

Cooperatizing Boston

Advancing Municipal Support for Worker
Ownership



Report for the
Solidarity Economy Initiative
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Project Origins

This report was produced for the Massachusetts-based [Solidarity Economy Initiative](#) (SEI). SEI began convening in 2015 through support from Access Strategies Fund, Boston Impact Initiative, Center for Economic Democracy (CED), and Solidago Foundation. Through SEI, POC-led, grassroots organizations have organized resources, technical assistance, and infrastructure for a just transition to a solidarity economy.

By 2023, a committee of SEI members became interested in starting or growing their own worker-owned cooperative (WOCs). Funded by [Tisch College Community Research Center](#), this research project aims to support their efforts for cooperative development by assessing how the City of Boston can expand its support for WOCs. SEI members Monique Nguyen and Luz Zambrano provided guidance to focus on the connections between municipal policy and cooperativism.

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Positionality Statement

Erwin Li grew up in a family and community of first-generation Chinese immigrants. His experiences with informal and formal mutual aid efforts, and his later work in agricultural cooperatives have been strong influences on his belief in worker ownership. He is not a worker-owner himself; what he has learned about WOCs comes largely from personal curiosity and academic study. He is grateful for the work and learning offered by spaces like [Coalition for Worker Ownership and Power](#), [Massachusetts Solidarity Economy Network](#), SEI, and the 2023 UMass Amherst Worker Power conference.

Methodology

This report reviews sources across academia, news media, and policy literature. It also draws from many semi-structured interviews, conducted with individuals mostly from Boston's worker cooperative ecosystem, but also with some contacts in other cities. Finally, additional observations come from the author's role as a fellow within the City of Boston in the summer and fall of 2023, and as a participant at worker ownership-related meetings and gatherings.

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Table of Contents

Frequently Used Acronyms	6
Executive Summary	7
Introduction	12
The Problem and Potential of Local Government	14
Cities and WOCs	16
Worker Ownership in Boston	20
Past Efforts	20
Current Efforts	23
Evaluating Policy Areas	25
Definition, Visibility, and Promotion	26
Business Development	31
“Embedded Approaches”	36
Key Considerations: What About Broader Transformation?	39
Conclusion	41
Bibliography	45

Frequently Used Acronyms

ARPA	American Rescue Plan Act
BCCO	Boston Center for Community Ownership
CBO	Community-Based Organization
CCDS	Center for Cooperative Development and Solidarity
CED	Center for Economic Democracy
CFNE	Cooperative Fund of New England
CTA	Corporate Transparency Act
CWB	Community Wealth Building
ESOP	Employee Shared Ownership Plan
LEAF	Local Enterprise Assistance Fund
MASEN	Massachusetts Solidarity Economy Network
MassCEO	Massachusetts Center for Employee Ownership
MOIA	Mayor's Office for Immigrant Advancement
OEOI	Office of Economic Opportunity and Inclusion
OERJ	Office of Equity and Racial Justice (City of Chicago)
RMV	Registry of Motor Vehicles
S.P.A.C.E.	Supporting Pandemic Affected Community Enterprises
SBD	Small Business Development
SEI	Solidarity Economy Initiative
USFWC	US Federation of Worker Cooperatives
WOC	Worker Owned Cooperative
WMBE	Women and Minority-Owned Business Enterprise

Executive Summary

As U.S. cities attempt to recover from the shocks wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, a sharp consensus has emerged: returning to “business-as-usual” will not suffice. Strong criticisms of capitalist economics have long existed, but recent years have underscored just how glaring the wealth disparities between rich and poor have become. And how they continue to grow. If cities are to truly serve and build better worlds for working-class people, different models are needed.

Already, worker-owned cooperatives (WOCs) have demonstrated their ability to grow in times of economic crisis. In Massachusetts, the number of WOCs has tripled over the past decade. There has been remarkable creativity and resilience by working-class people and communities of color to build WOCs, despite structural challenges and precarity.

As the desire for more cooperative ways of living and doing business proliferate, there are opportunities for government and public resources to amplify the worker cooperative movement. Local government can, and should be, an integral part of this effort. Across the country, a small, but increasing number of cities are demonstrating how policies and resources can support worker ownership as a means to build community wealth and expand collective capacities to meet people’s needs.

For this work to continue effectively and transformatively, cities will need to re-imagine economic development. Conventionally, economic development strategies tend to emphasize metrics like the number of jobs or businesses created. Other measures include the amounts of funding distributed or tax revenue raised. When this lens has been applied to worker cooperative development, cities have typically emphasized:

- The number of WOCs incubated, created, or converted
- The \$ amount or number of grants/loans given to WOCs
- The \$ amount or number of services offered to WOCs

Starting and funding more WOCs is certainly a future worth celebrating. But conventional metrics are not the only factors critical for WOC success. If WOCs fundamentally aspire towards democratic ownership and governance, municipalities will require more expansive ways to understand, describe, and assess WOC development. Frameworks drawing on job quality, social determinants of health, and ecosystem mapping are but a few examples that can better illustrate the relationship between worker ownership and community benefits.

In her book, *Emergent Strategy*, activist Adrienne Maree Brown offers the adage, “what you pay attention to grows.”¹ Inversely, we suggest: what we do not pay attention to, withers. WOCs are powerful because they can be part of practicing cooperative cultures, where relationships of solidarity, trust, and reciprocity have primacy – not ideas of competition, scarcity, and profit. If municipalities do not recognize and support the relational powers of WOCs, they risk dulling the potential for worker ownership to challenge conventional ways of thinking and being. In other words, WOCs are not an end-in-themselves, but one of many ways we can build a city that allows for people to more fully care and provide for one another.

This framework of our report is inspired in large part by Solidarity Economy Initiative (SEI) members, who champion cooperativism: a broader culture of care and kinship. For time immemorial, cooperative practices have existed in many parts of the world; however, we uplift traditions from Latin America because as some scholarship from the area denotes, language has helped shape a reality that understands a distinction between cooperatives as businesses (*cooperativista*) versus as part of cooperative values, processes, and movements (*cooperativismo*).²

Holding “cooperativism” as a north star, this report explores two areas.

1. To document the City of Boston’s (COB) past and current support for worker ownership

Since 2016, COB has supported WOCs through technical assistance and direct funding. At first, special initiatives like the Walsh administration’s Economic Mobility Lab (EML) supported longstanding departments like Small Business Development (SBD). They ensured existing City resources could be extended to WOCs because they too, were small businesses.

However, unlike some other cities, supporting worker ownership did not become part of SBD’s or a department of economic development’s explicit responsibilities. Multi-year commitments were not made, so by 2020, amidst mayoral transitions with their own priorities, WOCs faded as a policy agenda item.

Within the Wu administration, SBD has continued contracting with cooperative technical assistance providers to support WOCs. The influx of federal funds through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) has expanded opportunities for support, if only for a limited time. Boston’s Office for

¹ Adrienne M. Brown, *Emergent Strategy* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 42.

² Claudia Sanchez Bajo, “Research on Cooperatives in Latin America,” n.d.

Economic Opportunity and Inclusion (OEI) began distributing small business ARPA grants in 2023 and 2024, where a couple WOCs have been recipients.

2. To envision potential entry points for further expansion of municipal support for worker ownership in Boston

Advocacy for WOCs tends to ask for a whole suite of policy tools and support: technical assistance, direct funding, loan guarantees, procurement preference, legal status, tax benefits, land use changes, and more. These recommendations speak to the broad powers of local government, but all together, are likely too much for any particular administration to fully commit to. A more tactical approach might observe the political winds, and more critically examine specific levers for change. Like activists in many places across the world, “we are not asking what the local state can do, but what we can do to the local state.”³

While a couple champions for worker ownership exist in City Hall, none are higher than a Director-level. Other city staff remain open, but capacity within departments like SBD remains low. The easier entry-points, then, lie in existing programs. As SBD begins the second year of its legacy business preservation program, there is an opportunity for WOC conversions to become part of the program’s goals for succession planning. The Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Advancement (MOIA) based in the Equity and Inclusion Cabinet, has also become a key enabling office. Its own ambitions to incubate immigrant-led WOCs, especially with recent arrivals, can be a major resource.

³ Bertie Russell, “Beyond the Local Trap: New Municipalism and the Rise of the Fearless Cities,” *Antipode* 51, no. 3 (2019): 991, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12520>.

We offer the following recommendations to the worker cooperative ecosystem in Boston and Massachusetts more broadly. The following table also provides a summary of the report.

