

Participatory Budgeting Toolkit for British Columbia's Local Governments

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About the Participatory Budgeting Toolkit for British Columbia's Local Governments

Voter turnout is low in most communities across BC. At the same time, locally resourced community development activity happens each year, with many residents reporting a lack of awareness about how decisions have been made. Participatory budgeting aims to address these issues by empowering residents to decide on, or contribute to decisions made on, the destination of all or part of the available public resources (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2004). This toolkit includes information that can assist local governments in BC use participatory budgeting.

The Participatory Budgeting Toolkit for British Columbia's Local Governments consists of four sections. Section 1, *Definitions of Participatory Budgeting and Useful Links*, provides an overview of what participatory budgeting means and where information can be found about how it is and has been used around the world. Section 2, *Examples of Participatory Budgeting in Action*, offers two summaries of how local governments (one in Brazil and one in the USA) have used participatory budgeting. Section 3, *Power to the People in Tofino*, presents an overview of how the District of Tofino used participatory budgeting in their Council Grant process. Section 4, *Victoria's Vision for Community-Driven Decision Making*, outlines the City of Victoria's plans for how it will engage its citizenry in participatory budgeting activities in 2016.

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1. Definitions of Participatory Budgeting and Useful Links

What is Participatory Budgeting?

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a democratic process in which community members directly decide how to spend public budgets. PB allows citizens to identify, discuss, and prioritize public spending projects, and gives them the power to make real decisions about how money is spent. In short, PB enables taxpayers to work with government to make the budget decisions that affect their lives. PB generally involves a few steps: (a) Community members identify spending priorities and select budget delegates; (b) Budget delegates develop specific spending proposals, with help from experts where applicable; (c) Community members vote on spending proposals; (d) The city implements the top proposals as budget allows.

What Are Useful Links?

Participatory Budgeting Project: www.participatorybudgeting.org/

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. The PBP creates and supports participatory budgeting processes that deepen democracy, build stronger communities, and make public budgets more equitable and effective. The PBP grew out of informal collaboration between PB activists and researchers in the US and Canada, starting in 2005 at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. At the Social Forum, Josh Lerner, Mike Menser, Gianpaolo Baiocchi, and Daniel Schugurensky connected while organizing a session on PB in the Global North. Afterward, Josh and Gianpaolo launched a PB resource website (ParticipatoryBudgeting.org) and listserv. Over the next three years, they worked with a growing group of activists to organize conference sessions and workshops, publish articles, and put PB on the radar in North America.

PB Network: pbnetwork.org.uk/

The PB Network is the independent body advocating for learning and innovation in Participatory Budgeting in the UK. The PB Network puts on learning events, publishes policy related papers and stimulates debate on where Participatory Budgeting (PB) might go next. The goal of the new PB Network for the next five years is for PB to move beyond its predominant model of allocating small pots of money to voluntary and community groups, towards repeatedly distributing mainstream public budgets, in line with international best practise. It is hoped that public services routinely offer some form of PB for mainstream budget choices and that as a norm citizens will expect it to be offered. The aim of the network is for PB to be recognised as a key and effective tool for: addressing inequalities in service provision and resource allocation; engaging and empowering citizens in discussions on public budgets; and, stimulating co-production and mutual responsibility between citizens and the state.

2. Examples of Participatory Budgeting in Action

The number of municipalities using participatory budgeting appears to be growing around the world. This section presents two summaries of examples of participatory budgeting led by local government.

Case Study 1. Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil

Porto Alegre, Brazil, is one of the most widely discussed examples of participatory budgeting at the local level. Schneider and Goldfrank (2001) have explained how the participatory budgeting work in Porto Alegre has been successfully scaled-up from municipal to state level in Brazil, with the direct participation of hundreds of thousands of people.¹ The model is widely viewed as a successful experiment in participatory democracy that has contributed to the goals of poverty reduction while increasing confidence in public institutions.² Under Porto Alegre style participatory budgeting, citizens and civil society organisations directly participate in making budget decisions through a yearlong cycle of mass citizen forums, thematic assemblies addressing specific issues such as health and education, and the election of dedicated citizen-delegates who form a Participatory Budgeting Council which reviews the final budget proposal. The process is used to allocate budget resources (using a quantitative scheme to prioritise spending according to need and preferences), set broad social and economic policy priorities and monitor public expenditure.

