



# Engaging Residents in Kansas City's Business Plan

BY  
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Engaging Residents in Kansas City's Business Plan won GFOA's 2018 Awards for Excellence in Government Finance for Exceptionally Well Implemented GFOA Best Practices.

The City of Kansas City, Missouri, started developing a comprehensive, renewable five-year business plan in 2013. The plan, which guides financial and operational alternatives through the planning and budget process, included three essential components: the city's strategic plan, a financial strategic plan, and a five-year planning model. Then, addressing the importance of citizen engagement in the process, the city developed an annual series of resident work sessions, inviting the public to directly influence strategic and budgetary decisions.

The citywide business plan is Kansas City's primary policy document. The budget process and public input starts with the high-level strategic plan and long-range financial plan before the annual budget process begins. The city refers to the annual budget as the "one-year snapshot" of the citywide business plan, which is now the base of all city budgeting, reporting, and resident feedback.

Like many communities, Kansas City had a series of valuable but isolated policies and processes, including a strategic

plan, annual budget, financial forecasts, annual financial reports, and departmental plans. The city also had a public-facing program, KCStat, a data-driven management system in which management monitors and improves the performance of city departments in real time. These disconnected fragments needed to be put together to create a cohesive direction.

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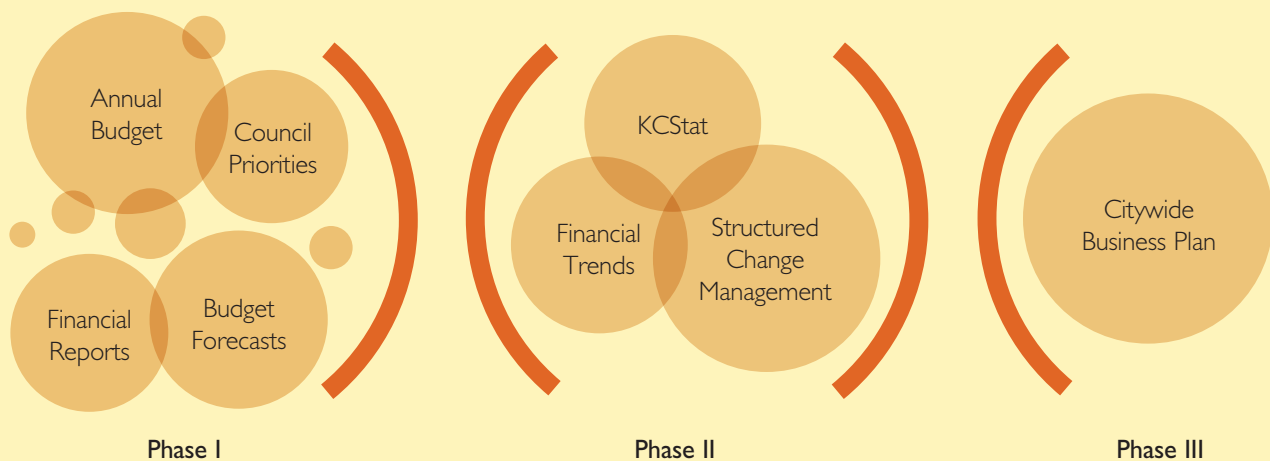
In April 2014, Kansas City residents approved a change in the city charter that required an annual financial strategic plan and five-year planning model. This change marked an important first step in breaking a pattern of successive single-year fixes, often implemented without a long-term view. It established the citywide business plan, with its three components, as the official blueprint to guide the city's policy and financial decisions.

This is how Kansas City finally "connected the dots." (See Exhibit 1.)

## IMPROVING CITIZEN FEEDBACK

Before the citywide business plan was implemented, the city got much of its resident feedback from an annual resident survey. Once the "dots" were connected, however, the city recognized that public involvement was crucial to legitimizing the choices presented in the citywide business plan. Ensuring that the plan reflected residents' priori-

### Exhibit I: Connecting the Dots



ties and preferences of service levels was crucial, so the city developed a series of “Resident Work Sessions” that give residents the opportunity to learn about the citywide business plan and to directly influence the plan through activities that simulate the city’s budget process.