- 1. Be loud, stay loud.** In Boston, key leaders from movement organizations have kept the issue of worker ownership alive in City Hall. Continued relationship-building and organizing across City departments will matter greatly moving forward.
- 2. Invest in municipal champions.** Demand and support a dedicated staff-person to lead and broaden support for worker ownership within local government.
- 3. Envision the City as convener.** The City of Boston should be seen as, and shaped into, a convener for the many stakeholders within the worker cooperative ecosystem and/or the wider field of local economic development.
- 4. Change the narrative.** A more robust communications and advocacy strategy can track WOC development and demonstrate how they translate local government priorities into reality.
- 5. Deepen knowledge of SBD.** Movement organizations can better support worker owners through more knowledge and promotion of existing small business development programs in Boston, both their opportunities and limitations.
- 6. Target municipal entry points for worker ownership.** Two areas to further advocate for worker ownership are legacy business preservation and creating entrepreneurial opportunities for new immigrants.
- 7. Develop a trans-local learning network.** WOCs across Massachusetts' are growing in relationship and their collective power. Together, they can share their learnings with advocates and champions in many cities and towns, to then strategically influence decision-making among municipal peers.
- 8. Strengthen ties with movements beyond worker ownership.** WOCs will need recognition and tactical alignment with potential allies in broader business development, but also deeper movement partnership with groups who are building power to shape land and labor justice. All are necessary for closing racial wealth gaps and building equitable, thriving cities.

Summary Chart

The City of Boston has never dedicated a budget line item specifically for WOCs. Any support happens through existing programs. But relationships, advocacy, and organizing can build future possibilities.

Type of Municipal Support	City of Boston Past/Current Efforts	Future Possibilities
Visibility and Education	- Different departments leading meetings and workshops with internal and external stakeholders	- Convene stakeholders in cooperative ecosystems to build clear definitions and goals - An advisory committee to steer the City's work and ensure accountability to the needs of the worker cooperative ecosystem
Small Business Technical Assistance	- \$400,000-\$650,000 (COB FY23-24 est.) in funding for 1-on-1 support or workshops, historically by BCCO or LEAF	- Streamlining worker owner access to more COB services/programs - Deepening knowledge of WOC structures among more mainstream TA providers - Expanding the definition of "technical assistance provider" to support solidarity economy organizations - Create legacy business to WOC conversion pipeline through education, data collection, outreach, and incentives.
Municipal Financing	- Loans to two WOCs - \$545,000 (COB FY23-24 est.) in Neighborhood Business Access Fund - ARPA COVID-19 funds through S.P.A.C.E grants, Re-FRESH grants, and Legacy Business Preservation	- Prioritize WOC applications to Neighborhood Business Access Loans - Administering loan guarantees through quasi-public agency - Direct remaining ARPA funding by end of 2024
Municipal Procurement	- None; ad-hoc bidding	- WOC certification as additions to existing certification programs. - Shaping contracts to prioritize WOCs on the basis of function or community relationships, not just certification status
Beyond Business Development	- MOIA efforts to integrate immigrant co-operative development with broader empowerment of Boston's immigrants	- WOCs further integrated in movements for housing, labor, and land justice - WOCs activated through COB's goals in arts, civic life, climate, and housing

Introduction

On Nov. 18, 2022, former Massachusetts governor Charlie Baker signed the language of Bill S.261 into law, enabling the Massachusetts Center for Employee Ownership (MassCEO) to become an official state agency. Similar statutes had been adopted in states like California and Colorado, but this victory for worker ownership was the result of a growing solidarity economy movement in Massachusetts. Through the Coalition of Worker Ownership and Power (COWOP), worker-owners, cooperative developers, progressive funders, union members, and many other allies had campaigned for months to secure greater state support for worker ownership. Establishing MassCEO and its budget was but the first of many steps in COWOP's policy agenda.

COWOP's theory of change operates with a key assumption shared by many cooperative movements worldwide: government support is critical to strengthening WOCs. Quoting the Boston Center for Community Ownership's (BCCO) Stacey Cordeiro, Center for Economic Democracy (CED) Executive Director Aaron Tanaka notes, "we cannot co-op our way out of capitalism."⁴ Broader shifts across society and government are needed to strengthen already nascent cooperative economies. Internationally, the WOCs of Mondragon in Spain, Emilia-Romagna in Italy, and through Le Chantier in Quebec have all benefited from provincial or regional government policies.

In the US context, policy advocacy has not always been seen as a viable option in movements for social and economic justice. US Federation of WOC staff aptly note why groups are skeptical of policy approaches: many government and institutional structures have been designed to exploit land, labor, and cultural capital.⁵ Still, they insist that opting out of political processes risks "leaving money and resources on the table that would be vital for our communities."⁶ Though implementation will need to be monitored, the federal WORK Act (2022) aims to disburse tens of millions of dollars in government to employee-ownership centers around the country.

⁴ Penn Loh, "Beyond Postcapitalist Economy: Toward a Pluriversal Politics of Transformation in Massachusetts," *Rethinking Marxism* 35, no. 1 (2023): 135–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2022.2159745>.

⁵ Mo Manklang and Esteban Kelly, "Unlikely Advocates: Worker Co-Ops, Grassroots Organizing, and Public Policy," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, August 8, 2023, <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/unlikely-advocates-worker-co-ops-grassroots-organizing-and-public-policy/>.

⁶ Manklang and Kelly.

Acknowledging these efforts of state and federal advocacy, this report asks: what is the role of local governments in supporting WOCs and more broadly, the cooperativism they represent? Lessons are drawn from different U.S. municipalities as well as the City of Boston's (COB) own past efforts, to inform the possibilities for further municipal programs and policies in Boston.

The Problem and Potential of Local Government

Fierce debates have long existed about how local governments should respond to social and geographic inequalities. After all, cities and towns have been the sites of many historical harms like chronic divestment, redlining, and urban renewal. They contain the many places and neighborhoods where people directly experience disparities in opportunity.

Yet the pressures cities face today have grown in unprecedented ways. Academic, policy, and media sources alike point to how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated long-standing racial and economic inequities. As working-class families disproportionately suffered more unemployment, hospitalizations, and loss of life, the wealthiest 1% of U.S. residents accrued more wealth than ever.⁷ This stratification, of course, comes after decades of government retrenchment, demographic shifts, technological change, and a growing climate crisis.⁸

The urgency of these complex challenges has prompted policymakers in local and city regional institutions to adopt “beyond GDP” approaches. That is, instead of competing for growth at all costs, they are increasingly experimenting with models centered on more socially, economically and ecologically just models of development.⁹ One such example of a “beyond GDP approach” is known as community wealth-building (CWB). Developed by the Democracy Collaborative, CWB holds that local communities should have direct ownership and control over their assets, envisioning a future where wealth is broadly held.¹⁰ With examples in Preston (UK) and Cleveland, OH, local government often sits uniquely at the center of the CWB model. As Democracy Collaborative researchers, suggest:

“[Local government] can calibrate and harness the grassroots energy on the ground, and empower and fund community-based organizations (CBOs). It can choose to invest its significant purchasing power locally, in underserved communities, instead of offering tax write-offs to a large corporation. It can partner with a local hospital to create job training programs, or grow community enterprises to service their demand locally.

And it can deliver needed public services from broadband to transportation in a fair, affordable, and accessible way. Importantly, local

⁷ Neil McInroy, Sarah McKinley, and Jeff Sutton, “A New Era for Community Wealth Building” (Shaker Heights, OH: Democracy Collaborative, 2022)

⁸ Richard Crisp et al., “‘Beyond GDP’ in Cities: Assessing Alternative Approaches to Urban Economic Development,” *Urban Studies*, August 12, 2023, 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980231187884>.

⁹ Crisp et al., 3.

¹⁰ “Community Wealth Building,” The Democracy Collaborative, accessed February 6, 2024, <https://democracycollaborative.org/programs/cwb.com>

government is a convenor, bringing together different groups across the community to drive progress and ensure alignment. It can use the power of the bully pulpit to support and catalyze a movement.”¹¹

Yet it would be inaccurate to assume that local governments are inherently transformational actors. Progressive agendas have understandably, but mistakenly, touted municipal power where state governments have been unsupportive and where federal law-making has hit a record low. Known in some circles as “the local trap”, this thinking conflates “local” with “better”, when in reality, just and democratic outcomes are far from guaranteed.

A growing number of grassroots actors, though, are addressing this limitation. Efforts are evolving to adopt the “municipal” as a strategic entry point for experimenting with broader practices of transformational change. The question has become “not what the local state can do, but what can we do to the local state?”¹² In other words, the local state is a “key terrain of struggle”.¹³ Governments may be prone to continue historic patterns of austerity, but they can also become a potential space for re-politicization, to both challenge the dominant paradigm of neoliberalism and strengthen nascent or growing economies of care, cooperation, and solidarity.

It is from this position of contesting power that we share this report, so that actors across Boston’s worker cooperative ecosystem and its broader solidarity economy may have more information to act from. Here, we draw a connection to social theorist Andre Gorz’s idea of non-reformist reforms. Many intermediary steps can be taken to expand power for workers, and iteratively build upon the conditions for possibilities beyond capitalism. But this work manifests as actual struggle, facing contradictions between visions and practice.

¹¹ McInroy, McKinley, and Sutton, “A New Era for Community Wealth Building,” 7.

¹² Russell, “Beyond the Local Trap.”

