

## BEYOND THE PUBLIC HEARING: CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT BUDGET PROCESS

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**ABSTRACT.** This study explores the use and effects of citizen participation in city budgeting. Interviews were conducted with budget directors in 28 midwestern cities. Participation was found to affect budget decisions, but the public hearing remains the primary formal opportunity for input in most cities. Technology is increasingly being used to expand the budget information available to the public. Budget complexity and citizen disinterest were cited as the major barriers to participation. However, a number of cities have successfully used participation mechanisms in the budget development process that can serve as models for other cities.

### INTRODUCTION

Scholars and professional organizations strongly encourage citizen participation in the governance process. Due to the public policy decisions inherent in the budget, the budget process would seem to be a prime opportunity for citizen input. However, the limited empirical research available suggests that citizen involvement in budgeting is not widespread. Do practitioners disagree with academics on the value of citizen input? Is there an intrinsic aspect to the budget process that prevents it? Are there other reasons for the lack of participation?

This study looks at the use of citizen participation in the budget process in cities with populations greater than 25,000. It was designed to explore the following questions: When and how are citizens involved in the budget process? Why is participation not used more? What are the

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effects of citizen participation? The findings are based on interviews with budget or finance directors in 28 cities in four neighboring states: Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska.

The next section reviews the literature relating to citizen participation and budgeting. The research methodology is then described, followed by the findings of the analysis. The last section presents the conclusions.

### **PARTICIPATION AND BUDGETING**

Citizen participation has received increasing attention in the past decade. An expanded role for citizens in the governance process has been advocated by scholars (Box, 1998; King, Stivers et al, 1998; Schachter, 1997; Thomas, 1995; King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998), and by professional organizations such as the International City/County Management Association (ICMA, 1999). The emphasis on participation can also be seen through changes in administrative functions; Nalbandian (1999) found that city managers have become much more focused on community building and facilitation of participation in public policies in the past ten years.

Citizen participation is seen as a way to reduce the level of citizen distrust in government, and to educate people about government activities. The goal is for citizens to have an active role in decisions and not just be passive “consumers” of government services. This is made difficult by barriers to participation such as lack of knowledge of government, public perceptions that they do not have access or their opinions are unwanted, and citizen apathy and lack of time (Frisby & Bowman, 1996; King, Feltey & Susel, 1998; National Academy of Public Administration, 1999).

However, the positive effects of participation have been demonstrated in the literature. Citizens in cities with more participation have been found to be less cynical about local government (Berman, 1997). The city of Dayton, Ohio uses community boards to improve neighborhoods; with their support, the city has not lost a tax election in twenty years (Gurwitt, 1992). Participation benefits have been reported by both participants (Kathlene & Martin, 1991) and public officials (Watson, Juster & Johnson, 1991).

Advantages of participation vary by the type of mechanism used. Public meetings are open to all, but turnout is often low and attendees might not be representative of the community. Citizen surveys may be generalizable if done scientifically, and can provide valuable information about service priorities and issues, but question wording can affect results, intensity of opinion may not be indicated, and they can be costly. Advisory committees can help individuals gain expertise in a given area, but may be time-consuming and may not be representative of the public (Thomas, 1995; Watson, Juster & Johnson, 1991; Kweit & Kweit, 1987). More intensive techniques, such as citizen panels, may be useful in major policy issues, but are costly and can require extensive time commitments (Kathlene & Martin, 1991). In general, researchers have concluded that participation is most beneficial when it occurs early in the process so that it can actually affect decisions, when it is two-way deliberative communication rather than simply one-way information sharing (Kathlene & Martin, 1991; King, Feltey & Susel, 1998), and when the mechanisms are designed around the purpose for participation (Thomas, 1995).

Interest in citizen participation has also included the public budgeting process, where important policy and resource allocation decisions are made. The empirical research specific to budgeting is limited, although a number of descriptions of budget participation mechanisms used by individual jurisdictions are available (for example: Watson, Juster & Johnson, 1991; Preisser, 1997; Johnson, 1998; Clifford, 1998; Benest, 1997). These studies have largely confirmed the advantages and disadvantages found in the broader citizen participation literature. Simonsen and Robbins (2000) studied a one-time project in Eugene, Oregon to determine citizen preferences in the face of fiscal stress; a variety of participation methods were used, including a budget-balancing exercise and citizen surveys with varying levels of service cost information provided. The authors found that citizen preferences revealed through these mechanisms vary based on the amount of budgetary information provided and on the individual's use of services.