**Resident Work Sessions.** The Resident Work Sessions are a series of events during the citywide business plan planning sessions in the fall. These sessions, which are held in different neighborhoods throughout the city, teach residents about the plan and how to provide input through discussions and hands-on activities.

In 2017, the city decided to evolve the Resident Work Sessions to provide a realistic simulation of the city’s annual business plan and budget process, which staff refers to as the “circle of life.” The revamp mimicked the city’s budgetary process, moving from general opinions to specific choices, included the following activities:

- **Focus Groups.** Participants were guided in small-group discussions to identify beliefs, opinions, and attitudes about specific issues, such as: What do you believe the city’s major priorities should be during the next three to five years? What, if anything, do you believe the city should do better, or differently? What are your dreams or visions for the city in the next five to 10 years?
- **Prioritization Exercise.** Next, participants chose the most important strategic objectives for the citywide business plan. Participants used iClicker software to vote on which city priorities were the most important to them.
- **Balancing Act.** Finally, participants used Balancing Act (learn more at [kcmo.gov/balancingact](http://kcmo.gov/balancingact)), an online tool residents can use to prepare and submit their own city budgets, subject to the same constraints experienced by elected officials. A step beyond prioritization, Balancing Act allows residents to choose which programs are critical and should receive the same or increased funding. After the selections are made, residents must balance their budgets in order to complete the activity. Because the program captures residents’ choices automatically, the city can consider the composite data to identify residents’ pre-

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vailing views and spending choices before the actual budget is finalized.

The mayor and city council then uses the information it receives to determine whether initial drafts of the citywide business plan and the budget truly reflect residents’ current priorities and preferences for service levels.

**Pick Your Priority.** Pick Your Priority is an interactive, bracket challenge game in which residents vote in head-to-head matchups on the pro-

grams they believe the city should focus on. The activity replicates an athletic tournament with four rounds of program-to-program matchups. (See Exhibit 3.)

In its first iteration, as an in-person activity, Pick Your Priority started with two program names and descriptions appearing on the presentation screen. Resident participants voted on their priorities with wireless clickers. Throughout the session, the most popular programs advanced through the tournament bracket until only one remained. The game was so popular the city communications office launched a web-based version through its online town-hall forum, KCMOMomentum.org.