¹³ Crisp et al., “‘Beyond GDP’ in Cities,” 3.

Cities and WOCs

Advocates of “beyond GDP” approaches often consider cooperatives as a centerpiece in a different kind of economic development strategy. WOCs, in particular, have been lauded as “the purest form of economic democracy,”¹⁴ as they have been responses to industrial capitalism, weakened wage labor, and unprecedented ethno-racial competition for jobs since the 1830s.¹⁵ Authoritative definitions by key advocacy organizations certainly confirm this thinking. According to the U.S Federation of Worker Cooperatives (USFWC), WOCs must meet two conditions. First, workers must own the business and share any profits. Second, workers serve on and elect their board of governors. More than a business structure, most WOCs espouse values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity, and connect seven additional principles to achieve these values.¹⁶

Many studies have demonstrated the economic benefits of WOCs in practice. Individually, worker-owners often experience higher wages and job retention compared to industry counterparts.¹⁷ WOCs also act as community strongholds. They hire more locally, demonstrate greater capacity to weather recessions, and circulate more money into local economies.¹⁸

Though mostly through policy reports, a growing body of literature has documented or conceptualized how municipalities support WOCs. Understandably, these sources come from a supportive ecosystem: researchers and organizations dedicated to advancing worker ownership. Efforts in the early 2010s mostly documented municipal

¹⁴ James DeFilippis, *Unmaking Goliath: Community Control in the Face of Global Capital* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 66.

¹⁵ Stacey A. Sutton, “Cooperative Cities: Municipal Support for Worker Cooperatives in the United States,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 41, no. 8 (2019): 1083–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2019.1584531>.

¹⁶ “What Is A Worker Cooperative? – U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives,” accessed February 6, 2024, <https://www.usworker.coop/what-is-a-worker-cooperative/>.

¹⁷ Kyle Funk and Zen Trenholm, “Municipal Playbook for Employee Ownership” (National League of Cities, 2021), <https://www.nlc.org/resource/the-municipal-playbook-for-employee-ownership/>.

¹⁸ Jessica Gordon Nembhard, “Community-Based Asset Building and Community Wealth,” *The Review of Black Political Economy* 41, no. 2 (January 2014): 113–14, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12114-014-9184-z>.

policies across the U.S., from smaller cities (Berkeley, Santa Clara)¹⁹ to mid-sized urban centers (Madison, Cleveland)²⁰ to large metropolises (New York City, Chicago).²¹

Other writing has created taxonomies to more easily classify different municipal strategies.²² Camou offers a framework based on who a municipality partners with: the anchor approach, the preference approach, and the ecosystem approach. In the anchor approach, cities primarily collaborate with local institutions who have roots in the city (schools, hospitals, philanthropy) to create markets for WOCs. Evergreen Cooperative in Cleveland is a frequently cited example. Similarly, in the cooperative preference approach, a municipality might directly offer its own procurement contracts and bids for WOCs (City of Berkeley). By contrast, the ecosystem approach involves facilitating and distributing resources for already existing networks of WOCs, cooperative developers, and funders (City of Madison). In some cases, local governments might fit in more than one category.²³

For Sutton, classifying cities depends on how they attempt to change the “enabling environments” for WOCs. Borrowing from international development and governance, Sutton defines enabling environments as “a set of interrelated conditions—such as legal, bureaucratic, fiscal, informational, political, and cultural—that impact the capacity of development actors to engage in development processes.”²⁴ Sutton rightfully recognizes that advancing municipal support for WOCs is not simply a technical process; it requires the interplay between material conditions, norms, expectations, values, and relationships. The resulting framework thus describes three profiles: developer cities, endorser cities, and cultivator cities.

¹⁹ Sustainable Economies Law Center, “Berkeley Policy to Support Worker Cooperatives,” n.d.; Brett Theodos, Leiha Edmonds, and Corianne Payton Scally, “POLICY STRATEGIES TO BUILD A MORE INCLUSIVE ECONOMY WITH COOPERATIVES” (Washington D.C.: Urban Institute, October 2020).

²⁰ Camille Kerr, “Local Government Support for Cooperatives” (Democracy at Work Institute, 2015), <https://institute.coop/sites/default/files/resources/local%20govt%20support.pdf>; Nicholas Iuviene, Amy Stitely, and Lorlene Hoyt, “Sustainable Economic Democracy: Worker Cooperatives for the 21st Century,” *Regenerating Local Economies: Environment, Equity and Entrepreneurship in America’s Post Industrial Cities* (MIT CoLab, 2010), https://web.mit.edu/colab/pdf/papers/Sustainable_Economic_Democracy.pdf.

²¹ Jennifer Jones Austin, “Worker Cooperatives for New York City: A Vision for Addressing Poverty and Inequality” (Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, 2014); Renee Hatcher, “Cooperation Chicago: Building Chicago’s Worker Cooperative Ecosystem” (Illinois Worker Cooperative Alliance / John Marshall Law School, 2018), https://base.socioeco.org/docs/cooperation_chicago_-_rev_082418.pdf.

²² Olivia King et al., “A Review of State, Municipal, & Community Strategies Supporting Worker-Owned Cooperatives,” 2022, 7, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1PY9ZIQGgmsuoJZueCo7d1x-JnzEEGAfkd3xCYqQeBb8/edit>.

²³ Michelle Camou, “Cities Developing Worker Co-Ops: Efforts in Ten Cities” (Imagined Economy Project, 2016), 2, https://community-wealth.org/sites/clone.community-wealth.org/files/downloads/report3_citycoops.pdf.

²⁴ Sutton, “Cooperative Cities,” 1086.

Developer cities have few, if any, WOCs or elements of the cooperative ecosystem before municipal involvement. Municipal leaders, supported by national consultants and philanthropy, will employ top-down, capital-intensive processes like “the anchor approach” to build cooperative infrastructure. Endorser cities often have long-standing cooperatives and supporting organizations. While city officials may openly validate the ecosystem’s work, they rarely offer significant capital investment. Cultivator cities embrace both bottom-up and top-down approaches, allowing grassroots actors to lead but also embed cooperative initiatives through city agencies and multi-year budget allocations.²⁵

Consequently, the body of research on municipal support for WOCs has produced an extensive list of policy recommendations. A coalition led by the CED even presented its own memo to COB staff in 2017, outlining a strategy to make Boston the most co-op friendly city in the country. A non-circulating, yet periodically active CED memo continues to track policy progress. Less research, however, has considered how to prioritize among policies. In particular, what does it look like to operationalize municipal strategies for worker ownership, accounting for the constraints that city departments face?

In some cases, cities support worker ownership through embedding them with other policy agendas. In San Francisco, the Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs helped start a WOC for young immigrants, who were part of its Dream SF programs yet faced barriers to employment.²⁶ Municipal champions for worker ownership are increasingly emerging in places other than departments for economic development. Chicago’s Office of Equity and Racial Justice (OERJ) was the key leader in securing \$15 million in ARPA funds for WOCs, community land trusts, and other organizations dedicated to building wealth in the city’s communities of color.²⁷ City officials are identifying how to create opportunities for populations who are frequently left out of mainstream labor markets.

Preserving legacy businesses has been another issue drawing municipal attention. For example, when the City of Durham was concerned with the future of its many storied, longstanding Black businesses, it became more open to worker ownership. It had a story it wanted to tell about its unique local economy: Durham aspired to build on the

²⁵ Sutton, 1088.

²⁶ Funk and Trenholm, “Municipal Playbook for Employee Ownership,” 29.

²⁷ Office of Equity and Racial Justice and Community Wealth Building Advisory Council, “City of Chicago Community Wealth Building Initiative” (Chicago, IL: City of Chicago, 2023), https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/sites/community-wealth-building/pdfs/OERJ_CWB_Report.pdf.

legacy of its Black Wall Street to ensure its growth could ensure prosperity for all.²⁸ So, municipal officials conducted a citywide survey to build a database of its legacy businesses. It then designed programs and a strategy for outreach that included succession planning and transitions to employee ownership.²⁹ WOCs may be fundamentally about ownership and democracy, but their ability to address many possible issues make them compelling as targeted policy interventions.

²⁸ Interview with Zen Trenholm, interview by Erwin Li, Zoom, December 7, 2023.

²⁹ Funk and Trenholm, "Municipal Playbook for Employee Ownership," 16.

Worker Ownership in Boston

Past Efforts

Though a City Council resolution in 2012 praised WOCs, the City of Boston's efforts to support worker ownership began more concretely in 2017.³⁰³¹ Under former Mayor Martin J. Walsh, the Economic Mobility Lab was founded to research and pilot ideas that would support Boston's working class. The Rockefeller Foundation and 100 Resilient Cities also supported the Lab's creation with additional philanthropic funding. The Lab's Executive Director, Jason Ewas, was its only staff person for a period, before it added additional members. Ewas' previous role was a Policy Fellow through the Mayor's Office for Policy and the Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics.

