



INTERVIEW

Reconnecting to the “Why” of Budgeting with Public Financial Management

A conversation with Kristin Trivelas

BY TOCHI MADUEKE

GFOA's **Tochi Madueke** spoke with **Kristin Trivelas**, finance director for the City of Renton, Washington, about transparency, inclusivity, and capital planning.

Kristin Trivelas has built a career focused on improving government processes, strengthening transparency, and enhancing the ways local governments engage with their communities. Recognized with GFOA's 2025 Recognition for Outstanding Public Service Award, Trivelas has led several initiatives that rethink how decisions are made, how financial information is communicated, and how residents participate in budgeting decisions.

The journey into public service

Trivelas's path into public finance was not linear. She began her career in the private sector, working her way up through accounting roles without initially planning to stay in the field. “I sort of worked my way up, starting as a file clerk right out of high school and then moved on to accounts payable, accounts receivable, payroll, and finally financial statement reporting,” she explained. Over time, she discovered a genuine interest in working with financial data. “I didn't originally plan

on making finance my long-term path, but somewhere along the way, I just really enjoyed working with data and analytics.”

After gaining practical experience, she returned to school to earn a bachelor’s degree in accounting and, later, an MBA. Her transition into the public sector was driven by a desire to do more meaningful work. “I really wanted to do work that had a direct impact on the community,” she said. Although it was initially difficult to get her foot in the door, the City of Renton, Washington, gave her the chance. Trivelas has been with the city for eight years.

As finance director, Trivelas manages 28 employees and oversees a wide range of responsibilities, including budgeting, financial reporting, and long-term planning. She also supports public-facing services such as utility billing and licensing. “Our department is here to make sure we’re being good stewards of public funds,” she said. “We work to make financial information accessible to residents and businesses, and we support both internal and external customers across all areas of finance.”

The foundation of transparency

Central to Trivelas’s work is an emphasis on transparency. For her, transparency is not simply about making information available, but about ensuring that it is understandable. “At the end of the day, it’s the public’s money,” she said. “People deserve to really understand how their money is being used.” She acknowledged that financial information can often be difficult for non-experts to interpret. “Not everyone can read financial information. It is important to remove those barriers of complexity,” she explained. “When people understand the ‘why’ behind decisions, it leads to more informed input and greater support from the community.”

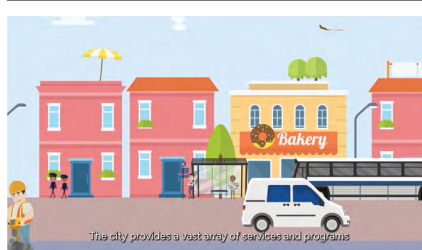
This philosophy has guided Trivelas’s efforts to rethink the way the City of Renton communicates its budget. One of her most notable initiatives was a community-friendly budget video designed to explain the city’s budget in a more accessible format. Traditional

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budget documents, Trivelas noted, were not effectively reaching the residents. “We have a huge budget book. To the non-finance person, it’s like reading Greek, and it’s a snooze fest,” she said candidly. “People don’t understand what they’re reading.”

Recognizing this gap, Trivelas sought to create a more engaging and digestible alternative. “I wanted something people could absorb and digest, that was easy to understand and related to them,” she said. The goal was not only to simplify information, but also to empower residents to engage more meaningfully. “If people understand the framework, then they can ask more pointed questions,” she added. By incorporating visuals and plain language, the city has been able to “meet people where they are,” particularly those without a finance background.

WATCH THE VIDEO



Accessible on the city’s budget page, the City of Renton’s budget video uses plain language and visuals to make the budget easier for residents to understand.

rentonwa.gov/Government/Departments-and-Offices/Finance/Budget

Getting more voices to the table

Beyond improving communication, Trivelas has expanded opportunities for public participation in the budgeting process. Historically, the city relied on a budget advisory committee of roughly 20 participants. While valuable, this approach limited the diversity of perspectives included in decision-making. “That’s a very small group, compared to the population, that was not very diverse,” she noted.

To address this limitation, Trivelas led the implementation of a community-wide budget survey, the first in the city’s history. “We had around 450 people respond, which doesn’t sound huge, but compared to 20, it was a big improvement,” she said. More importantly, the expanded outreach revealed a broader range of community priorities. “One of the biggest takeaways was just how diverse those perspectives were. We had missed out on that for a long time.”

For Trivelas, the value of better engagement extends beyond participation rates. Better public engagement fundamentally improves the quality of budgeting decisions. “It makes the budget more grounded in what the community actually values,” she said. “Instead of making decisions in a vacuum, we’re incorporating real input from the people we serve.” She also emphasized that responsibility for engagement lies with government, even when participation is limited. “The onus is on us to provide the opportunity,” she explained. “I can’t make people care, but I can make sure the information is available and accessible.”

Redesigning capital planning

Another area where Trivelas has driven change is in capital improvement planning. She led the redesign of the city’s capital improvement process, introducing a prioritization matrix that links projects to strategic priorities and improves transparency in decision-making. Previously, the capital plan was difficult to interpret and lacked clear evaluation criteria. “It was just a matrix of numbers. You

didn't know what you were looking for or how to justify what projects to prioritize," she said.

