

City's Office of Economic Development competing for funds to boost participation

Karen Morales
Bay State Banner
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Through a nationwide accelerator program sponsored by the Citi Foundation and the organization Living Cities, Mayor Martin Walsh's Office of Economic Development is hoping to ramp up efforts to increase the number of women-owned and minority-owned vendors the city has contracts with.

The City of Boston was recently named a finalist for the City Accelerator, a program that offers financing, collaboration and consulting to a cohort of municipalities aiming to improve economic equity.

The program is in its fifth year. The new cohort will focus on inclusive procurement, and Boston, along with 11 other cities, submitted a pitch for consideration.

Currently, the city's contracts with minority-owned businesses make up less than 1 percent of its total contracts.

The Office of Economic Development partnered with the Boston Planning and Development Agency in pitching an interagency council that will focus on inclusive procurement.

"Our goal is to lower the barriers to city contracting and increase city spending with local minority- and women-owned businesses," said Celina Barrios-Millner, director of equity and inclusion for the OED. "We want to coordinate all of the departments' efforts in inclusive procurement, share best practices and better track our numbers on a city-wide scale."

According to Barrios-Millner, each city department has its own budget and purchasing liaison to contract external professional services. The inclusive procurement council would streamline this process, align data systems for better information tracking and create the city's first consolidated buying plan across departments and agencies.

The inclusive procurement council would also document and standardize contracting requirements across departments and lessen the administrative burden on vendors.

If chosen for the City Accelerator cohort, Boston will have the opportunity to consult and collaborate with other city municipalities who are successfully implementing similar initiatives and receive technical assistance from Griffin & Strong, a law and public policy consulting firm based in Atlanta, Georgia that specializes in supplier diversity consulting.

Financing and in-kind support of up to \$50,000 is also part of the prize package, but Barrios-Millner said that grant money is not necessarily needed to implement the council.

“This is something we plan on doing anyway, but it would be great to have additional and external technical assistance too,” she said.

As part of the proposed initiative, representatives from the city’s biggest departments and affiliated agencies will be included in the inclusive procurement council. Those agencies and departments include Boston Public Schools, the Department of Innovation and Technology, the BPDA and the Boston Public Health Commission.

“It’s important that this is citywide and that the top departments with the most spending dollars are front and center,” said Barrios-Millner.

The cities chosen for the City Accelerator cohort will be announced this week.