At the time, the Lab's top priorities were affordable childcare and children's savings accounts. It also considered WOCs and employee-shared ownership plans (ESOPs) important issues. Ewas' personal interest in advancing worker ownership compelled him to continue this work, in collaboration with other key champions like John Smith, then a policy analyst in Chief John Barros' Office of Economic Development.³² For Ewas and Smith, WOCs offered a compelling solution to many problems affecting Boston's low and moderate income residents: labor exploitation, racial inequality, and a lack of wealth-building opportunities. WOCs also fit well into the Walsh administration's broader goals. At the time, its signature effort, *Resilient Boston*, aimed to address racism and promote racial equity and healing.³³

The Lab's early work started with building visibility and relationships. Ewas convened with others interested in worker ownership to map the local cooperative ecosystem, resulting in a City web page (now outdated). Roundtables and working groups were established with organizations like the Cooperative Fund of New England (CFNE) and Local

³⁰ Sutton, "Cooperative Cities," 1094.

³¹ For the purpose of documentation, this narrative of WOCs in Boston starts with the City of Boston. An equally valid interpretation begins with the grassroots, where many people and communities have long practiced cooperative living and business, often in ways that are less legible to the state. CCDS and other immigrant groups are primary examples.

³² Interview with Jason Ewas, interview by Erwin Li, Zoom, November 17, 2023.

³³ "Resilient Boston: An Equitable and Connected City" (Mayor's Office of Resilience & Racial Equity, 2017), https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/document_files/2017/07/resilient_boston.pdf.

Enterprise Assistance Fund (LEAF).³⁴ Support also came from a wider network of national supporters. The Democracy at Work Institute provided additional resources and knowledge to Ewas, and the National League of Cities awarded COB employees Ewas, Smith, Joyce Linehan (Ewas' superior), and Trinh Nguyen with its equitable economic fellowship.

Ewas and Smith both cited challenges in building broader support for WOCs within City Hall. Other municipal staff were often unfamiliar with WOCs, unsure whether WOCs were non-profits or businesses.³⁵ Some were even skeptics and opponents, doubting the economic potential for WOCs because they were not traditional profit-maximizing enterprises.³⁶ Noting these hurdles, the Economic Mobility Lab was pragmatic in its strategy. Unlike New York City, which had more legislative support, it did not propose a new budget line item for Boston to fund WOCs. Through its Worker Cooperative Initiative, the Economic Mobility Lab sought to leverage the City of Boston's *existing* programs to support WOCs. After all, Ewas reasoned, if he and others could frame WOCs as small businesses first and foremost, then the City of Boston's Small Business Development (SBD) programs had more abundant and stable resources to tap into than a budget line item.³⁷

Sometimes, this meant first removing onerous language. A lending program with SBD originally included stipulations that excluded WOCs: if a business had an owner that owned more than 20 percent in equity, it was not eligible for a loan from the City of Boston.³⁸ Once this language was amended, loans could eventually go to WOCs like Democracy Brewing (\$150,000) and CERO (\$100,000) through the City's Neighborhood Business Access Loan Program. City funds also enabled technical assistance providers to support WOCs; for example, after the Boston Cleaning Collective's founders contacted SBD, it paid the Boston Center for Community Ownership (BCCO) to support the co-op's legal incorporation.³⁹

By Ewas' estimate, at least a few hundred thousand dollars in funding, if not over a million, were invested in WOCs from 2017 to 2020. WCI had resulted in a toolbox of loans, technical assistance, educational training, and other support

³⁴ Interview with Jason Ewas.

³⁵ Interview with Jason Ewas.

³⁶ Interview with John Smith, interview by Erwin Li, Zoom, January 16, 2024.

³⁷ Interview with Jason Ewas.

³⁸ Interview with Jason Ewas.

³⁹ Erick Trickey, "How Boston Is Becoming the City Where Workers Rule," *POLITICO*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/12/boston-low-wage-workers-wealth-gap-124613>.

for aspiring and current worker owners. Yet in 2020, the EML and its WOC Initiative did not continue under either the Janey or Wu administrations. Ewas and Smith had served as important policy entrepreneurs, but mayoral transitions brought in their own personnel and priorities. Political cycles are a common challenge to any cause, and such transitions are why some advocates opt to secure multi-year, multi-stakeholder budget commitments, including from City Councils, philanthropy, and private investors rather than only mayors.⁴⁰ Perhaps because they were prioritized differently, some projects of the Lab did last. The Office of Early Childhood Education and Boston Saves were two programs integrated into Mayor Michelle Wu's Cabinet. To EML's credit, it did attempt to weave policy agendas together. Its Child Care Pilot Fund provided two months of business training to 22 day-care providers, mostly to women immigrants who work in their homes. The training included a talk on how to organize a WOC.⁴¹

While the Lab focused on the role of WOCs as businesses, its work does reflect an understanding of enabling environments. Removing onerous regulation, financing, and educational outreach were all aimed at changing conventional norms and beliefs around economic development. Cultivating relationships with local, regional, and national organizations was also essential. As Smith recounts, having regular collaborators in CERO, LEAF, and others were important for accountability,⁴² and it is ultimately the voice of WOCs and their surrounding ecosystems that make worker ownership relevant to new administrations.

⁴⁰ Interview with Christine Curella, interview by Erwin Li, Zoom, January 22, 2024.

⁴¹ Trickey, "How Boston Is Becoming the City Where Workers Rule."

⁴² Interview with John Smith.

Current Efforts

Today, the City of Boston's SBD team continues to provide support for WOCs. More specifically, SBD's technical assistance program pays TA providers for one-on-one consultations and cohort-based workshops. The budget line item for this program recently grew from \$400,000 to \$650,000.⁴³ Historically, BCCO and LEAF have been contracted for their work with WOCs. BCCO was commissioned to lead a six-part workshop series for aspiring worker owners in the summer of 2023. BCCO also supported the start-up of Earth Shapers, a landscaping WOC. A separate grant from the MOIA funded technical assistance for the bookstore, Rozzie Bound Co-Op.⁴⁴

The influx of federal funding in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has opened other avenues for Boston to support WOCs. In July of 2023, the City of Boston announced that 24 small businesses would receive \$2.83 million in federal ARPA funds. Known as the S.P.A.C.E (Supporting Pandemic Affected Community Enterprises) Program, these grants help small businesses with rent and other start-up costs as they move into vacant storefronts across Boston. A year of "wrap-around support," like technical assistance and membership to the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce is also included. A second round of \$4.58m in funding was given to 37 small businesses in April 2024.

To determine its S.P.A.C.E grantees, the City of Boston's Office of Economic Opportunity and Inclusion (OEOI) used a 35-point rubric to evaluate business plans, employment plans, co-operative structure, and letters of support from local community organizations or leaders. Businesses that were cooperatives or interested in co-op conversion were automatically awarded 5 points.⁴⁵ In other words, COB built in a preference for cooperatives.

The S.P.A.C.E program has \$1.53 million of ARPA funding remaining to award in its final round. Dorchester Food Cooperative and Centro Educativo Cooperativo Resplandor were the co-operatives that received support in the first round, while Democracy Brewing was the sole WOC grant recipient in the second round. OEOI's Policy Director Elijah Miller notes that more cooperatives did apply in this second round of applications, perhaps spurred by the first round's example. As per federal requirements, all ARPA funding must be contracted by Dec. 31, 2024, so the deadline

⁴³ Interview with Emily Patrick, interview by Erwin Li, Zoom, December 13, 2023.

⁴⁴ Interview with Stacey Cordeiro, interview by Erwin Li, Zoom, November 17, 2023.

⁴⁵ Interview with Elijah Miller, interview by Erwin Li, Zoom, December 13, 2023.

for the final round of S.P.A.C.E applications was April 30, 2024.^{46,47} Between the S.P.A.C.E grant and other sources like the Neighborhood Loan Fund, the Wu administration has provided upwards of \$800,000 to WOCs. Should more funding be administered through the final round of S.P.A.C.E grants, the total amount of financial support to WOCs may be comparable or even exceed the loans offered by the Walsh administration, though Miller notes the greater flexibility of federal funding.⁴⁸

S.P.A.C.E created an opportunity for OEI and SBD to take on a different role in supporting small businesses. Normally, as SBD Senior Neighborhood Manager Emily Patrick framed, they work to provide emergency services to small businesses in crisis.⁴⁹ With S.P.A.C.E. grants, the City could grow their dollar contributions from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands per small business. Moreover, the grants were largely directed to succeeding businesses, helping them stabilize further or even expand. Anecdotal evidence, however, does suggest that grantees are facing some additional challenges in navigating how to best use their funds. While child care WOC Resplendor received a S.P.A.C.E grant, it cited to MOIA Director Nguyen that it lacked knowledge and language access to further technical assistance. The City's implementation on wrap-around services does not appear to be air-tight.

