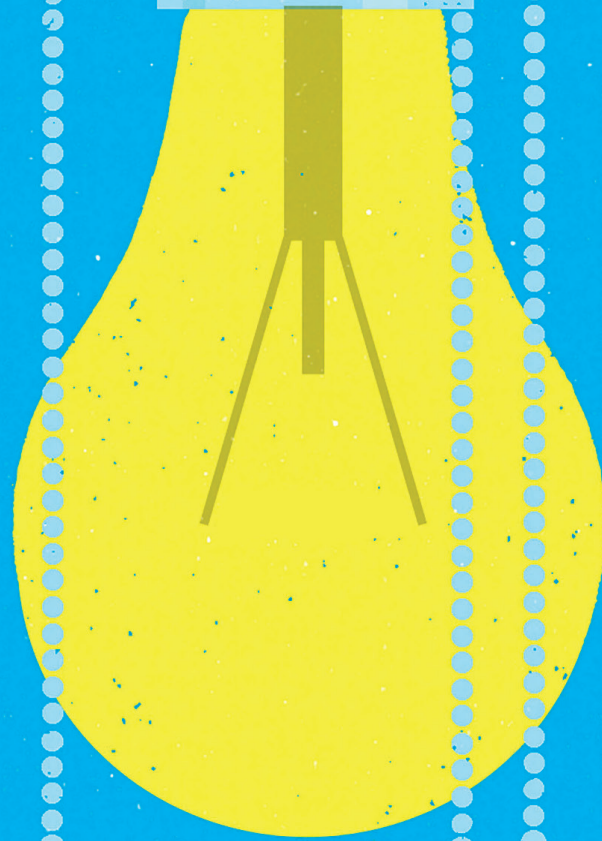




BY ELIZABETH I. ACKLEY

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Infusing Public Deliberation
into the Budgeting Process

We are living through an unprecedented impasse in the United States, where participation in the democratic process has recently reached an historic high. At the same time, Americans are also reporting more disillusionment over their role in the democratic process than ever before. Short-term solutions aren't likely to alter widespread public perceptions about the role of citizen engagement in local and national governance, but we should think of this remarkable time in history as an opportunity to educate and guide the path forward.

This shift we've seen in public sentiment is multifaceted—and far from surprising. Traditional strategies for engaging the public in local and national decision-making processes have lacked the critical ingredients needed to demonstrate value and meaning for citizen participants: transparency of process, sufficient background information to form an educated opinion, and a genuine role in decision-making. Anyone who has engaged in a public hearing, focus group, or information-gathering session at the local government level has likely left wondering if their input was listened to, valued, or in any way affected the final decision.

Public disillusionment is partly caused by the systems and processes used to engage the public, which means that local governments need to collaborate with their citizens in more innovative ways. In particular, planners and finance officers may be uniquely positioned to create a more inclusive and meaningful democratic process. Whereas a comprehensive plan serves as a community's guiding roadmap, grounded in residents' values and priorities, the budget offers

an opportunity for government leaders to actualize citizens' values by monetizing the community's priorities. If local governments can allow space in the budgeting process, shifting away from economic efficiency and return-on-investment strategies entirely, authentic community engagement has the potential to help align the priorities of the public (as outlined in a comprehensive plan) and the financial roadmap that funds it.

Establishing precedent

Citizen engagement in the budgeting process has been evolving worldwide since its inception in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in the early 1990s. Innovative forms of public engagement within the budgeting process has succeeded in utilizing citizens in:

1. Convening a diverse and representative group of citizens.
2. Providing the background information citizens need to make informed decisions.
3. Creating debate and dialogue among citizens and government staff.
4. Implementing final decisions made by citizens.

This last tenant, inarguably the most challenging for local governments to fulfill, is fundamental to restoring trust among citizens in the democratic process. GFOA's *Foundations for Thriving Communities* presents case studies of innovative participatory budgeting techniques that have succeeded in re-engaging citizens in meaningful ways through a variety of financial planning processes. This article introduces the process of public deliberation as an additional tool financial planners and budget officers can use to create authentic community engagement. It also presents a case study outlining the role of public deliberation in re-envisioning U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funding allocations in the City of Roanoke, Virginia.

