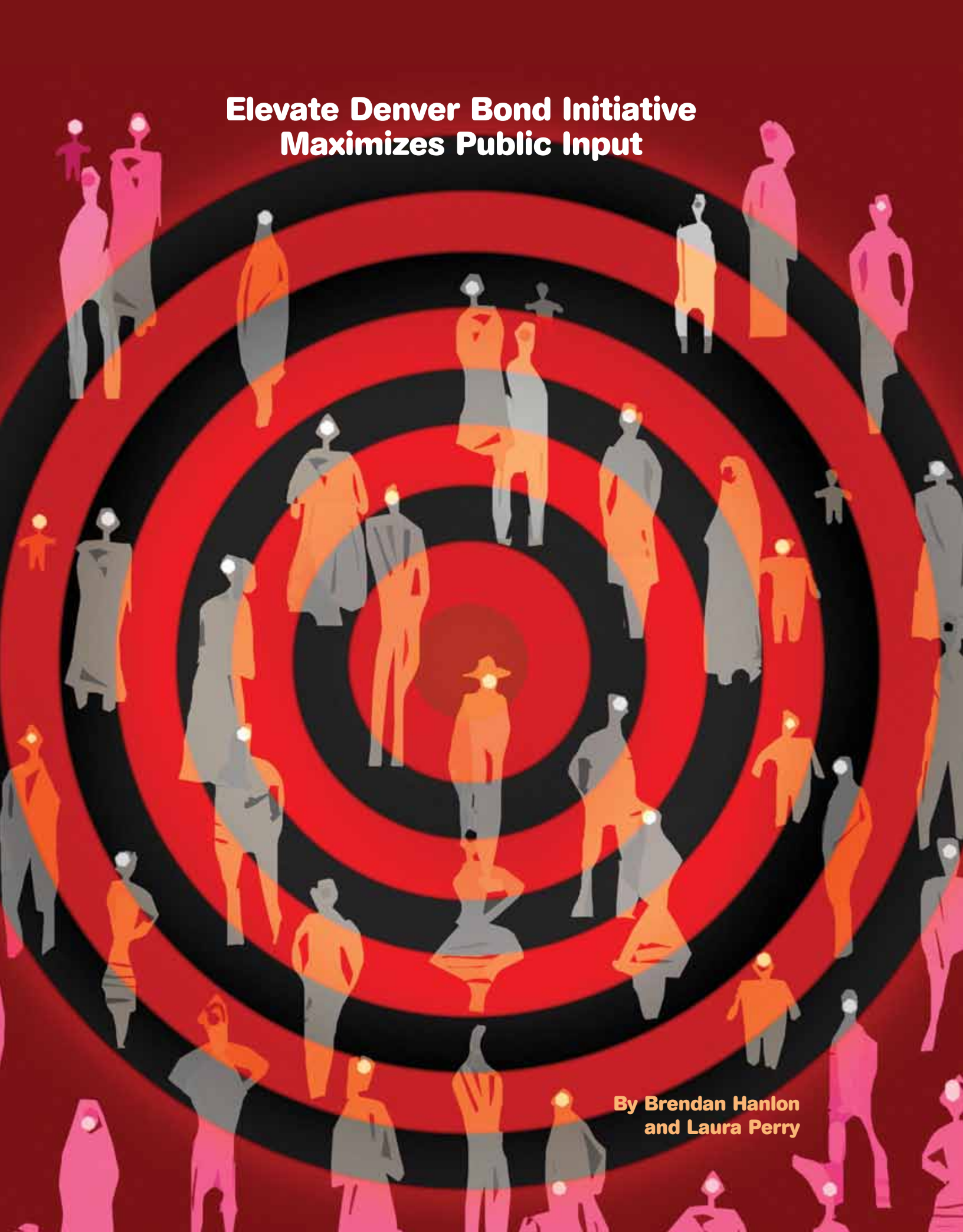


Elevate Denver Bond Initiative Maximizes Public Input



**By Brendan Hanlon
and Laura Perry**

In 2018, the County and City of Denver received the GFOA Award for Excellence for exemplary use of GFOA's Best Practice in Communicating Capital Improvement Strategies.

