



Boston City Council Committee on Ways and Means

Dockets #0588-0596 FY21 Budget

Inspectional Services Department

Working Session: Monday, May 18, 2020, 11:00 a.m.

Hearing: Thursday, May 28, 2020, 10:00 a.m.

The following is a collection of questions that were asked by the Committee regarding Inspectional Services Department's budget at the Working Session on Monday, May 18, 2020 at 11:00 a.m. Recording here: https://youtu.be/mi_nf4U4e_I

The Administration is requested to respond to all questions in one of three ways:

1. Verbally at the hearing on Thursday, May 28th, at 10AM.
2. For factual questions, through written responses supplied prior to May 28th, including budget book page numbers or other references where appropriate.
3. By deferring to a specific scheduled departmental budget hearing.

Please annotate and return this information request before May 28th, indicating how each question will be answered.

Inspectional Services Department Budget Questions

Councilor Kenzie Bok, Chair, asked:

- There is a 400% increase in overtime, which seems to be related to the after-hours inspection regime. This is something our constituents want, but please explain the detail here on the large overtime expense – shouldn't the use of third-party inspectors starting in FY21 enable us to bring more after-hours inspections under a predictable regular-pay regime?
- Please provide an update on the short-term rentals ordinance and implementation.
- Please provide an update on the executive order and implementation of reforms at the ZBA, including the ombudsman, the technical support, electronic public access, etc. It's my understanding there is funding in this budget for these efforts, please discuss the plans moving forward and timing. Also, how do you expect to adjust these plans in light of the need to conduct ZBA meetings remotely for some period? (*Joint question with DoIT*)
- I know language access issues have been a challenge at ISD. Please discuss next steps for improving language access in the department, beyond having certain standard documents translated.
- Please discuss the viability of increasing ZBA to weekly, rather than biweekly, at least temporarily, to deal with the backlog. Would the costs be covered by new permit fees generated? Please talk through the thinking and plans for robust participation at ZBA hearings for this period.
- If we're asking ISD to be part of more public-health-related inspections due to COVID-19, how is ISD positioning itself appropriately for the months ahead?



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How do you envision your role? Will the technological upgrades related to the new state sanitary code help us meet this challenge?

- As we open more outdoor eating spaces, we can expect rodent issues to rise; does ISD have a plan for proactively baiting public street sites? Relatedly, I notice there was a major dip last year in the number of sewers or public sites baited; was that related to the COVID-19 emergency or something else?

Councilor Liz Breadon asked:

- ISD brings in a lot of revenue from permitting. How much does ISD bring in? How is it redistributed into the general fund?
- Do you anticipate a decline in revenue due to COVID-19 and lower numbers of new construction permits?

Councilor Ed Flynn asked:

- When the pause on construction is lifted, what restrictions will be in place for physical distancing? What will ISD do for violations? What are the current construction plans? Does ISD have sufficient personnel for these additional inspections?
- Please discuss outreach needed for rodent control.
 - With construction to restart soon, are we prepared for ongoing rodent control?
 - Can we expand rodent control in various neighborhoods?
- ISD used to, or maybe still does, have a monthly outreach discussion about their role, and it was almost like a public awareness campaign for residents. Please provide more information about this kind of outreach.
 - How can the Council help promote this outreach?
 - Is ISD putting outreach information on social media?

Councilor Lydia Edwards:

- Please provide a detailed progress report on implementation of the ZBA reforms
 - There was a 45-day deadline for many of the technological upgrades, so where are you with those?
 - Tech upgrades for modernization included email notice to abutters, newsletters, ensuring all plans are submitted electronically and available online.
 - Please discuss the creation of the ombudsperson position.
 - Please discuss language access.