ARPA funds are also only a one-time cash infusion from the federal government. When the City of Boston returns to its usual sources of funding after 2024,⁵⁰ It is imperative for the local worker cooperative ecosystem to understand how to maximize support from existing programs. Moreover, the S.P.A.C.E program does not have to be a fleeting moment; its successive rounds have created an opening where city officials are becoming reacquainted with cooperative structures. Thus, even when worker ownership may not be the most politically salient campaign issue, there are possibilities for COB's buy-in. Becoming more normalized in the City's bureaucracy can be part of a coherent long-term strategy to normalize economic democracy in local government.

⁴⁶ Interview with Elijah Miller.

⁴⁷ "Second Round of SPACE Grant Awardees Announced | Boston.Gov," April 3, 2024, <https://www.boston.gov/news/second-round-space-grant-awardees-announced>.

⁴⁸ Interview with Elijah Miller.

⁴⁹ Interview with Emily Patrick.

⁵⁰ Interview with Elijah Miller. Departments that have not met benchmarks of contracting ARPA funding may be subject to having their funding re-allocated to other programs. This scrutiny does not guarantee that the S.P.A.C.E program will receive more funding, but it will be important to understand if and how any additional funds can flow to WOCs.

Evaluating Policy Areas

From procurement preference to workforce development, most reports calling for municipalities to support WOCs recommend a wide swath of policies. Trenholm notes that “this kitchen sink”⁵¹ approach is helpful in assessing the possibilities for intervention, where WOCs face many more obstacles than conventional forms of small business. We also believe that “kitchen-sink” thinking reveals a broader analysis of how systems need to transform to support worker ownership. Alone, a single policy may not be enough to strengthen the enabling conditions for WOCs.

But strategic wins are possible. If and when cities do not adopt comprehensive paradigms like community wealth-building or doughnut economics, supporters for WOCs can identify the opportunities where passing policy will still have substantial impact for pressing needs. Much of this work is undertaken by municipal champions, who act effectively as policy entrepreneurs – often pragmatic individuals who lead change through creative vision and extensive collaboration.

The following section assesses common recommendations for how municipalities can support WOCs, discussing constraints and opportunities in the City of Boston. Where applicable, it cites lessons learned from recent efforts in other cities.

⁵¹ Interview with Zen Trenholm.

Definition, Visibility, and Promotion

The City of Boston lists on its website that WOCs are “a business entity owned and democratically run by the people who work in it.”⁵² Generally, this description implies that worker owners have at least a simple majority in both business equity and voting power. But while the criteria of democratic ownership and governance are essential, a stronger operating definition is needed.

This is not just a matter of classification, where a black-and-white approach helps determine which entities are eligible for certain government benefits. A Boston City Hall that better understands the nuances of WOCs is ultimately more equipped to support the varying needs of worker owners. Below, we discuss the additional factors to consider in defining a Boston-based WOC: location, legal incorporation, and membership.

Location

Who is eligible for municipal resources and services? In the case of small businesses, where they are incorporated, or the location of their main office matters more than their customer or service area. Some of Boston’s WOCs are in fact incorporated or located within city limits. But a substantial number of WOCs are also in the Greater Boston area, just outside city limits. Given how interconnected this metropolitan region is (and many others), it may be appropriate to consider more geographically expansive approaches, based on other definitions of local business. Additionally, other WOCs would count as Boston-based if the residence of their worker owners was considered. For example, one of Firebrand Cooperative’s worker owners lives in Boston, though the WOC is headquartered in North Dakota and is registered as a foreign corporation in Massachusetts. Other WOCs without storefronts have used their legal counsel’s location to incorporate in Boston.

Legal Incorporation

Few within COB appear familiar with a statute that legally recognizes WOCs in Massachusetts. Known as the “Employee Cooperative Corporations Act,” Massachusetts General Law 157A (1982) was the nation’s first corporate

⁵² “Employee Ownership Help | Boston.Gov,” January 27, 2017, <https://www.boston.gov/economic-development/employee-ownership-help>.

governance statute for WOCs. It enabled WOCs in Massachusetts to legally incorporate as a democratically-controlled member organization, with additional capabilities to share profits, ensure longevity, and receive tax benefits.

WOCs in Boston, however, do not always incorporate as such. For example, Red Sun Press incorporated as a non-profit before MGL 157A was established; dissolving to re-incorporate as a WOC has may be more onerous than remaining as a non-profit. The Boston Interpreters Cooperative is actually a marketing cooperative. Each individual is a sole proprietor, but the marketing cooperative exists to advertise services and allow them to share interpretation equipment. In these cases where a WOC is not incorporated as a cooperative, its bylaws will have to stipulate the binding conditions for democratic ownership and governance.

For WOCs who have undocumented immigrants as worker owners, they must also incorporate differently. Federal law forbids businesses from knowingly hiring any person who lacks authorization to be employed in the US. The government enforces this restriction by requiring all employers to complete and archive I-9 forms for every person the business employs; failure to comply with a possible government audit may subject a business to significant fines and other penalties. Since worker owners are both employees and owners, WOCs may be required to report an I-9 form for each worker owner.⁵³

However, neither federal nor Massachusetts state law expressly prohibits undocumented immigrants from working for a business they own. As business owners, undocumented immigrants would not count as an “employee” and thus not be subject to I-9 reporting requirements. Thus, a limited liability corporation (LLC) has been cited as an alternative corporate structure.⁵⁴ It is important to note that if a WOC is incorporated as an LLC, it does not automatically imply its worker-owners are undocumented.

Reporting requirements are unfortunately changing. Upon taking effect this January, the Corporate Transparency Act (CTA) requires each beneficial owner of an LLC to submit reporting information to the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, a federal agency, by January 1, 2025. Here, a “beneficial owner” can mean someone who either:

⁵³ Matt Diaz et al., “Tackling the Law, Together: A Legal Guide to Worker Cooperatives Generally and in Massachusetts” (Transactional Law Clinic, Harvard Law School, 2015), 19,

<http://clinics.law.harvard.edu/tlc/files/2015/12/Tackling-the-Law-Together-Legal-Guide-to-Worker-Co-Ops-FINAL1.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Diaz et al., 20; Interview with Stacey Cordeiro; Interview with Maggie Cohn, interview by Erwin Li, Zoom, January 17, 2024.

- directly or indirectly exercises “substantial control” over the reporting company
- directly or indirectly owns 25 percent or more of the “ownership interests” of the reporting company⁵⁵

The CTA’s definition for “beneficial owners” has very few exceptions (minors, non-senior officers, creditors, etc.). From our research standpoint, ambiguous wording like “indirect” and “substantial control” likely includes at least some – if not all – worker-owners in a cooperative. For example, even if a worker-owner may not have 25% equity in their cooperative, the cooperative’s democratic governance structure may imply that a worker-owner exercises “substantial control.”

As part of the information they are required to report, beneficial owners must include identification information such as a non-expired passport or drivers’ license issued by a U.S. Non-expired foreign passports are also acceptable. However, many undocumented immigrants do not have such forms of identification, and many states will not issue them licenses or other forms of identification.⁵⁶ Thus, CTA is federal legislation that places undocumented immigrants at increased risk.

Theoretically, this risk may be slightly offset in Massachusetts. The 2023 Work and Family Mobility Act allows the Registry of Motor Vehicles (RMV) to issue standard drivers’ licenses to Massachusetts residents regardless of immigration status. In practice, however, while the Bay State has seen a 133% increase in licenses issued, it continues to take significant advocacy and coalition efforts to bring people through the process.⁵⁷ Hurdles remain, like language accessibility and other documentation requirements like English-translated birth certificates. As the RMV continues to add capacity, timely processing will be essential for any undocumented worker-owners facing challenges from CTA. Affected WOCs should consult legal counsel for exact instructions for how to proceed.

⁵⁵ “The Corporate Transparency Act,” accessed July 7, 2024,

<https://www.sec.state.ma.us/divisions/corporations/general-information/corporations-corporate-transparency.htm>.

⁵⁶ “CTA Challenges for Foreign Nationals,” Global Business Advisors, March 22, 2024,

<https://www.gba.law/new-blog-1/2024/3/1/cta-challenges-for-foreign-nationals>.

⁵⁷ Hadley Barndollar, “Mass. Allowed Undocumented Immigrants to Apply for Driver’s Licenses. Here’s What Happened.,” July 1, 2024,

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/mass-allowed-undocumented-immigrants-to-apply-for-driver-s-licenses-here-s-what-happened/ar-BB1pcnzd>.

Membership

In some cases, WOCs may have hybrid ownership structures. Dorchester Food Cooperative has board seats for both its consumer-members and workers. Dorchester Arts Project is transitioning to a cooperative model, using a multi-stakeholder approach with its workers and artists. Other WOCs like the Boston Cleaning Collective may appear more like family-run businesses, where worker ownership is distributed among relatives. Membership can determine funding eligibility. CFNE generally requires a WOC of at least three unrelated individuals, and even recommends at least five. On the other hand, a working definition by the USFWC remains silent on the required number of worker owners.

