

BUILDING THE CITIZENS' BUDGET

A Civic Coalition

Over the past decade, Cincinnati citizens' have generally been limited to two minutes of back-end testimony in shaping the City's biennial budget. However, with a huge budget deficit looming, the citizen voice will be essential to balancing the budget in a way our community can live with. Consequently, a diverse coalition of civic groups is partnering with the City Administration to bring deliberative citizen input to the beginning of the 2011-2012 biennial budget debate.

To truly reflect citizens' budget priorities, the process must include all of the City's diverse voices. Consequently, this broad *and expanding* coalition has come together to build this process and recruit diverse participants (especially from the West Side and African American communities). Coalition members—including Invest in Neighborhoods, the League of Women Voters, A.I.R. Inc., the Faith Community Alliance, Santa Maria, the Community Building Institute, the Women's City Club, and the Cincinnati Association—will use their extensive networks to maximize participation at events held in four neighborhoods across the City.

This citizen dialog will also be grounded in real choices, as the City Administration has agreed to create budget-cutting (and revenue-raising) options for consideration by citizens. In turn, citizens will be asked to discuss and agree upon options in an attempt to balance the budget. Such deliberation will help citizens 1) understand the competing community needs from the perspective of other citizens, 2) prioritize the City services that mean the most to them, and 3) learn to find common ground to resolve our community's fiscal challenges.

But to have any impact, citizen input must be heard and considered by City Council. Consequently, the coalition is working to create a working partnership with City Council and the Administration to generate citizen input that will help Council formulate the "policy budget" that guides the Administration in drafting the initial budget presented to the Mayor in the Fall.

In the end, this process aims to transform the way citizens think and talk about the City budget. Rather than merely "protecting our own", we all must begin to see the City budget as a collective effort. Consequently, this process will use self-contained small group deliberation to ensure that every citizen has a chance to speak, be heard, and weigh priorities. If citizens begin listening to each other before offering opinions to Council, we might be able to build consensus on how to meet our City's diverse needs.

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MISSION

To deeply involve citizens in creating the 2011-2012 biennial City budget by giving City Council deliberative and actionable citizen input.

COALITION VALUES

Inclusion

especially voices often not included in City decision-making
of minorities, especially African American, Appalachian, and Hispanic citizens
beyond the typical civic leaders
of all City neighborhoods
with high participation rates through a variety of modalities

Acceptance

by City Council and Administration
that begins with a public statement by Council embracing the process

Expression

of views and opinions by everyone involved
through small group dialog
via other modalities

Education

of citizens regarding the budget process and factual framework
about the issues for which City Council would like feedback
through a presentation of alternative choices (the NIFI model)

Data

presented to City Council
showing clear and actionable results
that reflect citizen contributions

Ongoing

work to improve the process in successive years
effort to build long-term citizen action to support City efforts

Transparency

so that citizens understand the role of everyone involved in creating the process
about how the entire process works and results are produced

The Case for Citizen Deliberation on the Budget

Why this is important?

- ✓ The City faces a \$50 million budget deficit

This is a crisis that will require tough cuts—we can't maintain the budget "as is"

Council's budget decisions will better reflect citizens' wishes if citizens first deliberate and chose solutions for themselves

- ✓ Structural budget issues need to be addressed to solve our long-term financial problems

Year after year, there are far more citizen requests for service than City money to pay for those services.

To solve that dilemma, citizens must either reduce their service expectations or be willing to pay more for those services.

This requires that citizens provide input on the role the City should play in meeting the needs of its citizens.

- ✓ Citizen dialog is important to the future of our community

Making good decisions on tough financial issues requires listening and thoughtfulness

A deliberative budget process will make issues around City finances less polarized, and therefore solutions will become more collaborative and productive.

Citizens will need to agree on large scale investments to achieve the vision of Plan Cincinnati, and such agreement will come only if citizens respectfully speak and listen to each other regarding budget issues.

What are the options?

- ✓ Generated by the Administration on a 100 point scale
- ✓ Supported with backing data, service consequences, and arguments for and against

What is the role for citizens?

- ✓ Understand the options and data
- ✓ Deliberate in small groups: speak their hearts and minds and listen to others' viewpoints
- ✓ Choose options that balance the budget