While most information regarding local government budget participation is based on individual cases, national surveys have also been used to look at cross-sectional patterns. One study of budget practices across various types of local governments found extensive use

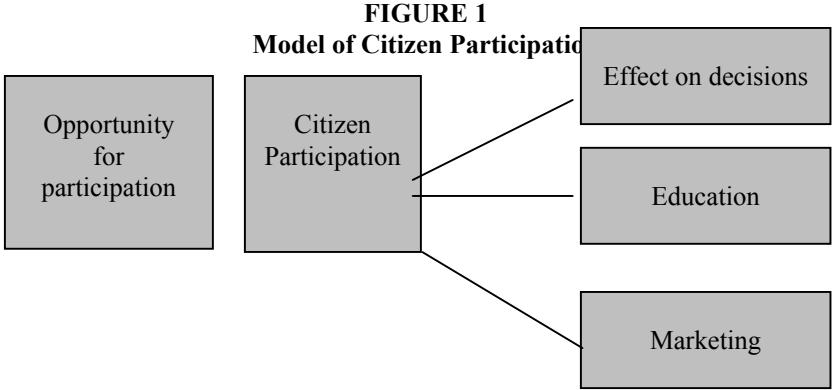
of public hearings and budget summary documents, but low usage of other methods included in the survey (O'Toole, Marshall & Grewe, 1996). A 1996 ICMA survey of managers in council-manager cities revealed that larger cities were more likely to use participation during the budget process than smaller cities, but the overall levels were not high; fifty percent of respondents obtain citizen input throughout the year that is used during budget preparation while only 18% hold community meetings for budget development input, and 32% receive formal recommendations from citizen groups during city council consideration of the budget (Ebdon, 2000).

While case studies provide valuable information about experiences with participation during the budget process, they shed little light on broader usage of various mechanisms. The survey findings illuminate the bigger picture, but also have limitations due to the restrictive nature of closed-ended questions: they may not include certain types of participation, and do not yield data relative to the reasons participation is used or not used, or the perceived effectiveness of participation mechanisms. The current study addresses these gaps through a more in-depth exploration of the perspectives of budget directors in a number of cities.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Participation has several components (see Figure 1). A city provides the opportunity for citizens to be involved in the process, and citizens may decide to participate. Input may lead to positive effects, such as influence on budgetary decisions, education of citizens regarding budget issues, and citizen assistance in marketing the budget. Based on the literature, it is possible that several factors might affect the use and effectiveness of participation in the budget process: the type of participation mechanism used, when it occurs in the process, and the size of the city.

This study explores these issues through telephone interviews with city budget officers in four neighboring Midwest states: Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska. The use of several states allowed observation



of differences that might be due to variations in state budget laws. The sample was drawn from the 54 cities in these states with populations of 25,000 or greater, to enable selection of several cities within larger population ranges. The sample included at least 50% of these cities in each state, and 50% of the cities with each of the two primary forms of city government (mayor-council and council-manager). Larger cities are in the minority in these states, so they were purposively oversampled, while smaller cities were undersampled. The composition of the final sample of 28 cities is shown in Table 1.<sup>(1)</sup>

Five questions, with a number of prompts, were asked of the interviewees. The questions were designed to gain an understanding of the use of citizen participation at different stages of the budget. In addition, the opinions of the budget directors were sought regarding the effects and value of participation and barriers to increased participation.

There are limitations to this methodology. First, results may vary in smaller cities not included in this study. Second, the perspectives of other staff members or elected officials could differ from those of the budget director. Third, respondents may have forgotten to mention participation or communication mechanisms used in their cities. Finally, the sample might not be representative of a broader group of cities, particularly since they are all in one region of the country.

**TABLE 1**  
**Sample**

	<b>Total Number of Cities</b>	<b>Sample Cities</b>	<b>Sample as % of Total</b>
Cities over 25,000 Population	54	28	51.8%
Population Range:			
25-50,000	29	11	37.9%
50-100,000	13	8	61.5%
100-250,000	8	6	75.0%
> 250,000	4	3	75.0%
State:			
Iowa	17	9	52.9%
Kansas	13	7	53.8%
Missouri	20	10	50.0%
Nebraska	4	2	50.0%
Form of Government:			
Council-Manager	39	20	51.3%
Mayor-Council	14	7	50.0%
Commission	1	1	100.0%

However, a variety of participation levels are used in these cities, and similar themes recurred throughout the interviews. Despite the limitations, the results provide valuable information on issues relating to citizen participation in the budget process.

