

Searching for a Role for Citizens in the Budget Process

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Citizen participation in the local budget process is not prevalent, despite encouragement from scholars and professional organizations. This case study of two Kansas cities that have used a variety of input mechanisms in the budget process analyzes the effectiveness of citizen budget participation. Limited effectiveness was found, which may largely be due to the timing of the input, unstated or unclear goals, implementation difficulties, and political and environmental constraints. Citizen input appears to have had little effect on budget decisions, and neither city has institutionalized participation in the process. However, the input mechanisms serve other purposes, such as education and support for specific proposals. Describing the benefits as well as the difficulty of involving citizens in a meaningful way is beneficial to other governments as they wrestle with the issue of defining the citizens' role in the budget process.

INTRODUCTION

Citizen participation has received increasing attention in the past decade. An expanded role for citizens in the governance process has been advocated by scholars,¹ and by professional organizations such as the International City/County Management Association.² However, the literature demonstrates that structured opportunities for

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1. Richard C. Box, *Citizen Governance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998); Cheryl S. King and Camilla Stivers, *Government Is Us* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998); Hindy L. Schachter, *Reinventing Government or Reinventing Ourselves* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); John C. Thomas, *Public Participation in Public Decisions* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995); and Cheryl S. King, Kathryn M. Feltey, and Bridget O. Susel, "The Question of Participation: Toward Authentic Public Participation in Public Administration," *Public Administration Review* 58, no. 4 (July/August 1998): 317–326.

2. International City/County Management Association, "ICMA Declaration of Ideals"; available from: <http://www1.icma.org/main/bc.asp?bcid=34&hsid=1&ssid1=17&ssid2=22&ssid3=166>; accessed 4 December 2003.

input into budget decisions are not prevalent. This is particularly true early in the budget process, when public opinion would conceivably have the most impact on decision making.

This study analyzes the effectiveness of citizen participation in the budget process in two cities based on characteristics identified with success in the literature. While many cities still rely primarily on public hearings held shortly before budget adoption, Topeka and Wichita, Kansas, have experimented with a variety of direct input mechanisms during budget development. The experiences of these cities can enhance our knowledge of the benefits and difficulties of participation in the budget process, as well as provide insights for other local governments considering participatory methods.

The remainder of the article is divided into six sections, beginning with a review of the literature related to citizen participation in the budget process. This is followed by an explanation of the methodology used in the current study. The next two sections describe and analyze the mechanisms used in each city. The final sections include a discussion of the key findings and the conclusions from this study and present a model of key factors that influence the role of citizens and the utility of their input.

PARTICIPATION AND BUDGETING

Citizen input is generally viewed as a way to reduce the level of citizen distrust in government, and to educate people about government activities. For example, citizens in cities with more participation have been found to be less cynical about local government.³ With the support of neighborhood boards in Dayton, Ohio, the city did not lose a tax election in 20 years.⁴ However, participation is made difficult by barriers such as lack of knowledge, public perceptions that their opinions are unwanted, and citizen apathy and lack of time.⁵ Overall, researchers have concluded that participation is most beneficial when it occurs early in the process, and when it is two-way deliberative communication rather than simply one-way information sharing.⁶

3. Evan M. Berman, "Dealing with Cynical Citizens," *Public Administration Review* 57, no. 2 (March/April 1997): 105–112.

4. Rob Gurwitt, "A Government that Runs on Citizen Power," *Governing* 6, no. 3 (December 1992): 48–54.

5. Michele Firsby and Monica Bowman, "What We Have Here Is a Failure to Communicate," *Public Management* 78, no. 2 (February 1996): A1–A5; King, Feltey, and Susel; and Panel on Civic Trust and Citizen Responsibility, "A Government to Trust and Respect" (Washington, DC: National Academy of Public Administration, June 1999); available from: <http://www.napawash.org>; accessed 4 December 2003.

6. Lyn Kathlene and John A. Martin, "Enhancing Citizen Participation: Panel Designs, Perspectives, and Policy Formation," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 10, no. 1 (1991): 46–63; and King, Feltey, and Susel.

A variety of participatory mechanisms have been used in government budgeting,⁷ and descriptions of individual methods are widely available.⁸ Each method has strengths as well as weaknesses. Citizen surveys have long been used to determine needs and service satisfaction levels.⁹ Survey responses may be representative, and consistent usage over time reveals trends in opinions. However, surveys may not reflect the intensity of a respondent's opinion,¹⁰ cost is a factor, citizens may not have appropriate information to make an informed decision, and questions can be written in a manipulative or leading manner.¹¹ Public meetings have been used in a deliberative way to provide two-way communication on budget issues,¹² but attendance is often low and may not represent the community as a whole, and participants may have insufficient knowledge for effective input.¹³ Citizen advisory committees allow members to develop expertise in an area, but can require more time and effort by city administrators and participants, and may not be representative of the community.¹⁴

One challenge with some participation methods is that individuals may have an incentive to "free ride" by stating a greater preference if they believe that they will not have to pay their fair share for a service.¹⁵ Studies have found a "discontinuity" between citizen demand and willingness to pay taxes, although the relationship between these attitudes appears to be more complex than the simple free rider concept; some citizens, for example, are willing to pay more than their fair share.¹⁶ In addition, willingness to

7. Carol Ebdon, "Citizen Participation in the Budget Process: Exit, Voice, and Loyalty," in *Encyclopedia of Public Administration and Public Policy* (New York: Marcel Dekker, 2003): 173–176.

