

# In Practice

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FINANCE TEAM

## Creative Approaches to Service Provision

### Washoe County, Nevada's Budget Congress

BY ALISON WUENSCH

**W**ashoe County, Nevada, hosted its first-ever budget congress in early February 2025. Department heads and elected officials could choose to attend or to send a designee on their behalf, but the rules were strict—one attendee per department, with the idea that one person is one vote. Attendees were instructed to come prepared with a three-minute “bullet point” discussion, but no formal presentations or audiovisual equipment. They were given just three guiding questions, designed to find commonality among the departments.

The headliner was: What keeps you awake at night?

Each department's representative had a time slot in the first half of the day, and their three-minute discussions—along with the results of the pre-congress survey, which the county had administered and distributed—were intended to guide conversation in the second half of the day. The stated goal of the budget congress was to discuss limited resources and creative approaches to providing services. By that definition and feedback from participants, the event was a success.

Budget Manager Lori Cooke introduced the idea to the county after attending a

GFOA training session that included the idea of a collaborative budget congress. Cooke recognized that carrying on as they had always done was not necessarily the most effective way to move forward. Her interest piqued, Cooke secured support from county management and set to work ironing out the details.

Cooke worked with GFOA staff, as well as Mary Ellen Leonard, director of fiscal services for the City of College Station, Texas, which had previously implemented a budget congress, to discuss how she would execute Washoe County's event. One of the next steps was to schedule a date and give participants



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enough notice. They were able to get out a Save the Date for February 4, 2025, but staff had questions about this new concept—questions Cooke and her team made their best efforts to address through consistent messaging via multiple channels of communication. They used email, one-on-one communications, presentations at departmental meetings, and other methods to communicate their message of “conversation, communication, collaboration.”

Cooke and other key resources shared successes and challenges from their first budget congress, along with their goals for replicating it this year. David Solaro, the assistant county manager, shared his experience serving as one of the facilitators, and Abbe Yacoben, the county’s chief financial officer, characterized her role as more of an ambassador. Meanwhile, Ryan Gustafson, director of the county’s Human Services Agency, and Evelyn Grosenick, Washoe County public defender, shared their experiences as participants in the first-ever Washoe County budget congress.

Yacoben said she’d worried that open communication and dialogue might be thwarted due to rumors of an event “like the Hunger Games.” Her concerns were ultimately unfounded, as the atmosphere started to shift when participants saw that the rules were the same for everyone. For example, someone brought more than one department representative, but organizers enforced the rule of one person per department. Everyone also received the same amount of talking time, even though, as Gustafson recalled, “The three minutes went very fast, even if you rehearsed it.”

Many department leaders helped create the right positive atmosphere from the back of the room by contributing “positive gossip.”

Cooke and the budget staff did not participate as advocates, *per se*; they were intended to be a resource for participants, supporting the process. The county manager opened and closed the meeting, with Solaro and his co-facilitator leading the discussion throughout the day. Going into the day, Grosenick recalled being told to keep an open day on the calendar and to be prepared to discuss the three guiding questions; she wasn’t entirely sure of what to expect, but she wasn’t particularly worried about trying a new approach. Cooke also shared that the participants received encouragement from the county manager, who told them it was okay to reset their expectations and figure out how to move forward without burning out, emphasizing prioritization.

The budget congress produced many benefits, one of which was giving the participants a shared understanding. Department representatives were able to hear what was going on in other departments and to better understand the needs and priorities of the organization, overall, which was very helpful, Solaro noted. In some cases, that meant hearing the same needs and the same struggles across departments—a valuable opportunity for departments to connect and collaborate on solutions. For example, Grosenick shared that many departments didn’t have enough control over their workloads, a challenge that resonated with her.

The first half of the day focused on hearing the departments’ issues, but the second half encouraged participants to think about how to solve problems—their own and those of their colleagues. The goal was for participants to use their understanding of the issues to help their peers. They were encouraged to ask, “How could that position help my issue?” and “How can I help someone else based on what I heard?” As Solaro explained, it was “groupthink in a positive way.” He also noted that the positive momentum from shared understanding and collaboration likely opened up pathways for groups that don’t talk often to connect. The cross-collaboration likely created efficiencies throughout the organization, he added.

