

Is the Portland region ready for participatory budgeting?

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What is participatory budgeting? Participatory budgeting (PB) is a deliberative democratic process wherein ordinary people decide how to allocate a portion of a municipal or public budget.

PB started in Brazil in the 1980s and has spread rapidly to well over 3,000 municipalities on all continents around the globe. Since PB launched in Chicago's 49th Ward in 2009, dozens of U.S. cities, both small and large, have begun allocating small but growing portions of their municipal budgets using PB.

PB varies from place to place but it usually consists of five basic steps. Essential elements are a dedicated source of funding,

community-driven project development, and a binding community-wide vote or decision process in which the selected projects are implemented with available funds. PB has been used to allocate funds for parks, housing and

transportation improvements, criminal justice reform and social services. It has been applied at the neighborhood or ward level, and citywide. Students in schools and tenants in publicly owned and managed housing have used participatory budgeting to shape public investments that directly impact their lives.

So far, most PB processes in North America have allocated small amounts of funds relative to the size of municipal budgets and populations. But the simple appeal in an era of democratic malaise has undoubtedly fueled growth in the size and number of PB processes. PB gives ordinary people real power over real money to make decisions that affect their lives. It gives tangible and even fun reasons for ordinary people to participate in their local government.

PB often garners support from across the political spectrum at a local level, including those interested in government transparency, budget accountability and democratic transformation. The Obama administration's Open Government Partnership Action Plan, Black Lives Matter, the Oregon Commission on Black Affairs and an abundance of academic research have all recognized PB as a potentially effective tool for increasing accountability, transparency and the number and diversity of people engaged in local self-governance and electoral politics.

In many cases, PB is designed and implemented with explicit social justice objectives aimed at building power and leadership in underserved and underrepresented communities.

For example, PB is often designed to allow and invite participation and voting by non-citizens, youth and people without a home mailing address – a major barrier to exercising suffrage rights in vote-by-mail states like Oregon. In Arizona, PB is being implemented in the Phoenix-area high schools specifically to prepare students to

Participatory Budgeting

The basic elements to participatory budgeting are:

1. Design the process

A steering committee creates the rules with city officials to ensure the process is inclusive and meets local needs.

2. Brainstorm Ideas

Through meetings and online tools, city residents share and discuss ideas for projects.

3. Develop Proposals

Volunteers develop the ideas into feasible proposals, which are then vetted by city experts.

4. Cast a vote

Residents vote to allot the available funding among the proposals.

5. Fund winning projects

The city implements the winning projects, and along with the residents, tracks and monitors implementation.

become voting citizens. Much of the research on the impacts of PB suggests it has been and can be an effective tool for democratizing power and building trust and community.

In recent years, PB has finally come to the Pacific Northwest. Seattle launched it in 2016 and Victoria, B.C., in 2017. Vancouver, B.C., and Tacoma, Wash., are initiating PB pilots in 2018. But so far this process has yet to come to Oregon.

That could change soon.

Bringing PB to the Portland region

On April 14, more than 100 people from around the Portland-metro region gathered at the Rosewood Initiative in East Portland to explore PB. Organized by volunteers with help from Healthy Democracy, the event brought together diverse community leaders, elected officials and local government staff to learn about participatory budgeting, hear from outside "experts" and discuss and explore its potential implementation in the region. Specifically, the forum sought to explore the following questions:

■ How does participatory budgeting work and how is it different from other forms of governing?

■ What are the potential benefits for increasing government accountability, making participation more meaningful, transparent, and inclusive, and building trust and community?

■ What can we learn from other municipalities before experimenting in Oregon?

■ How can we build the necessary community awareness and capacity to be successful? What goals or strategies would be important to consider in Oregon?

