

# Building the Citizens Budget

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

#### Primary Purposes

With a large structural budget deficit projected for the 2011-2012 biennium, a diverse coalition of civic groups partnered with the City Administration to bring *deliberative* citizen input to the beginning of the biennial budget debate. There were **three primary purposes** for this process:

- To assist City Council in making budget decisions by offering citizen input that balances competing community priorities rather than advocates for isolated issues;
- To build citizen ownership of the budget process through early and systematic education and collaborative input;
- To begin understanding and generating community consensus on key policy issues by forcing citizens to deliberate and choose between options with clear real-life consequences.

#### Coalition members

Applied Information Resources, Cincinnatus Society, CincyPac, Citizens for Civic Renewal, Community Building Institute, Equality Cincinnati, Faith Community Alliance, Invest in Neighborhoods, League of Women Voters, National Issues Forum, Santa Maria, Urban League of Greater Cincinnati, Women's City Club, and many other individual civic leaders contributed time and attention to the design and promotion of the process.

#### Process

- Identified with budget office 10 spending/5 revenue categories for balancing the budget;
- Used small group consensus design to ensure everyone was heard and contributed;
- Held three neighborhood sessions—Madisonville (30 people), Avondale (25 people), Westwood (20 people)—to gather data and spread the word about the work;
- Hosted a final All-City session (60 people) to review and refine prior data;
- Drafted report of findings for City Council.

## Key Findings

### Strong Agreement

- **Raise the admissions tax by 5%** - sport and entertainment events seen as a luxury in today's economic environment; the tax is also more "regional" in nature
- **A modest cut to Fire and EMS** – sense that the department has not adjusted operations to the changing demands on this service – no group wanted to cut EMS at all.
- **Total reductions cover half of deficit** – with high consistency in total dollars, groups generally found about half of the \$51M from reductions
- **Total revenue increases cover half of deficit** – with high consistency in total dollars, groups generally found about half of the \$51M from increased revenues
- **No cuts** to Clean and Beautiful, Street Maintenance, Project Development, Neighborhood Development.

### Agreement with Reservations

- **A significant cut to Police** – sense that there is room for significant cuts (more officers than other similarly-sized cities, overtime pay, civilian rather than sworn personnel for administrative functions, etc.) without impacting number of police on the beat
- **Moderately increase earning tax** – about 1/3 of groups didn't want to raise the earnings tax at all, while the rest wanted a .1-.2% increase in the rate; most wanted to see a stepped-up collections process and loop-hole closing (like taxing "income" rather than "earnings")
- **Maintain Park and Rec funding** – reservations focused on finding administrative savings by combing the two departments; a few citizens don't see health care as a City function
- **Maintain Health Care funding** – reservations about why this is city function rather than a county state or federal one.
- **Initiate Pay As You Throw** (curbside collection fee) – reservations about whether this is a core service funded by taxes and worries about enforcement against illegal dumping. Interestingly, although almost unanimous support, this was often not reflected in the spreadsheet.
- **Maintain Human Services funding** - reservations about why this is city function rather than one for charitable organizations.
- **No new Park & Rec Levy** – only one of the six small groups chose this revenue option.

### No Clear Agreement

- Increasing the **Property Tax** was supported by only about one third of the small groups but there seemed to be consensus on stepping up collections of the tax.

### **High Energy Ideas**

These were brainstormed ideas that did not fit the pre-determined categories given to citizens. Though all such ideas are included in the full report, the following ideas seemed to garner the most attention and energy with citizens across groups.

- Citizen/neighborhood ownership of services to make up for departmental cuts
- Shared services between City and County to save money
- Citizen audit of departments to find waste and new/better ways to do things (could be a good complement to citizen ownership of services)
- Merge parks and recreation
- More in depth discussions of City budget and how citizens can be of value

### **Suggestions for Future Budget Discussions**

- Overall, citizens found the process extremely valuable and want more
- Citizens want a much deeper process that dives into
  - How services are delivered, both by department and collectively in neighborhoods
  - Debates on the policy and practices of individual departments
  - Line item spending and more detailed options for budget cutting
- More people need to participate in the process
- Citizens want assurances that Council is listening
- Citizens want the administration to be more active in the process—a real partnership regarding the respective roles of the City and citizens