The new approach emphasizes clarity, consistency, and alignment with broader city goals. "We wanted to show not just what we're funding, but why," she explained, noting that projects are now evaluated based on criteria such as safety, compliance, and alignment with the city's business plan. The redesigned format also incorporates visual elements to make projects more tangible for the public. "Nobody understands a boring title of a capital project," she said. "So we added photos to help people connect the numbers to something real."

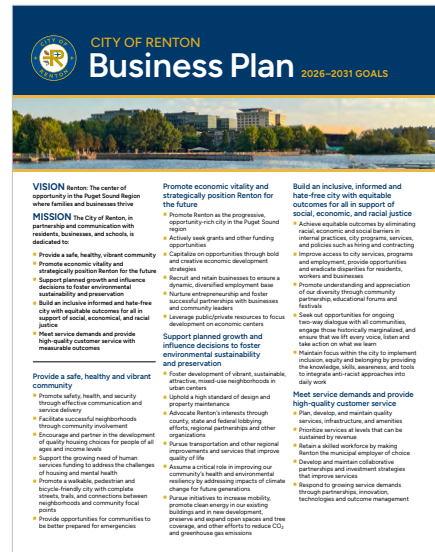
Internally, the changes have improved decision-making by reducing subjectivity in prioritizing projects. "Before, it was often the department that justified their project the best," she said. "Now we're ranking projects based on defined criteria, which brings more consistency and clarity." The result is a process that is easier to communicate both within the organization and to

the public. The city's efforts were recognized when it received the GFOA Distinguished Budget Presentation Award with special recognition of the capital section.

Leading with collaboration

Trivelas credits professional networks with shaping her approach to public financial management. Through her involvement in the Puget Sound Finance Officers Association and GFOA, she regularly exchanges ideas with peers and learns about emerging best practices. "They're incredibly valuable," she said. "We're learning what other agencies are doing and bringing back those best practices to our cities for process improvement." These networks, she noted, are essential in a field that is constantly evolving and varies across jurisdictions.

Her leadership approach is based on transparency, collaboration, and accountability. Trivelas places particular emphasis on fostering a supportive and open work environment.



The City of Renton's Business Plan outlines the community's priorities and strategic goals, guiding transparent budgeting decisions and investments that reflect what residents value most.

"I try to create an environment where people feel comfortable asking questions and sharing ideas," she said. She also encourages her team to adopt a solution-oriented mindset. "Finance can often be seen as the gatekeeper, the department that says no," Trivelas observed. "Our motto is not to be that gatekeeper. It's, 'How can we get you to a yes?' We can't always say yes, but we can help find creative solutions to get them operationally where they're trying to go—because finance touches everything, at the end of the day." This emphasis on collaborative solution-finding reflects the reality that for many governments, the finance department is the grease that keeps the wheels spinning.

Baby steps for improved transparency and public engagement

In a time when many municipalities approach transparency reactively, simply fulfilling statutory requirements, Trivelas and the City of Renton exemplify a proactive approach. Rather than simply meeting minimum legal obligations, they have actively created transparency that serves the community's information



City of Renton Finance Department staff celebrate receiving the Washington State Auditor's Stewardship Award for their exemplary accountability, transparency, and financial reporting for fiscal year 2024.



Members of the City of Renton Finance Department proudly display their awards for Excellence in Financial Reporting and Distinguished Budget Presentation, recognizing their commitment to transparent, inclusive budgeting for Renton residents.

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needs. The budget video, the redesigned capital improvement plan, and the expanded community survey all represent choices to go beyond what is required because the city values making complex financial information genuinely useful and accessible to the public, as well as finding more ways to involve the public in the budgeting process.

This stance reflects a needed shift in the way local governments think about their role in financial communication. It is not enough to make information available if residents cannot understand or use it. True transparency, as Trivelas demonstrates, requires meeting people where they are and providing information in formats that enable meaningful consumption and participation. Improving the way budget information is communicated to the public is one

of the key motivators behind the GFOA Distinguished Budget Award Program revamp, and the City of Renton is well on its way to rethinking its budget communication.

For professionals who want to improve transparency and engagement in their own municipalities, Trivelas offers practical advice. Rather than attempting sweeping changes, she recommends a more incremental approach. “It can feel overwhelming, but you don’t have to overhaul everything at once,” she said. “Start small and keep it simple.” She emphasized that the most important step is making information easier to understand. “Focus on how people can digest the information. Simplify language, add visuals, and try new ways to communicate.”

Trivelas also highlighted the importance of feedback as a tool for

continuous improvement. “Don’t be afraid to ask for feedback, both internally and externally,” she said. “That’s how you improve over time.”

Trivelas’s work for the City of Renton illustrates ways in which local governments can make incremental improvements to their budgeting process and how the public is included in this. By reconnecting to the “why” of budgeting and public financial management, Trivelas demonstrates that effective public financial management is not only about numbers, but also about building connection, communication, and trust. This is exactly what Pillar 2 and Pillar 3 of the GFOA Financial Foundations Framework ([at gfoa.org](http://gfoa.org)) recommend as part of the recipe for building thriving communities over time. ■

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