

April 25, 2019

Mayor Wheeler and Portland City Council
1221 SW 4th Ave.
Portland, OR 97204



Re: Public Involvement in Portland's budget process

Dear Mayor Wheeler and Commissioners,

The Neighbors West-Northwest Board is disappointed that public involvement has been significantly reduced in this year's budget process. Limiting community involvement in the budget development process undermines public trust and violates the City's stated goals.

In previous years, some bureaus did a good job of involving the public in developing their budget proposals, but most did not. Last year, City Council directed the Office of Community and Civic Life to take over public involvement in the budget process for all bureaus. We think Council intended to increase public involvement, but instead it has diminished.

The obvious approach to developing best practices for public involvement in the budget process would have been for Civic Life to review each bureau's practices and the city's BAC goals and roles¹, then compile a list of best practices and fill in any gaps. Civic Life could then work with each bureau to implement the best practices. But this hasn't happened, so we are attaching our list of best practices.

The public can most easily influence the development of bureau budget proposals, when priorities and budget options can be discussed and weighed. Later, change is harder to achieve -- opportunities to testify at Council budget events are limited or allocated only to "invited" speakers. Citizens can wait for hours, uncertain if they'll be able to testify for a few minutes. Unless there is a large group speaking to an issue individuals may not feel heard.

Unfortunately, development of this year's bureau proposals ended without any public involvement. Bureaus that formerly had good public involvement, such as Parks & Recreation, did nothing this year after that responsibility shifted to Civic Life. But Civic Life did not set up public input for any bureau's budget development phase, perhaps believing they only needed to advertise the April budget forums.

Why does this matter? This year, Parks faces an enormous budget gap that will result in large cuts to services. Yet there was no public involvement in developing its budget -- no open houses, no online surveys, no agenda time for public comment at Budget Advisory Committee (BAC) meetings. Unlike previous years, the Parks BAC was not allowed to make budget choices, they were presented with the budget proposal and asked only to comment on equity effects. A few public comments were allowed at the very end of the final Parks BAC meeting only after assertive individuals insisted, too late to affect choices. For the first time in many years, there were no neighborhood coalition representatives on the BAC, so there were no representatives to collect neighborhood input and bring residents information during the budget process. Huge cuts to the Parks budget have been recommended with virtually no public input. This was not a transparent or open process, and it ignored city public involvement goals.

¹ "About BACs". <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/cbo/article/430018>

This year, the city offered only one budget forum where public testimony was allowed. At the other forums, only invited speakers could speak, allowing Council to decide which voices to hear. At the Parks Budget Forum, Commissioner Fish asked for feedback on the “invited guest” format. Invited guests serve a valuable purpose, but public comment on the budget should never be limited to a single event. Instead of a half hour of city presentations, provide time for public comments.

We recommend including neighborhood coalition representatives in BACs for bureaus with high public interest such as PP&R, PBOT, and OCCL, because they can solicit neighborhood input and return with updates throughout the process, broadening outreach. They can reduce public confusion about the budget process and City budget goals, resulting in more informed public input to Council. In previous years’ Parks BAC meetings, coalition representatives have helped the committee by suggesting substantial budget cuts and explaining which facilities are more and less needed in their area. Moreover, coalition representatives will “increase community access to the bureau budget,” a city goal for BACs.² This involvement also builds citizen connections to the bureau, increasing the odds of voter support for measures such as a Parks Levy or Parks District to raise revenue to support Parks operations.

BACs need to have meaningful input on choices for bureau budgets. They should never be just a rubber stamp for a bureau budget.

Citizens are more likely to support budgets when they have played a role in shaping the values and priorities for spending. Involvement can also reduce controversy over budget proposals and decisions.

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 failed to provide those opportunities during this year’s bureau budget development process. We ask you to implement our recommended best practices, ask for BAC input on budget choices, and include neighborhood coalition representatives on Parks, PBOT, and OCCL BACs. Schedule more than one budget forum that allows public testimony. These steps would greatly improve the process next year and better align it with the City’s goals.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kristin Shorey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, stylized 'K' and 'S'.

Kristin Shorey
President, Neighbors West-Northwest Coalition

cc: Portland Parks and Recreation Director Adena Long, Portland City Auditor Mary Hull Caballero

² Ibid.

Best Practices for Phase 1, Development of bureau budget proposals:



BAC Members

- BACs should include:
 - Members of minority groups, disadvantaged populations
 - Labor representatives
 - BACs for Parks, PBOT, and OCCL should include neighborhood coalition representatives, who will commit to:
 - Gather coalition input on priorities, concerns, and questions
 - Share regular updates with coalition (at coalition meetings and via email)
 - Share open house schedules, including online open house information
 - Share answers provided by staff with the coalition
 - Share the hearing schedule and how to testify, most effective time to submit input to council.
- BACs should not be dominated by insiders (e.g. members of advisory committees)
- BAC members should attend open houses to hear public input firsthand if possible

Public Outreach and Involvement

- There should be online and physical open houses for each Bureau:
 - Hold at least one open house early enough so that public input can inform BAC recommendations, perhaps in early January.
 - 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.
- Bureaus should 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, they may have innovative ideas

BAC role

- Commissioners should try to be present at BAC meetings to:
 - Share their priorities and insights into Council views, and to answer questions
 - Understand the basis for BAC budget recommendations
 - Connect to community representatives
- BACs should be asked to provide meaningful input:
 - Shaping values and priorities
 - Meaningful input on tradeoffs and options

- Provide them budget numbers in appropriate granularity to provide meaningful input. Don't give them confusing spreadsheets that require them to understand changes with impact vs accounting changes.
- Not just a rubber stamp for a staff proposal

BAC schedules are often compressed with the traditional timeline that starts after the Mayor's budget guidance. Introductory BAC meetings and staff brainstorming about budget proposals could begin before the Mayor's guidance is available.

- New BAC members should be offered an introductory session offering bureau budget history, budget reading basics, an overview of the process, and an opportunity to ask lots of questions.

Meeting Logistics

- Meeting agenda should include 5 to 10 minutes for 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 two weeks prior
- Draft meeting agendas should be on bureau website at least one week prior
- Post other materials before meeting or the day after
- Staff should be available to answer questions during meetings and via email
- BAC facilitators should ensure everyone at the table shares their views (ask if they do not speak up)
- Each meeting should include an opportunity to offer feedback on the meeting
- Food and childcare, language and ADA accommodations would be helpful

Best Practices for Phase 2, Mayor's proposed budget and City Council hearings:

- The following should be shared online and via Friends and Partners email lists:
 - CBO recommendations when available
 - Mayor's proposed budget when available
 - Reminders about hearings schedule
 - Final approved city budget, calling attention to cuts and adds
- More than one hearing or budget forum open for public comments before the Mayor develops his proposed budget.
- Hold 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