For more information about the Porto Alegre PB model, see: www.unesco.org/most/southa13.htm

Case study 2: Participatory Budgeting in the City of Vallejo, California

The City of Vallejo made history by becoming the first U.S. municipality to approve participatory budgeting (PB) city-wide. Through PB, Vallejo residents and stakeholders share ideas, develop project proposals, residents vote on projects, and the approved list of projects that receive the most votes are submitted to City Council for consideration. In Year 1, Vallejo residents created and approved 12 public projects, from community gardens to youth scholarships to park rehabilitation. On March 6, the Office of the City Manager, City of Vallejo, released a summary report of Year 1 that addresses the background, participation, representation of Vallejo's diverse community, and outcomes. In Year 2, Vallejo residents created and approved 8 public projects, from housing to school bands to public art. At the time of developing this toolkit, the City of Vallejo is in its 3rd year of PB.³

For more information about the City of Vallejo, see: http://www.ci.vallejo.ca.us/city_hall/departments___divisions/city_manager/participatory_budgeting//

1 Schneider, A. and B. Goldfrank (2001), "Budgets and Ballots in Brazil: Participatory Budgeting from the City to the State", paper prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 30 — September 2.

2 OECD Development Centre (Policy Brief no. 22) (2002) by Jeremy Heimans (Strengthening Participation in Public Expenditure Management: Policy Recommendations for Key Stakeholders.

3 Ibid.

3. Laying the Groundwork for Community-Driven Decision Making – Victoria’s Story Preparing for the Participatory Budgeting



These steps guide all forms of public participation. Doing them well, and consistently, builds trust and relationships and lays the necessary groundwork for participatory budgeting.

- 1) **Determine how you will use the public's input, before you seek it.** Tell them how you will use it, and deliver on your promise. Knowing what level of public participation is needed and how the input will inform the decision, will then guide the tools and techniques used. If they are empowered to make the decisions, fully empower and support them!
- 2) **Use real language and examples folks can picture in their mind.** “Plans, processes, strategies, budgets”...they all sounds the same...like paper and words. Residents and businesses can picture community gardens, sewer pipes, bike lanes, parks and playgrounds, kids playing, and painted murals. The municipality has an important responsibility in making information easy to understand and compelling for the community to want to dig in.
- 3) **Good, complete, quality information, is key to meaningful public involvement.** It's important that context, facts, and constraints are provided to the community to build a foundation of understanding. This will inform their input and their involvement. It also forms the basis for the public to determine their further level of involvement.
- 4) **Don't plan for perfect, or you won't leave City Hall.** The issues facing municipalities are complex, and sometimes they're high stakes, sometimes they're messy, and usually the municipality doesn't have all the answers. Seek community input, advice, and involvement to find solutions the issues facing the community. In most cases, the community are the experts.
- 5) **Start with what the community has already told you.** Try to avoid reinventing the wheel each time there's a new opportunity or issue before you. Start by reflecting on what the community has already told you. Citizen surveys, correspondence, other related surveys.

- 6) **Go to where the people are. Talk about parks, in parks.** Talk about bike lanes, on the street. Make options available online, so a soccer parent can complete a survey while at soccer practice. Have staff in neighbourhoods, on the street, with the folks they serve.
- 7) **Maintain focus on providing great information and a great process, and don't worry about the potential outcomes.** Public involvement doesn't always make decisions easier, but it does make them better.
- 8) **Creativity and elbow grease outweighs costs.** Public participation doesn't have to take long and it doesn't have to be expensive. And when done well, decisions are better, better understood, and can be implemented quicker.
- 9) **Talk about what meaningful engagement looks like, beforehand.** Is it numbers? Is it reaching the "hard to reach"? Is it anecdotal feedback? Is it the outcome...? Give staff guidance on what elected officials or leadership staff need to inform advice or decision-making.
- 10) **Invest in relationships.** Truly seek to understand the needs and experience of the community. If afternoon rush hour is generating concern in a neighbourhood. Experience it like they do. Spend time experiencing it as those who live there do. Engage at a street level, where life happens.
- 11) **Close the loop:** let people know what you heard, and let them know what was done (or not done) with what was heard.

