

Ensuring Local Budget Choices Are Understood

Posted by [Mary Bunting](#) on September 27, 2012 at 03:41 PM EDT

Mary Bunting is being honored as a Champion of Change for her efforts in local innovation.

I became City Manager of Hampton, Virginia in January 2010 and began to prepare my first city operating budget as the decline in home values hit and the recession limited income growth of our residents. The city had an initial budgetary shortfall of \$19 million. Even though cuts were required, my past experience told me that – without a different approach – community consensus on what were acceptable cuts would be nearly impossible to achieve.



To many citizens, the budget is an overwhelming document that's hard to understand – and an easy target for criticism, especially when cuts are required. Yet, budget decisions drive nearly everything that happens in local government for the next year by setting the allocations of resources.

Traditionally, managers make such choices based on many logical factors, such as impact of programs and return on investment, but every program has a constituent group that values it. Once budgets are released, those stakeholders complain about the cuts. Often, council members – wishing to be responsive to resident feedback – then choose another set of cuts that affect a different group of people who have less time to respond to the impacts before the budget is eventually adopted. In the end, no one is happy and many will not understand the full effects until the cuts start to impact them on a daily basis. I believed there was a better way.

With help from a lot of people, we decided to engage our residents more proactively on the front end of the process – before staff recommendations were solidified and presented. By using an aggressive outreach program of large public gatherings—including adding instant polling technology that allowed every person to voice an opinion on every issue and immediately see the group polling results—small neighborhood and organizational chats, public comment drop-boxes, Internet chats, social media, and internet polling, we dramatically increased the number of people who actually participated in these crucial discussions.

By taking issues to residents, we worked to make the budget a much less intimidating issue. We worked to reduce dollar decisions to value choices that relate to other financial decisions that citizens make in their daily lives. For example, what services are “needs” vs. “wants”? Are you satisfied with the level of police protection, or should we do more? To save money, can we reduce hours at parks, libraries, and community centers, or should we consider closing some?

The budget isn't decided by polls, but greater outreach has given city leaders input to help us shape three years of extremely challenging budgets. Moreover, technology has enabled us to reach more people and engage them in their local government. And each year, more people have joined in the discussion, with much of the growth coming from busy working families who are able to contribute their views online.

Because of this extensive outreach and input, budget proposals have been adopted with few changes. Instead of pushback, stakeholders and residents have largely embraced the decisions because they have seen a correlation in the broader community input and the decisions made. Even in the face of difficult choice, Hampton's citizenry remains satisfied with our local services. Ninety-four percent of residents are satisfied with the level of information available on city services and 93% are satisfied with both the overall work performance and the courtesy of city employees. I believe citizens are satisfied because residents play a role in shaping our decisions. Residents contribute ideas, feel more involved in government, and thus understand the difficult choices we face.

I am honored to have been selected as a White House Champion of Change, but the honor really belongs to all the Hampton residents and staff that came together to ensure local budget choices are understood by the larger community.

Mary Bunting is City Manager of Hampton, Virginia