



With a metro area of 2.1 million people, Kansas City spans 319 square miles in four counties.



Kansas City Uses Data to Tell Its Budget Story and Engage Residents

BY DEBBIE CHIU

Kansas City, Missouri, uses online transparency tools to educate the public about the city's financial information and to get them involved in spending decisions. Using resident engagement initiatives, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) links budget data, performance data, and storytelling to explain what's behind these numbers.

To tell the city's story, OMB had a lot of dots to connect. Phase one of this journey started with long-term trend analysis of the city's annual financial report and an internal departmental strategic planning process focusing on structural change management. But these processes weren't connected; separate pieces from different departments and divisions were combined into the citywide business plan to "connect the dots." The city went from having parallel but distinct processes to interlocking all these components into one cohesive, streamlined plan.

BUDGET CYCLE. The budget's cycle of life starts with the priorities laid out by the city council. The cycle is a whole year, starting May 1, the beginning of the city's fiscal year. OMB starts off with a trends analysis, tying the council priorities with the citywide business plan, which is submitted to the mayor and council in early fall. That's when OMB starts involving residents to give feedback—one of two opportunities they have to give feedback on the business plan. When the council adopts the business plan, by November 1, OMB starts the work

that leads to the submitted budget, which is essentially a one-year snapshot of OMB's business plan. At that point, residents are involved again through public budget hearings, where OMB receives feedback that it presents to the council. The final step, then, is when the council adopts the final budget.

BUSINESS PLAN. The citywide business plan has three major components: the city strategic plan, which highlights the mission, vision, values, goals, objectives, and strategies; a financial strategic plan, which contains financial objectives; and a five-year planning model, which provides both the baseline and balanced scenarios needed to evaluate the city's financial and operational alternatives through the planning and budget process. The business plan is a four-year strategic plan, essentially mimicking the council terms.

PUBLIC EDUCATION. OMB educates the public via transparency initiatives and linkages to performance. The city has Twitter and Facebook accounts that it uses to engage residents, and these accounts become very active during budget season with live tweets and posts from events such as public budget hearings. OMB also likes to post a budget fact of the day, highlighting different departments' programs and funding throughout the year. The city also has a portal called Open Data KC, where information and data—essentially a snapshot



Things to Know about Kansas City, Missouri

Kansas City, Missouri, has a population of a little less than 500,000 and a metro area of 2.1 million people. The city covers 319 square miles in four counties.

Kansas City has 20 departments with more than 300 programs with 7,100 full-time-equivalent employees. It is the only municipality in the nation that doesn't have local control of its police department. The city council has 13 members, including the mayor. The city is divided into six council districts that are revised according to population at least every five years. The mayor and six city council members are elected at large, and the other six members are elected from within the districts they serve.

Kansas City is known as a City of Fountains because it has 200 fountains, second in the world after Rome. The city's football team was the 2019 Super Bowl champion—go Chiefs! Another claim to fame: Two seasons of the reality show “Queer Eye,” along with its predecessor, “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,” which ran from 2003 to 2007, were filmed in Kansas City.

of budget-related files—can be downloaded by anyone who is interested. This includes, for example, 311, performance data, and the city's monthly auction that lists towed vehicles that will be auctioned. All the reports that OMB presents to the mayor, the council, and the public are archived here. Quarterly analysis, budget documents, and the city's business plan are all made available for anybody who is interested in reading more about it (see Exhibit 1).

The Tools

OPEN BUDGET. Open Budget is an interactive tool that OMB uses to present the city's budget in a visual and interactive way. It allows users to create and share customized links, and to download budget data. Exhibit 2 shows the submitted budget and the adopted budget, as well as the actual budget from the previous year. The city's departments, mayor, city manager, and residents can see how much was originally submitted for the budget, how much was approved, and how much was spent.

REPORTING. The Office of Management and Budget and the Office of Performance Management, known as DataKC, present the business plan and reports on how the city is doing—if it is meeting its marks—and continually update the city's performance dashboards (see Exhibit 3).