### **FINDINGS**

The findings are organized around five topics: the types of citizen participation used in the budget development stage; participation and communication methods during city council consideration of the recommended budget; types of participants; effects of input; and limits to

participation. Unless otherwise noted, differences between cities could not clearly be attributed to population, state, or form of government.

### **Citizen Input in Budget Development**

Citizen input would presumably have the best chance of being used to determine budget priorities if it occurs early in the process, prior to or concurrent with the administration's development of the proposed budget. Interviewees were asked what types of participation the city uses at this stage. Table 2 groups the responses into four categories of participation.

**TABLE 2**  
**Citizen Input in Budget Development\***

<b>Input Method</b>	<b>Number of Cities</b>	<b>% of Total Sample</b>
No formal input	9	32.1%
Non-budget-specific input	9	32.1%
Input for non-operating funds allocation	9	32.1%
Community budget input sessions	6	21.4%

\*There is some overlap between the last three categories, as some cities use more than one method.

Nine of the cities, one-third of the sample, do not have any formal mechanisms to obtain citizen input at this early stage of the budget process. However, a number of these respondents specifically stated that city council receives budget input throughout the year, either through individual conversations with citizens, or from constituents or groups speaking at regular council meetings. In addition, several of the cities have city council retreats or work sessions to discuss budget priorities at the beginning of the process. These are generally open to the public, but there is usually no opportunity for citizen input at these meetings. The media covers the meetings, but few citizens attend: "A few people come,

but it tends to be interest groups that get funds from the city, like the Visitor's Bureau."

Nine cities (32.1%) actively seek citizen input during the year, through opinion surveys or strategic planning sessions, which is used in determining budget priorities. Several cities do general satisfaction surveys every two or three years, while one also does a financial survey every two years. One city is currently combining a citizen survey with a strategic planning effort by holding a series of community forums to identify key issues that will be considered by city council in an open workshop, then used to prepare next year's budget proposal. Another city recently completed a strategic planning process with a citizen's committee, and has already used their recommendations for storm water project funding in the budget. Most of the respondents using these methods noted that the results are important considerations in budget development. For example, "the survey has allowed us to look at trends over time; if more people or money needs to be allocated someplace, it goes that way. For example, people in the city aren't real happy about roads right now, so we have been allocating additional funds to that."

Nine budget directors (32.1%) noted that they have special processes to obtain input into allocation of non-operating budget funds, or for particular portions of the operating budget. These include the Capital Improvement Program (six cities), Community Development Block Grant funds (two cities), and special earmarked funds for community agencies (three cities). One city funds 15 agencies through a separate social services budget, with an advisory board that makes funding level recommendations to city council. Another city has separate funding processes for the Arts Commission and Social Assistance, again with advisory committees that develop recommendations. Two cities in Missouri allocate a portion of the sales tax receipts among city council districts; one of these cities has a formal application process, with an appointed committee that submits the recommendations to city council.

Only six cities (21.4%) currently solicit citizen input on the operating budget as a whole during development. These methods include open community meetings (five cities), focus groups (one city), and input from citizen participation organizations (one city). The cities that have held open forums/community meetings report that these are generally sparsely attended. One city that tried using an open forum this year had



about 30 people attend: “about 50% of the needs and demands related to the budget, but the rest were about federal grants that aren’t included in the regular budget.”

One city selected a cross-section of citizens last year and conducted a half-day focus group. “We walked them through the budget, worked on general priorities, and built their recommendations into the budget process. They had a pretty good discussion after the six hour process. It was successful, but it raised questions about who was picked to be on it. It didn’t have the same force to city council as if the people were self-selected.”

Another city has extensive involvement from six elected citizen participation organizations. Members of these councils, along with neighborhood association leaders, attend a workshop to learn basic budgeting concepts and rules. They then participate in a computerized survey, where they respond to questions and prioritize answers; since they cannot see or hear other responses, no dominant personality emerges. This year, this group identified street maintenance as a concern, so it is being addressed in the budget.