Policy Implications

While it may help with clarity, COB should not establish definitions of WOCs that are too restrictive. Doing so risks de-legitimizing the diversity of organizations within Boston's cooperative economy. Still, if too lax, the City of Boston's definition of WOCs cannot safeguard against misclassification and programs may not benefit the right organizations. Striking a balance requires a tiered approach that upholds worker ownership and democratic decision-making, but is more flexible on other considerations. To this degree, CED has offered its own concise definitions, describing WOCs as either worker cooperative corporations (WCCs) or worker-owned businesses (WOBs), with the major difference being legal incorporation. CED's scope also includes worker-centered enterprises (WCEs), which includes ESOPs and other businesses that support workers through board representation, equitable pay ratios, and more.

Under the right conditions, city officials may also consider evaluating substance in addition to form. For example, the residency of worker-owners could be included as part of determining a worker-cooperative's location. While the stringent bureaucratic procedures of government often do not lend themselves to this kind of nuance, the City of Boston's S.P.A.C.E grant process appears to have had a more holistic evaluation of whether applicants had cooperative structures.

Currently, COB continues to be open to thinking through worker ownership. Several champions or supporters exist at a director-level or below. But Mayor Wu and Cabinet-level leaders have not indicated worker ownership as their top priority. COB's general vision for economic development has meant resourcing programs and projects that expand

opportunity. But a more concrete values-driven framework has not yet been offered. Nor should COB do so alone. Building a solidarity economy comes from the bottom-up. In 2021, in the lead up to funding \$15 million for WOCs, CLTs, and community investment vehicles, the City of Chicago's Office of Equity and Racial Justice convened a working group of 30 leaders that developed recommendations on city policies and investments for CWB.⁵⁸ City officials had been tempted to work on their own, but knew they had to meaningfully share power if they were to truly succeed in breaking patterns of governments and philanthropy co-opting movements.⁵⁹ In practice, this commitment led OERJ to form a CWB advisory council of community members. Through a local philanthropic organization, all 20 CWB advisory council members were paid \$2,500 for their one-year role. Eventually, in the transition from Mayor Lori Lightfoot to Mayor Brandon Johnson, OERJ ceded its convening role to the CWB advisory council, now known as "the Hub".⁶⁰ Chicago is an example of how the principal role of local government can change from developer to endorser.

An economic strategy and vision like CWB creates space for worker ownership to dovetail with other policy agendas: limited equity housing co-ops, community-driven investment, development without displacement, community land trusts, anti-poverty initiatives, participatory budgeting, universal basic income, and much more. Grassroots coalitions like COWOP (and CED's networks more broadly) have acted with this belief, and continue to ideate more connections between labor and land. But COB requires a more explicit vision. Securing the buy-in and collaboration from senior city officials, who wield greater influence over agenda-setting and institutional reform, will be key to inciting change.

⁵⁸ McInroy, McKinley, and Sutton, "A New Era for Community Wealth Building," 14.

⁵⁹ Office of Equity and Racial Justice and Community Wealth Building Advisory Council, "City of Chicago Community Wealth Building Initiative," 40.

⁶⁰ Office of Equity and Racial Justice and Community Wealth Building Advisory Council, 242540.

Business Development

Policy recommendations for how municipalities can support WOCs typically center on business development. The logic often goes:

- Technical assistance and other small business programs can provide WOCs with key knowledge and resources to improve business operations.
- Given their well-documented issues of accessing capital from traditional financial institutions, WOCs may be better supported through municipal finance in the form of loans, loan guarantees, or grants. Cities can also be key partners in brokering relationships and facilitating investment from other sectors.
- Cities can directly help WOCs grow their business through procurement contracts or other preferences.

Small Business Development

SBD's TA program has allowed WOCs to receive free 1-on-1 and workshop support. It usually contracts with organizations like BCCO and LEAF to do so. But WOCs should not be limited to receiving help from only organizations with a demonstrated interest in cooperatives; if they have more conventional needs in finance, marketing, or law, they should be connected with a greater pool of service providers. Not every TA request may require deep familiarity or knowledge about co-operative models or governance structures.

Moreover, to not over-burden the local worker cooperative ecosystem, SBD can work with other organizations beyond Boston. This is a tact that New York City's Small Business Services takes. Generally, any TA work worth less than \$10,000 can be approved without much bureaucracy by SBD; larger projects typically involve an RFP prioritizing the lowest bidder. It may be strategic for WOC movements to use this system to bring other ecosystem actors into the COB network, especially if "technical assistance" can be broadened to include education, mediation, political advocacy, and other WOC needs (which are arguably shared by any small business).

Technical assistance is actually the least capitalized program among SBD's three main programs. While "Restore & Design" and "Main Streets" may not be immediately applicable to Boston's current WOCs, stronger familiarity with the City's existing programs may behoove the movement as a whole. Many small business owners are not aware of these public resources, which remains a persistent challenge for SBD.⁶¹ For example, the Restore & Design program has allocated \$880,000 to fund storefront repairs like lighting and signage, or support marketing needs with graphic design. When these needs are minor and cost less than \$10,000, the City is capable of funding repairs in full, though the buy-in of building owners and landlords is often required. Nonetheless, the City has in some cases funded much larger repairs in low-to-moderate income neighborhoods.

SBD, however, also does not actively promote some of its programs. The Neighborhood Business Access Loan has an estimated \$545,000 available to offer in loans to small businesses. While the amounts given are discretionary, they have favorable terms and built-in loan forgiveness. However, various restrictions exist on this pool of funding because its source is a Community Development Block Grant. Small businesses are required to submit receipts or invoices for business expenses (excluding rent and labor), meaning eligible applicants have to have some level of working capital. City officials claim that this funding is not publicized because it would have too many applicants otherwise.⁶²

Cities, however, need to do more than remove barriers and make programs available. They have a responsibility to actively invite small businesses on the margins. Some recognition of this messaging need is developing; as Miller notes anecdotally, WOCs, Black-owned businesses, and immigrant-owned businesses are more likely to engage with an opportunity if there is language in an application or form that speaks to them. A program might be open to everybody, but people might self-select if they do not see welcoming language in that form.

Financing

Access to capital is a critical need for WOCs. Traditional investors do not generally have familiarity with models of worker ownership, and may thus perceive WOCs as risky or at the very least unlikely to generate high financial returns. Boston's WOCs have generally been supported by local community development financial institutions and other

⁶¹ Interview with Emily Patrick.

⁶² Interview with Emily Patrick.

impact investors, but significant capital gaps still exist. Non-traditional lenders, who may wish to minimize or even rule out personal guarantees from worker owners, are still unable to meet their total demand for capital.

In New York City, the budget for the Worker Cooperative Business Development Initiative has grown from \$1.35 to \$3.18 million. This commitment is substantial, and is the largest commitment by any municipality to grow a worker cooperative ecosystem. But even NYC's approach appears to be largely for non-profit service providers and other community associations. The \$3.18m budget is not necessarily allocated for WOCs directly. The possible tension between funding for WOCs versus ecosystem actors must be recognized and navigated.

Loan guarantees have been frequently cited as a solution to issues of capital access.⁶³ In theory, if a local or state government can assure lenders that their loans to WOCs will be repaid, lenders may be more willing to establish more favorable loan terms. For this reason, COWOP's own state-level campaign has included loan guarantees from 2022-2024. In 2023, it most explicitly asked for loan guarantees in its broader budget advocacy, though the measure did not succeed. Given the evidence linking WOCs to equitable economic development, it is understandable how cities could be incentivized to issue loan guarantees for, or even directly capitalize, WOCs.

However, COB's Law Department has raised a major challenge for financing WOCs. Known as the "Anti-Aid Amendment", Article 18 of Massachusetts' Constitution was originally designed to restrict the use of public grants, appropriations, money, property, or loans of credit grant to benefit private religious institutions. Today, the wider application of this law has established that public funds and resources may not be used to directly benefit any private enterprise, including businesses (and therefore WOCs). Exceptions to the anti-aid amendment do exist. Federal funds are not bound by state constitutions: this is likely why a number of other cities that have loan programs for WOCs are capitalized by federal money.⁶⁴ Also, in cases where benefitting a private enterprise is incidental to a public purpose, public funds may be used. Thus far, however, local economic development has not been a strong enough reason for approval from COB's legal team.⁶⁵

⁶³ Funk and Trenholm, "Municipal Playbook for Employee Ownership"; Interview with Maggie Cohn.

⁶⁴ Funk and Trenholm, "Municipal Playbook for Employee Ownership," 22.

⁶⁵ Interview with Elijah Miller.

