

September 2014

# Organizing for Participatory Budgeting

*How to start participatory budgeting in your community.*



PARTICIPATORY  
BUDGETING PROJECT



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The Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP) is a non-profit organization that empowers people to decide together how to spend public money, primarily in the US and Canada. We create and support participatory budgeting processes that deepen democracy, build stronger communities, and make public budgets more equitable and effective.

[www.participatorybudgeting.org](http://www.participatorybudgeting.org)

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# Introduction

Have you noticed all the cuts being made to your city budget? To schools and libraries, fire fighters and social services, and other public spending? Think you could do a better job managing the budget?

Through participatory budgeting (PB), people in over 1,500 cities around the world are directly deciding how to spend public money. In the US and Canada, tens of thousands of residents in over a dozen cities have used PB to allocate over \$100 million to key community improvements. This guide offers tools and tips for starting participatory budgeting in your city.

PB is a better way to manage public money. It deepens democracy, builds stronger communities, and makes public budgets more equitable and effective.

Building on over 5 years of work supporting PB processes across North America, the Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP) has created this toolkit to help organizers and advocates start new PB processes. We hope that the toolkit makes your organizing more successful, and that you send us feedback so that we can make it more useful.

**Together we can help communities build real power over real money!**



# Could PB work in your community?

## YES!

Participatory Budgeting is a democratic process in which community members directly decide how to spend part of a budget, and there are many ways to make this vision a reality.

At the most basic level, you need political will from above and community support from below. In other words, you need support from:

- **people who control budget funds** (e.g. an elected official, agency head, department director, etc.), to agree to let the public decide how to spend part of the budget; and
- **community organizations**, in particular those working with marginalized communities, to help get people to participate and push the process forward.

You'll need to ask around to see if the right conditions exist. Once you've identified organizations or decision-makers who might be sympathetic, start organizing!

# Building Support

Successful campaigns require a variety of tactics and lots of perseverance! The best place to start is by recruiting champions from the two key groups in the previous section - officials who control budgets and community groups.

When you begin to introduce the idea of PB to your community, talk with as many interested organizations and parties as possible. This includes government representatives and elected officials, local nonprofits, block clubs, religious institutions, political groups, foundations, universities, schools, and activists. The knowledge and relationships of these groups will determine how far your efforts will go.

At meetings, we recommend sharing the following materials\*:

- PB Intro Video: Real Money, Real Power (show this in person, even if someone already thinks they know what PB is)
- PB info sheet
- Sample ballot
- “Putting In Their 2 Cents” New York Times, March 2012

You can also try proposing PB at community meetings, writing editorials or blog posts, and asking elected officials or candidates to take a stance. Bit by bit, this public outreach can add up and spark local interest.

\*these materials are available at [www.participatorybudgeting.org/resources](http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/resources)

# Making the case for PB

When meeting with potential champions, you'll often have just a few minutes to explain why they should support PB. We've found that people get excited about PB for different reasons, but focusing on the following impacts can help build support from officials and community organizations:

## **MORE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

Participatory budgeting has increased participation in political and community organizations, community boards, school boards, and block associations; increased community mobilization on other issues; and it may also increase voting rates in local elections.

## **BROADER POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

In each of the initial processes in the US, Steering Committees have decided that any resident at least 16 years old can vote in PB. This inclusive criteria enables historically marginalized populations such as youth, immigrants, and the formerly incarcerated to participate.

### **NEW COMMUNITY LEADERS AND MORE ACTIVE CITIZENS**

PB develops residents' civic skills, knowledge, and attitudes. It functions as a school of democracy and citizenship, as participants go through months of deliberation and decision-making.

### **STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN GOVERNMENT, ORGANIZATIONS, AND RESIDENTS**

PB connects officials with constituents, enabling them to work together and build trust. It also forges new relationships between organizations focused on different issues and communities.