NEXTDOOR. Nextdoor is a social networking site for neighborhoods. The city communications office and other departments use it to market and promote city events or release news because not everyone is on Facebook or Twitter. The idea is to use several platforms to reach as many residents as possible.

CITY WEBSITE. Submitted and budget documents, anything related to the business plan and quarterly analysis, and other reports provided to the mayor and council are posted on the city's website (kcmo.gov/budget).

The site also provides a link to Open Budget, Balancing Act, and capital improvement programs.

Engaging Residents

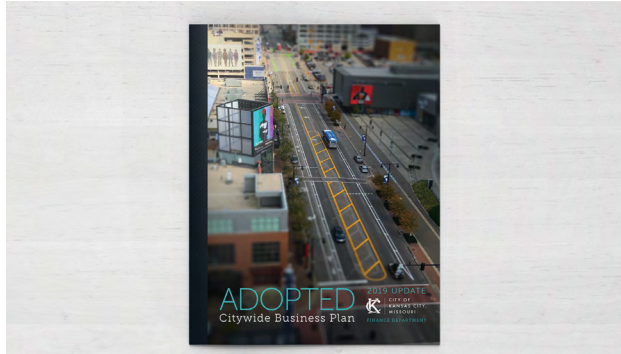
STORYTELLING. The city's visitor engagement efforts center on the idea of storytelling with budget data. This is one of many avenues the city uses to present financial data to the masses.

RESIDENT WORK SESSIONS. Rather than the traditional annual budget public hearings that are held in the spring, OMB conducts resident work sessions in the late summer and early fall to present the citywide business plan to the public. This provides opportunities for participants to discuss the city's proposed goals and objectives, to set long-term budget priorities, and to send direct messages to the city council. They also get to interact directly with staff and elected officials.

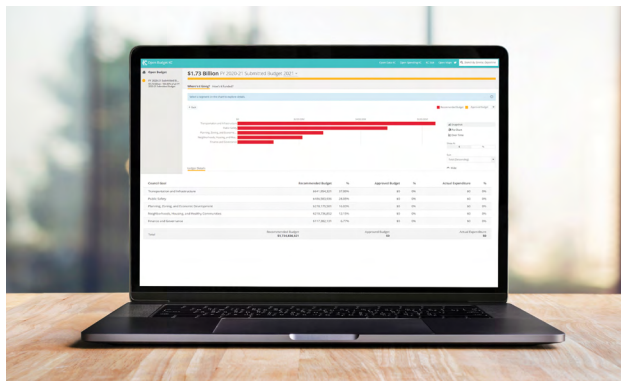
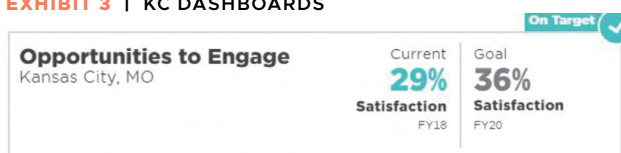
Because Kansas City covers 319 square miles, OMB divides the city into north, central, and south sections and locates meetings in all three areas to make sure there will be locations that meet everyone's needs. Meetings are also convened in the evening, on a weekday, and on weekends to give residents as many opportunities as possible to participate.

FOCUS GROUPS. OMB holds focus groups where it asks questions in a group setting to help engage residents and get feedback about how they would like the city to progress in the future. Sample questions include: What should be the city's major priorities during the next three to five years? What, if anything, should the city do better or differently? What are your dreams or visions for the next five to 10 years? (See Exhibit 4.)