One alternative path may lie in quasi-government institutions. The City of Atlanta established InvestAtlanta, its own quasi-economic development agency, to lend to small businesses with a mix of federal and local funds. In Massachusetts, quasi-institutions like MassDevelopment or Mass Growth Capital Corporation, could then administer financing for WOCs. But since these entities are independent from the City of Boston, they have no obligation to follow the City's directives; while COB may prefer awarding grants to loans, a quasi-public agency may opt for its historic preference. Smaller COB grants, however, are permissible. Amounts less than \$50,000 do not require legal approval, only legal advice. OEI has consequently offered micro-grants to Legacy Business Program awardees (see following section).⁶⁶ Overall, a new set of relationships appears to be needed for WOC financing, which may include deeper public-philanthropic partnerships.⁶⁷

Procurement

Nearly every article and report on municipal support for worker ownership recommends procurement preferences for WOCs. Yet to date, few if any existing policies at the municipal level appear to support preferential purchasing of goods and services from WOCs; Berkeley's City Council voted for WOC procurement incentives in 2019.⁶⁸ While meaningful, this 5% bidding preference applies to all local businesses. In other words, WOCs do not have to be the exclusive beneficiary for public contract preferences.⁶⁹

Historically, the size of local government contracts do not always align well with the capacity of small businesses. Yet in noting the disparities that result when cities predominantly reward larger firms, advocates for business equity have targeted ways to break up municipal contracts. In 2022, COB made such an intervention. It awarded a \$17 million Boston Public Schools contract to City Fresh Foods, an employee-owned, Black-owned food service company based in Roxbury.⁷⁰ Moreover, in Mayor Wu's 2024 State of the City Address, she pointed to how Women and Minority

⁶⁶ Interview with Elijah Miller.

⁶⁷ Interview with Elijah Miller.

⁶⁸ Yassi Eskandari, "Berkeley Sets the Bar for Municipal Support of Worker Cooperatives," Sustainable Economies Law Center, February 22, 2019, https://www.theseic.org/berkeley_sets_the_bar_for_municipal_support_of_worker_cooperatives.

⁶⁹ Eleanor Hollander, "Referral Response: Further Supporting Worker Cooperative," May 31, 2022, 3, <https://berkeleyca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2022-05-31%20Item%2040%20Referral%20Response%20Further%20Supporting.pdf>.

⁷⁰ "\$17 Million BPS Food Service Contract Announced with Roxbury-Based, Black-Owned Business | Boston.Gov," May 18, 2022, <https://www.boston.gov/news/17-million-bps-food-service-contract-announced-roxbury-based-black-owned-business>.

Business Enterprises (WMBE) doubled their revenue from City contracts, and an additional \$9 million investment will go towards building local business capacity to compete for bigger contracts.⁷¹

It may seem like the emphasis for WMBEs would pave the way to win certification and bidding for WOCs. Yet with the little representation that Boston's WOCs have (~20 out of the City's 40,000+ small businesses), it is still unlikely that procurement will be a major window of policy opportunity. Of course, WOCs can still win contracts on their own merits or with sole source contracts;⁷² Earth Shapers was recently awarded a two-year contract by the City's Green Infrastructure program to maintain facilities in Boston's community gardens. More broadly, WOCs may benefit from adding their support to the growing momentum for WMBEs. Not only are at least some WOCs also WMBEs, but supporting other causes allows WOCs to scale across.

Not every tactic has to be about business growth. In 2015, New York City's WOC movement considered this same question as it considered advocating for a separate procurement policy from WMBEs. Eventually, it chose to join a much larger organizing effort for WMBEs, which had been led by civil rights organizers for 30 years. This decision was an act of "seeing the constellation of policy and aligning political stars," where Curella and others determined that supporting other movements would in turn, accelerate their own work, not dilute it.⁷³

⁷¹ "Mayor Wu's 2024 State of the City Address | Boston.Gov," accessed February 29, 2024, <https://www.boston.gov/news/state-city-2024#read-the-address>.

⁷² Sole source procurement refers to a situation where a public entity determines that only a single provider is capable of providing the goods and/or services it needs, and thereby awards a contract.

⁷³ Interview with Christine Curella.

“Embedded Approaches”

Worker ownership may be embedded with other policy priorities emerging from the Wu administration. An estimated 28.2% of Boston residents are foreign-born. As new migrants arrive in Boston, some of whom are escaping dire conditions of political violence and economic turmoil, MOIA is continuing to explore policies and programs that allow immigrants to fully and equitably participate in economic, civic, social, and cultural life in Boston. Though preliminary, MOIA is now designing an educational program for new migrants to learn about entrepreneurship and cooperative development. While visionary, it has been difficult to advance this work in light of the essential services and programs that are often higher priorities for new migrants.

COB is also supporting its historic neighborhood businesses. Funded by ARPA, the Legacy Business Program awarded 30 small businesses in 2023 with opportunities for targeted technical assistance, legal support, and succession planning. The City has at least stated that conversions to employee ownership will be part of succession planning,⁷⁴ but actual instances have not yet been confirmed.⁷⁵

Sometimes referred to as “the silver tsunami”, U.S. adults from the baby boomer generation are entering retirement at a record pace. This demographic shift is often cited as an opportunity to scale up worker ownership.⁷⁶ As early as 2016, non-profit business associations in Boston were conducting outreach to inform retiring business owners about WOC conversions.⁷⁷ In 2023, to spotlight MassCEO’s possible future role, the *Boston Globe* highlighted small business-WOC conversions across Massachusetts, from Dean’s Beans in Orange to RLMG in Watertown.⁷⁸

Baby boomers are estimated to own over half of all small businesses in the U.S., but only 20-30% of their small businesses will likely sell.⁷⁹ A significant market gap thus exists; expanding the sale of businesses to workers could both help older adults build wealth and extend economic opportunity into the next generation. Seeing these

⁷⁴ “Legacy Business Program | Boston.Gov,” August 17, 2022, <https://www.boston.gov/government/cabinets/economic-opportunity-and-inclusion/legacy-business-program>.

⁷⁵ Interview with Elijah Miller.

⁷⁶ Interview with Maggie Cohn.

⁷⁷ Interview with Emily Patrick.

⁷⁸ Dana Gerber, “As the ‘Silver Tsunami’ Hits Small Businesses, Could Worker Co-Ops Be a Solution?,” *Boston Globe*, June 14, 2023, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/06/14/business/worker-cooperatives-in-massachusetts/.gerb>

⁷⁹ “State of Owner Readiness - Exit Planning Institute,” accessed February 19, 2024, <https://exit-planning-institute.org/state-of-owner-readiness>.

possibilities, New York City developed the Owner to Owners hotline as a resource and referral portal. It explicitly connects small business owners with service providers that can facilitate transitions, like the ICA Group.⁸⁰ Business owner engagement and assistance is also recorded over time, providing long-term insights on small business outreach.

Obran Capital is a Boston-based WOC conglomerate that specializes in WOC conversions. To do so, it uses federal legislation (1042 Tax Benefit for Conversions) that allows business owners who sell their business to defer any capital gains tax from the sale. With these incentives, Obran has been able to acquire small businesses for employee ownership, even with lower bids. However, like other start-up WOCs, Obran still experiences its own share of cash flow challenges, and could benefit from more public sector support.⁸¹ So far, the relationships between SBD and the worker cooperative ecosystem to support conversions to employee ownership do not appear to exist.

Stronger policy frameworks can further enable the WOC conversions. Building on Italy's Marcora laws and Washington D.C.'s Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act, the Right to Own framework was developed by the Next Systems Project. When a business is put up for sale, it proposes that workers should receive a right of first refusal: a one-week period to where they may offer to purchase the business. A final sale agreement can then be agreed upon over several more months. However, such policies are unlikely to be effective at the municipal scale; business can simply re-locate elsewhere to avoid the right of first refusal process.⁸² Nonetheless, existing workforce development programs may offer important spaces to experiment with the kinds of support workers may need to convert and then run their own businesses.

While not without their own challenges, serving new demographics and legacy business preservation represent two opportunities to continue engaging COB. Research has indicated that for worker-owners, their role in WOCs can take on multivalent meanings. They can simultaneously hold nuanced, even conflicting views about WOCs as a way to improve working conditions and to usher in a new economic system.⁸³ Municipal officials may adopt similar hybrid

⁸⁰ Funk and Trenholm, "Municipal Playbook for Employee Ownership," 20.28

⁸¹ Interview with Hendrix Berry, interview by Erwin Li, Zoom, December 4, 2023.

⁸² Peter Gowan, "Right to Own: A Policy Framework to Catalyze Worker Ownership Transitions" (The Next System Project, 2019), 16.gown

⁸³ Tyler Luis Rivera, "'No One Washes a Rental Car': Parsing Contested Narratives of Worker Ownership in the Massachusetts Cooperative Economy" (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2022), <https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/144827/rivera-tlr-mcp-dusp-2022-thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

stances. In fact, a dynamic, multi-faceted understanding of WOCs may actually be preferable to a static, standardized one because it recognizes multiple ways to change.

Key Considerations: What About Broader Transformation?

Thus far, this report has assessed municipal policy to support WOCs from a more targeted perspective. In other words, it focused on WOCs and their ability to address discrete socio-economic problems. Many interviewees embraced said framing. A more linear logic sees concrete ways for municipalities to advance worker ownership: the more action and resources that address enabling conditions, the better off worker cooperative ecosystems may be. In some cases, there was a specific concern for scale. While the Greater Boston area boasts more WOCs than most metropolitan areas, its tens of WOCs are still a minute number compared to small business overall.