The Elevate Denver Bond program is a 10-year, \$937 million general obligation bond issue approved by voters in 2017 to provide critical citywide improvements to City and County of Denver, Colorado, infrastructure: roads and sidewalks, parks and playgrounds, libraries and museums. The bonds will pay for more than 500 public improvement projects that touch every corner of the city, benefiting all of Denver's 78 neighborhoods in seven ways: transportation and mobility, cultural facilities, Denver Health and Hospital Authority, libraries, public facilities, public safety, and parks and recreation. (See Exhibit 1.)

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

Denver strives to balance the ongoing rehabilitation of its existing assets with the need to meet the needs of its growing population — a situation faced by many other governments. Denver's existing assets have continued to age and age faster due to increased usage. To address this reality, the city engaged a third-party engineering firm to complete a comprehensive, two-year infrastructure study to determine the city's current deferred maintenance backlog and asset maintenance requirements. The study was built on several years of internal work by departmental staff to complete asset condition evaluations, inventories, and other studies to compile asset condition data.

After reviewing all sources of asset data available, the study determined that the city faced a deferred capital maintenance backlog of \$789 million. With a daunting capital maintenance backlog, the challenge immediately presented was balancing the need for funding to rehabilitate and/or replace existing assets with a growing desire for transformative projects to enhance residents' quality of life.

Public engagement was the center of Denver's general obligation bond process, so the second challenge in planning for the GO bond was developing a way for every stakeholder — from the public to city council to city agencies — to provide input on the capital projects at every step of the process

that should be included in the final bond package. The city began the GO bond process in 2016 by engaging the Denver community in a conversation about the enhancements they want in their neighborhoods and throughout the city. With six public meetings, a map-based online tool, city council engagement, and comment cards located at all libraries and recreation centers, the city received more than 3,000 investment ideas. To maximize input, the city held public meetings in locations around the city that were easily accessible. It also made translation and childcare services available. The public engagement and communications strategy for the GO bond was designed to ensure that every Denver resident was able to provide input.

In addition to the public input, the city also used its six-year capital plan (known as Elevate 2020), to develop the foundational project list that was evaluated during a stakeholder committee process. Projects listed in Elevate 2020 are

a culmination of ongoing input the public has contributed at community meetings and through e-mail, written comments, along with input from city agencies and the city council. During the stakeholder committee phase of the GO bond process, the city received an additional 1,000 project comments from the public in support of various projects, and each stakeholder committee meeting featured a public com-

ment period. As a result of this robust and inclusive outreach and evaluation process, the 2017 GO bond has been the most inclusive bond in Denver's history.

The third challenge was developing a strategy for narrowing the list to a balanced package of projects that the city could reasonably finance and execute. The GO bond team organized six stakeholder committees, comprising more than 60 diverse community leaders, to help the city review proposals and make final recommendations to the mayor. The committees held more than 50 meetings totaling 90 total hours over the course of several months. Each meeting was open to the public. Meeting agendas, minutes, and materials were posted on the city's GO bond website (denvergov.org/2017GObond) to transparently demonstrate every step of the process.

Committees used guiding principles such as project readiness, geographic diversity, and key equity indicators to help them rank the projects. Equity was a significant guiding princi-

Denver strives to balance the ongoing rehabilitation of its existing assets with the need to meet the needs of its growing population.

Exhibit I: What the Bonds Will Pay For



ple that was carried throughout the process to ensure the proposed bond package balanced social, economic, health, and geographic considerations. Several internal tools were used to evaluate investments, including Denver's Neighborhood Equity Index, which provided data to inform stakeholders about where city investment and resources are needed most to help those living in Denver's undeserved neighborhoods reach their full potential. Finding the right distribution of project locations and project types was also a significant challenge, which is why the guiding principles were so critical for the stakeholder committee process.

Denver's approach in planning for their general obligation bond was successful in breaking organizational silos and in

building public trust as it allowed for a true citywide evaluation of investment priorities from a bottom-up approach. The success of the project input process was a key contributor to the overwhelming support from voters.