8. Douglas J. Watson, Robert J. Juster, and Gerald W. Johnson, "Institutionalized Use of Citizen Surveys in the Budgetary and Policy-Making Processes: A Small City Case Study," *Public Administration Review* 51, no. 3 (May/June 1991): 232–239; Vic Preisser, "Citizen-Based Budgeting: The Redding, California, Experiment," *Public Management* 79, no. 5 (May 1997): 18–21; Eric R. Johnson, "Recommended Budget Practices: Incorporating Stakeholders into the Process," *Government Finance Review* 14, no. 4 (August 1998): 15–18; Craig Clifford, "Linking Strategic Planning and Budgeting in Scottsdale, Arizona," *Government Finance Review* 14, no. 4 (August 1998): 9–14; and Frank Benest, "The Bottom Line," *Public Management* 80, no. 4 (April 1998): 10–12.

9. K. Webb and Harry P. Hatry, *Obtaining Citizen Feedback: The Application of Citizen Surveys to Local Governments* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 1973); Thomas I. Miller and Michelle A. Miller, *Citizen Surveys: How to Do Them, How to Use Them, What They Mean* (Washington, DC: International City Management Association, 1991).

10. Thomas.

11. Harry P. Hatry and L. H. Blair, "Citizen Surveys for Local Governments: A Copout, Manipulative Tool, or a Policy Guidance and Analysis Aid?" in *Citizen Preferences and Urban Public Policy*, ed. Terry N. Clark (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1976).

12. Nancy Roberts, "Public Deliberation: An Alternative Approach to Crafting Policy and Setting Direction," *Public Administration Review* 57, no. 2 (March/April 1997): 124–132.

13. Thomas.

14. *Ibid.*

15. L. A. Wilson, "Preference Revelation and Public Policy: Making Sense of Citizen Survey Data," *Public Administration Review* 43, no. 4 (July/August 1983): 335–342.

16. Mark A. Glaser and W. Bartley Hildreth, "A Profile of Discontinuity between Citizen Demand and Willingness to Pay Taxes: Comprehensive Planning for Park and Recreation Investment," *Public Budgeting*

pay has been found to be related to an individual's perception of government performance.¹⁷ Surveys can be designed to elicit citizens' sincere preferences.¹⁸ Budget pie charts are also used to introduce budget constraints into decision making by asking respondents to allocate budget dollars among various services.¹⁹ Eugene, Oregon, used a variety of participation methods to determine citizen preferences in the face of fiscal stress, including a budget-balancing exercise and citizen surveys with varying levels of service cost information provided; the amount of budgetary information provided and the individual's use of services were found to affect their revealed preferences.²⁰

In spite of the potential benefits of participation methods, many local governments still rely almost exclusively on the public hearing at the end of the budget process. Little use of other methods has been found in national surveys,²¹ regional studies,²² or single state analyses.²³ The latter two studies did find that public officials considered citizen input very important and influential in budget decisions, however.

Most existing literature focuses on the use of single budget input methods, such as citizen surveys. The exception is cases such as Eugene, where multiple methods were used on a one-time basis due to a budget crisis. However, the citizen participation literature suggests that input methods each have distinct potential strengths and weaknesses. Cities that use more than one method, then, on a regular basis, might be more likely to attain effective participation, by offsetting the weaknesses of one method with the advantages of another. This study analyzes the effectiveness of budget participation in two cities that have utilized a variety of different input methods.

We consider participation efforts to be effective if they include the following characteristics, all of which are cited as participation strengths in the literature:

(footnote continued)

and *Finance* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 96–113; and Mark A. Glaser and Robert B. Denhardt, "When Citizen Expectations Conflict with Budgetary Reality: Discontinuity between the Public's Demand for Services and Its Willingness to Pay Taxes," *Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting & Financial Management* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 276–310.

17. Mark A. Glaser and W. Bartley Hildreth, "Service Delivery Satisfaction and Willingness to Pay Taxes," *Public Productivity and Management Review* 23, no. 1 (September 1999): 48–67.

18. James A. Ferris, "A Theoretical Framework for Surveying Citizens' Fiscal Preferences," *Public Administration Review* 42, no. 3 (May/June 1982): 213–219.

19. J. P. McIver and Elinor Ostrom, "Using Budget Pies to Reveal Preferences: Validation of a Survey Instrument," in *Citizen Preferences and Urban Public Policy*, ed. Terry N. Clark (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1976).

20. William Simonsen and Mark D. Robbins, *Citizen Participation in Resource Allocation* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000).

21. Daniel E. O'Toole, James Marshall, and Timothy Grewe, "Current Local Government Budgeting Practices," *Government Finance Review* 12, no. 6 (December 1996): 25–29; and Carol Ebdon, "The Relationship between Citizen Involvement in the Budget Process and City Structure and Culture," *Public Productivity and Management Review* 23, no. 3 (March 2000): 383–393.

