



CREATIVE SOLUTION TO A COMMON CHALLENGE

# East Bay Municipal Utility District

## *Budget-in-Brief Initiative*

BY ISABELLA ROMANO



### About the East Bay Municipal Utility District

East Bay Municipal Utility District provides high-quality drinking water for 1.4 million customers in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, both in California. The district's award-winning wastewater treatment protects San Francisco Bay and serves 685,000 customers. The organization's mission is to manage the natural resources with which the district is entrusted; to provide reliable, high-quality water and wastewater services at fair and reasonable rates for the people of the East Bay; and to preserve and protect the environment for future generations.

**L**ike many other public agencies, the East Bay Municipal Utility District (East Bay MUD) is experiencing increasing pressure for financial data transparency. Although the biennial budget document presents an extensive amount of budgetary and financial data, non-financial readers can find it difficult to understand rate increases. Field staff also indicated that they are often approached by members of the public who have questions about the budget and billing rates, but they find themselves unable to provide informative answers. To address this situation, budget staff designed and developed a biennial budget summary in brochure format—known as the Budget-in-Brief—to promote transparency, better inform the public, and draw direct connections between the district's charges and the services it provides.

### GETTING STARTED

Jeanne Chase, East Bay MUD manager of budget, and David Mercado, the district's principal management analyst, were working on a data visualization effort when a consultant recommended that East Bay MUD should develop a two-page summary of its annual budget. Chase and Mercado agreed and began working on the district's first Budget-in-Brief as part of the fiscal 2020 to 2021 budget process.

"We thought that in addition to being able to communicate information about our budget in a concise manner, it would also be a good opportunity to offer some background information about the district," Mercado said. "Most people think you turn on the tap, you get water, and that's the end of it. But there's a lot more to it."

Staff looked at examples from other governmental bodies for inspiration and guidance and found that cities were more likely to publish a budget-in-brief than utility districts. "They range from a couple of pages to something much longer," Mercado said. "But the general idea was that it should have visuals; it should not have a lot of text; it should be something easy to read."



Chase and Mercado created a rough draft for Michael Bergstrom, the district's senior graphic designer, who turned the rough concept into a final product.

"This whole budget-in-brief concept was new to me," said Bergstrom. "It was interesting to see what other agencies are doing and where it was most effective."

### HIGHLIGHTING THE UTILITY'S WORK

At the same time, Water Distribution Crew Foreman Deelorean Johnson pointed out that work crews are often approached by customers who have questions about rates, but they didn't have any information to offer. Johnson and Chase worked together to develop roadshows and set up front-line workers with Budget-in-Brief pamphlets for these situations.

"The Budget-in-Brief has been a great help out in the field," Johnson said, adding that customers often come out while he is onsite and ask about their charges. "They just know that it's part of the financial package they have to pay to get water from the district. Having that booklet available and being able to open it up and show where all of their dollars go has been a great help."

Chase agreed that the pamphlet helps highlight East Bay MUD's work. "In the Bay Area, our customers are very knowledgeable and engaged," she said. "We make a concerted effort to explain what our services cost. For example, most people don't realize that we run a fish hatchery or that we have 57,000 acres of watershed land, which is about 2.5 times the size of San Francisco. We want people to understand that. We want people to understand what they pay for."

In addition, work crews are available for maintenance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. "If there's a leak, they're there," Chase said. "It costs money to have that level of availability. We want customers to understand this."

Mercado added that the visibility of the district is affected by its status as a utility, rather than a general government. "When you live in a city, I think you are a little more in tune with who your representatives are. In general, it probably gets more coverage than our utility does."

In the future, the district hopes to translate the Budget-in-Brief document into two of the main languages spoken in the service area and to explore new avenues for distribution.

### ADVICE FROM THE DISTRICT

The staff at East Bay MUD had some advice for other jurisdictions that want to create a budget-in-brief: The hard work of boiling down a huge budget document to only its most crucial components was worth the effort. But keep it brief. "You have to be very selective about what information you're going to put in there," Mercado advises. "Most people probably don't read the 300-page budget document, so now if there is an interest—even if it's a slight interest—they are much more likely to open this budget-in-brief and read it."

Also, involving Bergstrom as the designer at an early stage was crucial, as this allowed him to shape the document into something that would be pleasant to look at and easy to follow.

And finally, "The document would be nothing if we didn't have people like Deelorean Johnson who embrace it. There's the bridge to the customer right there. You need to look at the entity as a whole and ask how you're going to get the end product into the hands of the people who want it," Chase said.

### GFOA BEST PRACTICE

East Bay MUD followed GFOA's *Making the Budget Document Easier to Understand* Best Practice in creating its Budget-in-Brief. In this Best Practice, GFOA recommends that governments incorporate guidelines to encourage more people to read the budget document and to help them understand it better. The guidelines GFOA provides concern organization, to lessen redundancy and provide a better flow of information; limiting of excessive details such as financial schedules, text, and supplemental data; design, making the budget document simple, easy to use, and attractive; consistency in presenting information; highlighting of major points; and the observation of formatting conventions.

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- Staff began the biennial budget process with the end goal of a Budget-in-Brief in mind.
- Budget staff created a rough draft of the document, including a graphic design specialist early on. They focused on using as few words as possible, incorporating vibrant graphics, and keeping the writing at a 10th grade reading level.
- The designer created a brochure on legal-size paper that was tri-folded to form a document that was easy to carry in the field.
- Budget staff held presentations with field staff to help them become familiar with the brochure. For example, budget staff worked with a water distribution operator to build a strong network with public-facing employees.
- Field staff started carrying the brochures in their work vehicles and distributing them to the public when approached by customers.
- Other channels of distribution include outreach events and display at public watershed locations.



View the Budget-in-Brief brochure: [gfoa.org/EBMUD-budget-in-brief](https://gfoa.org/EBMUD-budget-in-brief)