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Boston test program lets residents send texts of ideas to fill storefront vacancies

By Matt Rocheleau

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City officials in Boston are testing out an initiative to have residents and visitors send text messages about what types of businesses they would like to see fill storefront vacancies.

The crowdsourcing measure could help reduce the number and duration of business vacancies, increase community involvement, and promote innovation, according to municipal workers spearheading the pilot program.

“We don’t want to just capture feedback from people who go to meetings, we also want people who walk by and live in the neighborhood,” said Rafael Carbonell, deputy director of Boston’s business development office. “We want to connect more

Credit:

broadly with our constituents.”



Signs hung in the windows of empty shops will give passersby several options for what could open there and will ask residents to text a certain phone number to tell city officials their preference.

For example, a sign might say to text the letter “a” if you want to see a restaurant, “b” for a coffee shop, and so on.

The list of options will be chosen by leaders of that neighborhood’s Main Streets program, which are publicly-funded nonprofits that work to support

some 20 business districts across Boston by improving storefronts and public spaces.

For each vacancy, there will also be an “other” or “none of the above” option to encourage ideas beyond the ones developed by Main Streets officials.

Those who decide to text their opinion to the city will receive a series of follow-up texts asking for further information, including asking if they are a resident or visitor to the area and other basic demographic information. Users can opt out of the questioning at any point by simply not responding.

City officials will share the responses with developers and property owners.

He said that because such data has not normally been collected, decisions about who to rent to have often been made solely based on money and timing.

“We’d been hearing that this was a challenge to property owners – to not just go to the first knock on their door,” said Carbonell. “They didn’t know if the business would be a good fit for the neighborhood and if it would stick around for even a year.”

Providing the business community with a better assessment of what the local customer-base is interested will valuable, he said.

“Landlords want to know this kind of information to try to determine if their business tenants will be around for a long time and that they will be successful,” said Carbonell. “And, businesses want to know how much demand there is among residents for the services they provide.”

In addition to posting signs at empty stores, the Main Streets groups will use ties they have to their neighborhoods to announce locations where suggestions are being sought. The organizations, for example, will reach out to surrounding civic groups and associations and will use social media, their websites and email to reach other constituents.

The initiative is being tested at a vacant storefront in the Grove Hall section of Dorchester.

Two more sites are scheduled to join the pilot in the next week or so: the Washington Gateway and Upham’s Corner districts.

Within the next month, two more sites will be picked to partake.

The city will monitor what works and what doesn't at those five test locations before expanding it further.

Devin Quirk, operations director for city's Department of Neighborhood Development, and Brian Goodman, innovation and systems manager for the business development office, said the idea for the pilot came from a think-tank session held recently with local college students.

"One of the things we heard from students is don't try to solve the problem all on your own – get the community involved," Quirk said.

The program, also backed by the city's New Urban Mechanics office, will be funded by about \$5,000 from a \$50,000 fund Mayor Martin J. Walsh has set aside for innovation projects in neighborhood business districts.

The initiative also goes hand-in-hand with a budget proposal Walsh [announced last week](#) to increase funding to the Main Streets groups by 30 percent.

"Investing in our Main Streets districts preserves and protects our neighborhood commercial centers, and helps our small businesses thrive,

grow, and adapt to the changing economy,” said a statement from Walsh. “Access to a variety of retail in neighborhoods is critical to maintaining robust and connected communities.”

The program’s launch was reported on previously by [BostInno](#).

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Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s side gig as a consultant to New York University has apparently won him some enviable New York City housing benefits.

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Three Injured in Fitchburg Shooting



Three people were shot at KC's Pub on River Street in Fitchburg after midnight Saturday, NECN reports.

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Boston Celtics Owners Invest in Skateboard League



There might not be many obvious similarities between high-tech electric car racing and some dude in a hoodie riding a skateboard.

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BDC Now - Weekend Event Picks


Looking for something to do this weekend? Check out some events that include plenty of wine, a chance to meet some Red Sox players, a burger bash, and more. Watch BDC Weekend with Jenny Johnson.

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US Ordered Not to Force Feed Guantanamo Prisoner



A federal judge in Washington ordered the U.S. military on Friday to at least temporarily stop force-feeding a hunger striking prisoner at the Guantanamo Bay naval base.

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Genetically Modified Foods Confuse Consumers

Genetically modified foods have been around for years, but most people in the United States have no idea if they are eating them.

Food and dining  2 hours ago  Share

Vt. Sex Offender Faces Sentencing in Niece's Killing

A convicted sex offender who killed his 12-year-old niece after luring her to his house with a ruse about a pool party is due to be formally sentenced to life without the possibility of parole.



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Hike with Caution at White Mountains





Campgrounds in New Hampshire's White Mountain National Forest are open, but the Forest Service is warning people that some areas still have snow, and spring melt-off can lead to some slippery footing.

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Will Connecticut Schools Ban Chocolate Milk?



Connecticut lawmakers moved forward this week on a new nutrition bill that could remove chocolate milk from public schools.

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Lacrosse Team Honors Fallen Officer and Coach



The girls lacrosse team at Exeter High School is honoring their late coach Stephen Arkell, a New Hampshire police officer who was killed in the line of duty.

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Celebrating 10 Years of Gay Marriage

On May 17, 2004, Massachusetts offered the first marriage licenses to same-sex couples. We asked five couples to talk about what they've learned about themselves and their relationships over the past decade.

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10 Parting Shots at SNL Heading Into The Season Finale

Here are "10 Parting Shots at SNL" as the show's 39th season comes to a close Saturday night with Andy Samberg as host.