22. Carol Ebdon, "Beyond the Public Hearing: Citizen Participation in the Local Government Budget Process," *Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting and Financial Management* 14, no. 2 (2002): 273–294.

23. Aimee L. Franklin and Brandi Carberry-George, "Analyzing How Local Governments Establish Service Priorities," *Public Budgeting and Finance* 19, no. 3 (1999): 31–46.

participants are representative of the broader community;²⁴ participation is open to large numbers of participants;²⁵ input occurs early in the budget process;²⁶ participation includes two-way communication between citizens and officials;²⁷ citizen input is considered by decision makers;²⁸ and input reveals sincere preferences of citizens (i.e., citizens consider willingness to pay issues and budget tradeoffs).²⁹

METHODOLOGY

Three research questions were explored. First, has citizen participation been effective in these cities? Second, what factors have influenced the effectiveness of participation? For example, are there political or environmental contextual variables that may affect the value of participation? Third, how might experiences and lessons from these cities be applicable to other governments?

A previous study of central states found that Topeka and Wichita were unusual in that they have used several different input methods in their budget processes.³⁰ These cities provide the rare opportunity to address the effects of varying mechanisms within the same city. In addition, both cities operate under the same state laws governing the budget process; this helps to control for external variables that might affect the use and effectiveness of participation. Both cities have received the GFOA Distinguished Budget Award, suggesting the presentation of information is suitable for communication purposes.

The authors spent about one week in each city, during the city council consideration of the 2001 budget. Forty interviews were conducted, 20 per city, each lasting approximately one hour. Open-ended questions were used to uncover mechanisms used by each of the cities³¹ and to elicit the interviewee's experience with and perspective on the budget process, and the role of citizens in the governance process. Interviewees were purposively selected to represent three categories of actors: elected officials, city administrators, and active citizens. Included were a majority of the city council, the

24. Ned Crosby, Janet M. Kelly, and Paul Schaefer, "Citizen Panels: A New Approach to Citizen Participation," *Public Administration Review* 46, no. 2 (March/April 1986): 170–178; Johnson; Kathlene and Martin; Thomas; and Watson, Juster, and Johnson.

25. Kathlene and Martin; and Thomas.

26. Kathe Callahan, "The Utilization and Effectiveness of Citizen Advisory Committees in the Budget Process of Local Governments," *Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting & Financial Management* 14, no. 2 (2002); Kathlene and Martin; King, Feltey, and Susel; Johnson; Preisser; and Thomas.

27. Benest; Crosby, Kelly, and Schaefer; Frisby and Bowman; Kathlene and Martin; King, Feltey, and Susel; Roberts; and Thomas.

28. Callahan; Crosby, Kelly, and Schaefer; Glaser and Denhardt; Kathlene and Martin; Roberts; Thomas; and Watson, Juster, and Johnson.

29. Ferris; McIver and Ostrom; Simonsen and Robbins; and Wilson.

30. Ebdon, "Beyond the Public Hearing."

31. Other participation mechanisms may have been used by these cities, but they were not mentioned in the interviews or uncovered by the other methods employed in the case studies.

mayor and primary administrative officer, the budget director, several major department heads and staff members, and five external community stakeholders in each city. The community representatives were selected based on recommendations from city officials.

We observed a city council meeting and public budget hearing in each city, and attended two citizen advisory board meetings in Wichita. Finally, archival analysis was conducted to review city council meeting minutes, newspaper articles, budgets, and other appropriate documents.

Every effort was made to obtain a wide variety of views, but we may have missed a perspective due to the selection method and number of interviews. In addition, experiences in these cities may not be generalizable. However, lessons from these cases can add valuable knowledge to our sparse understanding of citizen participation in the budget process.

Both cities use a calendar fiscal year, with the proposed budget presented to the city council in early July, and adoption in mid-August. State law requires one public hearing, held after publication of the maximum amount of the budget and tax levy. Property tax rate limits were replaced in 1999 with truth in taxation legislation, which requires a city ordinance if General Fund property taxes will increase due to increased assessed valuation (other than from annexation, new development, or increased personal property valuation).

WICHITA

Wichita has a population of approximately 329,000, with a council-manager form of government, an elected mayor, and six council members elected by district. The proposed 2001 budget was \$310 million, a 7 percent decrease from the revised 2000 budget, with a 31.4 mills property tax levy. The mill levy has not increased in eight years. The proposed budget is available on the city's web site, council meetings are televised, and city officials have e-mail addresses for direct contact. The city has used a variety of formal budget input mechanisms, including a citizen survey, a facilitated prioritization exercise, neighborhood advisory board meetings, a budget simulation, and public hearings.

Citizen Survey

A citizen survey was conducted by researchers at Wichita State University in 1997 to determine views of quality of life and service delivery, willingness to pay for various services, neighborhood and community orientation, and citizen involvement. The survey was mentioned primarily by city administrators. Only one council member and one community representative expressed knowledge of the survey, but the original survey and a follow-up did appear to have some effect on budget priorities. According to a staff member, "One thing that came out of this was public safety. At this time there had been a couple drive-by shootings and crime was a big issue. The public safety initiative was a direct result of this. ... There was a follow-up survey a couple years later. ... It resulted

in \$1.2 million for street maintenance.” One elected official also used the survey as validation: “The top two items were the cost of air service and street conditions and maintenance. This is a personal favorite of mine, street maintenance. I was happy to get agreement from the public. I had previously made this a priority.”