### **FAIRER AND MORE EFFECTIVE SPENDING**

PB connects local knowledge with technical expertise, leading to more informed and responsive spending decisions. High participation by underrepresented groups helps to direct resources to communities with the greatest needs. There are fewer opportunities for corruption, waste, or costly public backlash, and more pressure to dedicate resources to public priorities.

# Common arguments against PB

When government officials and other decision-makers first hear about PB, they often have some doubts and concerns. Here's how you can respond to the most common arguments against PB:

**THAT'S THE ELECTED OFFICIAL'S JOB:  
VOTERS ELECT GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS TO MAKE THE  
TOUGH DECISIONS, SO SHOULDN'T BUDGETING BE THEIR  
RESPONSIBILITY?**

Sure, they should be responsible. But if they share this responsibility with community members, they can better represent local needs and desires. PB helps officials do their job better, by putting them in closer touch with their constituents, and by injecting local knowledge and volunteer energy into the budget process. Officials still make plenty of other decisions, even when they share some power with the people.

**THERE'S NO MONEY: BUDGETS ARE BEING CUT ACROSS THE  
BOARD, SO HOW COULD THERE BE MONEY TO LAUNCH PB?**

Fortunately, PB does not require a new pot of money, just a change to how existing budget funds are decided. You will need some resources to carry out PB, but this investment saves money down the road, as participants discover new ways to make limited budget dollars go farther.



**THE PROCESS WILL BE CO-OPTED: IF BUDGET DECISIONS ARE OPENED UP TO THE PUBLIC, WON'T THE "USUAL SUSPECTS" AND POWERFUL COMMUNITY GROUPS DOMINATE?**

This is a valid concern for any kind of public participation, and PB is not immune. But if you involve all segments of the community in planning the process, and reduce the barriers to participation for marginalized groups, you can prevent any one sector from taking control. Regardless, when people are given real responsibility to make budget decisions, they have tended to rise to the occasion, and think about the broader community.

# How could PB Work?

Even if you find enthusiastic officials, they'll probably still have lots of questions. Here are the most common ones, and some options for answering them.

## WHAT POT OF MONEY WILL THE COMMUNITY ALLOCATE?

PB usually starts with “discretionary funds”—money that is not set aside for fixed or essential expenses, and that is instead allocated at the discretion of decision makers. While this is typically a small part of the overall budget, it is a big part of the funds that are available and up for debate each year.

Potential pots of money include (but are not limited to):

- Discretionary funds of elected officials
- City, county, or state budgets
- Housing authority or other public agency budgets
- School, school district, or university budgets
- Community Development Block Grants
- Community Benefit Agreements
- Tax Increment Financing (TIF) money
- Non-governmental sources like foundations, non-profit organizations, or grassroots fundraising, if this money is intended for public or community projects.

Some PB processes mix funds from different sources to build a bigger budget pot.

## HOW MUCH MONEY IS ENOUGH TO DO PB?

The amount of money you need depends on what it will be used for, but the good news is that almost no pot of money is too small to start! PB has worked with a few thousand dollars and with many millions of dollars. We suggest starting with at least \$1 million, so participants feel like it's worth their time.

Most processes involve 1-15% of the overall budget. PB often starts as a pilot project with a small budget. Once the process is successful, it's easier to build political will to increase the pot of money.

Regardless, you'll want funds that are renewable from year to year, so that PB isn't just a one-year fling. And in the long run, the more money, the more you can do!

## HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO IMPLEMENT PB?

Building a new democratic process takes a lot of work. You need staff to run the process, and funds for operating costs like design, printing, publicity, and a website. To make the process accessible for diverse communities, you need to pay for translation, interpretation, childcare, refreshments, trained facilitators, and outreach canvassers.

The costs vary depending on how large and complex the process is. For a city of under 200,000 residents, \$200,000 is a good starting point for an implementation budget. In other words, one dollar per resident. For larger cities there are more economies of scale, such as cheaper mass printing and publicity, so the process costs less per resident.

## HOW LONG DOES PB TAKE?

Once a pot of money has been committed, you'll want 4-6 months to plan and design the process, and then another 6 months to carry out the process. It typically takes a month or two to collect ideas, 3-4 months to turn them into concrete and vetted proposals, and another month for voting (including outreach).