Overall, most of the sample cities do not actively solicit citizen participation in operating budget development. A few have done so in the past, or considered doing so, but felt that the results were not worthwhile: “We used to do it years ago, but it wasn’t productive and just turned into a gripe session;” “We did things in the past, but had some people with an ax to grind show up at the meetings. Participation was pretty meaningless.”

Due to the small sample size, and the open-ended nature of the interview questions, statistical tests were not conducted for significant differences between cities based on state, form of government, or population. However, the findings do suggest some patterns. A majority of the Iowa cities have no formal participation, while all of the Kansas cities in the sample use some form of participation noted here. Cities with the mayor-council form of government appear to be more likely not to use formal participation methods, relative to their weighting in the sample, while council-manager cities are more likely to use non-budget-specific mechanisms such as surveys and strategic planning sessions.

### Legislative Consideration and Citizen Communication

Once the administration proposes a budget, information about the recommendations are communicated to the public and additional opportunities for participation are presented. Table 3 summarizes the various ways in which proposed budget information is disseminated to the public.

**TABLE 3**  
**Communication of Proposed Budget**

<b>Information Method</b>	<b>Number of Cities</b>	<b>% of Sample</b>
Budget document available	28	100.0%
Hearings	28	100.0%
Media coverage/ads	25	89.3%
Citizen's guide/budget in brief	9	32.1%
Televised city council meetings	9	32.1%
Web site	6	21.4%
Handout at meetings	3	10.7%
Community access channel	2	7.1%
Newsletter to citizens	1	3.6%

All the cities hold at least one public hearing on the budget, and most have city council hearings where the administration presents and answers questions about the recommendations. State laws require publication of the public hearing notice, and varying types of summary budget information. In Kansas, once this information is published, the budget cannot be increased; citizen input at the public hearing, then, cannot be used to increase, only decrease the final budget.

Most cities (89.3%) mentioned the use of media coverage and newspaper ads to communicate information. The media was also seen as the most effective method of communication by 39.3% of the respondents (there was little consensus from the other respondents, with several saying that nothing is effective). As one noted, "citizens take the

local newspaper as gospel, so that's important." A number of budget directors stated that they try to work closely with newspaper reporters and editorial boards to provide information: "We get most questions from the newspaper articles - that's why we make the effort to meet with the papers and lay things out, both the good and bad news;" "We have a savvy local reporter who understands the budget process, and ends up helping us out by doing nice graphical presentations for the paper. The process gets good technical coverage that way." However, several interviewees noted that not everyone reads the newspaper, and that the city does not control what the media reports: reporters "tend to look for controversial things."

Nine of the cities (32.1%) make available a citizen's guide or budget in brief for citizens or groups that request them; these provide a more accessible, "big picture" view of the budget than does the full document. However, use of these guides appears to be declining; five of these cities have stopped publishing budgets in brief, either due to the cost, lack of interest, or because they are moving towards use of a web site instead. Three cities provide a budget overview handout at budget hearings. Only one city mentioned the use of a citywide mailing.

Technology is changing the way budget information is disseminated. At least nine of these cities now hold televised city council meetings and budget hearings. One director noted that this has affected the way administrators approach the hearings: "Before we had the televised hearings, the department heads focused their council presentations on the numbers - now, the departments use this as a chance to do public relations. They aim their presentations at the people watching, and talk more about what the department does. The council seems to enjoy this also." Six cities currently put the proposed budget on the city's web site, while another eight are in the process of doing so; five cities put the adopted budget on the web site, but not the proposed budget.

Many of the respondents struggle with finding a good way to inform the public. The internet can reach people who have not had ready access to budget information in the past, but as two directors noted, not everyone has use of the internet: "A web site won't reach my parents' age group." Another noted the difficulty of finding the appropriate level of detail: "Either the information is so technical or too dumbed down. A one-page pie chart is worthless without information about the process

and choices, but the budget document itself is too dense. We haven't found a middle ground." The most effective method of communication, according to one respondent, "would be a detailed letter to each household, but that's very expensive."

The actual participation level of citizens in the budget consideration phase is not generally high. Attendance at public hearings is usually low, unless a specific issue attracts attention. According to one director, "Hearings are generally effective. It's good to have them available, but they probably aren't used by citizens unless something upsets or excites them." One respondent believes that public hearings are not the best way to solicit input, because "input should be a dialogue rather than a lecture." Another notes that it is generally the "naysayers" who show up at hearings, but that they "have a good function, they keep government on its toes; those people do have a point."