Facilitated Prioritization Exercise

A priority-setting exercise was developed during the development of the 1999 and 2000 budgets. The city invited leaders of neighborhood organizations and other community groups to participate in small groups of six to eight. They used networked computers to vote on city budget priorities. The first step was to brainstorm a list of 19 to 26 priorities. Participants then were given five or six votes to allocate among this list; items not receiving at least two votes were eliminated. The remaining items were then placed in rank order, and the sum of the individual rankings was used to create the final priority list. The top five issues for the sessions primarily related to public safety, infrastructure, and code enforcement. In the second year, the 65 to 70 participants (some of whom may have also participated in the first year) were also given the opportunity to determine the allocation of the general fund budget between seven major categories. The results did not differ significantly from the prior year. Part of this may be due to the fact that multiyear public safety and infrastructure initiatives had been incorporated into the budget and there was a desire to continue funding for these priorities.

This form of input is perceived as valuable, but interviewees acknowledge the relatively low rate of participation and that participants may not have been representative. It appears that no direct initiatives came from these activities, but the results tended to confirm input received from other sources: “The city council may have done these things anyway since the results were things like community policing... The staff already had it in the budget.” However, several participants attended a city council meeting to thank the city for allowing them input. As one staff member recalls, “The City Manager sent me a note that in his 35 years of management he had never heard anyone offer thanks for participation in the budget process.”

District Advisory Boards

Citizen organizations, with elected representatives, have existed in Wichita since the 1970s. The organizations were replaced in 2000 with District Advisory Boards (DABs). The district city council member chairs the meetings and appoints the members, and the city manager’s office provides staff. “The DABs will provide feedback and input on city policies, programs and projects. DABs will assist with issues ... such as the city operating budget....”³² The role of the DABs in the budget process remains to be seen. Elected

32. City of Wichita, *District Advisory Board Home Page*, 2000; available from: <http://www.wichitagov.org/Government/DABS/default.htm>; accessed 4 December 2003.

officials expect little input into the operating budget: “I do not see the DABs as contributing much to the budget. I do not know about other districts but mine will contribute hardly anything”; “Not in six months of the DAB has anyone said that a district item needs to be in the budget.” The proposed budget received little discussion in DAB meetings.

Budget Simulation Exercise

A new budget exercise was developed in the 2001 budget preparation process. Neighborhood association leaders and DAB members were invited to a meeting that was also open to the general public. City council members were also invited, and several attended. The budget director presented an overview of the budget process, and budget issues and trends. City staff then moderated the simulation, in groups based on city council district. Participation varied by district. Attendees from one district included only one DAB member, a neighborhood association leader, the city council member, and a city staff member. Another district included nine of the eleven DAB members, the city council member, and a staff member.

The materials for the exercise included background information, cost, and performance data for 34 different activities, grouped into six functional areas. Each group could choose to add or reduce funding for individual activities, but any additions had to be offset by other spending reductions or revenue increases. The proposed budget summarized the results of the exercise:

Community priorities identified by the citizen participants included the following: at-risk youth programming (especially in the evening hours); infrastructure maintenance (especially storm water drainage and street maintenance projects); municipal court improvements; and neighborhood issues (i.e., code enforcement). There was moderate support for public safety issues, even though Wichita is experiencing the lowest crime rates in years; however, there was actually opposition to financing some of the more visible specialty programs such as the helicopter and mounted patrol.³³

Based on our interviews, it appears that most groups chose to increase the mill levy to balance the revisions they had made in the different activities, rather than reduce services elsewhere.

The simulation was held late in the budget development process, because the DABs had just been organized. This may have reduced the potential effect on decision making, but the results apparently led to slight modifications in the proposed budget, such as additions to at-risk programs. Public safety changes proposed in the simulation were not accepted by the administration because of a perception that the city council did not want to make cuts in this area.

Two primary issues were raised about the simulation. Several participants noted that they had not received the overall results from the city. “I have not seen the feedback.

33. City of Wichita, *2001–2002 Proposed Budget*: CM-8.

That is the downfall. If you ask for input you need to report back.” The only formal information transmitted to elected officials about the exercise appears to be the brief summary in the proposed budget. One participant was also concerned that the exercise was too simplistic: “The information was not real.... You have to budget with the facts, not a mock up test case. If you take and say the DAB said they want this to happen, this is not real. An example is the mounted unit. There are several funding sources, it is not just general taxes. But why didn’t they say this?”

However, participants and city staff considered the simulation valuable. Most interviewees noted that it gave citizens a greater voice, but also provided educational benefits to the participants. As staff members noted, “They do not appreciate the limits we face. We wanted to find a way to get input and at the same time find a way to get them to appreciate our position”; “It did give them more insight into what staff and city council go through to adopt the budget. They did not realize the ongoing costs. Like it is one thing to plant a tree, but you also have to maintain it over time.” Participants agreed: “The benefits are twofold. You can put in your two cents’ worth, but you get information about the city budget”; “Doing this is really difficult. It is like trying to balance your checkbook.” All interviewees want this exercise to be continued.