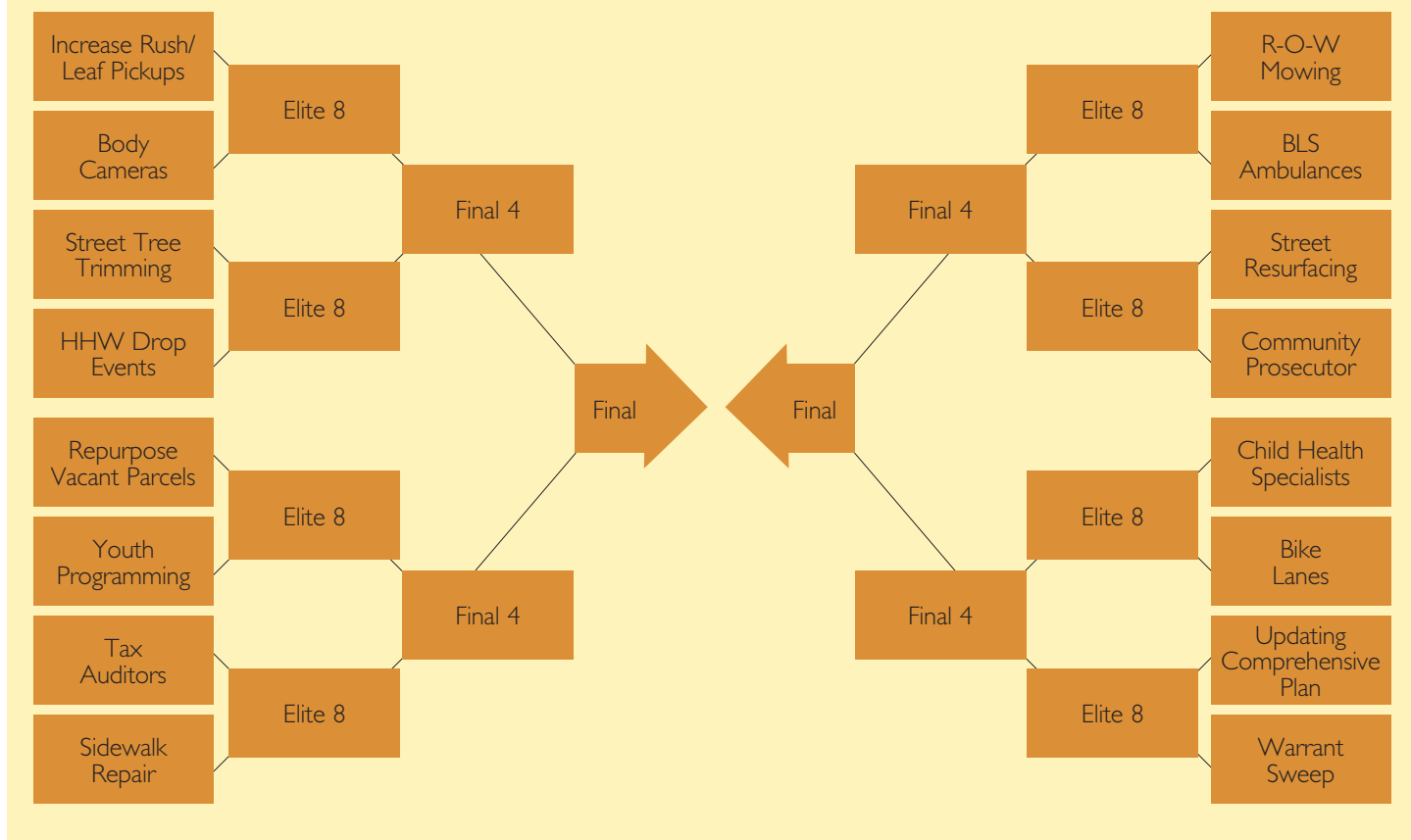
The mayor and city council uses all the information it receives from the sessions to drive budget decisions. For

**Exhibit 2: The Kansas City “Circle of Life”**





### Exhibit 3: The Pick Your Priority Bracket



example, during the 2015 activities, results indicated that the top priority was investment in neighborhoods — specifically, vacant homes/lots and code violations. The city responded by investing more in neighborhoods in the fiscal 2016-17 adopted budget. Those investments included:

- Authorizing a \$10 million bond issue for dangerous building remediation.
- Appropriating \$200,000 for the land bank to add a sixth vacant lot mowing cycle.
- Aligning waste collection with nuisance abatement activities by transferring solid waste collection to the Neighborhoods and Housing Services Department.
- Adding \$300,000 to the housing court home repair program to address code violations.