But WOCs have demonstrated a capacity for broader transformation in how they build relationships and power. In their convenings and associations, WOC projects are learning what it means to work in democratic, relational ways to each other.⁸⁴ This requires more than un-learning attachments to individualism and hierarchy, but attending to needs for trust, solidarity, and even generative conflict. Here, Cooperation Jackson is an often cited example. Emerging from a Black Power perspective, Cooperation Jackson developed its own WOCs, but also engaged the state as part of independent party politics. Candidates from People's Assemblies succeeded in winning mayoral and city council elections, seeking to transform local government from within.⁸⁵

Grassroots efforts to build municipal policies that support worker ownership have to navigate a key tension: wins for worker ownership may not be inherently wins for solidarity economies. The prevailing political zeitgeist of cities is to measure the success of their economic development policies by GDP, tax values, and jobs or businesses created.⁸⁶ WOC development is not exempt from this thinking; New York City's own key performance indicators emphasize the number of WOCs formed, jobs created, and technical services offered.⁸⁷ While important for visibility and accountability of public funds, these measures of success can be limiting for evaluating WOCs, and even jeopardize support for worker ownership. If local governments only value measures of growth, WOCs cannot compete with

⁸⁴ King et al., "A Review of State, Municipal, & Community Strategies Supporting Worker-Owned Cooperatives," 16.

⁸⁵ Kali Akuno, "The Jackson-Kush Plan: The Struggle for Black Self-Determination and Economic Democracy," February 18, 2017, <https://pressbooks.pub/jacksonrising/chapter/the-jackson-kush-plan-the-struggle-for-black-self-determination-and-economic-democracy/>.

⁸⁶ Interview with Christine Curella.

⁸⁷ Mayor's Office of Contract Services, "Working Together: A Report on the Eighty Year of the Worker Cooperative Business Development Initiative" (New York, NY: NYC Small Business Services, 2023), https://www.nyc.gov/assets/sbs/downloads/pdf/about/reports/worker_coop_report_fy22.pdf.8th y

traditional firms. For example, in terms of cost efficiency, technical assistance for WOCs can be highly intensive, and thus cost much more than traditional approaches that seek to maximize job quantity.⁸⁸ Under the conventional paradigm then, WOCs may not be worth significant public resources. Another danger lies in a dynamic where WOCs receive just enough support to survive, but not to thrive. They are “experiments” that may earn short-term recognition, but not longer-term investment. So, we require other ways of framing WOC and community success. Beyond the often-cited figures of business longevity, approaches like Jobs for the Future’s Quality Jobs Framework or the social determinants of health offer important and arguably more rigorous ways to evaluate a community economic development strategy. Monitoring living wages, pay equity, employee well-being and sense of agency, inclusion of historically and systemically marginalized groups, and dollars circulating locally are but a few ways to expand current municipal thinking – not just to benefit WOCs but to transform the standards by which municipalities operate and see themselves.

Still, the entire apparatus of economic development does require broader transformation. Success is not just about what we can quantitatively measure. For the WOC movement, this work will be relational. It requires more than individual municipal champions, no matter if they are legislators or city officials. Where WOCs can excel is in building extensive relationships with one another within a greater ecosystem of organizations. That is what it means to scale across and scale deep, the embodiment of cooperativism. So, change will take grounded assessments of the quality of movement relationships. It is from this basis that we should develop a grassroots vision for what local government can become.

⁸⁸ Interview with Stacey Cordeiro.

Conclusion

Equipped with a historic influx of federal funding, the City of Boston has demonstrated a renewed – albeit budding – interest to support WOCs. The local worker cooperative ecosystem has an opportunity to build on this momentum. New touchpoints between city officials and the local worker cooperative ecosystem do not have to be transactional or tactical; they offer a possibility for deeper relationships and an entry-point for further transforming the apparatus of local government. The WOC system can demonstrate the viability of solidarity economies, and also actively build solidarity *within* local government. Through visions of inclusive ownership and community wealth-building, recent cases like Chicago demonstrate that catalyzing this work is possible. For Boston, it will ultimately depend on how worker owners and their associated ecosystem of organizations situate worker ownership within a broader agenda for transformation, in concert with movement organizations across social, economic, and environmental justice.

In light of these learnings, we offer the following recommendations to the worker cooperative ecosystem.

1. **Be loud, stay loud.**

Though worker ownership has not been institutionalized in Boston's local government, past and current City of Boston officials cite that constituents and organizations have been key actors in keeping WOCs relevant to City Hall. Worker-owners and ecosystem groups have been persistent. COWOP's state-wide efforts, like its latest advocacy day in the state house, can also translate to relationship-building and organizing at a municipal scale. It is possible to both expand the number of municipal champions and broader familiarity with WOCs among city departments.

2. **Invest in municipal champions.**

A couple WOC advocates exist in City Hall, but their other priorities may compete with their ability to champion worker ownership. Relying on a political champion does present issues of longevity. But it is currently necessary to demand and develop a dedicated staff-person to lead and broaden support for a worker ownership agenda within City Hall.

3. **Envision the City as Convenor.**

Despite the cooperative values of WOCs and ecosystem organizations, the challenges of day-to-day operations make it difficult to gather and act in coordination as a movement. The City of Boston has the resources and spaces to bring organizations together more regularly. Just like the City has organized a Youth Summit and a Civic Summit, it too could build a Co-op Summit (or other gatherings).

Superficial participation cannot be the goal of this work; ideally, representatives from WOCs are seen as leaders and advisors not just to City Hall, but also to the wider consortium of anchor institutions, associations, CBOs, and philanthropic actors the municipality can bring together. As evidenced in Chicago, the Community Advisory Council was essential to guiding its \$15 million ARPA fund investment into community-wealth building. The Council has now transitioned to become the “WEB”, the principal leader for Chicago’s co-operative ecosystem.

4. **Change the narrative.**

What is the political moment for the City of Boston? As the Wu administration details its signature projects in the lead-up to a possible 2025 re-election campaign, the worker cooperative ecosystem can embed itself into City Hall’s priorities. Be it Boston’s climate readiness goals, cultural and arts economy, or WMBE procurement targets, a communications and advocacy strategy can detail how WOCs can help translate Mayor Wu’s ambitions into reality.

5. **Deepen knowledge of COB small business services.**

WOCs do not appear to be excluded from accessing the City’s small business services. But they may not be invited to do so, or know how to navigate otherwise bureaucratic processes. Even when worker owners may receive support, they can face additional barriers in receiving wrap-around services. Given the intensive technical assistance needs of WOCs, it may merit growing the COB list of business associations, law firms, and other TA providers for WOCs. Of course, substantial training may need to take place before this scaling can happen.

The WOC movement can share lessons in its advocacy and learning circles, especially to identify where City Hall has been unable to follow through on its services and support.

6. Target municipal entry points for worker ownership.

Two areas to further advocate for worker ownership are legacy business preservation and creating entrepreneurial opportunities for new immigrants. This work demonstrates how worker ownership can embed itself into City programs by addressing other challenges. It serves a broader narrative in which WOCs are seen as expanding and continuing economic opportunity, across generations and across national origin. Though certification, procurement preference, and loan guarantees are arguably more directly impactful for WOCs, their lack of precedence in Boston and other cities may make them better longer-term demands rather than immediate priorities.

7. Develop a trans-local learning network.

Through COWOP, WOCs across Massachusetts have begun to build and deepen their relationships with one another. Its broader convenings have even brought together more diverse stakeholders. MASEN's annual summer gathering was an opportunity for legislators, policy-makers, non-profit advocates, and worker-owners to share and learn from one another. This is fertile ground to assess the conditions not just for policy changes in Boston, but in cities and towns across Massachusetts. After all, interventions in one place have cascading effects; municipalities often look to one another for models, inspiration, and sometimes competition. This is a dynamic that worker cooperative ecosystems can leverage for their own agendas.

8. Strengthen ties with movements beyond worker ownership.

Documentation of WOCs tends to focus on their number and location. But the strength of these organizations is not just their existence. Where WOCs can distinguish themselves is the extent to which their relationships are interdependent, internally and externally with each other and ecosystem organizations. These relationships are worth growing and illustrating.

In some ways, the legitimacy of WOC movements also depends on potential allies like labor unions and worker centers. As cases like New York City portend, if labor movements do not recognize WOCs as legitimate, beneficial workplaces, they will not lend their support politically. Already, this understanding has been demonstrated in COWOP, with its partnerships with ESOPs and AFL-CIO. Broader frames like community-wealth building can expand the possibility for stronger political alliances, with labor and other related causes, be it WMBE businesses or community land trusts. Thus far, the Wu administration has lacked an overall thesis for its economic development, despite rhetoric and some politics that may fit into alternative economic paradigms. Chicago's own CWB focus outlines the possibility for how with enough people power, a broader economic platform and vision can pierce the veil of "business-as-usual".

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