

Participatory Budgeting Handbook: A Community-based Curriculum

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A Participatory Project

The point of this document is to provide a curriculum to train persons to create and implement participatory budgeting projects in their cities and neighborhoods. A review of the available literature reveals that this sort of training program is rare.¹ What is mostly available might be classified as toolkits that spell out in a few steps the participatory budgeting (PB) process. A curriculum, however, is different; specifically, a curriculum is much more comprehensive. In a curriculum, philosophy and practical guidelines are combined into a program of action.

In general, participatory budgeting represents a new imagination, whereby ordinary citizens have significant input into local municipal budgets. Many critics believe that this change will help to improve the current social conditions. After all, many communities, particularly those that are marginalized, are suffering. The current reality in these locations has become difficult, due to racism, austerity measures, and the economic downturn brought on by the recent Pandemic. In short, participatory budgeting offers the opportunity for inspiration and change.

But what is participatory budgeting? Typically, PB is described as a process whereby community members meet regularly to discuss the need for funds to address local issues. As part of this process, they conduct a diagnostic of their neighborhoods, debate and develop solutions, and make budget proposals to remedy the problems that have been identified. A final step, accordingly, is to offer alternative budget plans to local officials. As might be imagined, the benefits that accrue to a community extend beyond exerting some control over budgets. If

¹ For additional literature and other information about participatory budgeting, go to: <https://www.urbangreenworks.org/participatory-budgeting>

undertaken properly, PB can encourage local skill development, foster civic responsibility, and enhance community solidarity.

In many ways, participatory budgeting is aligned with a new trend of social planning, referred to as community-based work (CBW). What is discussed in the initial section of this curriculum is that this change represents a significant shift in philosophy regarding how community interventions should be planned, implemented, and evaluated. A lack of attention to this philosophical change, however, has prevented many projects that strive to become community-based from achieving this end. As the term suggests, becoming community-based is thought to make local interventions relevant and thus sustainable.

Community-based Philosophy

Particularly relevant to community-based work is that philosophy is at the root of an apparent practical task. As a result of this new philosophy, every facet of a community intervention is changed. Traditionally, interventions have followed a top-down model, with professionals taking the lead in projects. In CBW, on the other hand, local participation is the fundamental tenet, specifically “grassroots” involvement. What should be noted, however, is that participation is related to far more than periodic local consultations and the associated input. Community-based work requires far more direct participation than is usually the case.

What is essential to community-based projects is “authentic participation” (Fals Borda, 1988). Two principles are at the core of this idea. The first is that local knowledge should guide all interventions. And based on this view of knowledge, the second is that local persons should control every aspect of an intervention. The rationale behind these two principles is that local persons know their communities and have the skills to adopt complex strategies to solve problems and create pertinent and sustainable policies and practices. Clearly, this strategy

departs significantly from the standard top-down, “expert”-driven model. But this change represents more than a logistical maneuver.

Particularly noteworthy is that CBW recognizes that human agency plays a large role in how communities view valid knowledge. Specifically, a fundamental connection is understood to exist between human action and the stock of knowledge community members use to make decisions about various aspects of their lives, such as health or the economy. How they interpret their situations has a lot to do with the identification of problems and the selection of solutions. Community life, in other words, is shaped significantly by their perspectives and definitions of local shortcomings and commitments.

Traditionally, the insights offered by community members were treated as simply opinions, and thus were considered subjective and little more than anecdotal evidence. As a result, outside experts had control over the information that was taken seriously during the planning process. For this reason, communities were merely consulted periodically, mostly at the end of planning, or were treated as passive partners throughout this process. Furthermore, when treated simply as stakeholders or partners, the role of community members is very restricted. In the framework of community-based work, a significant shift takes place whereby local persons are elevated in importance and become the experts.

What is the thrust of this philosophical outlook? Stated directly, a community must be viewed differently from the past. No longer can a community, for example, be treated as a location or be associated with a set of demographic or socio-economic indicators. In terms of CBW, not much is gained by knowing the demographic profile of a community. Knowing whether people are Black or poor does not provide much insight into what they think about the economy or how they will respond to an intervention. What is recognized in a community-based

project, instead, is that a community must be approached as a product of interaction and local invention. A community has a lot to say about how a local project should proceed that must never be ignored or marginalized.