In addition to hearings, several other input methods were noted. Five respondents mentioned that citizens contact city council members directly. Two cities ask web site users to submit budget comments via e-mail, while another city has used a viewer call-in television show. One city has a citizen review committee of seven to nine individuals; the committee reviews departmental requests and makes recommendations to council. Finally, one city used a Citizens Budget Education Committee one year, to help educate other citizens about the proposed budget; this was perceived as working well, but has not been used again.

Cities use a variety of methods to disseminate information on the proposed budget, with perceived limited success. No patterns were observed in the responses based on form of government, population, or state. While information methods vary, however, the public hearing remains the primary way in which input is received from citizens at this stage, and hearings generally attract few participants.

### **Who Participates?**

According to the respondents, the people who attend public hearings or meetings are generally those who are interested in an issue that affects them, or are representatives from organizations that receive public funds.

“The people that want something show up.” Two directors also mentioned that representatives from tax protest groups may attend, and several noted that they have a few people who always attend council meetings. Virtually all the directors noted that participants overwhelmingly either want increased services (or to have proposed service cuts restored), or complain about proposed tax or fee increases.

Attendance has usually been sparse at these hearings in recent years: “As long as people are happy, they won’t show up at hearings;” “Times are good now, we have cut taxes six years in a row, so citizen concerns are lower now, and we get lower attendance at meetings.” Only one city noted that attendance at their four public budget hearings is pretty good: “These are pretty well attended; 20-30 people will testify, and more people attend if there’s a particular issue - in that case, special interest groups will attend, and we might have several hundred people show up.”

Respondents were universally concerned that participants at open meetings and public hearings do not offer constructive suggestions for how to pay for restored/increased services or reduced taxes/fees. The few cities that have received more constructive input are those that have used focus group mechanisms or citizen review committees during the budget development process. In these cases, participants are selected based on their background or affiliation. One city gets recommendations from the Chamber of Commerce, the Labor Council, and the NAACP, in addition to city council selections. Another city hand-picked a cross section of people, such as “business types, people actively interested, some people off the street,” and another city uses neighborhood association leaders and members of elected citizen participation organizations.

There are also disadvantages to these more intensive methods. Respondents in these cities felt that the process was useful, but noted that it took extra time and effort on the part of both the administration and the participants, in order to provide budget education before soliciting input. In addition, one director noted that city council seemed to prefer a more open forum to this select group. The administration felt that the input received in the focus group was more valuable: “Citizens off the street at the open forum had more parochial interests - for example, my window’s broken - which is more of a micro approach rather than the macro approach allowed by the focus group session.” This respondent thought, though that city council was more comfortable with the open forum

where anyone could come to share their views: “The people that came to the open forum had a lot of weight with council; three or four council members thought this was important and took their thoughts to heart.” This may have been due to the selection of the participants in the focus groups, or may represent a basic difference in the way elected officials and administrators view participation.

This leads to an issue raised by a number of respondents about whether input is representative of the views of the community. City planners in one city recommended that a new skatepark be located in one neighborhood, but city council changed the location after more residents of another neighborhood attended a budget hearing. Should the “squeaky wheel get the grease?” Another budget director from a university town noted that they receive valuable participation from university employees on boards and commissions as well as in the budget process, but get little interest from other segments of the community.

### **Effects of Participation**

The budget directors in the sample cities overwhelmingly believe that citizen input affects budget decisions. Of those who addressed this issue, 77% said that input definitely influenced decisions, while 9% said it did not, and the remaining 14% said sometimes. Effects were felt regardless of whether the input was received during the budget development or budget consideration stage. “We’ve had some localized problems with storm water; this issue wasn’t high on our priority list, but because of citizen input it became a higher priority.” “We had an old ice hockey facility and threatened to close it, then fans filled the council chambers in uniform, and saved the arena.” “A lot of stuff gets added back in after people complain. Whenever eight-ten people unite and provide input to council, it can have lots of influence.”