Reducing challenges and maximizing benefits

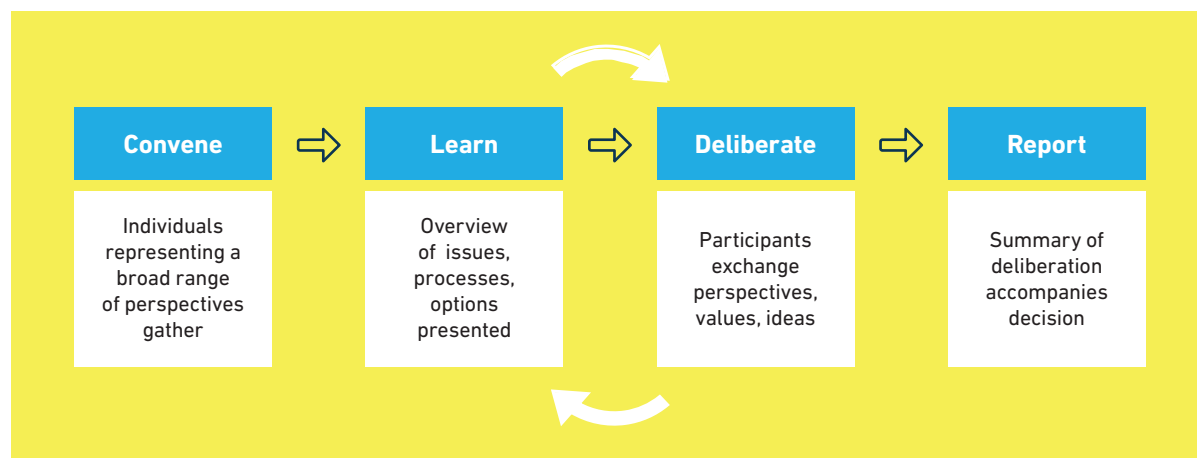
Like traditional citizen-focused budgeting practices, public deliberation is grounded in a four-step process. After convening a small, representative sample of the public (for instance, 20 to 25 people), participants engage in a series of educational and reflective conversations led by a neutral facilitator and supported by content experts (including government officials, public health experts, finance officers, and individuals with relevant lived experiences), guiding citizen participants to make a decision that can be acted on immediately. As a final step, a summary of the deliberation processes and decisions made is generated and shared with the public. (See Exhibit 1.)

Public deliberation encourages critical aspects of authentic community engagement (like creating an engaging experience and providing credible facts and information to encourage productive and open dialogue) while also overcoming a number of significant shortfalls of public hearings and focus groups (such as emotion-driven or reactionary decision-making, dominating personalities, a lack of clarity, or public input as a “box checking” exercise with inconsequential outcomes). The process of learning and deliberating sets the stage for innovative decision-making that is grounded in evidence. Moving from small-group (three to four people) to large-group discussion invites criticism, which is an inherent component of deliberation. We want to decrease the likelihood of “groupthink” by inviting participants to consider multiple viewpoints before generating a consensus and by encouraging

participants to move beyond their personal opinions and attitudes. This is done by fostering perspectives that are grounded in shared values and beliefs that represent the broader community more holistically. Moreover, positioning city government officials and staff members as panelists or content experts (rather than conversation facilitators) subverts the hierarchical influence inherent to public hearing and focus groups. This encourages residents to share their viewpoints more openly, which keeps leaders in tune with community values and beliefs.