A mix of guest speakers shared a diversity of perspectives and case studies. Boise State University Professor Brian Wampler provided

a global perspective on the founding and spread of PB as well as the research documenting its positive impacts. Former Seattle Youth Commission Co-Chairs Jess Juanich and Becky Scurlock shared their experience implementing Seattle's youth-based PB process Youth Voice, Youth Choice, which launched in 2016. City of Seattle Community Program Strategic Advisor Amy Nguyen described the evolution of Seattle's PB into Your Voice, Your Choice – Parks & Streets. This year the program will allow Seattleites to allocate \$3 million for parks and streets funding across seven neighborhood districts. Finally Jamal T. Fox – educator, professor and former City Councilor from Greensboro, N.C. – shared the perspective of a local elected official who successfully advocated for PB implementation in his city. In 2015, Greensboro launched the first PB process in the American South.

Following the presentations and panel discussions, forum attendees participated in two rounds of small group discussions and one round of real-time voting. Participants explored their concerns, questions and ideas about bringing participatory budgeting to the Portland region. A major question during the discussion centered on how to ensure participatory budgeting could most effectively challenge the status quo and not be subject to capture by the usual suspects.

Participatory budgeting, elite capture and clientelism

How can we be sure bringing participatory budgeting to the City of Portland won't merely reproduce existing power relations? This is the concern of "elite capture," that PB will be dominated by the usual suspects, the "involocrats" with the time and resources to participate. It is an unsurprising concern at a time when an affordable housing crisis appears to be squeezing out renters and helping preserve Portland's past as a white-dominated City despite demographic trends in the nation and even in the state and region toward a multi-ethnic majority. Many Portlanders facing rising housing cost burdens have the time and knowledge to participate.

Nevertheless, the concern begs a question: How could the status quo of Portland's largely consultative or advisory "public involvement" processes become any less exclusive by a process that directly shares power over public resources by supporting more people to participate in decisions of real consequence? The City's current budget advisory committee process is notoriously opaque, arcane and disconnected from the budget outcomes. Moreover, there is growing evidence that Portland's much heralded system of neighborhood associations, born from the insurgent 1970s, no longer provides a viable mechanism for fostering new, diverse voices.

Some neighborhood organizations may be making authentic strides toward creating more welcoming and inclusive spaces for young, black, brown or immigrant Portlanders most threatened by involuntary displacement. Nevertheless, in too many cases, neighborhood associations have become barriers, not pathways, to new

diverse leadership in city governance. The recent controversy over the attempt of the Overlook Neighborhood Association to exclude houseless people from association membership highlights this trend.

But for years observers like civic historian Steve Johnson and environmental justice advocate Jeri Jimenez have documented the decline and limits of neighborhood association participation. "Elite capture" is already a problem with the status quo. Isn't it the time to create and expand alternative, more equitable and meaningful pathways for participation and self-governance in Portland?

Research on participatory budgeting suggests a sustained effort to increase the number of people with transparent, deliberative and binding decision-making power over public budgets has a number of positive impacts. These impacts begin with giving a tangible reason for underrepresented members of the community to turnout, get involved and learn how to participate more effectively.

The evidence suggests creating these opportunities gets more and more diverse people involved in local self-governance. One recent analysis also found that PB increases voter turnout; people are more likely to vote in subsequent elections after participating in PB. PB has also been linked to the growth in civic society organizations, stronger communities, shifts in government policy priorities and improved public health outcomes especially among vulnerable populations.

Moreover, research also indicates that by strategically designing PB processes to allow fuller and more diverse participation, the positive impacts can be amplified and overall quality of municipal self-governance improved. This may be because, far from perpetuating an "elite capture," PB erodes clientelist relationships wherein elected officials or influential elites deliver limited public resources in exchange for political support or power, a dynamic that can thwart more systemic or transformative change.

The presentations and deliberations at the April 14 Community Forum shaped a draft Forum Report that includes specific recommendations to local governments interested in implementing participatory budgeting in our region. Many of these recommendations incorporate proven strategies to make PB more inclusive and accessible to underserved and underrepresented populations. Portlanders who missed the forum can watch the presentations and panel discussions, review the forum report and recommendations, and find out how they can help bring PB to Oregon at www.pboregon.org.

Participatory budgeting is not a silver bullet. Its effectiveness at renewing and expanding democratic participation can be greatly increased by thoughtful, strategic, community-based design and implementation. But PB offers one powerful mechanism of participatory democracy that can advance systemic change by sharing real power over real money in shaping the decisions that affect everyone's lives.