As a result, the community does not exist; a community should not be viewed as a singular entity. What a community consists of are multiple and often conflicting perspectives, and thus represents a confluence of these outlooks created for various purposes. In the end, a community is fluid and generated through the daily interaction of persons. And to be understood properly, this locally generated understanding must be the focus of attention. Accordingly, the local knowledge that holds people together is not simply subjective, and thus irrelevant, but is central to identifying problems successfully and creating proper interventions or correctives.

What are the benefits to practicing authentic participation? Elevating local knowledge in importance and allowing local persons to design and control projects results in relevant interventions, skill and confidence building, and community autonomy. In other words, a spirit of inclusion is fostered that accompanies the participation of all persons. And because the projects that are developed are based on real collaboration, any outcomes tend to be accepted and sustained overtime.

As should be recognized, PB allots a new role to citizens. As local persons learn about budgeting, and offer alternative budget proposals, capacity building occurs in a community. And due to this expanding knowledge base and experience, a more intense sense of community may develop. And on the more practical side, budget priorities may begin to shift and become more just and equitable. To use a term that has become quite popular nowadays, participatory budgeting can culminate in community becoming empowered. As communities begin to witness improvements because of their efforts their sense of efficacy increases—they begin to believe

that their actions matter—while their identities are affirmed. These and other civic rewards are regularly a result of participatory budgeting.

Degrees of Participation

As noted above, participatory budgeting is a part of a genre of planning that is often referred to as community-based. Because of the importance of this philosophical shift, PB should be viewed fundamentally and thoroughly to be a participatory activity. Anything less betrays the aim of this mode of budgeting. Nonetheless, there are stages of participation that should be recognized.

The question that needs to be addressed is, what is participation? At first, this question may seem frivolous since participation may appear to be obvious. But there are several dimensions to any adequate definition. Participation, for example, relates to the number and variety of persons involved, the scope of the issues that are addressed, and the control that local participants can exert over the process. Although there is a quantitative aspect to participation, the quality is also a significant consideration.

Without a doubt, everyone in a community should be encouraged to participate in neighborhood budget assemblies (meetings). Everyone should be allowed to speak. But additionally, the effort should be made to include more than the usual suspects who often attend meetings. Furthermore, all ideas should receive a fair hearing and be solicited from every sector of a community, even the margins.

To be more specific, Arnstein (1969) writes that a “ladder” of participation exists. Participation can range from periodic consultations, toward the low end, to citizen control at the top. In actual practice, projects that operate at the bottom of the ladder merely keep the participants informed, while those at the top are more participatory and allow these persons more

control over the design and implementation of a project. As might be suspected, a truly functioning participatory budgeting project would be at the top of the ladder, with budget design in the hands of neighborhood members.

In theory, PB projects should strive to be as participatory as possible and reach the top of the ladder. To achieve this condition, however, attention should be directed to explaining the frameworks of participation. There are several ways to think about the conditions under which budgets are written and implemented.

Participation can take place in so-called closed spaces (Cornwall, 2002). The traditional conduct of budgeting was undertaken in this manner. Specifically, budgets were established behind closed doors, with input mostly from professionals and civic officials. As a result, budgets were often proposed that, at best, only addressed indirectly the desires of communities, especially those that are underserved.

To counteract this absence of local participation, many municipalities and other organizations began to operate as invited spaces. In this case, community members are invited to participate and give some input into the budgeting process, along with some other projects. The problem with this format is that participation is controlled by authorities. For example, local priorities are addressed in terms of how well they fit into the budget plans developed by accountants and professional planners. While some consultation is appreciated, this participation is minimal with residents having little influence over final decisions.

A thoroughly participatory project, on the other hand, takes place in claimed or created spaces. Real participation is encouraged in these projects, with local knowledge and control at the center of all planning activities. As should be noted, PB should be initiated in this sort of framework.

These claimed spaces, however, do not simply occur but are opened up through local persons becoming active and demanding inclusion. In a PB project that aims to go beyond consultation, for example, community persons must be encouraged to challenge the traditional budget priorities and the processes whereby they are established. Prompting this critique is a vital part of a community-based PB process.

Toward the bottom of the participation ladder, persons are involved passively in projects. Most often they are simply informed of policies, practices, and changes in plans or budgets. Clearly, this approach is inconsistent with the aims of PB to generate more informed and participatory communities, where local control and autonomy are desired.

