



EXCEPTIONALLY WELL-IMPLEMENTED BEST PRACTICE:  
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE BUDGET PROCESS

# Mecklenburg County, North Carolina

## *Budget Public Engagement Initiative*

BY ALEXIE SCHWARZ



### About Mecklenburg County

Mecklenburg County is home to 1,110,356 people, making it the second-largest county in North Carolina. The Mecklenburg Office of Management and Budget also received the GFOA Award for Excellence in 2018 for its Budget Monitoring Reports.

**M**ecklenburg County, North Carolina, started its Budget Public Engagement Initiative in 2019 to encourage public participation in the annual budget process while also increasing fiscal transparency and accessibility.

Seeing a need to improve the community's engagement with the decisions being made about the county budget, the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners asked the county's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to develop a strategy. The OMB went on to develop a robust and sustainable program that would provide access to residents who wanted to be involved with the county's budget process. The resulting Budget Public Engagement Initiative gives residents transparent access to county budget information and a say in budget priorities.

### SETTING GOALS AND BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER

When the OMB started gathering information about public participation in mid-2019, it had five goals in mind:

- **Inform:** Provide residents with the information and tools they would need to understand the budget process.
- **Consult:** Gather public feedback on decisions and alternatives.
- **Involve:** Get residents directly involved via workshops and random, representative polling.
- **Collaborate:** Include residents in a partnership where they were considered equals in important budget decisions.
- **Empower:** Put the final decision-making power in the hands of residents.

In line with GFOA's Best Practice on *Public Engagement in the Budget Process*, the county made use of technology, social media, community partners, and local news media outlets to ensure broad



reach and to maximize participation. Town Hall meetings and virtual Facebook Live events were also employed to answer questions, gather feedback, and address concerns from residents who were interested in the budget process. And although state statute only requires one budget public hearing each year, Mecklenburg County authorized an additional public hearing in fiscal 2020, before the budget was formulated, to reach a larger and more diverse group of residents.

Adrian Cox, the county's acting management and budget director, emphasized that the county wanted to make sure it was targeting the right audience. To that end, it distributed a budget priority survey (in both English and Spanish) to help gauge public priorities and promoted it via social media (Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook) and appearances on local television and radio media outlets.

The collaboration that took place at the public meetings was a big reason for the initiative's success, according to Cox. "The more you can bring people together to work through the challenging aspects of budgeting, the better results you'll get," he said, adding that other governments that might be working on improving public engagement should strongly consider including their public information department and leaders from both teams in public meetings. "It creates an environment where residents are not afraid to ask questions and can learn from a variety of voices."

### ONGOING EFFORTS

The Budget Public Engagement Initiative includes broad plans for community outreach in coming years, many aspects of which have already been implemented. These plans include a budget priority survey and a Balancing Act Budget Simulator, which were particularly important in gathering feedback for the fiscal 2021 operating budget. The county also held community budget workshops in early 2020 to educate residents about important budgeting terms and processes.

The Balancing Act Budget Simulator allows residents to adjust the county's budget according to their priorities through an online tool. They can either change the way money is spent or change the way money is brought in. Throughout the exercise, the deficit and surplus amounts are visible to the user, helping them understand how a budget is balanced. This simulation is



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ACTING MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET DIRECTOR



Above left: Residents can use the county's online Balancing Act Budget Simulator to create a budget that aligns with their priorities.

Above right: Acting Management and Budget Director Adrian Cox stands with team members Sam Sparger (left) and Brandon Juhais (right).

helpful for residents who want to know more about the budget process and have ideas about how public funds should be spent.

Using a resident budget priority survey, the county was able to gauge public opinion about how county funds are allocated. The results of this survey were made available online via an interactive dashboard where survey results can be sorted by respondent race/ethnicity, income, age group, or living situation. Viewers can also explore different responses.

Community budget workshops were another important part of disseminating information about the county's budget process. In these workshops, a county representative taught residents the basics about county government and the budget. They led budget prioritization exercises and took questions from the audience about terms, processes, and outcomes.

Cox recommends that governments considering a similar project make use of different modes of communication to provide information. "Leverage online platforms, host meetings, and go out into the communities that you wish to involve," he suggested.

### GFOA BEST PRACTICE

GFOA's *Budget Public Engagement Initiative* Best Practice recommends that governments encourage an effective and well-implemented public engagement budget process, enabling the public to work with their government to help make beneficial budget decisions. This includes deciding the purpose of public engagement, encouraging people to engage, providing the engagement medium, and providing opportunities for future engagement.

*Alexie Schwarz is a graduate student at the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University. She worked as a 2020 summer intern in GFOA's Research and Consulting Center.*