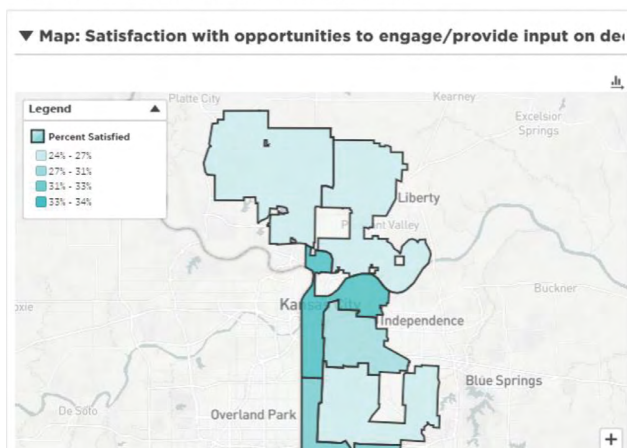
One of these sessions was focused on ranking seven of the city's goals. (See Exhibit 5.) The customer service and communication departments simplified the language, making it easier for residents to understand

EXHIBIT 1 | KANSAS CITY'S BUSINESS PLAN

The business plan can be found at kcmo.gov under the Office of Management and Budget.

EXHIBIT 2 | OPEN BUDGET**EXHIBIT 3 | KC DASHBOARDS**

Source: City of Kansas City, MO, Office of Performance Management, 2018

**EXHIBIT 4 | QUESTIONS ASKED IN RESIDENT WORK SESSIONS**

This question focuses on all of the city's goals.

Which issue is a higher priority for you?

City goal: Customer service and communication

To create an internal culture that focuses on the customer across all services provided by the city, supports essential internal and external communication, and fosters public engagement.

- ☐ Better and more consistent communication with staff and public
- ☐ Expanded resident engagement throughout the city
- ☐ Increased transparency
- ☐ Better internal and external customer service

EXHIBIT 5 | SCORING PRIORITIES—THE CITY'S PUBLIC SAFETY GOAL

Each person scores the following goals from 1 to 5, based on their own priorities.

Public Safety

- ☐ Reduced crime, particularly in young offenders
- ☐ Improved patient outcomes in the emergency response delivery system
- ☐ Improved diversity, succession planning, and retention in KCPD and KCFD
- ☐ More effective and efficient municipal court to better serve the community
- ☐ Decreased animal-related threats and increased animal welfare

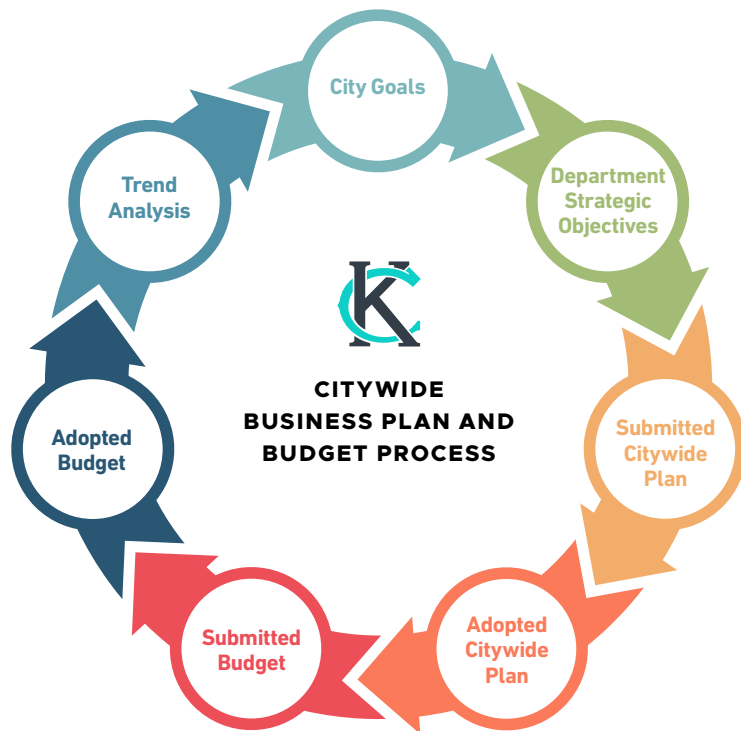


Strategic Priorities

The city council sets the overall policy for the city by adopting resolutions and ordinances, making appropriations and approving budgets for all departments, and conducting public hearings on city affairs. After an ordinance or resolution is passed or the budget is adopted, the city council continues to monitor the results of its actions through studies, surveys, and hearings.