Some cities have tried to condense the process into just a couple months, but this usually results in less participation and more projects going to the ballot before they've been fully developed or approved

by technical experts. This tends to be frustrating for both staff and residents. Staff lose faith that the public can come up with good ideas, and community members become disillusioned when their projects don't get implemented.

# Organizing Public Events

Once you've identified some champions and had initial discussions, organize a public event or events to push PB forward. We recommend two events in particular:

## COMMUNITY FORUM

Hold a public talk in a community or university space to build awareness and support from community groups, residents, and elected officials. Bringing in expert speakers who have experience implementing PB adds legitimacy and importance to the event, and helps address people's practical questions and concerns. Ask local organizations and universities to host or co-sponsor the event, to build up support and resources.

A basic agenda includes:

- Presentations and videos from PBP and elected officials or community groups who have done PB
- Responses from local organizations and elected officials
- Question & Answer
- Next steps - for event organizers and participants

People learn the most when they participate actively, so use ice-breakers, small group discussions, pair shares (asking people to pair up with the person next to them to debrief after presentations), and other creative methods to make the event interactive.

And don't forget to collect participants' names and contact info at the door!

## **CITY COUNCIL / GOVERNMENT BRIEFING**

Work with supportive elected officials to schedule an official briefing, presentation, or study session for City Council, the mayor, or other elected officials who could potentially implement PB. If possible, invite an elected official who has used PB to speak - officials learn best from their peers.

If your events are successful, they'll lead to some new opportunities for PB. Then you can refocus your organizing energy around planning a new PB process!

# Public Event Planning Checklist

## Planning the event

- Form a planning committee
- Recruit sponsors
- Find a location and confirm date
- Create an agenda outlining the schedule
- Identify speakers
- Recruit volunteers
- Secure refreshments, materials, childcare, and interpreter

## Publicizing the event

- Create and distribute a flyer and email announcement
- Collect RSVPs and track contact info to send reminders
- Write a press release and send to local media
- Do outreach in the community
- Promote the event via social media
- Activate event sponsors and partners to help recruit Invite elected officials

## At the event

*(60-90 minutes before the event)*

- Post flyers and signs to help people navigate the space
- Set up sign-in table with sign-in sheets, pens, markers, name-tags, PB info sheets, and information from partners
- Set up refreshments table: healthy snacks, plates, napkins, cups, serving utensils, plates
- Test A/V equipment: projector, laptop, speakers, microphone

## After the event

- Thank volunteers, sponsors, and speakers
- Follow up with attendees about how they can get more involved
- Schedule follow-up meetings with key decision makers and the event planning committee



## Next Steps

Reading about strategies is great, but the only way to make PB happen is to take action!

Here are 3 steps you can take right now:

1. Share this toolkit with potential allies to start the conversations leading to a public event.
2. Visit [www.participatorybudgeting.org/resources](http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/resources) to see find more information, sign up for the PBP Newsletter and connect with us on Social Media!
  - [twitter.com/PBProject](https://twitter.com/PBProject)
  - [facebook.com/ParticipatoryBudgetingProject](https://facebook.com/ParticipatoryBudgetingProject)
3. Email [info@participatorybudgeting.org](mailto:info@participatorybudgeting.org) and let us know that you're ready to bring PB to your community; we can then connect you to other PB advocates near you!

## More resources

FOR TONS OF ADDITIONAL RESOURCES, VISIT  
[WWW.PARTICIPATORYBUDGETING.ORG/RESOURCES](http://WWW.PARTICIPATORYBUDGETING.ORG/RESOURCES)

You will find:

- - Info Sheets and FAQ
- - Videos (in English and Spanish)
- - Photos of PB in action
- - Policy briefs
- - Sample ballots, brochures, flyers, rulebooks, resolutions, and other materials
- - Calendars of upcoming PB events
- - Stories of PB participants
- - Case studies
- - and more!