PB should be at the top of the ladder of participation where widespread participation and local control are valued and practiced. The idea is that such participation is contagious and can spread throughout a community. With participation on the increase, problems can be evaluated and addressed in a locally relevant manner. Communities can thus exert the power that they have to change and improve their living conditions.

Phases of Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting makes a significant departure from how municipal budgets are usually produced. This process is controlled typically by professionals, and thus limited access is granted to the public. Therefore, transparency is restricted and, at best, communities are included at the tail end of this process. Although the rhetoric may be different, and possibly tout inclusion, the image is conveyed, and often accepted by community members, that the development of budgets is beyond the reach of ordinary citizens.

Most important, however, is that PB does not simply challenge the typical method of generating budgets. The aim is not simply to question the numbers or argue over formulas. The

point is that an entirely new role is created for communities. As noted earlier, their involvement starts at the beginning and continues throughout the creation and adoption of a local budget.

This new philosophy, accordingly, pervades every phase of a participatory budgeting project.

The usual phases of PB are as follows:

- Establish a budget forum
- Identify public dissatisfaction
- Engage in outreach
- Conduct research
- Institute community budget assemblies
- Produce an alternative budget

Although these stages do not necessarily occur *ad seriatim*, there is a logic to this development. That is, a bottom-up strategy is adhered to that is designed to foster an atmosphere of inclusion and foster participation. Throughout the growth of a PB project, the point should never be forgotten that this activity is centered in a community.

A. The Budget Forum

A budget forum is the term that is used to describe the local committee, established often at the neighborhood level, to initiate and guide a participatory budgeting project. Founding and developing this group is often a balancing act that represents a merger of new and well-known persons. Accordingly, the inaugural members may feel pushed aside by those who join later, and any conflict must be deftly managed. As might be imagined, two goals are central at this juncture. Specifically, the members must feel wanted and be motivated to continue their participation.

This original group does not have to be large, but the attempt should be made to expand membership over time. This process is referred to as outreach and will be discussed later in this document. The initial members may consist, for example, of close neighbors, family members, persons who are seen regularly on the street, or friends who attend the same church. The idea is that many persons may be interested in joining, some of whom you never expected but have never been asked. Often these forums start small but expand as the word gets out about participatory budgeting.

These forums play a fundamental role in PB. These groups are responsible for several vital activities:

- Organizing community meetings
- Disseminating information
- Conducting training/education sessions
- Interfacing with local city/county administrators

These groups constitute the linchpin in participatory budgeting. Simply put, they guide and support communities throughout this activity. In these neighborhood groups is where the entire PB process is orchestrated.

B. Identity Dissatisfaction

Participatory budgeting originates mostly because particular issues in a community are not being addressed. A city or county, for example, may be delinquent in repaving sidewalks or roads, or the amenities in local parks may be deteriorating. In fact, in the context of PB most complaints and locally produced budget proposals relate to these areas. To remedy these issues, neighbors begin to question whether adequate funds have been directed to their communities. At

this point is where participatory budgeting becomes relevant, with the particular aim of redirecting or reallocating funds.

As part of educating local persons, the community forums must document complaints about neighborhood conditions that need to be fixed. Often this process is referred to as needs assessment. In PB, the preferred term is a diagnostic. Nonetheless, information about the complaints of a particular community can be obtained from various sources:

- Local media
- Church meetings and neighborhood clubs
- School and community meetings
- Web-based information
- Local or governmental surveys
- Local officials
- Everyday discussions with neighbors, family members, and friends

The collection of this information is often treated as a sophisticated practice that is beyond the skills of local persons. But detecting problems can involve little more than taking a closer look at a neighborhood and listening to the residents. A slow walk through a park, for example, can reveal a lot of issues. Of course, there are many more complex methodologies but looking through a new lens and striving to communicate can result in many novel insights.

To be consistent with community-based work, how community members interpret those issues should be a primary concern. What a community thinks should be fixed or newly established depends on local history, current discussions, and ideas about the future. Any budget proposal that overlooks or marginalizes these considerations will likely have little local support and be ineffective.

C. Community Outreach

Outreach is the process whereby news is disseminated about participatory budgeting. At the beginning, persons must be contacted about the formation of a community forum. Likewise, other meetings require the dissemination of information. Outreach is particularly significant to convening the budget assemblies where local proposals are discussed and funding decisions are made.

