

Notes on the “Budget Workshop” Approach

Budget workshops can offer the general public, as well as organized stakeholders, an opportunity to question, comment on, and shape budget goals and development. Workshops may involve gatherings of various sizes and will often make use of a facilitator.

Keep In Mind

More than surveys, budget workshops promote collaborative discussions among residents and offer a greater depth of budget-related input to local officials. They are particularly useful processes through which participants can generate information about the services they most value and express preferences for planned budget expenditures.

Budget workshops are typically held on weekday evenings or on a weekend, so workshop time is often limited to a few hours. This may provide enough time to convey very basic budget information to participants but often not enough for participants to grapple with complex budget recommendations or to consider substantive alternatives. Time constraints may also limit the potential for workshop participants to reach detailed agreement on recommendations, especially where substantive differences exist.

To be successful, budget workshops require good design and logistics, preparation of background materials (as appropriate), effective recruitment of participants, and skilled facilitation. As a result, inclusive budget workshops can require significant staff time and other resources. Some agencies employ consultants to help plan and facilitate workshops. Alternatively, staff and/or volunteers may plan and facilitate the meetings and small group processes.

The bottom line is that budget workshops are effective strategies if the goals for the meeting are realistic for the time available, and if the information participants have (or are given) about the budget and budget choices prepares them for the discussions.

The decision to hire a professional facilitator turns on the skills and availability of agency staff or volunteers. Sometimes the public may perceive consultants or community volunteers as more impartial, which can generate more trust in the process.

Key Elements

Budget workshops differ in their scope. Some are larger, “town hall” style community forums. Others are smaller meetings involving neighborhoods or targeted groups in the community. Some agencies choose to hold multiple workshops each to be held during different phases of budget development.

The first step is to determine the goal of the workshop(s). A county or city may be seeking community input on service priorities to guide overall budget development or may want the public to comment on particular aspects of the proposed budget. Generally, workshops that focus on more limited goals, such as budget-related visions, values, and/or preferences will be most successful. Discussions aimed at reaching group consensus on more detailed budget recommendations require realistic plans for adequate discussions and skilled facilitation. (See “Deliberative Forums” section.)

In terms of presenting information, workshops typically begin with brief presentations by elected officials or senior staff about relevant budget information, history and challenges, perhaps with reference to prepared budget documents. Staff from multiple departments may be on hand to answer questions.

Depending on the size of the workshop, attendees can be divided into smaller groups to discuss ideas, preferences, and/or priorities. Participants may engage in back and forth discussions, exchange views and opinions, and seek to reach common agreement on their ideas or recommendations. An outline of critical questions or choices facing decision-makers can help focus the discussion. It can also be helpful to present different budget scenarios.

This note is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties.

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

- *Email:* tamsler@ca-ilg.org Subject: *Notes on the Budget Workshop Approach*
- *Fax:* 916.444.7535
- *Mail:* 1400 K Street, Suite 205 ▪ Sacramento, CA ▪ 95814