Atiim will start where the cost is smallest and the learning is greatest — one district, one pilot, measured publicly — and will say plainly that connection work requires staff capacity, not just good intentions.

A city that knows itself is a city that can govern itself. Connection isn't decoration — it's infrastructure, and it can be built or neglected.

Sources & further reading: Creative Portland — First Friday Art Walk · Maine Initiatives — Immigrant-Led Organizations Fund 2026 · League of Women Voters Maine — Neighbor-to-Neighbor 2025 · Portland Engagement Project — portland.gov/civic · Participatory Budgeting Project · NACTO Urban Street Design Guide · Open Streets Project.

Atiim B. Boykin · Candidate, Portland City Council At-Large 2026 · atiim.org · Atiim4Portland@gmail.com

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