There are many options available to get the word out about a new budgeting process.

Some of these are:

- Social media, neighborhood blogs
- Radio, newspapers
- Fliers, going door-to-door
- Churches
- Neighborhood papers, clubs, organizations
- Sport events
- Everyday discussions with neighbors, family members, and friends

Each of these practices have strengths and weaknesses. As a community-based strategy, local persons know the best way to reach their neighbors. For example, where would persons most likely read and respond to fliers? Which church would be best to hold a discussion about participatory budgeting? Clearly, local knowledge has advantages at this stage of a participatory budgeting project. Outside experts may have theories and models that address how to reach communities, but none of these are as reliable as local insight.

The basic principle is to constantly expand outreach. The aim is to go beyond the usual participants and search in different areas in neighborhoods to achieve diversity, for example, in

race, age, gender, or ethnicity. Budget assemblies seem to be most productive when a variety of perspectives are represented. Similarly, community forums are more sustainable when everyone feels welcome. And accompanying this diversity is the generation of policies and practices that are more readily accepted and adopted. A nice watchword is to look beyond the comfortable places in communities and invite those who have been regularly ignored. In this way, the margins of communities become less peripheral.

D. Learning about Budgets

To participate effectively in the budgeting process, a certain amount of research is necessary. At the outset, local officials should be contacted by the neighborhood forums. The office of management and budgets in many cities and counties, for example, will offer workshops or meet individually with local groups. The purpose is to learn about the operating and capital budgets and how funds are currently allocated. Learning about the budget flow is essential to having an accurate view of a municipality's financial condition -- where do the funds originate and how are they used? To provide some transparency, most municipalities prepare booklets that provide a lot of this information and are available to the public. All of these suggestions are addressed in some detail in the following section.

A budget, however, does not simply provide a financial picture. While sources of revenue and expenditures are important, a budget spells out the values of a municipality. With regard to PB, local groups must know how much money is available to be reallocated or redirected to neighborhood projects. But equally important is having some insight into the values that underpin city or county budgets. Knowing some of these facets will enable a community to assess accurately the prospects of securing local funding.

Particularly important is to learn the budget cycle. The term budget calendar is used most often to outline this process. Simply put, a budget calendar details the stages of developing a city or county's budget. For example, one stage relates to the formation of an initial draft plan, while another is when the final proposal is presented to a city or other local council for adoption. What is particularly noteworthy for PB is when neighborhood groups can have input.

In this sense, two points on the budget calendar are especially important. The first relates to public hearings. By law, every municipality is required to have meetings where a proposed budget is presented to the public and comments and suggestions are solicited. These hearings are usually towards the end of the budget calendar, just before the final version is approved.

When the public hearings that are required by law are convened, however, the impact of local input is often minimal. After all, the budget process is almost finished. But there is a second point where local participation is possible, although this stage is not as well advertised as the first. Earlier in the budget process, many cities or counties hold meetings in local settings to discuss priorities and funding prospects. In terms of PB, these more informal meetings are often very productive. Indeed, budgets are not necessarily close to finalization, and thus local input can have significant impact.

In addition to local officials and their meetings, communities can consult other sources of budget information. For example, often municipalities produce a budget guide that is available to the public. Nowadays this information is distributed on the webpages of the offices of management and budget of cities and counties. The information conveyed in this manner is often similar to that presented in public meetings, although in much more detail.

The big idea about engaging in research is that local groups should be prepared to participate in PB. To advance sensible proposals they must know, for instance, how much is

available for local projects and the amount needed to support these proposals. And to have a significant impact on municipal budgets, knowing the best time to intervene is critical. The message is that local groups must be prepared to participate.

E. The Budget Assembly

In many ways, the process of participatory budgeting culminates in budget assemblies. These are the meetings where local project proposals are discussed and funding decisions are made. The research that has been conducted, along with the other skills that have been learned, come to fruition in these sessions. The general goal of these assemblies is to produce budget alternatives that redirect funds in the manner desired by a community.

Community persons or neighborhood groups come these assemblies prepared to present their proposals. They offer their ideas, budgets, and answer questions. Following this step, a general discussion is usually held to compare and contrast all of the proposals. At the end of this process, decisions are made by the entire group, most often by vote, to prioritize the projects for funding.