Two directors commented that citizens can actually have more influence on city council than staff expertise. “To city council, Joe Blow citizen has the same impact as staff people on a given issue even though staff have expertise and have done research on the issue. For example, a mom worried about her kid’s safety can get a traffic light put up even if a

staffer has spent lots of time studying the issue and says it's not needed." "There's been a big push for a skateboard park. Community members were demanding it, and they all wanted it in their own neighborhood. The decision was to do it, and it ended up in the neighborhood where the most people showed up to lobby, and it will be bigger than what the staff recommended."

Participation does not guarantee influence, however. Regular attendance at hearings may dilute, rather than increase effectiveness. "The same four or five people tend to show up: one likes to see himself on TV, a couple others want to keep taxes low, one guy is a budget analyst wannabe - these people have less influence every time they show up. Council thinks they're just there for the show, they're not credible anymore." "We have a couple goofballs that show up for every council meeting that also come to the budget hearing." The specific interest of the participant may also make a difference: "If people are just saying, 'taxes are too high,' it doesn't have much impact, but if they have specific proposals and recommendations, it has more influence." Another respondent noted that to influence decisions, "It has to be an issue with widespread support."

As noted earlier, most of the respondents said that they have had very little attendance at public hearings or open forums recently (except in the case of individual issues). What assumptions do city officials make in this case? That citizens are basically happy and satisfied with city services and the budget. "In the past couple years, we haven't had much turnout; if people are pretty satisfied with their level of services, they're not as likely to show up." "Nothing seems to do a good job of getting public input prior to adoption. Either they're apathetic or satisfied." Nonparticipation, then, also has effects on decision-making, as officials believe that it supports the status quo.

Citizen participation also has other effects. Directors in cities that use focus groups along with budget training sessions feel that this provides a good opportunity to educate citizens about the budget. "People become more educated as they get involved in an issue." Education is also an important consideration when deciding how to communicate the proposed budget to the public. For example, one director commented on the positive trend of cities using more graphics and popular reports: "People don't look at the numbers, but they will look at graphs. This

helps to educate and generates more comments, helps them understand the big picture.”

Use of a citizen review committee was seen as having additional political advantages. “When we have specific volatile issues, it’s helpful to say that there’s citizen input - this has been helpful politically over the years - although the input is also good for management and operational purposes.” Another director noted that staff and elected officials may differ on why input is valuable. “Staff see citizen involvement as helping to sell the document to the community, fellow citizens selling each other on it. Council tends to see it more from a political standpoint, that the citizens committee can help take the heat off city council.”

In summary, most budget directors believe that citizen input, as well as the lack of input, does affect the decisions that are made in the budget process. Additional benefits to participation are the ability to educate citizens in the complexities of the budget (depending on the method used), and using participation to help market the proposed budget. If participation is so beneficial, why is there not more of it?

### **Limits to Participation**

Only twenty-four percent of the respondents who stated an opinion were satisfied with the level of citizen participation in their city. Those that are satisfied are in cities that have no formal input mechanisms for the operating budget; they believe that citizens have ample opportunity to comment. Interestingly, none of the directors from cities that use citizen committees, open forums, or focus groups, expressed satisfaction with the level of participation.

Dissatisfaction stems from two major factors: the number of participants, and the type of participation. In recent years most cities have had low attendance at public hearings or open meetings. Those who do show up tend to be concerned with the “micro” level budget decisions that affect them personally, and have no suggestions for how to pay for additional services. “If we want input, we have to structure it so they’ll understand where we’re at now, then have to be able to come up with alternatives. It’s easy for people to say ‘we want more’ but if money is added for something, we have to take money away from something else. To be meaningful, people have to see the whole budget.” “Citizens need



to be more involved in deciding what services they want, and prioritizing and making choices - those discussions haven't happened. What we get instead is four minute increments at council meetings about what people want, not what they'd accept as tradeoffs."

What are the barriers to participation then? The respondents' perspectives are summarized in Table 4.

**TABLE 4**  
**Perceived Barriers to Participation**

<b>Perceived Barriers</b>	<b>Number of Cities</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
Budget/system complexity	12	42.8%
Lack of interest	12	42.8%
Content with status quo	8	28.6%
People think their input does not make a difference	5	17.8%
Busy	5	17.8%
Prefer representative democracy	2	7.1%
Lack of encouragement from city	1	3.6%

The most-cited participation barrier is budget complexity. Respondents feel that citizens generally do not understand the budget enough to effectively participate, or that people do not know how to either obtain information or participate. "The budget is over \$100 million, and people's eyes roll back in their heads. Talk of different funds, procedures, etc. is mind boggling to people." "A \$150 million budget overwhelms people. The budget is broken down into different funds and different departments, it's difficult for outsiders to recognize and understand the structure and magnitude."

