

Participatory Budgeting in Vallejo

Davenport Institute Case Story

Sponsoring Agency: City of Vallejo

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The Problem: Vallejo is a mid-sized city of approximately 117,000 residents 32 miles north of San Francisco. In 2011, the City of Vallejo was emerging from Chapter 9 Bankruptcy and placed a sales tax measure before the voters to restore vital public services. Councilmember Marti Brown wanted to provide residents with more opportunity to help determine how to spend the additional \$11 million that Measure B would generate. Residents of Vallejo would need to trust their city government if the City was to overcome a severe financial and historic leadership crisis.

The Proposed Solution: After Measure B passed in November, the City Council established a Participatory Budgeting (PB) process in April 2012 to allow the community to help decide how to spend 30% of the Measure B sales tax – or approximately \$3.2 million. The City is now in its fifth PB cycle, which began on June 3, 2017. Each year the City Council appoints a PB Steering Committee and staff develops a PB Rulebook to describe the PB process, which is then approved by the City Council.

Targeted outreach is done throughout the process to ensure the widest possible representation of all residents of Vallejo. Special efforts are made to reach low-income households, non-English speaking residents, the Millennial Generation and Hispanic and Latino residents.

Each cycle begins with the collection of ideas that residents believe will address various issues in Vallejo. These ideas are collected through various platforms and then Budget Delegates collaborate to turn ideas into project proposals. These proposals are then vetted to ensure that they meet minimum requirements set forth in the PB Rule Book.

Residents are given the opportunity to vote on the proposed projects, and the projects that receive the highest votes are then submitted to the City Council for approval. Residents as young as 14 years old are encouraged to vote for their preferred projects. After proposals are funded, City departments, other agencies and/or non-profit partners implement the approved projects.

Goals:

1. Improve our city (infrastructure, quality of life, safety, city profile and civic pride)
2. Engage our city (ensure that the underrepresented in the community are engaged and heard)

3. Transform democracy (develop leadership from the bottom up and build deeper connections between residents, neighborhoods and communities)
4. Open up government (increase transparency, accountability and collaboration)

Outputs:

In each of the previous four PB cycles, between 400 and 600 residents have participated in 7-10 Budget Assemblies in two month periods. Between 500 and 830 ideas for projects have been generated each cycle. Approximately one hundred residents have volunteered per PB cycle to become Budget Delegates, and up to 4,200 people have voted on the projects. Each year the City Council has approved and funded between \$1 – 3.3 million in projects. The entire process has involved a wide cross section of Vallejo residents who are representative by race, income and age of the highly diverse City's population.

Outcomes:

Over thirty projects have been approved and funded in infrastructure, public safety, social services, public art, education and youth services. They are being or have been implemented by the City, partner agencies and community-based non-profits. Some of these projects would not necessarily have been funded through the usual City Council budgeting process. These projects improve the overall quality of life in Vallejo and are reflective of stakeholder and community interests.

The City has noted that quite a few PB participants have volunteered for service on City commissions, boards and committees. Although public participation in the overall City budget remains about the same, thousands of Vallejo stakeholders provide input and prioritize potential projects for Council consideration through the PB process. PB is making the city government more representative of the population as a whole. Also, new people become involved in PB each year.

Vallejo has attracted positive media attention for its PB innovation and has won awards nationally and in California reflecting well on its civic progress. It has strengthened relationships between the community and city government and has become a source of civic pride. PB is no longer viewed as a special project in Vallejo. Instead, it is part of a larger commitment by the City to effective civic engagement.

Lessons Learned:

Be sure of your agency's capacity to administer the PB process before undertaking it. It can be administratively intensive. You need adequate time, funding and staffing to do it right. Also, the elected leaders must be comfortable with PB.

Eligibility guidelines for projects should be well defined, easily understood and spelled out to avoid confusion and frustration and to be certain that they meet legal requirements for the use of public funds.

Similarly roles and responsibilities for volunteers, committee members and City staff should be clearly defined in a rulebook.

“Campaigning” by volunteers for their favorite projects should be discouraged. Volunteers are encouraged to promote the overall PB process, and Steering Committee members are prohibited from project campaigning.

Targeted outreach for demographic groups less likely to participate is key.

Invest enough time to vet projects before they appear on the ballot. This may mean involving City staff from relevant departments sooner to assist the volunteers in shaping the projects.

Make voting simple and clear. Get the rules straight.

PB is about more than consultation – it’s about collaborative decision-making. Be sure to act in accordance with this principle to maintain public trust.

Vet partner agencies and non-profits for suitability for this program and define their roles and commitments clearly from the start. Pre-qualify non-City implementing partners to address capacity issues early.

Don’t overburden volunteers with bureaucracy and use them and resources wisely based on data.

Go to where the people are. Use existing events to engage the public rather than stand-alone meetings.

On-line voting offers convenience, but may skew towards already overrepresented groups and demographics.

Utilize existing guidelines (such as CDBG) to address community need.

Reward volunteers with non-work events – everyone loves ice cream.

What can be replicated?

Vallejo believes that most cities can replicate all or parts of PB with similar benefits and results. The City was in the depths of a fiscal and governance crisis the likes of which few cities face when it undertook PB. Moreover, lessons learned in Vallejo and elsewhere make implementing it in other cities more feasible. First developed in Brazil in 1979, PB is now practiced in over 1,500 cities worldwide.

Resources:

See the website PBVallejo.org