The overall theme of these meetings should be collaboration among the participants. In this sense, two facets are especially important: where the assemblies are located and how these meetings are configured. These are very political decisions, and this aspect will be discussed later in this document. For now, the emphasis is on encouraging participation.

Everyone must feel comfortable attending these assemblies. For this reason, care must be taken when choosing a location. Certain sites may be far away, inconvenient, or perceived to be off limits. Where the assemblies take place has a lot to do with the number and type of persons who will attend. Remember that the point is to be as inclusive and accessible as possible.

How these meetings are configured, likewise, has an impact on the participation. For example, how should the seats be arranged and where should a podium be placed? Participation depends on such details. After all, everyone should feel comfortable speaking and all ideas should be given serious consideration. An environment must be created that is compatible with these aims. Community sentiment should have a lot to do with specifying how these meetings are undertaken.

A facilitator who understands community-based philosophy can create an appropriate meeting dynamic. What is fundamental is that a collective spirit be fostered. Accordingly, this person serves merely as a starting point and strives to grow the group. For example, the facilitator coordinates an agenda that distributes responsibilities. Additionally, the participants are encouraged to educate one another. Correspondingly, everyone gains knowledge, feels important, and is supported throughout an assembly. With this sort of mutual aid in place, all participants and their ideas should be treated fairly.

A facilitator, therefore, can help to avoid an adversarial meeting. But often the final budget priorities, in traditional discussions, are based on consensus or a vote. In contrast to the general outlook of inclusion encouraged by PB, these strategies produce winners and losers, and many participants leave dissatisfied. If an assembly is conducted properly, budget proposals should not be viewed separately, in a competitive scheme, but as joint attempts to serve a community.

In participatory budgeting, the grand finale should be to make the “wisest” decisions regarding the proposals that are funded. The question that guides this process is: what would be the best combination of projects? The money that is available should be allocated to have the

widest impact. One project may be well designed but have a narrow focus, while several others working together may address a wider audience.

For this style of assessment to succeed, however, assemblies must be viewed as collective undertakings, rather than venues where various interest groups compete for funds. Instead of several groups walking away with their winnings, the aim should be to put together a configuration of funding that promotes community uplift. A wise decision allocates funding to improve all areas of a community as much as possible, with the money that is available. Here is where budget wisdom and social vision begin to merge into communal budgeting.

F. Making a Proposal

The central feature of participatory budgeting are the proposals generated by community members and submitted for discussion by the assembly, or directly to local budget officials. The guiding principle is to keep these proposals simple and straightforward. Striving for simplicity, however, does not mean that these proposals cannot be informative. The key is to present ideas clearly and succinctly.

Those who plan to enter a proposal into the discussion should do their homework; sufficient research will help persons or groups to clarify their ideas and make reasonable cost estimates. All budget submissions should state clearly what is needed and how much a project is going to cost. There should not be equivocation.

Beyond providing the name and community location of each person or group submitting, all proposals should briefly describe the project. Two-hundred and fifty words, or one typed page, should be sufficient. On another page, the cost of the project should be provided, with key budget items listed. Provided with this information, an assembly or city or county officials will

be able to envision the project. But to assess the impact, and judge the overall reach of a project, the criteria used to estimate its success should be stipulated.

With all this information, a budget proposal should not exceed two pages. When a proposal is clear and direct, an assembly or other evaluator can make an honest assessment of a project. And with feedback from the assembly or local officials, a proposal can be improved and put into its final form. The final product can then be integrated into the budget proposals sent to a city council or county manager for possible funding. The idea is that a range of proposals is considered and the most propitious collection is funded to foster widespread change.

What Communities Need to Know about Budgets

What is Budgeting?

At the core of participatory budgeting (PB) is the formation of a budget. But most persons consider this process to be mysterious, even archaic and formidable. Therefore, community training should be informative and accessible. Persons should be able to understand and put this knowledge into practice right away.

What do persons need to know about budgeting to participate competently in PB? Information must be selective, yet sufficient to make informed decisions about the allocation of money. But like PB in general, a budget has both theoretical and technical aspects. At the initial stages of budgeting, an important question is, “What a budget?” The point is for persons to view budgets to be more than numbers and money. In general, a budget allows a municipality to have a broad view of itself and exert control over financial decisions. Likewise, a neighborhood budget developed through PB says a lot about a community.