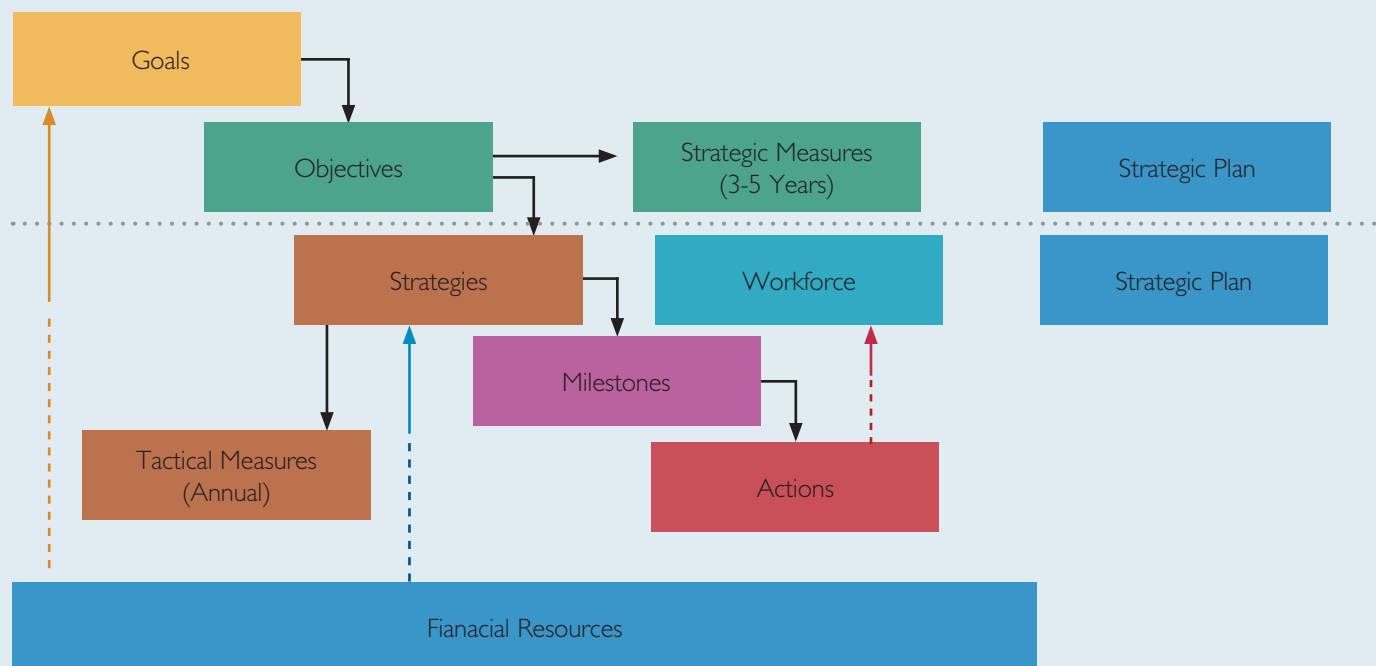
### OTHER TOOLS FOR GATHERING FEEDBACK

Kansas City also uses online transparency tools and social media platforms to track additional resident feedback.

**Online Community Engagement Strategy.** Another new feature of this year's citywide business plan is an interactive budget builder, which will help with the city's continued effort to keep the community involved. Residents use this online voting tool to demonstrate what they believe the city should prioritize. Individuals have two ways of adjusting the budget, either by changing the way the money is spent or by changing the way money is brought in. This tool allows individuals provide their input even when they can't come to in-person meetings.

**Social Media.** Online transparency tools and social media platforms have helped Kansas City track additional resident feedback. These online platforms include MySidewalk (KCMOMentum.org), OpenBudget via Socrata, Twitter, and Facebook. The city also created an explanatory video on YouTube, explaining the budget process and how citizens can get involved. It is updated yearly and contains the dates, times, and locations of public engagement opportunities. This video allows resident to stay engaged through online and social media platforms.

## Kansas City's Goals



Kansas City's business plan supports the following goals:

### Customer Service and Communication

To create an internal culture that focuses on the customer across all services provided by the city; to support essential internal and external communication; and to foster public engagement.

### Finance and Governance

To be transparent and employ best practices in governance and management, and to strengthen, expand, and make judicious use of Kansas City's economic resources to achieve and maintain solvency and build resilience.

### Housing

To sustain the city's diverse housing for all income groups through strategic planning and well-designed developments, with an emphasis on revitalizing aging neighborhoods.

### Neighborhoods and Healthy Communities

To support the development, maintenance, and revitalization of sustainable, stable, and healthy communities where neighborhoods are safe and well maintained, people have access to health care services, strategies are in place to prevent injuries and illnesses, and the environment is protected.

