

To [addressee],

On behalf of the citizens of Portland, the Neighbors West-Northwest Board implores Portland City Government to commit to comprehensive public involvement in the budget development process. The first phase of this year's budget process is nearly complete, yet the City has not solicited public input as it has in previous years. Excluding your constituents from this broad, far-reaching decision making process--one that ultimately affects every citizen in Portland--challenges trust in government and erodes the foundation of democracy.

In previous years, bureaus such as Portland Parks & Recreation have sought public involvement in their budget development through open houses, online surveys, time for public comment at meetings and more. This has not been the case this year. This silence coincides with City Council's decision to task the Office of Community and Civic Life with gathering public input on the budget process for all bureaus. We assume City Council intended to improve public involvement, but the exact opposite has occurred.

It is crucial for the two phases of the budget process to be open to public input. The first phase, when bureaus develop their own budget proposals, is easier to include the public, since the discussions center on bigger picture values and priorities. The second phase, when City Council conducts hearings on the Mayor's and bureaus' budget proposals, often stifles public comment. Opportunities to testify at these hearings can be limited, so people invest hours in testimony, unsure if they'll even be granted a few minutes to share. Unless there is a large group speaking to a particular issue, citizens' opinions and ideas often go unheard.

Why does this matter? There are serious consequences when public involvement is overlooked. For example, this year Parks & Recreation faces an enormous budget hole that could likely result in major cuts to service. Because there has been no opportunity for public input, the people who use Parks & Recreation services will see large changes they did not have a chance to comment on. We value the views of the Parks & Recreation Board, but the Parks Budget Advisory Committee (BAC) would benefit from a balanced range of voices. In addition to not having neighborhood representation on the BAC committee, this year's Parks BAC meetings did not allot time for public comment, nor were there any public open houses or online surveys; all are very concerning departures from previous years.

One of many solutions to this dearth in public involvement is to reinstate neighborhood coalition representatives on BACs. For many years coalition representatives collected and shared public input and educated their communities about the budget process. As caretakers of our neighborhoods, these representatives offered an opportunity to expand BAC outreach across the city; they cleared confusion about citywide budget goals, the meaning of add and cut packages and more. Their dismissal is a blow to government transparency and ultimately hurts public understanding and engagement. We have attached additional suggestions with the hope of improving the process for next year.

There is lasting value in engaging the public, particularly at a time when national faith in democracy is statistically low. A successful democracy depends on citizens feeling they have the means to educate themselves and speak up about the issues that matter to them. Portland City Government has so far failed to provide these opportunities throughout this year's budget process. We hope this letter will inspire a future approach inclusive of all Portlanders' voices.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR PHASE 1, DEVELOPMENT OF BUREAU BUDGET PROPOSALS:**

### **Representation**

- BAC members should attend open houses to hear public input firsthand
- BACs should include:
  - Members of minority groups, disadvantaged populations
  - Union representatives
  - Neighborhood coalition representatives

The 2019 Parks BAC is made up of;

- Parks Board, 15 members
- Community Organizations, 5 minority group members
- At-Large, 3 members
- Labor Representatives, 5 members
- Commissioner's Office, 3 members
- 17 Parks and City Staff in attendance

### **Public Input**

- There should be online and physical open houses for each Bureau:
  - Hold at least one open house when public input can influence the BAC process, perhaps in early January
  - Online materials should be available in different languages
  - The format for comment submission--both online and in-person--should offer clear choices with opportunities to write more. Fill-in-the-blank formats can deter participation
- Bureaus could provide email updates about the BAC process and open house schedules to their Friends and Partners lists throughout Phase 1
- Bureaus should provide their final budget submissions to BACs and the public, along with the Council hearing schedule and advice summarizing the most effective ways to comment
- Staff should be asked to propose Add packages

### **BAC meetings**

- Commissioners should be present at BAC meetings to:
  - Share priorities and answer questions
  - Understand motivations behind ultimate budget proposal

- Introductory BAC meetings and staff brainstorming about budget proposals could begin before the Mayor's guidance is available. BAC schedules are often compressed with the traditional timeline
- BACs should receive real budget numbers in appropriate granularity to provide meaningful input
- New BAC members should attend an introductory session offering bureau budget history, budget reading basics and an overview of the process

### **Meeting Logistics**

- Meeting agenda should allot at least 5 to 10 minutes to public comments
- Meeting date, time and location should be available on bureau website at least two weeks prior
- Email meeting information to Friends and Partners lists
- Draft meeting agendas should be available on bureau website at least one week prior
- Post other materials before meeting or the next day
- Staff should be available to answer questions during meetings and via email
- BAC facilitators should ensure everyone at the table is heard
- Each meeting should include an opportunity to offer feedback on improving future meetings
- Food and childcare, as well as language and ADA accommodations would be helpful

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR PHASE 2, MAYOR'S PROPOSED BUDGET & CITY COUNCIL HEARINGS:**

- The following should be shared online and via Friends and Partners email lists:
  - CBO recommendations
  - Mayor's proposed budget
  - Reminders about hearings schedule
  - Final approved city budget, calling attention to cuts and adds
- Consider holding a wrap-up BAC meeting in May to:
  - Discuss the results of the budget process
  - Discuss implementation and next steps
  - Gather feedback on the BAC process and suggestions for improvement