The other barriers perceived by the budget directors are largely due to the unwillingness of the public to get involved. This may be due to lack of interest in the budget, the fact that people already have busy lives

and this is low on their priority list, or their belief that what they say will not have any impact anyway. Eight directors also mentioned the effects of the economy on budget participation. “In the 1980s when the economy was stagnant, we had more participation, but the city was also broke...In general, people are more apt to respond to negative rather than to positive forces.” Two respondents also mentioned that many people believe that budget decisions are the job of their elected representatives.

Based on these responses, cities might be able to work harder to overcome a few of these perceived barriers. On the whole, though, achieving substantial levels of participation is unlikely given the perceived unwillingness of the public to be involved.

### **Summary**

A model of participation was shown in Figure 1. This model does work to some extent in the budget process in these cities. All of the sample cities provide at least a very basic level of opportunity for citizens to participate through public hearings, and all have budget information available for those who express interest. Most of the cities, though, have focused more on opening up the process and providing educational information (e.g., city council work sessions for budget planning, televised city council meetings, citizen budget guides), rather than actually soliciting input. A number of these cities are beginning to use methods to encourage more active participation, such as open community forums or focus groups. However, at the present time, many of the sample cities have no formal mechanism for citizen input in the budget development stage of the process.

However, citizen input in the budget does appear to have effects. The vast majority of the budget directors sampled believe that budget decisions are influenced by public comments and interest. Most volunteered examples to show that a group of citizens commenting at a public hearing resulted in changes to the proposed budget, or the results of citizen surveys determined high priority areas for budget development. Most have also found informational tools, such as media coverage, to be useful in educating the public and “selling” the budget.

The major problem, based on these interviews, is the actual citizen participation that is experienced. In general, few people turn out to

provide input into the budget. When a group of people does participate, they primarily focus their attention on increasing funding or avoiding service cuts in areas of interest to them, or on holding the line on tax or fee increases. The budget directors do not find this level of participation to be useful, because it does not help the city to determine where to make trade-offs to achieve these demands.

### CONCLUSIONS

Public input does affect budgetary decision-making, particularly when a group of citizens join together on a particular issue. However, the budget directors interviewed for this study believe that the complexity of the budget and the perceived general lack of citizen interest are significant barriers to participation. These findings support prior research on citizen participation. In addition, research suggests that participation works best when it occurs early in the process, and is a dialogue rather than simply one-way information sharing (Kathlene & Martin, 1991; King, Feltey & Susel, 1998). This study found that budget participation in the sample cities primarily still occurs in the late stages of the budget process, and that changes have focused more on providing additional information to the public than on opening up a two-way dialogue between city officials and citizens. However, several cities have used methods that can help to achieve more meaningful participation.

One way to help citizens develop a more “macro” level view of budget trade-offs is to combine education and participation early in the process, at the budget development stage. A few cities in this sample are doing this by holding focus groups, workshops, and budget simulation exercises with small groups of people. There are several disadvantages to these methods, though: they require more time and effort on the part of both the city and the participants, they limit the number of people who can be involved at a given time, and it may be difficult to get a group that is representative of the community at large. The latter point, of course, is an issue with all participation methods.

In addition to these methods, the use of citizen surveys appears to be beneficial for budget decision-making. These surveys take less time on the part of citizens, and a larger number can be reached than through more intensive methods. While the results of these surveys might not be helpful in determining macro level decisions and trade-offs, they at least

provide valuable information relative to primary areas of concern to the public, so can help officials determine budget priorities.

Given past experience, it is probably unrealistic to ever expect regular, representative attendance at public budget hearings or open meetings. However, a combination of these alternative methods could increase citizen input in the budget process. The use of focus groups and citizen surveys can help to overcome some of the barriers to participation, and provide valuable information on budget preferences to city officials. Although only a minority of the sample cities currently uses these methods, most budget directors expressed interest in increasing citizen participation; they may be encouraged by learning of successful experiences in other cities.

#### NOTE

1. 1996 population data were from Gaquin and Littman (1998). Form of government, and city phone numbers, were obtained from International City/County Management Association, 1998, or from city web sites.

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