### Planning, Zoning, and Economic Development

To develop a vibrant economy where there is opportunity for job creation, entrepreneurship, and growth, particularly in historically underdeveloped areas; all citizens have opportunities for creating wealth and prosperity; and visitors continue to consider Kansas City a desirable destination.

### Public Safety

To protect Kansas City residents, visitors, and employees by providing comprehensive, high-quality public safety and public health services, including strategies to prevent or significantly reduce public safety and public health problems and threats in a timely manner.

### Transportation and Infrastructure

To improve the city's physical infrastructure with special attention to streets, curbs, sidewalks, and water/sewer systems, and to strengthen the multimodal transportation system in ways that enhance connectivity among neighborhoods, business centers, and cultural/health/recreational destinations.

## BEST PRACTICES

In creating these programs, Kansas City implemented several GFOA best practices, including *Public Participation in Planning, Budgeting, and Performance Management*. (All best practices are available at [gfoa.org](http://gfoa.org)). It states that “good public participation practices can help governments be more accountable and responsive to their communities, and can also improve the public’s perception of governmental performance and the value the public receives from their government. Transparency is a core value of governmental budgeting. Developing a transparent budget process will improve the government’s credibility and trust within the community.” GFOA provides the following recommendations for successfully engaging the public:

- Decide the specific purpose of the engagement effort.
- Assure a broad perspective by collecting information in a variety of ways and from a variety of sources.
- Make conversations more productive by making sure participants have a common set of facts to work from and designing the environment to facilitate conversation.
- Systematically collect, maintain, monitor, and analyze information gained from public involvement activities, and maintain contact information on individuals and groups that wish to be kept informed.

Resident engagement has helped guide future budgets toward making the city more resilient. The process began by following the budget and performance management frameworks included in GFOA’s *Establishment of Strategic Plans and Long-term Financial Planning* best practices, along with several other budgeting and long-range forecasting concepts.

*Establishment of Strategic Plans* recommends that all governments use some form of strategic planning to provide a long-term perspective for service delivery and budgeting, establishing logical links between authorized spending and broad organizational goals. It directs governments to develop mechanisms to identify stakeholder concerns, needs, and priorities. The next step is to use the resulting information to identify the most critical issues. Issue recognition should reflect stakeholder concerns, needs, and priorities as well as environmental factors affecting the community; these goals should address the most critical issues facing the community. Changes might be necessary because of external factors, including new information about stakeholder needs or results.

In *Long-Term Financial Planning*, GFOA notes that long-term financial planning is a highly collaborative process that considers future scenarios and helps governments navigate challenges. It works best as part of an overall strategic plan. According to the best practice, a long-term financial plan should look at least five to ten years into the future. In deciding how to use the information it gathers, the government should engage in a highly participative process that involves elected officials, staff, and the public. The decision phase also includes a culminating event where the stakeholders can assess the planning process to evaluate whether the purposes for the plan described in the mobilization phase were fulfilled and where a sense of closure and accomplishment can be generated.

Some key points Kansas City took from GFOA’s recommendations were:

- Incorporating public participation efforts into their planning, budgeting, and performance management results processes.
- Getting the broader public’s perspective, not just the opinion of a small number of highly vocal special interest groups.
- Timing public participation efforts for the moments when they are most likely to be effective in the planning/budgeting/performance management cycle.
- Incorporating the public feedback into decision making.
- Communicating to the public how the information that was collected will be or has been used.
- Achieving buy-in from top government officials, from the beginning.

## CONCLUSIONS

The 2017 update of the citywide business plan marked the fifth plan since the new process began in 2013. The adopted plan included seven city goals with 30 objectives and 131 strategies. (For more information, see the “Kansas City’s Goals” sidebar.) The plan will also drive the city’s fiscal 2018-19 submitted budget. During the past five years, resident engagement has expanded greatly, providing the city with much more resident feedback. These results will guide the city council, manager, and departments to guide the next several budgets toward a resilient Kansas City. ■

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