Public Hearings

Several public hearings on the proposed budget are scheduled during the morning city council meetings. In some years, evening meetings have also been held for budget hearings. The 2001 budget drew few people to the public hearings; for example, the only external speaker at the hearing we attended thanked the council for their support for Wichita State University. Prior years have seen more interest, however. Officials feel that “the public will get interested when there is a general sense that things are not going right. When there is a deterioration of service, then you will hear from them”; “When times are good, then the budget is not on anyone’s radar screen.”

Wichita Summary

Interviewees were generally enthusiastic about the value of the participatory mechanisms, particularly the new District Advisory Boards and the budget simulation exercise. As one citizen proclaimed, “I think they will consider our input. I think they will really try. I felt our city council member was listening.” These two opportunities allow for more two-way discussion between officials and citizens than other methods provide (although it is not clear how much ongoing involvement the DABs will have in budget issues). To some, however, of equal or even greater importance, is the ability to educate citizens regarding the difficult issues in government budgeting.

Trust appears to be a factor in the willingness to enhance participation. The city manager has held his position for 15 years, through many changes in both city council membership as well as key administrative staff, and is widely respected by elected

officials: “The city manager’s gift is his rapport with the City Council and his ability to read them.” This may have allowed the city manager to open up the process in ways that could not have been done elsewhere. As one administrator put it, “In 1998 a lot of the city council was resistant to citizen participation before the budget was established. They did not want them to screw it up. This year it is an incredible turn around. Our own organization is starting to value this.”

It is not clear that citizen input has affected budget decisions, though. Major city initiatives were undertaken after the citizen surveys, but may have been planned previously. Minor changes were made in the budget proposal after the simulation exercise, but the city manager did not go along with other suggestions. Also, property tax rate increases are avoided at all costs by officials: “I don’t know if you caught this, but there is a lot of pride in not raising the mill levy.” When simulation participants opted to raise taxes to pay for services, the results were not seriously considered by the city: “We were disappointed by how many took the easy way out and raised taxes”; “No one wants us to raise taxes but yet a lot of them decided to do this in their groups.”

The timing of these mechanisms has also limited their use. The budget exercises were done fairly late in the budget development process, after preliminary decisions had been made. DAB budget consideration and public hearings occurred even later, while the city council was considering the proposed budget. To be truly effective, input needs to be solicited earlier in the process.

Other determinants of effectiveness are whether the input is representative of the community, whether it is open to large numbers of citizens, and whether it elicits “sincere” preferences. The survey most successfully met these criteria. The other Wichita mechanisms have been limited in the number of participants, and have focused on neighborhood leaders who may or may not be representative of the community. The budget simulation exercise did utilize a budget constraint that forced participants to consider their willingness to pay for priority services.

Finally, none of these mechanisms have been institutionalized, so their future is unclear. The District Advisory Board members and some but not all city council members and staff were excited about the potential for the DABs, but they may not take an active role in the budget process. The city does plan to continue using the budget simulation exercise, however.

TOPEKA

Topeka has a population of 126,000, with a mayor-council form of government. The mayor is elected at large, with nine district council members. The mayor presides over city council meetings, but is not a voting member. The recent mayor-council relationship has not been smooth. The mayor submitted two budget options for the 2000 fiscal year: one would have held the tax rate constant with extensive service level reductions, while the other would maintain service levels with a 3.7 mill levy increase. After that

experience, the city council passed an ordinance requiring the mayor to submit future budget proposals based on council budget priorities determined by early May of each year. The top priorities for the 2001 budget were to reduce taxes and cut costs. The mayor's proposed 2001 budget was an increase of about 1 percent, with a slight decrease in the property tax rate. However, the proposal did not include firefighter raises, which would likely be required by union negotiations, and the mayor reduced community organization funding; for example, social service agency funding was reduced by one third.³⁴

The proposed budget is on the city's web site, with e-mail links for questions and comments. In 2000, city council budget work sessions were televised and held on the same evenings as city council meetings, which enhanced access to budget information. In addition, a citizen survey has been utilized, along with focus groups and an open forum, as described below.

Citizen Survey

A citizen satisfaction survey was conducted in May 1999. Over 90 percent of respondents considered three issues to be very or somewhat important: eliminating red water, stabilizing the cost of utilities, and devoting resources for safe schools and neighborhoods. The majority (57 percent) felt that they were getting their money's worth from taxes.³⁵ However, the citizen survey was not mentioned by any of our interviewees, and we were unable to find any evidence that the survey results affected budget decisions.

Focus Groups

The mayor has convened two different types of focus groups during budget development. The first included 10 to 12 active citizens, budget critics, and business leaders. Participants discussed the entire budget and recommended changes such as eliminating the police athletic league, which was already under discussion. Participants did not want increased taxes and generally confirmed the mayor's choices. The second round of focus groups was structured differently because "most participants cannot get their arms around the whole budget." The mayor got small groups together to talk about specific changes in a few policy areas. This format was used to identify macro trends, gauge reactions, and to craft the budget message.