Despite the many benefits of public deliberation as a community engagement tool, the process is considerably more labor-intensive than traditional approaches to gathering public input. Public deliberation requires organizers to develop meaningful facilitation materials with a neutral facilitator. Thought needs to go into who will be recruited as content experts, and those experts will need instruction on how to develop educational materials that are meaningful, bias-free, and easily understood by citizens with varying levels of education and numeric literacy. Local leaders who participate as content experts or small-group facilitators must be trained to allow the deliberative process to play out without intervening, and they must be willing to implement the group's final decision. Lastly, given the duration of typical public deliberation sessions, which last one to two full days, local governments must consider ways to nurture public engagement by reimbursing participants for their time and removing barriers to participation (for example, providing transportation, meals, and childcare).

EXHIBIT 1: THE PROCESS OF PUBLIC DELIBERATION



SOURCE: Kristen L. Carmen, et al., “Effectiveness of Public Deliberation Methods for Gathering Input on Issues in Healthcare: Results from a Randomized Trial,” *Social Science & Medicine*, 2015.

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Case Study: Positioning “Status Quo” Criteria in HUD Allocations

To promote equity across city neighborhoods, Roanoke designates 65.4 percent of annual entitlement funds from HUD to a single neighborhood, designated as the city’s target area, for five years. The intent is to fund projects related to housing development and rehabilitation, and new infrastructure and economic development, and to sustain public services such as mental health and food services—while encouraging concurrent investment by private partners. The planning department has traditionally used need and opportunity metrics to establish the city’s target areas, but the selection criteria wasn’t calibrated against the community’s values and priorities. The city decided to use public deliberation as a way to review and revise the HUD allocation decision-making criteria, letting residents make a very expensive decision—where to allocate roughly \$10 million over the next five years.

As part of Roanoke’s engagement in the *Build Healthy Communities for Children and Families* cohort initiative (led by ChangeLab Solutions), the city’s Invest Health team¹—made up of representatives from city government, community development finance, higher education, and the public-health sector—received training on new ways to encourage authentic citizen engagement in decision-making processes. Public deliberation experts from the New York Academy of Medicine (NYAM) guided Roanoke’s team through each phase of public deliberation.

In reviewing and revising the city’s HUD Target Area criteria, the city used public deliberation to determine how HUD allocation decisions should be made—specifically, what criteria should be used and prioritized to select neighborhoods for consideration. Once identified, criteria were used to determine which neighborhoods should be eligible for consideration as the next Target Area.

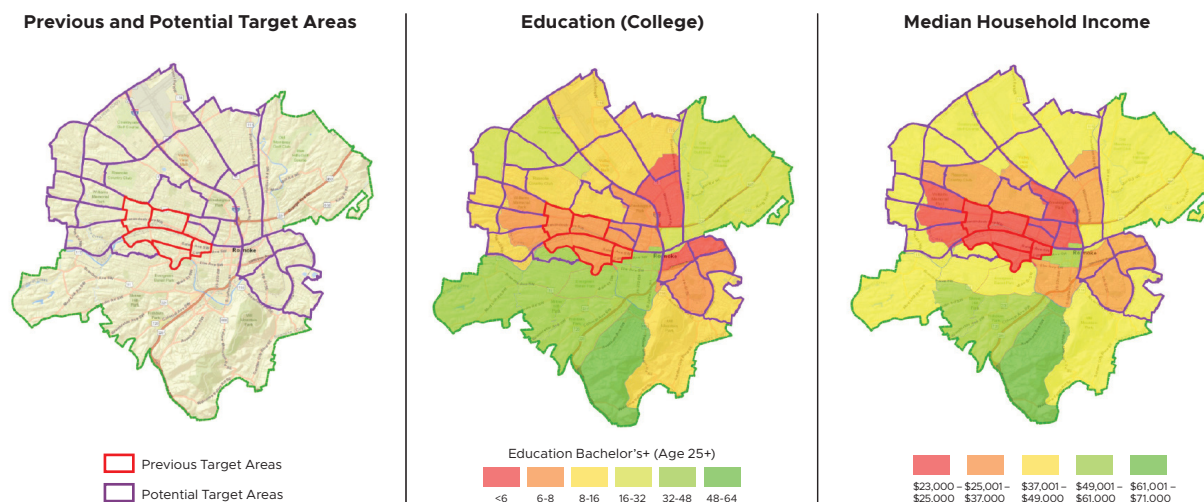


Roanoke, Virginia used public deliberation to determine what criteria should be used to select the neighborhood to receive roughly \$10 million in HUD annual entitlement funds over a five year period.

