



BEST PRACTICE

Public Participation in Planning, Budgeting, and Performance Management (2009) (BUDGET)

Background. Good public participation practices can help governments be more accountable and responsive, and can also improve the public's perception of governmental performance and the value the public receives from the government. The National Advisory Council on State and Local Budgeting Recommended Budget Practices includes recommendations for stakeholder input throughout the planning and budgeting process.

Traditionally, public participation meant voting, running for office, being involved in political campaigns, attending public hearings, and keeping informed on important issues of the day by reading government reports or the local newspaper. At an increased level of involvement, the public, acting as individuals and in groups, advocated specific government policies by attending or sponsoring public meetings, lobbying government officials, or bringing media attention to policy issues. More recently, governments have used new forms of public involvement – surveys, focus groups, neighborhood councils, and Citizen Relationship Management systems, among others – as inputs to decisions about service levels and preferences, community priorities, and organizational performance.

While public participation efforts can be extremely valuable, superficial or poorly designed efforts may simply waste valuable staff time and financial resources, and at worst can increase public cynicism if the public perceives that its input has not been taken seriously.

Recommendation. The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) recommends that governments incorporate public participation efforts in planning, budgeting, and performance management results processes. The GFOA also recommends that to ensure effective and well implemented public participation processes, governments include the following considerations in designing their efforts:

- Purposes for involving the public;
- Assurances that they are getting the public's perspective rather than only that of a small number of highly vocal special interest groups;
- Approaches to eliciting public participation and the points in the planning-budgeting-performance management cycle those approaches are likely to be most effective;
- Information that the process will be incorporated into decision making;
- Communication to the public regarding how the information collected will be and was used; and
- Buy-in from top government officials.

Establishing Purposes for Public Participation Efforts

Articulating the purpose for conducting a public participation process is critical because the purpose becomes the foundation for deciding who to involve, how to select them, what activities they will be involved in, what information will be collected, and how the government will use the information. Consequently, determining the purpose should be the first step in designing a participation effort. Governments *should not* initiate public participation processes without establishing a tangible purpose or objectives, nor is it sufficient to create a public participation process simply because it is a best practice or because other governments have done so.

Purposes may include one or more of the following, and, in addition, individual governments may identify other purposes for involving the public:

- To improve performance by better understanding what the public wants and expects from its government;
- To adjust services and service levels more closely to citizens' preferences;
- To establish performance measures that incorporate the public's perspective;
- To differentiate among the expectations of a jurisdiction's various demographic groups in policy and service design;
- To understand public priorities in planning, budgeting, and managing services. (Public priorities are particularly important in making budget decisions when revenues are not sufficient to continue to provide all services at their current levels);
- To establish long term strategies to provide for a fiscally sustainable future for the jurisdiction;
- To ensure that capital investment decisions, such as the location of infrastructure elements, are informed by public input;
- To provide information to the public about a government's services and results.

Identifying the Public's Perspective

Citizens are diverse. Not only do citizen viewpoints differ from those of government "insiders," but from citizen to citizen. No single citizen or group of citizens is able to represent the views of all citizens. The best way to assure a broad perspective is to collect information in a variety of ways and from a variety of sources.

Timing and Approaches to Public Participation

Timing and approaches are related because approaches that work in one phase of planning, budgeting, and performance management may not be effective in other phases. For example, a community goal setting session would be very appropriate in assisting a government to establish priorities in developing a strategic plan or in the early stages of the budget process. General approaches and timing are listed below:

- Identifying citizen preferences and satisfaction levels. Such efforts should occur before a decision has been made, or to test various ideas and approaches. Governments may solicit information for general purposes, such as strategic planning, or may solicit targeted information as input for specific projects, plans, or initiatives. Unless there is a compelling reason to target only certain segments, public involvement approaches should encourage all citizens to participate. In addition, governments should make involvement opportunities accessible to all citizens and hold meetings at various times to provide maximum participation. Local governments have used numerous mechanisms for eliciting public input. Common methods for soliciting information include the following:
 - Surveys, either in person or via mail, phone, or Internet.
 - Focus groups
 - Interviews
 - Comment (or point of service) cards
 - Public meetings, such as public hearings, "Town Hall" meetings, and community vision sessions
 - Interactive priority setting tools
- Creating public or neighborhood advisory groups, committees, and informal task forces. These are often ongoing and can be used both to seek information during planning and information gathering and can in connection with subsequent phases, including consideration of alternatives, decision making, implementation, evaluation, and reporting. It is important to identify specific groups that will be affected the most by the decisions made.

- Providing information to the public. This approach is appropriate at all stages and may include
 - Newsletters
 - Public notices in community media
 - Public hearings
 - Public reports, such as Budgets-in-Brief, Popular Annual Financial Reports, or performance reports
 - Web sites
 - Individual or group emails, phone calls, and in-person contact
- Using technology, such as Constituent Relationship Management (CRM) systems. CRM may be used to manage service relationships as well as to identify public preferences and priorities.

Deciding how to incorporate information into decision-making

Information derived from public involvement processes provides a critical perspective for making decisions in planning, budgeting, and management. However, such information should be considered along with expert knowledge and judgment (such as the engineering expertise necessary to build a bridge) and objective data (such as economic and demographic information, both of which are also critical to good decision making).

Providing feedback to the public on how their input has been used

Governments should systematically collect, maintain, monitor, and analyze information gained from public involvement activities, maintain contact information on individuals and groups that wish to be kept informed, and use multiple communication mechanisms to ensure that those involved or interested in the process are notified of opportunities for additional feedback and of decisions made based on the public involvement process. Most importantly, governments should explain how public involvement has made a difference in plans, budgets, and performance, and gather public feedback on how successful the process has been through the public's eyes.

References

- "Citizen Participation: Legitimizing Performance Measurement as a Decision Tool," Government Finance Review, GFOA, April 2002.
- *The Voices of the People: Missing Links in Performance Measurement and Management*, GFOA, 2006.
- *Best Practices in Public Budgeting*, NACSLB, <http://www.gfoa.org/services/nacslb/>.

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