Those who support focus groups describe them as an evaluative tool to determine potential changes in specific items, as well as being politically useful for a group outside the administration to agree with the mayor's decisions. Critics feel that the focus group was used too late in the process as the mayor's budget "was already practically done by

34. Mike Hall, "Service Cuts Foreseen," *The Topeka Capital-Journal*, 20 July 2000.

35. City of Topeka, *2000 Proposed Budget*, Mayor's Budget Message (1999); available from: <http://www.topeka.org>; accessed 1 July 2000.

this time,” and city council members rejected the credibility of the results; “They claimed that the participants were all handpicked by the mayor to do what she wants done.”

Open Forum

An open forum was held during consideration of the 2000 proposed budget, designed as a “nonintimidating and relaxed environment” for the public to share their budget concerns. Bus transportation was arranged, and the forum was widely announced. We received conflicting reports of the number of attendees for this activity, ranging from 15 to 35 to 150 to 200. Speakers were mostly concerned with their city services or increased funding for groups they represented: “They just brought up things like pot hole repair”; “There were 35 speakers, 34 said give us more money.” Some interviewees did not see this as useful, and even felt that it raised expectations. The timing was also considered poor; one interviewee thought it should have been held prior to the mayor’s budget proposal, while another felt it should have been held later, after council made their preliminary decisions. Another criticism was that city council members stacked the audience with their friends, just as the mayor had done with the focus groups.

There were also perceived benefits of this mechanism. New faces were seen: “For some this was the first time they had ever been to council chambers.” In addition, some speakers’ concerns were incorporated into budget changes. For example, a new skateboard park was said to have come about as a result: “The forum helped get the ball rolling. It brings ideas to the forefront.” The forum was not repeated again for the 2001 budget, however.

Public Hearing

Public hearings are generally not well attended, but over 100 people attended the budget hearing for the 2001 budget, which lasted about six hours. Speakers primarily represented social service agencies, arguing to restore their funding levels. Three citizens made specific suggestions for budget reductions in a variety of areas. Normally, the hearings bring out the same “cast of characters” that regularly attend city council meetings, and one “self-proclaimed government watchdog” who reviews the budget in line item detail. Interviewees do not find the hearings to be useful, partly because of the timing. The maximum budget and taxing levels have to be adopted and published prior to the hearing, so the effect of input is limited at this point: “The law is to protect the public, but the timing is bad. We should hear from the public first.” On the other hand, the effectiveness of the hearing was evident. The city council did restore the community agency funds in their adopted 2001 budget, along with funding the firefighter salary increases. This was done by increasing the mill levy and deferring police car purchases.³⁶

36. City of Topeka, “Topeka Budget Approved for 2001,” *City Press Release*, 24 August 2000.

Topeka Summary

Lack of trust among city officials negatively affects the budget process in Topeka. Interviewees frequently used the words “animosity” and “dysfunctional” to describe the relationships between some city council members and between the council and mayor. “Some city council members do flat out not like the mayor and they will attempt to destroy the budget but this is for personal and political reasons.” Some members of the council “think their role in life is to oppose the mayor,” and they “micromanage” and review the budget in line item detail.

This relationship has apparently affected the perceived value of these participation mechanisms. The mayor’s focus groups lacked credibility with the city council, and vice versa, with the council-sponsored open forum. More traditional methods of receiving input are considered important, however, such as telephone calls and e-mail messages from constituents. In the prior year, a significant level of phone calls to the city council was said to have prevented substantial reductions in the code enforcement budget.

Some interviewees feel that the budget is too complex for the average citizen to be able to give valuable input, due to the variety of city functions and the multiple funds system, and that most people are only interested in their own issues: “The budget is a terrifying tool. It is too big and too unwieldy to have input.” People “do not want involvement unless some service is not there. They would prefer that we handle resource allocation.” An advisory board is used for allocation of social services funding, and the neighborhood organizations are highly involved in Community Development Block Grant funding decisions. However, these groups are not felt to be as interested in the rest of the budget: “There is no carryover into concern about the operations budget.”

The effect of citizen input from formal mechanisms has been mixed. An open forum apparently led to the development of a skateboard park, and the city council restored social services funding in the 2001 budget after a heavily attended public hearing, but no evidence was seen of the survey or focus groups affecting budget decisions. This may partly be due to timing. The forum and focus groups were held after major budget decisions were already made, and the public hearing must legally be held after determination of the maximum tax rate and budget level. In addition, the city council’s priorities are clearly to hold down the tax rate; this is based on their perception of citizen desires, but limits the potential for additional input to affect decisions.

The mechanisms used in Topeka have been designed for one-way comments from citizens, rather than two-way communication. In addition, the input received was said to relate primarily to specific service demands, rather than determining citizen willingness to pay or potential tradeoffs for additional services. The open forum and the survey were open to large numbers of participants; while the respondents to the survey may have been representative of the community, though, many of the complaints about the open forum were that it was not representative.

Other than the requisite public hearing, citizen budget participation has not been institutionalized in Topeka. Methods used in the past, such as focus groups and an open

forum, were not used in the 2001 budget process. Part of the difficulty is that the budget process itself appears to change each year, due to issues between the mayor and the council. This lack of trust between officials also makes it difficult for input mechanisms initiated by one to be considered credible to the other.