Step 1: Convene

Information sessions with resident participants—who were recruited during community engagement sessions for Roanoke’s 2040 Comprehensive Plan—were held in each neighborhood library branch. The sessions were also advertised across all major news outlets and on social media. These residents provided contact information and completed a brief demographic survey, developed to ensure that the participants represented the diversity of Roanoke’s population. The participants responded to prompts about age, sex, race, ethnicity, education level, and neighborhood of residence. Of 42 residents, 23 were selected to participate in the

¹ Invest Health is an initiative of Reinvestment Fund and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The program works with mid-sized cities to reduce health inequities through innovative, citizen-guided investment strategies and infrastructure projects. To learn more about Invest Health, visit investhealth.org.

EXHIBIT 2: GIS MAPS ILLUSTRATING NEIGHBORHOOD BOUNDARIES AND METRICS

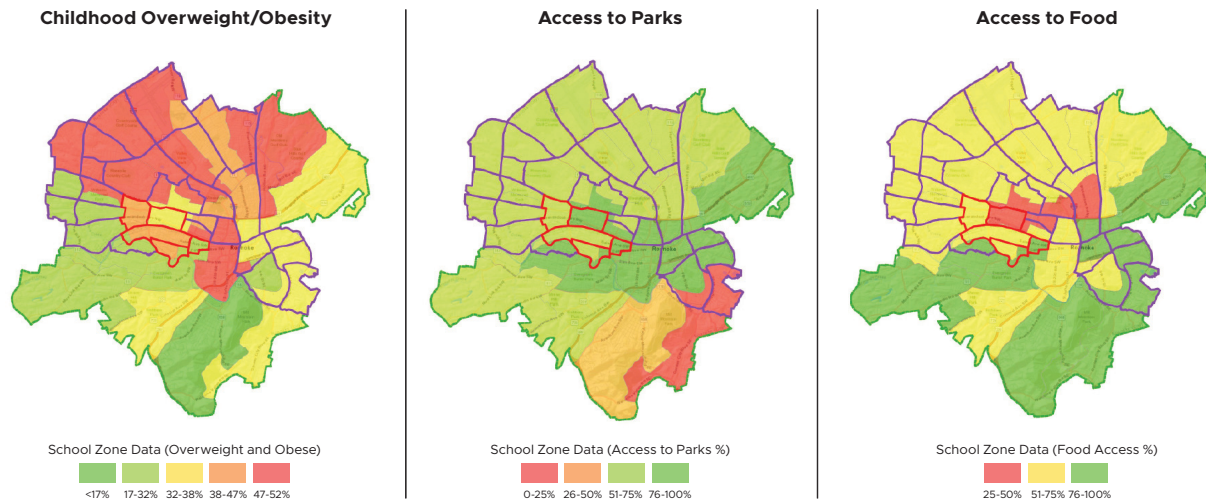
day-long deliberation session. Meals, transportation vouchers, childcare, and payment were provided for the full day of engagement (\$100 for 8.5 hours), which occurred on a Saturday at a city public library. NYAM's expert team ran the deliberation session, which opened with facilitator and participant introductions over breakfast and an outline of the proceedings and objectives.

Steps 2 and 3: Learn and deliberate

Session 1 In the first round of learning and deliberation, members of the city planning team introduced participants to the purpose of HUD funds—what they are and how they can be allocated—and the city's use of HUD funds in neighborhood Target Areas, including how those neighborhoods were traditionally selected based on metrics of need and opportunity. Panelists also included residents of two previous HUD target neighborhoods, who described the benefits and drawbacks of living in a neighborhood selected for HUD funding. Participants then engaged in a small-group activity to discuss neighborhood factors seen as important in determining HUD eligibility. They identified poverty, blight, walkability and historical significance as priority criteria and then applied these criteria to a shortlist of 25 potential neighborhoods eligible for Target Area designation.