What is a Budget?

A budget is the quantitative expression of a proposed plan of action set by an organization for a specific period, and an aid to coordinate what needs to be done to implement that plan.

A budget is most useful when this document is integrated into an organization's growth strategy. Some questions that need to be considered in the preparation and execution of budgets include:

- What are the organization's short and long-term objectives?
- How does the organization serve the interest of its stakeholders or constituents?
- What is the best organizational and financial structure to carry out the objectives?
- What are the risks and opportunities of alternative strategies, and what are the contingency plans if the preferred plan fails?

Why a Budget?

Most units of government (e.g., cities, counties, states) must have budgets to comply with laws and regulations. However, beyond a compliance role, budgets help to (1) promote coordination and communication among the sub-units of an organization or government unit, especially to make sure that all employees understand and carry out the organization's goals; (2) provide a framework for judging performance and facilitate learning; and, (3) motivate the organization's leadership or management and other employees.

In addition to the allocation of money, budgets provide a map of a society. What is illustrated, although sometimes subtly, are the values of communities and their social priorities. For this reason, budgets are referred to often as moral documents.

On the financial side, budgets provide insight into the flow of money throughout a community. For example, where does the money originate and how are these funds used? Resources are identified, along with their dispersion throughout a society. An overall view is provided of a city's or county's financial framework, with the aim of improving decisions and policies. In other words, the so-called "big picture" is revealed of how a municipality operates.

Key Vocabulary

When conceptualizing a budget, there are several terms that everyone should know. These words and phrases are often used when meeting with municipal budget directors and during participatory budgeting assemblies. Basically, these terms relate to the budget flow. The ones that are commonly used are:

- Operating budget – contains the revenue and expenditures related to the daily operation of a city.
- Capital budget – money devoted to the acquisition or maintenance of fixed assets, such as sidewalk or ponds, that is distinct from the operating budget.
- Preliminary budget – the budget that is available before final approval by a municipal administrator, and usually reflects input from department heads and the public
- Approved or Adopted budget – a preliminary budget that is accepted by a city or county administrator or governing board.
- Fiscal year – a one-year period that is used for budgeting purposes. This period does not necessarily correspond to the calendar year.
- General fund – represents most of the money available to run a municipality, except for special set-asides, and includes the operating and capital budgets.

- Discretionary funds – money that is available in the general fund that is not earmarked for a special purpose – such as police or fire – and can be allocated after a preliminary budget is approved.
- Tax rate – the percentage at which personal or other income is taxed. For example, if a person earns \$30,000, the tax rate would be 20%.

Budget Calendar

Most operating budgets run through a one-year cycle (often called fiscal year). Before the start of the year, managers at all levels consider (a) past performance, (b) feedback from stakeholders, and (c) anticipated future changes to start planning for the next period. At the start of the process, the leadership sets specific nonfinancial expectations for the coming year, and these expectations then become detailed plans in terms of cash flows (income and expenses). During the year, employees at various levels track and investigate any deviations from the plan.

The budget calendar of a city or county is very important. This plan outlines the stages of a budget's development. For example, during the months of January and February a budget director may expect his or her department heads to report their needs and the estimated costs of next year's operation. And a preliminary budget may be expected by August, and public hearings may be conducted in September. These steps are part of what is called the budget-cycle.

What is important for PB, however, are the local meetings when community input into budget formation is solicited. In most municipalities, budgets cannot be approved without the public hearings that are prescribed by law. These meetings, however, are very formal and minimal changes are possible at that time. They occur almost at the end of forming a budget.

Less formal, local meetings are especially significant for PB. Because these meetings are conducted earlier in the budget process, changes are possible, even expected. At this point is where community groups can have some influence in shaping a municipal budget and receive some funding for their projects. And because these meetings are somewhat informal, the members of a neighborhood budget forum will have time to explain their projects and receive significant attention. Nowadays, notices of these meetings, both formal and informal, are made available on a municipality's website.

Most municipalities hold these relatively informal meetings early in the budget cycle. Community groups, however, should be organized and have budget proposals prepared for presentation. Although these meetings are advertised, persistence is required to pin down the dates and times. Several calls or emails to the office of management and budget may be necessary.

