

Location: Santa Cruz

Issue: Santa Cruz's Online Participatory Budgeting

Methodology: Web Portal Developed Using UserVoice

Link to more: <http://budget.santacruzcityca.gov/>

Faced with a \$9.2MM budget deficit in 2009, the government of the City of Santa Cruz was faced with a set of extremely difficult decisions. Like many cities in California, 2009 was yet another year of cost cutting. After it had already enforced a 15% headcount reduction, more cutbacks needed to be made following mandates from Sacramento.

In light of these dramatic decisions, Santa Cruz's long-time City Manager, Dick Wilson, called in his Economic Development Coordinator, Peter Koht, to see if there was some quick way to engage the public on these difficult choices. Koht called in a few friends from the community with software expertise to discuss the possible development of a web portal.

The result was a "Budget Crisis" website, that included both a blog and surveying functionalities. Utilizing a software package created by the local firm, UserVoice, the team was able to add a section to the site that enabled citizens to offer budget reduction suggestions that could then be voted up or down by fellow citizens. City officials could also interact with residents through the site, replying directly to suggestions with relevant facts and history.

They had the site up and running in just over a week, with all donated development time and software.

The use of the site was a tremendous success in engaging the public. As Koht says, the reach of the portal was "much further than public meetings". All told, the City received dozens of suggestions with thousands of votes cast – fully 8% of the City population participated. While there were some "outliers", Koht says the vast majority of the public's recommendations and feedback was "reasonable, helpful, and creative".

In the end, another 48 positions had to be cut, but the process has opened the eyes of many in the City to the ability of the web to engage residents in public discussion. It will be something they use again.