Session 2 Returning to large-group discussion, the second round of learning and deliberation began with an educational session that positioned social and environmental determinants of health as an introduction to metrics of neighborhood-level vitality and need. Steven Woolf, director of the Center for Society and Health at Virginia Commonwealth University, served as content expert for this session and described the near-15-year gap in life expectancy experienced by residents across Roanoke's diverse city neighborhoods. Participants learned how neighborhood living conditions affect their health and life expectancy, and Woolf connected the dots between neighborhood-level demographic indicators and the social and environmental factors that influence them. The discussion was a novel learning experience that also provided an element of continuity with Roanoke's soon-to-be-adopted 2040 Comprehensive Plan, which included health and equity in each thematic priority area.

Session 3 The third deliberative session guided participants through a series of images representing innovative metrics of neighborhood-level opportunity and need, including residents' perceptions of access to resources that support healthy living, derived from the Roanoke Valley Community Healthy Living Index. The index is an annual health surveillance system conducted by the Center for Community Health Innovation at Roanoke



College to capture perceptions of neighborhood vitality across the city. Using visual storytelling, the presenter used prevalence maps created in GIS to demonstrate differences in metrics across neighborhoods. The maps illustrated neighborhood boundaries, previous and potential target areas, traditional metrics used by the city to determine Target Areas (such as median income, vacancy, and education level), and innovative metrics reflecting social and environmental determinants of health, including life expectancy, childhood obesity, grade-level reading, resident perceptions of access to food, parks and greenspace, and perceived neighborhood safety. [See Exhibit 2.] In large-group discussions after the presentation, participants shared ideas about the relative importance of each new data point as a criterion for Target Area eligibility.