Review Local Budget Guides

Every municipality publishes a document that details the annual budget. These publications, for example, provide information about the tax rates, the sources of revenue, and expenditures. There are a lot of numbers and charts. Much of this presentation can be overwhelming. These documents are usually available on a municipality's website.

But along with these full documents an executive summary is usually provided. These summaries are very readable and accessible to most persons. These overviews, therefore, are helpful in figuring out how much money is already allocated and unavailable for local projects. These shorter and more concise presentations of a city or county's annual budget revenues and allocations should be carefully reviewed. With a little patience, some discretionary funds may be identified.

Typical Expenses Incurred by Local Governments

A common misconception is that operating budgets largely involve infrastructure expenses, including large construction projects. However, government units are primarily focused on providing services and their most important expenses involve paying people to provide services such as law enforcement, fire prevention, zoning inspections, etc. Hence, the primary expenses found in government budgets are salaries and post-retirement benefits (e.g., pension and medical plans). Additionally, in most municipalities well over 50% of operating budgets are devoted to public safety, such as police and fire services.

Role of Budget Director

Most municipal budget directors operate at an abstract level and focus on their spreadsheets. PB, on the other hand, adds a human touch to the formation of budgets. What is important in participatory budgeting are local needs and desires. Accordingly, neighborhood forums and community assemblies strive to put a human face on the budgeting process.

Therefore, meeting with the local budget director is a vital aspect of PB. Contact can be made through the phone or email, but persistence is required to secure a meeting. Remember that budget directors are high-level officials and can perform their jobs adequately, for the most part, without talking regularly to community members.

Most important is that community groups become visible and clearly state their needs and priorities. When these high-level budget decisions are being made by budget directors and their support staff, a visible community may get some added attention in this process. Many underserved communities, for example, must work especially hard to get recognition. Nonetheless, budget directors seem to respond to persistent requests for a meeting or a phone call. No one should get discouraged if an immediate response is not forthcoming.

Budget Review

Local city or county budgets deal with a lot of money. The effort must be made to determine how much is available for PB inspired projects. Despite outward appearances, and claims made by politicians, these budgets are often flexible. In other words, every dollar is not necessarily strictly allocated when claims are made about tight budgets. Even budgets in the final stages of preparation may contain some unassigned money.

What is important is to become familiar with the published budget documents, attend municipal budget meetings, and contact local officials to explain how PB operates. At every opportunity, talk about the benefits of this activity and try to get the attention of these officials. The aim is to re-socialize these budget administrators and get inside the process. The idea is to bypass the bureaucracy and obtain some insight into where some discretionary funds may be located that can be diverted to support neighborhood projects.

Neighborhood Projects

Although on a much smaller scale, the budgets that are prepared and presented at budget assemblies, or directly to local budget officials, have a similar function. Their aim is to provide a general overview of a project, identify its key components, and allocate the money needed to make each one operate properly. As should be noted, more than money is at stake.

Sometimes a sum of money is set aside specifically by a city or county to fund PB. Accordingly, the decisions made at budget assemblies are able to allocate money from this pot. Many municipalities, however, do not operate in this manner and reserve money to support participatory budgeting. In the absence of these special funds, locally-generated budgets are submitted directly to officials, for example, in the office of management and budget or a related office. Budget directors and their staff decide the community projects to fund.

These neighborhood, alternative budgets tell a story about how a project is going to proceed. This narrative includes a depiction of what is going to be done and who is going to carry out a project. Making a budget, therefore, requires that those who are proposing projects think seriously, in a holistic manner, about the skills, number of persons, and other resources that are needed. Planning thus becomes rigorous.

The Overall Vision

The key idea is that budgets are guides; these documents should not be viewed as written in stone. Nonetheless, clarity is important. The various budget items and their estimated costs should be carefully specified. Remember that a budget says a lot about a municipality and a neighborhood, so attention to detail is important.

The Politics of Participatory Budgeting

As should be noted, participatory budgeting is not simply about money. This entire process operates within the framework of community-based work, where the emphasis is on human agency, inclusion, and the democratization of budgets and decision-making. As a result, the potential civic rewards from this activity are immense, including increased transparency, improved and relevant services, and community building. And at various stages of this process certain decisions are made that are truly political, although they are not always viewed in this manner.

The question that needs to be asked at this time is: what is politics? In view of current writing, a reasonable definition could be as follows:

Politics relates to personal, interpersonal, contextual, and organizational factors, including policies and practices, that either restrict or open discussions and the range of acceptable proposals. (Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, p. 251).

