

MEMORANDUM

DATE: 9/30/2021
TO: President's Workgroup for Racial Justice, Antiracism, and Equity
FROM: Karen Kapusta-Pofahl, Common Council Legislative Analyst
RE: Overview of Best Practices in Participatory Budgeting

Summary: This memorandum provides a high-level overview of participatory budgeting (PB), provides a list of core components and best practices, and offers a selection of links to US municipalities' PB programs. The appendix provides an infographic on the PB process, as well as some examples of municipal PB guides and materials.

Background

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a broad range of approaches to increasing resident and community input into various aspects of municipal budgets. In the conventional budget process, residents engage through attendance at Finance Committee and Common Council meetings, as well as contacting the mayor, alders, or through Neighborhood Resource Teams. In a PB project, residents are provided with entry points at all stages of the budget process and are able to make decisions or provide guidance on which city projects are funded. PB initiatives vary widely in the amount of decision-making control that is given to community members and in the amount of money that is allocated to the PB project.¹ Further, PB projects also vary widely in scope, with most in the United States being neighborhood capital budget projects.²

The goals of PB include increased transparency in how public funds are allocated; opportunities to educate and engage residents, particularly residents who are not engaged in the traditional budget process, in the democratic process; increased effectiveness of municipal funding; and increased community control over municipal resources (cities), particularly among historically marginalized groups and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities.³ In practice, PB projects have had varying degrees of success and varying degrees of impact. In the United States, where PB was first initiated in 2010, the projects have been much narrower in scope, as compared to PB projects in Brazil, where PB was first implemented in 1989.

Core Aspects of PB Projects

¹ <https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/what-is-pb/>;

² <https://localprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Participatory-Budgeting.pdf>;

Wampler, B. 2007. "A Guide to Participatory Budgeting." In *Participatory Budgeting*. Ed. Anwar Shaw.

³ <https://m4bl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ParticipatoryBudgeting-OnePager.pdf>;
<https://dignityandrights.org/initiative/public-budgeting/>

While the details of each depend on the design of the project, particularly the amount of decision-making autonomy the residents are given, and the scope of the initiative, PB programs tend to have a few core aspects⁴:

- **Information Sessions:** Outreach and education about the City budget to the residents in areas of the city that are prioritized for the PB project.
- **Idea Collection:** Residents submit project ideas
- **Budget Delegates:** A smaller group of residents representing the various parts of the city that are participating in the PB project who come together to vet project ideas
- **Voting:** Projects are often open to all residents from a younger age than traditional voting age
- **Evaluation:** A way to measure success and gain feedback on things to improve in the future

PB Best Practices

Participatory budgeting works best when the project is well-resourced and enjoys broad support from elected officials⁵. In order to work to ensure that the PB effort is not merely symbolic and is not coopted by elites, secure the following:

- **Broad Political Support:** PB projects require enthusiastic support from both legislative and executive branches, in order to facilitate smooth cross-agency cooperation in designing and implementing the process, and to ensure the integrity of the process.
- **Adequate Financial Resources:** Even PB projects working with a narrow scope require financial support for staff, education and outreach, data collection and evaluation, and implementation of the voting process. PB projects span many months and require staff to dedicate significant amounts of time to each phase of the project.
- **Civil Society Cooperation:** PB projects rely on extensive outreach and education to residents in the target districts. Doing so requires collaboration and relationships with both community organizations and informal community networks.
- **City Staff Buy-In:** PB projects require a significant amount of work for a significant amount of time from a broad range of agencies. As such, staff buy-in is necessary.
- **Well-Defined Project Goals:** Before building a PB project, it is advised to establish clear goals for the project. What would you like the PB project to achieve?

⁴ <https://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/participatory-budgeting-paper.pdf?m=1455295224>

⁵ <https://www.gfoa.org/materials/public-engagement-in-the-budget-process;>
[https://consensus.fsu.edu/Collaborative-Leadership/pdfs/UCF_Participatory_Budgeting_2013.pdf;](https://consensus.fsu.edu/Collaborative-Leadership/pdfs/UCF_Participatory_Budgeting_2013.pdf)
Wampler, B. 2007. "A Guide to Participatory Budgeting." In *Participatory Budgeting*. Ed. Anwar Shaw.

- **Robust Resident Education and Outreach:** Before pitching projects or voting, residents participating in the PB project need to be provided with robust education on the City budget and the PB process. Rapport needs to be established with communities, which may require recruitment of volunteers and sustained connections with formal and informal networks. Outreach is necessary on an ongoing basis.
- **Project Evaluation and Follow-Up:** Plans for evaluation of the program and follow-up with the residents need to be established.

Links to US Municipal Participatory Budgeting Projects

This selection of projects illustrates both the core elements across all PB programs and the wide differences between programs. Some programs, such as New York City's, use Council discretionary funds for their PB initiatives. Many programs apply PB programs to capital improvements, as opposed to programs and services. Funding amounts range widely from \$3,000 to over \$33 million. Further, no cities in the US as of yet have transformed their entire City budget into a PB budget.

Cambridge, MA

<https://pb.cambridgema.gov/>

Durham, NC

<https://durhamnc.gov/3747/Participatory-Budgeting>

<https://www.pbdurham.org/>

New York, NY

<https://council.nyc.gov/pb/>

<https://delibdemjournal.org/article/id/420/>

Philadelphia, PA

<https://www.phila.gov/2020-12-01-philadelphia-announces-participatory-budgeting-other-equitable-budgeting-initiatives-to-reduce-racial-disparities-and-improve-community-outcomes/>

Seattle, WA

<https://council.seattle.gov/2021/06/01/participatory-budgeting-advances/>

<https://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/programs-and-services/your-voice-your-choice>

Vallejo, CA

<http://www.ci.vallejo.ca.us/common/pages/DisplayFile.aspx?itemId=8255348>

Interactive Map of US Municipal PB Projects

<https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/participate/>

Book-Length Study of PB in the United States

Democracy Reinvented: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation in the United States <https://www.brookings.edu/book/democracy-reinvented/>

Attachments

Appendix 1: Infographic on steps in the PB process (source: www.participatorybudget.org)

Appendix 2: City of Durham PB Program Evaluation 2018-2020

Appendix 3: City of Durham PB Rulebook 2018-2020

Appendix 4: PB Cambridge 2021 Budget Delegate Guide

Appendix 5: Lerner J. & Secondo D., (2012) "By the People, For the People: Participatory Budgeting from the Bottom Up in North America", *Journal of Public Deliberation* 8(2). doi: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.148>