DEVELOPING THE PROJECT LIST

To replicate Denver's inclusive process for gathering input from a variety of stakeholders and narrowing down to a feasible list of projects, the first step is to outline the phases of the major capital planning process. Denver's GO bond process involved three major steps over 18 months: developing the project list, evaluating it, and making recommendations to elected officials based on stakeholders' suggestions.

Within each of these steps, a work plan was developed which included a timeline, communications strategy, list of supporting materials, and execution approach. For example, each member of the stakeholder committee received a notebook that included all supporting process materials, including a one-page description of each project. Standard templates were developed to ensure that all participants in the process had access to the same level of information. City council members were regularly briefed throughout the process and were provided with content to include in newsletters and social media to ensure that their constituents were informed. The GO bond process team also maintained a city website where regular updates were provided, including project materials, maps, and updates.

One of the most notable attributes of Denver's GO bond process was that it was implemented solely by city staff, using minimal resources and no consultants. This approach succeeded because of the involvement of more than 100 staff citywide from various departments, who were able to provide subject matter expertise, evaluate project ideas, and share their passion for making Denver a world-class city. These employees staffed tables at community events, provided ideas and input, staffed stakeholder meetings, and more.

COMMUNICATING CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

This project made use of one of GFOA's best practices, *Communicating Capital Improvement Strategies*. In it, GFOA recommends that organizations develop a communications plan for public participation focused on explaining capital needs, options, and strategies, and for facilitating feedback in advance of any major capital program. The best practice stresses that capital programs gain from the support of the community both to ensure that capital projects will deliver

A major priority was developing a way for every stakeholder — from the public to city council to city agencies — to provide input on the capital projects at every step of the process that should be included in the final bond package.

expected and desired outcomes as well as to ensure there is adequate support for the investment. Tips include the following:

- Communications should engage citizens, public officials, officials from other jurisdictions, businesses, community groups, interest groups, staff, and regulatory agencies.
- To develop the messaging, organizations should take care to ensure that there is a clear and consistent message that delivers accurate information both on the costs of the project, duration, impact, and benefit. Building credibility is essential in communications.
- Organizations should communicate project benefits, costs, impacts, and schedules clearly and at a level of detail appropriate for the audience and communication method. The finance officer should present accurate information clearly and avoid using the communications to sell or unnecessarily advocate for the project.
- Organizations should consider strategies that use multiple methods of communication to reach different audiences (e.g., signage, press articles, website, social media, presentations to interest groups, regular communications at public meetings, and media).



View the full list of bond projects at gfoa.org/DenverBondProjects, as well as the projects in the first debt issuance, at gfoa.org/DenverFirstIssuanceProjects.

- When using communications methods that are more interactive and provide the opportunity for stakeholders to provide feedback, the organization needs to be receptive to ideas and address any significant issues. Staff should also be prepared and develop a process for evaluating public feedback.
- Organizations should maintain communications through the end of the project and report on results. Monitoring of progress and accurate reporting on the project will provide accountability and give credibility to the next project.

CONCLUSIONS

Periodically, the City and County of Denver authorizes GO bonds to restore, replace, and expand infrastructure and capital assets across the city — assets that are uniquely Denver and are points of pride for residents. Under the leadership of the mayor, Denver initiated a complex planning process to identify, evaluate, and recommend to voters a series of infrastructure investments that will help continue to make Denver a world-class city. The public engagement phase of the pro-

Denver's approach in planning for their general obligation bond was successful in breaking organizational silos and in building public trust as it allowed for a true citywide evaluation of investment priorities from a bottom-up approach.

cess, which was the most robust in the city's history, resulted in more 4,000 comments and ideas from the community. The foundational emphasis for the planning process was to be inclusive, equitable, and designate up to half of the investment for transportation and mobility improvements.

This planning process was a turning point for addressing deferred capital maintenance and population growth by repairing existing assets and constructing new ones. Ultimately, the city's process resulted in the overwhelming approval of a \$937 million bond package by Denver voters in

November 2017. The bond package includes over 460 projects, with more than half focused on fixing and repairing existing infrastructure and the remainder dedicated to upgrades and new infrastructure across the city. ■

BRENDAN HANLON is the Chief Financial Officer for the City and County of Denver. **LAURA PERRY** is the Capital Planning and Programming Director for the City and County of Denver, Department of Finance.