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- Please discuss the addition of staff to ensure ethical compliance.
- How much funding has been committed to these upgrades and how much money has been spent so far? Is additional funding needed to continue these reforms?
- If the ZBA is having virtual hearings in June, how will it be equipping civic associations with the tools needed to make their role compatible and accessible with an online process (especially for older neighbors, people who don't speak English, and others)?
- With all the development ongoing in East Boston, does 1 inspector make sense anymore? In the North End, as well? With the construction moratorium lifting, we will need more building inspectors and capacity – what are the plans for this?
- Short-term rental (STR) inspections will also be happening. How much money was added to the budget for STR and now COVID inspections? How much has been spent so far?
- Is the STR database being cross referenced to ensure no fraud? What money has been spent so far enforcing the order and dealing with complaints?

Councilor Michael Flaherty asked:

- Much of ISD's role in terms of what they've been doing lately dovetails a lot with DoIT, as technology plays a greater role in ISD's work. Is ISD up to date with all the technology they need, especially for access to building plans for review?
(Joint question with DoIT)
- Please provide an update on STR enforcement to date and rental inspections to date. How are we keeping pace with both of those?

Councilor Kim Janey, President, asked:

- Please provide an update on trash collection. I've noticed in some areas that are more densely populated, apartment buildings rely on dumpsters. Do those dumpsters have free public access as they did pre-COVID? I see a 10% increase in this line item for ISD.
- Please discuss your enforcement capacity, especially as we re-open and the public health measures are lifted moving into FY21, and your ongoing plans for monitoring the public health guidelines.

Councilor Annissa Essaibi-George asked:

- Due to the public health crisis and the move away from in-person gatherings, how are we adapting/increasing community engagement, sharing information about



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- upcoming hearings, and allowing residents to engage in those hearings in different ways? Is there the capacity to do more direct outreach?
- What is envisioned through neighborhood walks?
 - How often do they happen?
 - Are they done with communities, neighbors, and civic and neighborhood leaders?
 - How is outreach done?
 - Please provide an update on ADUs. Do we anticipate seeing an impact of COVID-19 and desire to keep more physically distant in living spaces?
 - Please provide an update on short term rentals.
 - As we reopen the City, how will be responding with health inspections and other inspections that will be needed as we reopen?

Councilor Matt O'Malley asked:

- There's been about a \$2 million increase; line 51200 is \$1.5M in overtime, which accounts for the bulk of that increase. I think this recognizes the importance of inspectors. Every year we ask about increasing the number of inspectors, since sometimes we can't get important, time sensitive, constituent services issues addressed – not for lack of trying, just simply that the inspectors are stretched very thin, and that seems to be reflected in the overtime.
 - Is there any opportunity to grow the number of inspectors?

Councilor Julia Mejia asked:

- One of the department's goals is to make improvements to the ZBA.
 - Please expand on that goal, particularly around language access. We heard at our hearing last Friday that the ZBA meetings are rarely, if ever, offered with interpretation.
 - In general, how are we making meetings more accessible?
 - In addition to translation, as we think about ways to remove barriers to engagement, what, if any, opportunities exist for meetings to provide food or childcare?
- Please explain what the ethics trainings will involve. Will these trainings have a cultural competency lens?
- Please expand on your goals for FY21.
- What are we doing to ensure we're engaging small business, especially MWBEs in contracting bids?



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Councilor Ricardo Arroyo asked:

- Why is the Recommended budget for Overtime so high?
 - FY20 was \$351,433 and FY21 Recommended is \$1.8 million (\$1.5 million increase or 426% increase)
 - If this is a matter of understaffing how does this budget remedy that.
 - In your response to the Committee's request for information, it says "new after-hour inspection process" -- what does this mean?
- Has ISD incurred any unexpected costs in FY20 related to COVID?
 - Does ISD anticipate unexpected costs going into FY21 due to COVID? Is this accounted for in the budget?
 - For example, inspection services related to reopening the economy in Boston.
- Does ISD contract out any services? If so, what is the breakdown of MBEs, WBEs, and SBEs?
 - And if not, why is there \$564,000 budgeted for Contracted Services for FY21?