Although power is not explicitly mentioned, who and how persons get to participate is the central issue. Power is expressed, accordingly, with regard to whether choices are expanded and democratic habits are encouraged. Empowerment is clearly at stake at several crucial areas of participatory budgeting.

A. The Politics of Talking

Who gets to speak at neighborhood forums and budget assemblies? The point is to avoid any person or group having a monopoly on the ideas expressed or the ability to speak. The issues that must be addressed range from the languages that are recognized to the opinions that are accepted. Participatory budgeting will be stifled if biases are present related to who is likely to have good ideas or believed to be motivated to participate in the long-term.

B. The Politics of Meetings

Do meetings support inclusion? For example, inclusion is affected by who sets the agenda, where meetings are located, and the environment that is established in meetings. Some of these decisions are subtle, such as how seats are arranged. On the other hand, favoritism or cliquishness is much more overt and can quickly destroy a meeting and undermine the motivation of participants.

C. Politics of Project Selection

Basic to PB is that project selection should be as expansive as possible. Specifically, the best combination of projects should be proposed for funding, so that an entire community is improved. All ideas, therefore, should receive a fair hearing and discussions should not be closed prematurely by calls to be pragmatic. In this way, projects will be funded in a wise

manner. No-one will be left out and everyone will feel satisfied that the best funding decisions were made.

D. Politics of Empowerment

Empowerment is thought of as the ability to make decisions and solve problems, along with the opportunity to implement those activities. In this regard, the goal of PB is to change the location of action (or power) to include those in the past who have been marginalized or ignored. For example, through the processes of disseminating information, building local skills, and stressing community control, participatory budgeting can contribute to changing who has control of budgets and how local funding is distributed. Therefore, different and more local centers of action can be established. The idea is to encourage cooperation, while maintaining an assertive posture. Through collective action, the traditional location of action can be shifted away, even so slightly, from government officials and traditional powerbrokers to local communities.

E. The Politics of Social Justice and Solidarity

The aim of PB is to establish a more “moral economy.” If budgets are inclusive and everyone is treated with dignity, and equity is emphasized, community solidarity can be improved. Through those budgetary discussions persons and groups can begin to appreciate how they can learn from one another and witness the benefits of mutual support. Furthermore, by fostering a spirit of collaboration and emphasizing wise budget decisions, community well-being can be elevated in importance, along with trust. Social justice can thus rise on the agendas of everyone, as persons experience collaboration and entertain a broader vision.

What should be noted is that PB has a political outlook, without an overt partisan agenda. The fundamental notion is that democracy can be expanded as a consequence of building local budgets from the ground-up. With more people involved in this process, civic life can be

enriched and more relevant services made available to communities. As locals gain a foothold in the budgeting process, and experience some success, a change in power is likely to occur. In this sense, PB is political.

Conclusion

Like most practices, participatory budgeting works best when this process is conceived to be a community-based activity. The assumption is that when based on local knowledge and control, both city and county budget practices and community life can be improved. Nonetheless, a sustained commitment is required on the part of local officials and community members to successfully carry out a participatory budgeting project.

At first, the reallocation of funds may appear to be impossible. Budget lines may be firmly established and long-term commitments made to a particular distribution of funds. But with perseverance, based on solid research, adjustments can often be made to fund local projects. Local communities, accordingly, must do their homework and make the necessary contacts to get the attention of city or county officials to support local budget proposals and the associated projects. Nobody should be discouraged if an initial foray into participatory budgeting is met by resistance or lack of interest from local officials. Persistence is necessary.

Likewise, community members should not be disenchanted if PB begins as a series of pilot projects. Such a maneuver on the part of city or county officials does not mean that a more widespread adoption is not in the offing. When local administrators have some doubts, but are willing to proceed, pilot projects represent a step toward a broader acceptance. The point is to get a foot in the door and progress as much as possible.

PB has a lot of potential. But institutionalizing this practice must occur on two fronts. Communities must be prepared and committed to participate. On the other hand, local officials

must be cajoled into viewing budgets through a new lens. After all, there must be money available for communities to use. The overall message, therefore, is that communities have a lot to do to make PB work and regain control of how their tax money is spent. This task is not necessarily easy but rewarding, both in the long and short-term.

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