Obnoxious Boston Fan  3 hours ago  Share

Environmentalists in Portland Oppose Tar Sands Oil

Environmentalists will rally at the Deering Oaks Park bandshell in Portland to oppose the Keystone XL oil pipeline and the shipping of tar sands oil through Maine.

News  4 hours ago  Share



Broke Beats: F.Stokes – ‘Liquor Sto’ Diaries’



Broke Beats is BDCwire’s open-source hip-hop column. Every Saturday, we showcase the best new albums, EPs, and mixtapes available for free stream or download. The Midwest has long been a stronghold for spirited rappers and producers who haven’t quite pierced the East Coast market. F.Stokes is among the most fearless of of these artists, and the... [Read more »](#)

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Oprah’s Network Postpones Sam Documentary



The planned documentary by the Oprah Winfrey Network on Michael Sam, the NFL's first openly gay player, has been postponed.

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Woman Falls Down Elevator Shaft at Fenway Park

A 22-year-old woman is hospitalized after falling down an elevator shaft at Fenway Park Friday during a Red Sox game, according to the Boston Fire Department.

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Obama, Congress Move to Address Veterans Affairs Firestorm



The Obama administration and Congress are moving quickly to respond to a growing political firestorm over allegations of treatment delays and falsified records at veterans hospitals nationwide.

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Conn. Exhibit Looks at Benedict Arnold as Hero

A new exhibit on display at the Slater Memorial Museum is the latest effort to bring heightened visibility to a subject Norwich has deliberately ignored for centuries.

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Testing Inconclusive, Suspected Bobcat Returned

A judge has returned a 38-pound feline to a New Jersey woman after DNA testing couldn't conclusively say whether it was a purebred bobcat.

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Clearing This Afternoon with Sunshine for Sunday

Weather Wisdom  6 hours ago  Share



Nissan's Taxi of Tomorrow Hoping for a Fare Future



Members of the New England Motor Press Association had the dual experiences of driving and riding in this Taxi of Tomorrow when Nissan brought a pair of the hackney versions of its NV200 van to town.

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Teen's Arm Reattached After Pasta Accident

Four surgeries later, 17-year-old Brett Bouchard can move his arm after it was severed below the elbow.



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Red Sox Fall to Tigers, 1-0, Back Under .500





The loss drops the Sox back below .500, at 20-21, and 10-12 at home.

Extra Bases  12 hours ago  Share

North Reading Man Busted Allegedly Selling Drugs Out of Restaurant

Richard "Ricky" Ward faces a number of drug charges following a six-month investigation by police.

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Feds Deny Tsarnaev Lawyers' Complaint About Leaks

Federal prosecutors say there's no need for a hearing on what defense attorneys have called leaks and improper comments in the case of Boston Marathon bombing suspect Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.

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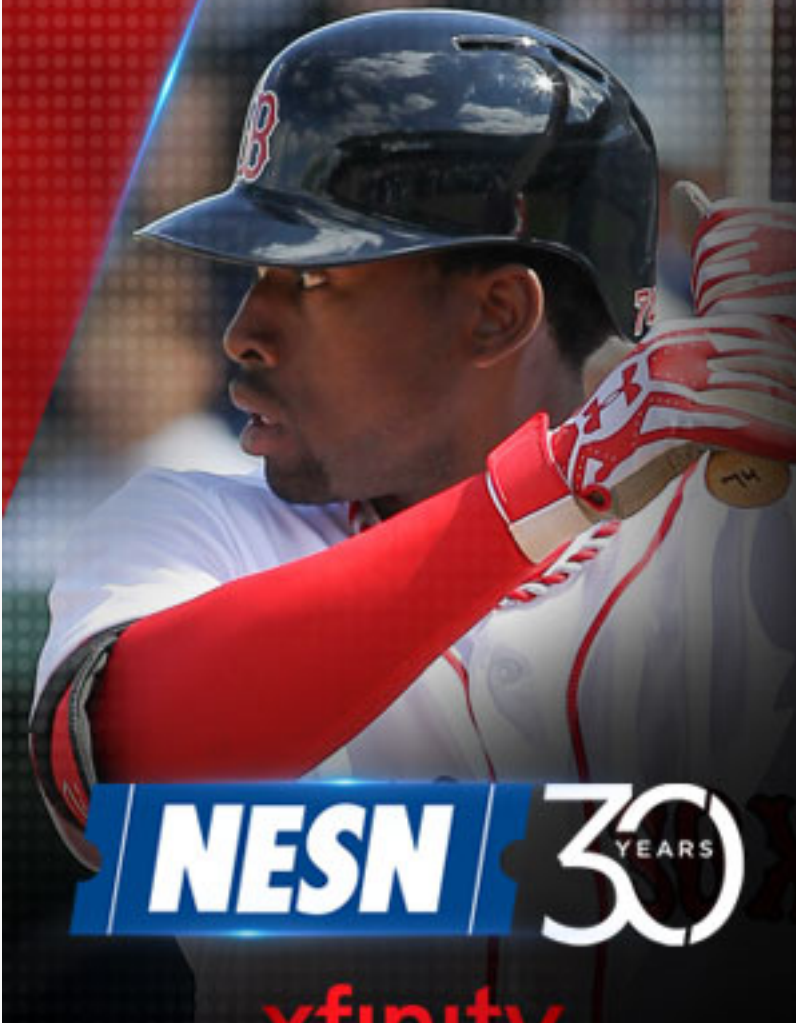


Celebrating 10 Year Marriage

Life Share

TIGERS AT RED SOX

TONIGHT 6^P_{ET}



NESN 30 YEARS