The city council's six main strategic priorities are: neighborhood livability, healthy communities, governance, public infrastructure, economic development, and public safety. The city employs innovative strategies to:

- Effectively and efficiently provide customer-focused services.
- Improve public safety.
- Develop sustainable, healthy communities where all prosper. We lead by inspiring, collaborating, measuring progress, and celebrating success.



the strategies for each objective. In this exercise, individuals choose the higher-priority strategy within the objective, which then allows the city to see what's important to residents.

The second part of this exercise is more of a conversation. Each person presents their rankings, which leads to a dialogue between residents and city employees, the mayor, council, and the Office of Management and Budget. OMB also asks residents two important questions: what they love about Kansas City and what keeps them up at night. These questions hone in on the same topic, allowing residents to talk about their priorities, and they also get people thinking.

More than 100 residents participated in these focus group discussions in fall 2019. The questions were designed to assess resident priorities, determine if residents have seen progress on the plan, and suggest strategies the city may not have thought of that should be included in the plan.

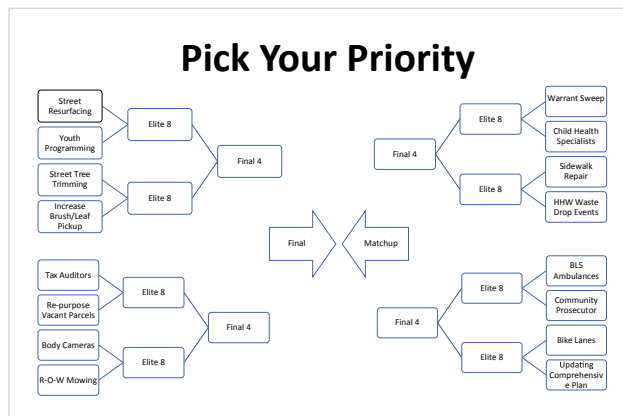
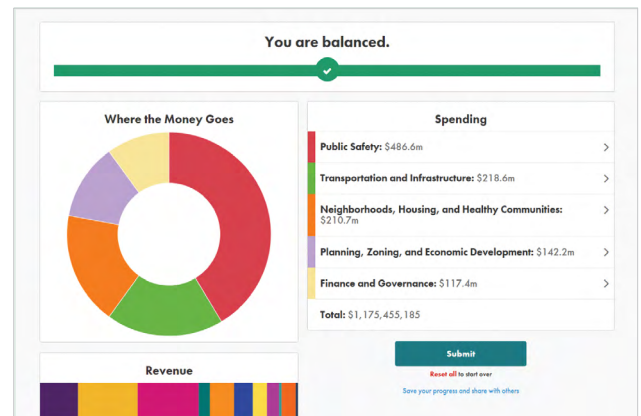
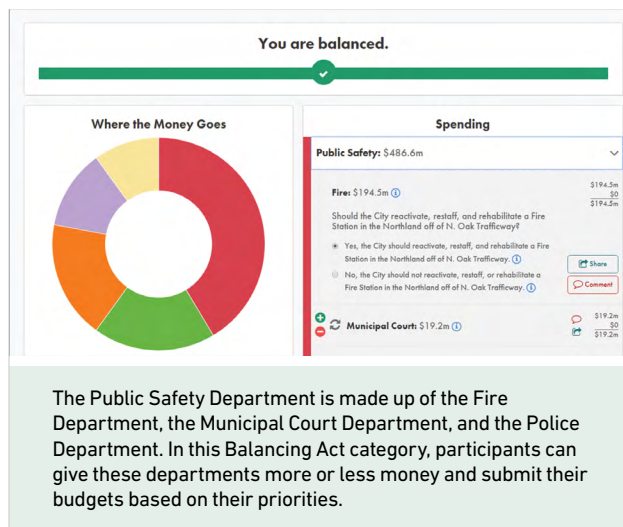
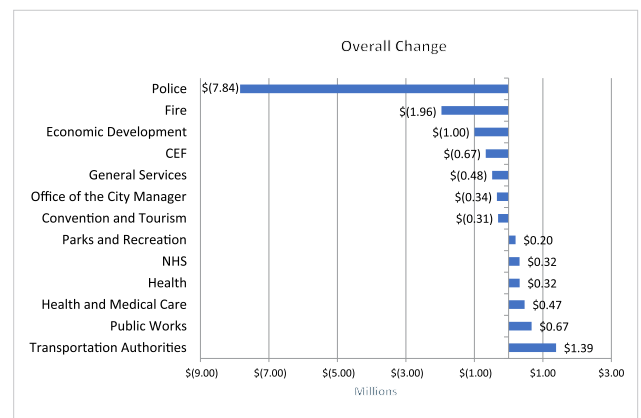
SURVEYS. OMB surveys participants to see how the city is doing—and 100 percent recommended these sessions

