Some Bostonians feel largely unheard. With MIT’s ‘Real Talk’ portal now public, here’s a chance to really listen

A database of more than 200 community conversations in various Boston neighborhoods launches publicly on Monday.

By Meghan E. Irons Globe Staff, Updated October 25, 2021, 21 minutes ago

In a community dialogue in East Boston this summer, a man named Alejandro inquired about whether the city’s high schools would receive the funding they need to thrive.

In West Roxbury, a resident named Beth expressed weariness about electing
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“transactional leaders instead of transformational leaders that are uncorruptible.”

And a Dorchester woman named Nina raised a question about whether anyone in government is really listening to residents’ concerns about the dramatic changes occurring in their communities.

These remarks are captured in an MIT initiative called “Real Talk For Change,” a series of more than 200 community conversations now available on an online portal — realtalkforchange.org — for public consumption. MIT researchers leading the effort said they hope the conversations will help prompt future community dialogues about the lived experiences of everyday Bostonians, particularly those in marginalized communities.

They also hope the project, inspired by Boston’s historic mayor’s race, will help inform news coverage and public policy.
Ceasar McDowell, the MIT professor spearheading the effort, said he hopes the conversations will lead to “an experienced-based accountability system” that government officials can use to craft “more appropriate responses” to problems.

Current civic engagement includes people offering opinions about their issues, but this new project anchors the lived experiences of the participants in how political leaders can take a different approach to governance, McDowell said.
Ceasar McDowell, lead project director and associate director at the Center for Constructive Communication at MIT, was at the August press conference held outside Madison Park High School to announce the launch of Real Talk for Change. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

“It’s about lifting up the experience as a fundamental piece of what we need to understand [people’s lives], to make better public policy decisions, and to think about who we want to be in leadership roles,” he said.

Boston’s two mayoral hopefuls, City Councilors Michelle Wu and Annissa Essaibi George, are expected to discuss the project in a pair of forums Thursday (at 11:30 a.m. and 12:30 a.m.) on Boston Neighborhood News.

The project began this summer when MIT enlisted neighborhood leaders — from Dunk the Vote, the Family Nurturing Center, and other organizations — to convene a series of dialogues with about four to eight people in various Boston communities. The talks were recorded and uploaded to the Local Voices Network. MIT’s artificial intelligence tools organize the conversations by issues and neighborhoods, matching voices with transcripts. They identify patterns and trends in the conversations. The aim is to allow the candidates, or any user, to really listen to what the participants are saying.

Since that time, the project has logged 50 hours of conversations with nearly 250 participants in 21 communities. Sixty-two percent of the participants were either Black and Latino.

Housing, government and institutions, public health, discrimination, and economic opportunities were top issues. Facilitators lead the conversations around two key questions: “What is your question about the future of Boston and your place in it?” and “What experience led you to that question?” The answers varied.
“My thought is that there’s been a lot of changes in the area ... but I have not seen any service or door-to-door questioning in terms of what our input could be about the things that are happening in our area. They just kind of happen, and then we have to deal with them,” says a woman named Nina, reflecting deep concerns about people who feel ignored by their government leaders.

The project paints a complex picture of Bostonians’ experiences, particularly those who have carried disproportionate levels of trauma over generations, said Dimitra Dimitrakopoulou, an MIT visiting assistant professor who is part of the effort.

“There are so many things that are coming up, so it’s not just people sharing examples of discrimination or feeling insecure in their communities, but also how all these different things connect and are interrelated,” Dimitrakopoulou said.

In one of the conversations held in Roslindale, a woman who is Black said the results of the Sept. 14 preliminary elections for mayor left her with a “heavy” heart because none of the Black candidates made it to the final. “What could I have possibly done to maybe help to get some of those candidates over the top?” she asks.

In Roxbury, a man who said he worked in public housing for many years raised concerns about gentrification. “What is the big picture future of Boston’s historically Black neighborhoods?” he asks.
Mattapan participants expressed concerns about gun violence, segregated schools, and the proliferation of drug use in the area.

“It is something that’s always been on my heart — seeing these people out here doing whatever they have to do to get their next fix, not having any place to go, bathing in the streets if they bathe at all, stealing from people, hurting one another. It’s part of the crime that’s in our communities,” says a participant named Gina, who shared her own experience with drug use.

In East Boston, a participant raised concerns about the impact of climate change on the neighborhood, saying he really wants “honest answers” about what the city will do to address it.
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In South Boston, another participant voiced frustration about the lack of action to really get things done. “Stop talking and do something,” says the woman, whose name is Pat. “We don’t have enough dedicated people. And they will criticize other people who are doing it. But if you’re serious, stick with it and do it. ... Stop talking. Get out there.”

In the Fenway, a man named Randy wonders about his future in the city: “Will I be here long term, will I be able to just, I don’t know, settle here? Will I ever feel at home?”

The portal is available to researchers, journalists, government officials, and anyone in the public.
So my question about the future of Boston is more related to me. Will I be here long term, will I be able to just, I don't know, settle here? Will I ever feel at home? I don't know, that kind of