When you have meetings that are half a day or longer, there is the added benefit of sitting next to people you don’t see every day during breaks and lunches, Gustafson added. His experience at the congress was that he had the opportunity to talk to people he hadn’t talked to recently. The budget congress helped establish more of a shared understanding that we’re all trying to be the best we can be, and trying to understand how we can better help the people we serve.

For example, Grosenick’s “a-ha” moment came when discussing fleets and the idea of having a central carpool at one location. That moment stood out to her as emphasizing that departments aren’t in a zero-sum game for resources. This was part of what Gustafson called “the secret sauce” of what worked throughout the process of planning and executing the budget congress—including the ground rules and expectations that went out before the meeting, and were

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reemphasized at the beginning, as well as having a strategy for creating equity around time frames.

The meeting also needed to be facilitated well. Yacoben praised Solaro's curiosity in facilitation for the budget congress, appreciating that he was not asking questions or responding with preconceived notions or canned answers but just genuine curiosity. For others looking to replicate their success with facilitation, Yacoben strongly advised that the facilitator doesn't have to be an expert—pick the most curious person on your team.

According to Gustafson, they were also able to use best practices for the budget congress. They ensured people felt valued, and the pre-teaching and pre-work also helped. People knew generally what they could and couldn't ask for, so, as Gustafson put it, "There was not a lot of time wasted on things that we aren't going to be able to do." People understood that the emphasis was more on resource sharing than on money.

People's willingness to share and leverage resources was another key benefit of the budget congress. The collaboration, transparency, and open, honest dialogue encouraged creative solutions to sharing and making use of resources, helping achieve the budget congress's stated goal. Cooke also shared that the budget congress produced better qualitative data with more narrative for their county commissioners than previous meetings, which were data-driven/data-focused.

This helped contribute to the understanding that the county doesn't always have the resources to do the special

projects that are layered on with strategic planning. According to Gustafson, the congress helped policymakers and all participants better understand the long-term and strategic planning perspectives. Many things have a very long tail, which doesn't necessarily mean the requests discussed will happen in the next year, he noted. It could be five or ten years, and it helps for everyone to understand that. Gustafson called Washoe County "as nimble a government as I have seen," but there is no instant gratification in government. He encouraged continuing these conversations throughout the year to understand the large-scale vision, where the county is, and where the trends are. "The more you understand that, the more strategic you can be with your planning."

The budget congress was an improvement over the budget process in past years, a process Grosenick and others called stressful. The prior process didn't provide participants with a clear understanding and took a lot of resources and time. Solaro called much of that time wasted—wasted staff time, wasted budget staff time, and wasted elected officials' time. It was also sometimes unfair and uneven. For example, Solaro, in his role as assistant county manager, sat in on the previous budget meetings and advocated for the departments he oversaw, which he considered unfair to the other departments. Cooke noted that the prior process emphasized good presentation skills and extensive visuals in PowerPoint presentations, but some of the smaller departments didn't necessarily have those resources. For Cooke, the budget congress presented an opportunity for

participants to understand the budget not as a zero-sum game or the tragedy of the commons, but as an opportunity to collaborate and share resources.

People have more goals for the upcoming budget congress, and beyond. Grosenick, for example, wonders, "What are you going to do with the information?" She wanted to know if, from a stakeholder perspective, there would be additional opportunities to provide input, including opportunities to discuss smaller details that didn't seem to fit into the higher-level discussions at the meeting itself. She also wanted to know how certain ideas or requests affect other departments.

Cooke agreed on the goal of improving their follow-up after the budget congress and communicating how they're using that data to inform policymakers. She also suggested the idea of asking subcommittees or interested groups to contribute more input in the future. Cooke agreed with Grosenick that there are effects people might not think about that have downstream or potentially upstream effects, and one of the goals is to start avoiding unintended consequences. She noted that they will concentrate on the feedback loop after the upcoming budget congress. ■



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