DISCUSSION

The first research question asks “Has citizen participation been effective in these cities?” According to the citizen participation literature, the following criteria should be met:

- Input is representative of the community;
- Opportunity is available for large numbers of citizens to participate;
- Input occurs early in the process;
- Sincere preference/willingness to pay is revealed;
- Participation includes two-way communication between public and city officials; and
- Input is considered in decisions.

Based on this definition, participation has not been effective in Wichita and Topeka. Table 1 summarizes the criteria that were met by each of the mechanisms used in these cities during this period. The citizen surveys were the only method that allowed for a representative sample of public opinion. The surveys also are beneficial in that they allow for large numbers to participate. This was also true of the public hearings, and the open forum held in Topeka, although we heard different stories about who was invited to participate there.

Participation needs to occur early in the budget process, when there is a greater opportunity for it to be considered by officials in their deliberations. The timing was poor in both cities, occurring either right before the proposed budget was finalized or after the city council had held budget work sessions. The literature has also pointed out the importance of ascertaining not only citizen desires related to service provision, but also their willingness to pay for those services, or their “sincere” preferences. The citizen survey and the budget simulation exercise in Wichita were useful for this purpose, but the other activities used were focused more on specific issues of high salience or else on determining a list of overall services priorities.

Effective participation includes two-way dialogue between city officials and citizens, rather than just one-way passage of information. Many interviewees commented on the difficulties of input due to the complexities of the budget. The simulation exercise in Wichita, which did allow for two-way communication, is one way to begin to break down this barrier. In fact, the greatest benefit noted by the respondents, including citizens, elected officials, and staff, has been the ability to educate citizens about public budgeting. Finally, we saw evidence that the input received affected budget decisions in four out of the nine methods used; this included some results of the citizen survey and

TABLE 1
Effectiveness of Participation Mechanisms

Participation Mechanism Used	Effectiveness Criteria Met
Wichita	
Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representative • Open to large number of participants • Sincere preference revelation • Input considered in decisions
Prioritization Exercise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None
District Advisory Boards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None
Simulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two-way communication • Nominally representative^a • Sincere preference revelation • Input considered in decisions
Public Hearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open to large number of participants
Topeka	
Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representative • Open to large number of participants
Focus Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None
Open Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open to large number of participants • Input considered in decisions
Public Hearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large number of participants • Input considered in decisions

^aAll DAB members were invited to the simulation, but turnout varied by district, with some districts having “perfect” attendance and others having only one or two members.

budget simulation in Wichita, and on one issue in both the open forum and public hearing in Topeka.

None of the mechanisms used in these two cities met all six of the criteria for effective participation. The survey in Wichita met four criteria, but it is not clear that it was done early in the budget process, and did not allow for two-way communication. The budget simulation exercise in Wichita met three criteria, but was conducted late in the budget preparation process, and was limited in the number of participants and not necessarily representative.

The second research question considered “What political and environmental factors might affect the value and effectiveness of participation?” Our study only considered two cases, and so is exploratory only; future research is needed to determine the generalizability to a larger number of cities. However, we found two consequential factors in these cities. First, relationships among city officials appear to be important. Wichita city council members uniformly describe agreement on the budget and have a high level of confidence in the staff, especially the city manager, who has long-term

tenure spanning many different city councils. In Topeka, elected officials distrust each other; city council budget deliberations occur at the line item detail level and are targeted to exposing waste and mismanagement. Thus, where the Wichita administration and city council have worked together to implement input mechanisms, attempts to gather input in Topeka have been viewed as suspect by either the mayor or city council. These two cities have different forms of government, but it is impossible based on the small sample to say whether the form itself has some effect on this situation.

Second, predetermined constraints affected decision making. Holding down the mill levy is a high priority among officials in both cities, as they believe this is what citizens want. Therefore, citizen demands for additional resources are unlikely to affect outcomes unless accompanied by a strong show of support by a large number of individuals. In this case, changes in other revenue sources or reduced spending in other areas are preferred to property tax increases.

Overall, both cities are still searching for an effective role for citizens in the budget process. In neither case do interviewees feel that a “best” solution has been found. While a number of different efforts have been made, none has yet stood the test of time and been institutionalized, with the exception of the mandated public hearing. However, these methods have been valued by participants and officials as an additional means of communicating spending preferences, building connections among residents, allowing greater opportunities for citizens to be heard, and educating citizens about resource needs and limitations. The educational benefits alone may be well worth the effort of providing these opportunities; budget information may affect an individual’s preferences,³⁷ and individuals with enhanced knowledge of government performance may be more willing to pay for services.³⁸