to their friends and colleagues. Some people also come back year after year because they want to stay involved with the city and provide feedback. In addition, 30 percent of respondents said they felt more connected to the city government after attending these sessions.

PICK YOUR PRIORITY. This activity allows residents to choose programs based on head-to-head tournament-style brackets with live instant scoring. (See Exhibit 6.) It's like a game show where residents look at the programs and use a clicker to vote on which is a top priority.

The Office of Management and Budget works with the city's 20 departments to identify 16 programs that residents can vote for. They're given \$1 million to allocate to programs ranging from street resurfacing to bike lanes to sidewalk repair. Residents essentially pit their choices against those of the other attendees, and their votes show us their top priorities.

ONLINE BUDGET SIMULATION. The City uses an online budget simulation tool (kcmo.gov/balancingact) that

EXHIBIT 6 | PICK YOUR PRIORITY TOURNAMENT-STYLE BRACKETS**EXHIBIT 7 | WHERE THE MONEY GOES****EXHIBIT 8 | THE PUBLIC SAFETY PRIORITY****EXHIBIT 9 | A SNAPSHOT OF THE ACTIVITY RESULTS**

residents (or anyone else) can use to submit their budget choices. Exhibit 7 shows a submitted budget. Residents are asked if they think this is how the city should be spending their tax dollars, and if not, how they would change the budget. Exhibit 8 shows Public Safety, which is made up of the Fire Department, the Municipal Court Department, and the Police Department. Participants can give these departments more money or less money and submit their budgets based on their priorities. Exhibit 9 is a snapshot of the results submitted through the online tool identifying changes to various city functions.

OMB starts off with a balanced budget, so to increase the funding for a program or department, residents must decrease the money allocated elsewhere. For example, if a resident wants to give more money to the Health Department, Public Works, and Transportation Authorities, which consists of bus and streetcar services, they must reduce funding for something else by the same amount. The room gets amazingly quiet during this exercise because residents, who usually see just a snapshot of the budget, had never realized how many programs the city has. Playing with the budget and looking at the programs opens a lot of people's eyes.

Behind the budget numbers

What does the city do with all the data being collected through the public budget hearings (the work sessions and social media outlets)? Exhibit 10 shows results from resident work sessions in 2018 to 2019, focusing on the topics of neighborhood investment and youth programs. Dangerous building remediation was a topic of great importance, so in response, the city funded a two-year, \$10 million bond program—this is the \$1.3 million debt service shown in Exhibit 10—to help with the backlog of either

EXHIBIT 10 | RESULTS FROM WORK SESSIONS—NEIGHBORHOOD INVESTMENT AND YOUTH PROGRAMMING

- **\$1.3 million** debt service for dangerous building remediation
- **\$200,000** additional for Land Bank to add sixth mowing cycle
- Transfer of solid waste collection to Neighborhoods and Housing Services
- Additional positions for receivership program and public engagement
- **\$300,000** to Housing Court home repair program
- **\$200,000** for youth programming