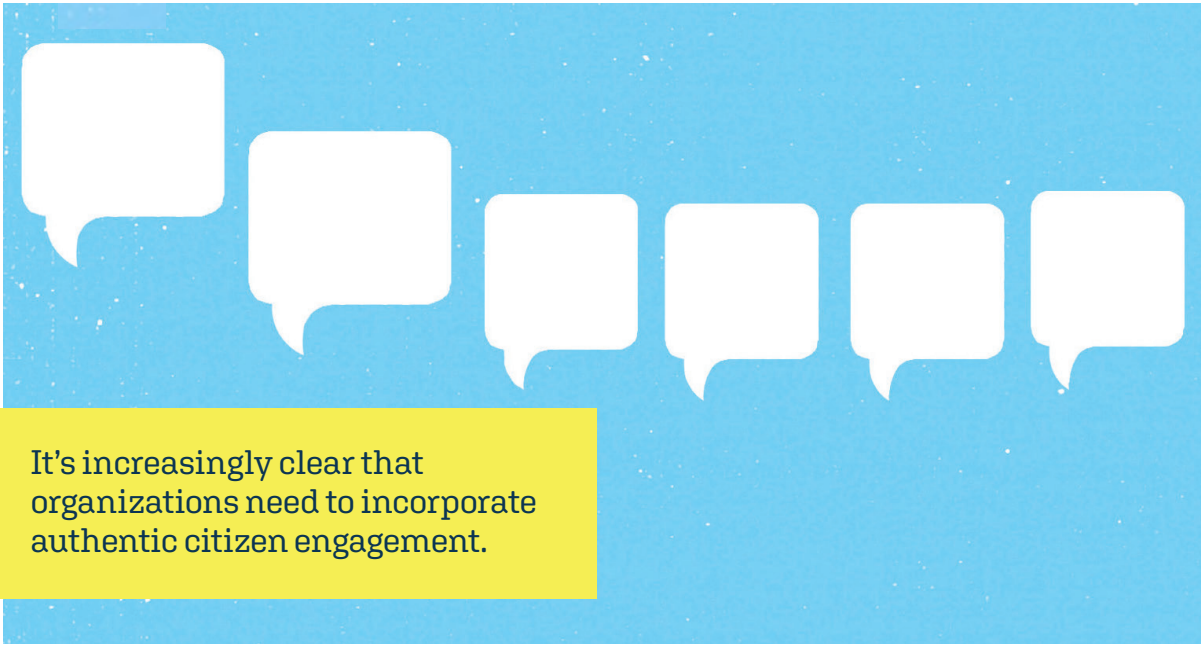
Session 4

Small groups determined if any of the new data should be included in the decision-making matrix for HUD eligibility and ranked the new criteria in order of perceived importance. Throughout this discussion, facilitators looked at how and why criteria were weighted for decision-making, guiding groups to develop consensus across their ranking to prioritize beliefs and values over attitudes and opinions. Participants then applied their new weighted criteria to neighborhoods that were eligible for consideration to determine three neighborhoods that should receive the city government's highest priority for Target Area selection.

Step 4: Report

At the end of the meeting, the facilitators from NYAM summarized the day's activities, including those pertaining to the primary outcomes. They determined that public deliberation had shifted the perceived value of the metrics used to identify neighborhoods, with metrics of neighborhood need being weighted more heavily after learning and deliberation. Poverty, blight, walkability, and historical significance were perceived as criteria before the deliberation. At the end of the meeting, participants had identified education level, perceptions of safety, poverty level, and housing affordability. This shift showed that participants were willing to consider evidence and community values in their decision-making. Applying the new criteria also changed the shortlist of eligible neighborhoods.

After deliberation, participants indicated that they believed overwhelmingly that public deliberation should be used in government decision-making (98 percent agreed or strongly agreed) and that they would participate in similar experiences in the future (100 percent), saying they felt "their voice was heard." Nearly half of all participants reported that the information presented was entirely novel (48 percent), demonstrating the value of the educational component. Two participants commented on the need to streamline activities, saying the time commitment for both organizers and participants was too great.



It's increasingly clear that organizations need to incorporate authentic citizen engagement.

Summary

As local governments seek to both restore public perceptions of their role in the democratic process and respond to increasing public pressure to prioritize equity in decision-making, it's increasingly clear that organizations need to incorporate authentic citizen engagement. Armed with the tools needed to engage citizens authentically, planners and finance officers may be uniquely positioned to lead a shift toward a more inclusive and meaningful democratic process, given their ability to “monetize” community values.

When viewed against GFOA's *Foundations for Thriving Communities*, public deliberation offers opportunities for quick wins related to multiple pillars of the Financial Foundations Framework.

Participant perspectives from Roanoke's case study suggest that public deliberation is a promising tool for building trust in local government decision-making because it creates opportunities for residents to make informed, values-based decisions that local governments can put into action. In addition, residents and employees from community anchor institutions can act as content experts, which both generates opportunities for relationship-building and demonstrates trust in the community.

The heavy reliance on evidence in the deliberation process presents opportunities for local governments to learn from and enhance their capacity through engagement with community anchor institutions. In the case study presented, innovative datasets from the Center for Community Health Innovation at

Roanoke College and the Center for Society and Health at Virginia Commonwealth University allowed a deep dive at the neighborhood level that typical government databases simply wouldn't allow. In communities across the country, data-sharing capacity could be enhanced by working with a diverse array of nonprofit partners, and (as a result of the Affordable Care Act mandate to conduct community health assessments) nonprofit hospital systems and health departments.

Despite these strengths, the deliberative process in Roanoke was limited by the inability of content experts to adequately portray neighborhood opportunities (for example, potential private investment) during learning sessions. Opportunities for private investment within neighborhoods that were eligible for consideration could not be discussed with citizen participants, like they are in closed-door sessions among collaborating organizations in local government (such as economic development, planning, and management). This may have weighed heavily on the shift in participant perspectives toward HUD allocation criteria in the Roanoke case study. As such, when developing opportunities for public deliberation, facilitators need to consider data availability representing each side of the decision-making process to put participants in the best position possible for making a decision that the government can act on. ■

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