CONCLUSION

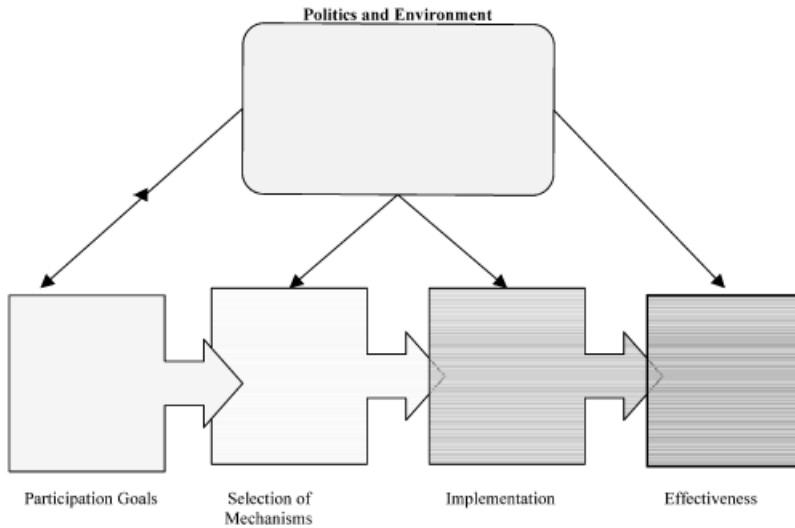
What lessons can be learned from the experiences in these cities? Many governments are struggling with how best to structure citizen participation mechanisms. As can be seen from these cases, finding appropriate mechanisms for citizen input into the budget process is clearly not an easy task. It takes time and effort on the part of officials and citizens, and needs to be carefully developed to make the information gathered as useful as possible. The six criteria addressed in this study can be used to guide city officials when deciding how to get input, as different mechanisms have varying strengths and weaknesses.

Some might argue that citizen surveys are sufficient by themselves in eliciting citizen input regarding budget issues. This method met more of the criteria for effective participation in Wichita than did any of the other methods used in either city. However,

37. Simonsen and Robbins.

38. Glaser and Hildreth, “Service Delivery Satisfaction and Willingness to Pay Taxes.”

FIGURE 1
Model of Citizen Participation



surveys do not allow for effective two-way communication. This is an important point, because interviewees in our study consider education to be a primary benefit of participation. Other mechanisms, such as budget simulation exercises with discussion between officials and citizens, are more useful for this purpose than is the standard citizen survey.

In addition, surveys will not automatically meet the effectiveness criteria attained with the Wichita survey. For example, we found no evidence that survey results were considered in decisions made in Topeka, and the survey was not designed in a way to elicit citizen willingness to pay for services. Officials need to be careful in how they handle the input they receive; if citizens do not feel that their opinions are valued, the results may be worse than if the public had not been contacted in the first place.

While all the mechanisms used in these cities were seen to have some value by the participants, the selection of the mechanism itself is not sufficient to achieve effective citizen participation. As seen in Figure 1, other issues were also found to be important here. First, the primary goal or goals for obtaining input should be articulated up front by the decision makers.³⁹ For example, citizen surveys appear to be the best method for obtaining representative responses and input from large numbers of citizens but do not involve two-way communication. The focus group and simulation approaches are

39. Judy B. Rosener, "Citizen Participation: Can We Measure Its Effectiveness?" *Public Administration Review* 38, no. 5 (September/October 1978): 457-463; Thomas; Kathlene and Martin; Simonsen and Robbins; and Crosby, Kelly, and Schaefer.

valuable for two-way communication and for revealing preferences, but are somewhat limited in the number of people that can participate and there are questions concerning representativeness. The original goals of participation were not always clear in these cases, but that may have been because we were primarily studying the use of mechanisms after the fact. Or, it may be due to the fact that they were not well articulated in each city, so different groups of participants implicitly expected different results. Goals might also include criteria that were not addressed here, such as building civic engagement or building political support. Effectiveness of participation must be measured against stated goals; unfortunately, the articulation of goals is seldom explicit.

The way in which participation mechanisms are implemented is also important in their eventual effectiveness. The most serious barrier to effectiveness found here was in the timing of the input. If received prior to development of the budget proposal, it might be given greater weight by city officials. Any of the methods employed by these cities could be done earlier to address this issue. This approach would have the added advantage of providing a clear reporting mechanism and an opportunity for two-way feedback in a timely manner. Both of these are identified as important aspects of participation in the literature and in the empirical evidence of these case studies.

Finally, political and environmental issues may also be important considerations in designing budget input methods. These factors may affect the goals of participation, the type of mechanisms selected, the manner in which they are implemented, and ultimately their effectiveness. For example, the political issues in Topeka make it much more difficult to find a method that all actors can accept, which limits the potential. Wichita has a built-in group of active citizens on district advisory boards that can be asked to directly participate in budget exercises, where other cities might have more difficulty in soliciting participants for this type of activity.

In summary, then, there are several factors that condition the effectiveness of citizen participation and the utility of the information to city decision makers. Instead of just encouraging cities to incorporate more and more mechanisms into the deliberation process, what we can discern from these cities is that there needs to be:

1. Articulation of the expectations and goals/results desired from participation;
2. Strategic selection of the mechanisms that will be employed and the degree to which they can gather input that is both representative and reveals sincere preferences;
3. Attention paid to the details of implementation, in particular the timing and structure of the information sharing and gathering processes; and
4. Careful consideration of the unique political and environmental factors that will affect the use of the information that is gathered and the perceived effectiveness of the process in aligning the preferences of citizens with the decisions made by their elected representatives.