EXHIBIT 12 | FY 2020 TO 2021—RESULTS FROM RESIDENT INPUT

- **\$327,000** for the creation of the Office of Tenant Advocacy Program
 - 2 Tenant Advocate positions
 - Consultation, mediation resolution services, outside attorney services
- **\$200,000** to restore funding to the KC Film Commission
- **\$250,000** to restore funding to Children's Mercy Hospital

EXHIBIT 11 | RESULTS FROM WORK SESSIONS—INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT**\$162.6 million in capital improvements**

- **\$13.7 million** for street resurfacing
- **\$850,000** for Bruce R. Watkins Drive
- **\$3 million** to Paseo Gateway to match \$30 million grant
- **\$2 million** for Urban Youth Baseball Academy
- **\$24.2 million** to advance shovel-ready projects
- More than **\$10 million** for fleet replacement debt service

mediating dangerous big buildings or tearing them down if they're deemed too dangerous to remediate. The city also provided \$200,000 in additional Parks and Recreation funding for youth programs, which is especially important during the summer months, when young people don't have anything to do. These programs are a direct result of the city's resident and online engagement.

Then there's infrastructure investment. (See Exhibit 11.) In Kansas City, street infrastructure is consistently ranked as a top priority. Exhibit 11 provides some detail about the infrastructure improvements the city has made because of the feedback from our resident work sessions and the citizens survey.

Several projects were included in the 2019 budget because residents spoke out about them. (See Exhibit 12.) The city created an Office of Tenant Advocacy, which included several new positions, as well as funding for consultation, media resolution services, and outside attorney services.

After the budget was submitted in February 2020, some other changes were made because of citizen input, as shown in Exhibit 12. One of the things residents strongly supported was restoring funding to the KC Film Commission, which had been cut from

Award-Winning Resident Engagement Strategies

- ICMA's 2019 Program Excellence Award: Strategic Leadership and Governance for governments with populations of 50,000 or more for "Connecting the Dots: The Evolution of KCMO's Strategic Planning Process"
- GFOA's 2018 Award for Excellence in Government for "Engaging Residents in KC's Citywide Business Plan"



EXHIBIT 13 | THE CITY'S TWITTER PAGE



the previous budget, and to talk about why it should receive more funding. As a result, the city allocated \$200,000 toward Seasons 3 and 4 of the popular reality show “Queer Eye” to help get it filmed in Kansas City.

OMB hosted three of these public budget hearings with more than 100 people at each session. It was exciting to see this engagement, with people coming out and talking to the mayor, council members, and staff from city departments about their priorities and what the city should be funding. (See Exhibit 13.)

Lessons learned

Two key takeaways about resident engagement and financial transparency are to start slow and to think realistically. Also, make sure your policies and tools relate to the government’s strategies and planning.

- **Solicit direct participation with your elected officials.** Kansas City

was lucky to have a former mayor pro tempore and finance chair who pushed resident engagement to their colleagues, and to residents, explaining how important it was for residents to give feedback on how the city is doing.

- **Kansas City has a number of success stories, but they weren’t accomplished instantly, or at the same time.** There were also projects that would have been great but didn’t work out. Take the time to determine what your organization really wants to do.
- **Plan carefully to determine what tools you’ll use and how they’ll help with policies and planning.** Kansas City uses its tools to incorporate resident feedback, which helps determine residents’ priorities, and thereby the budget.
- **Experiment with different tools—and expect to have issues.** For every 10 things you try out, it’s likely that only one will work.

- **Publish relevant and curated information.** Instead of dumping data, make sure the information you publish has an impact on the entire organization.
- **Communicate the importance of transparency to all your stakeholders.** The residents of Kansas City are always hungry for more information on our social media, especially Twitter. Use the formats you have available to constantly communicate, provide feedback, and engage residents.
- **Keep your information up to date!** This has been especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Communicate results.** Use several platforms to provide the information about what residents have said.

Debbie Chiu is the former budget operations manager for the City of Kansas City, Missouri.