4. Power to the People in Tofino



After a year of Council and committee deliberation and consultation with the community, in 2014 Tofino Council approved a participatory budgeting process for their Council Grants (aka Grants-in-Aid, Community Grants), a \$21,000 funding program for community organizations. Previously, grant decisions were made entirely by the seven-member council. The new Participatory Budgeting process turned the decision-making entirely over to the community. Council set overarching goals and criteria, and past grant recipients and interested community members worked with staff and a third-party facilitator to design the process. Proponents submitted a one page 'letter of intent' describing their project and then developed a visual storyboard. These were displayed at a one-day "Community Voting Expo," in which community members came to meet proponents, learn about their projects, and vote on preferred projects.

12 Lessons Learned from Tofino's first year of Participatory Budgeting

1. **Identify a champion** amongst your elected officials or staff – someone with the passion, interest and patience to help others understand the pros, cons, and potential for participatory budgeting in your community.
2. **Work to get both political and staff support.** Just as it is with many initiatives in the local government world, those with both strong political and staff support can succeed more easily, and more quickly.
3. **Have patience.** It took a year for Tofino's Council to fully endorse the concept, and it took a further six months to design and deliver the process for the first time. Listen carefully to fence-sitters and opponents: they have good questions and advice that will improve the likelihood of success if you acknowledge and consider their concerns, and incorporate them into decision-making.
4. If you contemplate changing an existing program, e.g., Grants in Aid, **host one or more information sessions or roundtables** with past recipients or participants and give them plenty of advance notice that the program is changing. Even if you are introducing a brand new budgeting program, host one or more information sessions or roundtables with the general community!
5. **Determine overarching goals or criteria before developing the details of your Participatory Budgeting process.** For example, Tofino Council determined that Participatory Budgeting projects should strive to meet community goals as expressed in certain plans and policies, and they set a maximum funding amount for each project. This level of guidance was appropriate for the elected body to provide and gave structure to community participants who designed the process details.
6. **Ask community members to help design the Participatory Budgeting process** – allow them to design the process entirely with a staff member or with a third party facilitator. This gives them ownership and confidence in the process.
7. **Resist the temptation to have elected officials assist in designing your Participatory Budgeting process.** A hands-off approach demonstrates trust and confidence in your community members. Just as Council decisions are made after some considerable thought and debate around the Council table, part of the participatory democracy process is having community members get their own experience in policy-making by participating in the participatory budgeting process design.
8. **Partner with another organization** that can help design and facilitate the process. A neutral third party with no vested interest can help smooth the bumps you will invariably face.
9. Ask your Council or Board to commit to a **minimum of two or three years** to allow for changes and tweaks that will make the program more successful. It could be too tempting to write off the program after one year if it doesn't meet everyone's expectations the first time. (SEE #3 ABOVE RE: PATIENCE!)
10. **Brand your participatory budgeting process** with your own name ("Participatory Budgeting" is a bit dull!).
11. **Work with your staff to ensure proper policy and guidelines are in place.** For Tofino's Council Grant Participatory Budgeting process, a guideline document was developed to ensure clarity for project proponents, the community (i.e., the Participatory Budgeting 'electorate').
12. **Do not forget to evaluate!** Document the process and undertake a "before and after" evaluation approach. Consider interviews and/or questionnaires immediately after your first participatory budgeting program. Check in a year later with project recipients or community neighbourhoods that benefited from participatory budgeting funding.