

Participatory Budgeting:

A Librarian's Experience

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Abstract

This article discusses one librarian's experience with the Participatory Budgeting process in New York City. It includes information about how New York's Participatory Budgeting process works, as well as Participatory Budgeting's principles, and some discussion of how libraries have utilized PB. In addition, it includes discussion of how librarian skillsets can be especially useful for participatory budgeting.

Introduction

Cities and other institutions throughout the world have been experimenting with and integrating participatory budgeting (PB) into their workflows and governance structures since 1989, when Porto Alegre, Brazil launched the first PB program (Souza, 2001). Participatory budgeting, as a process, aims to make government more accessible to citizens, restore trust in government, and increase civic engagement (Swaner, 2017). It does this by giving community members a chance to propose projects that use government funds, then vote on them to choose which projects are implemented. Since its origin, PB has spread throughout the world, and in many places, nonprofits and non-governmental organizations have also become involved in this process. One notable example is the Participatory Budgeting Project, which sought to bring the practice of Participatory Budgeting to the United States ("Mission, History & Values," 2021).

Participatory Budgeting in Libraries

Aside from its use in government, participatory budgeting is gaining currency in libraries. For instance, the Brooklyn Public Library in New York lobbied its patrons to utilize PB as a tool to fund needed improvements (Brooklyn Public Library, 2019; Rosario, n.d.) and the New York Public Library created

a fact sheet about how participatory budgeting funds could be used to benefit their library system (Mihaltses, n.d.). Individual libraries have also devoted portions of their budget for PB, allowing patrons to have a more direct process to make their voices heard about their wants and needs in terms of equipment, collections and services (Asaro, 2019). More recently, academic institutions and their libraries have also tested allocating portions of their budgets for participatory budgeting, including schools such as Brooklyn College and Queens College (Asaro, 2019; Iqbal, 2019; Jordan, 2016).

Beyond this, libraries might even be considered pioneers in PB, since prior to the formal creation of the participatory budgeting process many libraries had workflows through which patrons could suggest collection or database additions. In addition, many of America's libraries were incorporated as Carnegie Libraries, which can be seen as a proto-participatory budgeting process. The Carnegie process required community groups to apply to the Carnegie Corporation for aid to build libraries for their towns and cities, and the Carnegie library application process effectively joined these civic groups with town agencies or library boards to jointly demonstrate their need and desire for library services and receive funding ("Carnegie Libraries," n.d.).

Participatory Budgeting in New York City: My Experience

Having seen advertising in my local community for Participatory Budgeting events, I decided to participate in local participatory budgeting projects over the past three years. I am a resident of Brooklyn, New York, which has been experimenting with PB since at least 2011, when City Council Members Brad Lander, Melissa Mark-Viverito, Eric Ulrich, and Jumaane Williams implemented the first participatory budgeting

programs in New York City (“About PBNYC,” n.d.). After several cycles of PB by these and other council members, New York passed a law mandating that council districts incorporate PB into their annual budget allocations, though its implementation has been paused due to budget shortfalls wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic (Khurshid, 2020).

In New York City, PB is typically run at the City Council District level, although it has also been attempted at the state level. The district I live in, NYC’s 38th City Council District, is somewhat of a pioneer in New York’s PB journey. Our council member, Carlos Menchaca, has taken great pride in partaking in the participatory budgeting process, and our district’s first PB cycle was featured in the PBS documentary *Public Money* (Sterrenberg, 2018). In addition, the council member from the neighboring city council district, Brad Lander, is one of the key figures who first brought PB to New York City. As a council member, Lander can often be seen at local events, because depending on the event’s location, overlapping populations from both council districts often attend.

My residential area is also one of the only parts of New York City to attempt participatory budgeting at the state level, when our then-State Senator Jesse Hamilton conducted the first PB program run by a state representative in 2018. These events indicate that PB has been quite important to our neighborhood – not only were we ranked in the top five districts in participation (“Participatory Budgeting Cycle 9,” n.d., p. 9), we did it despite the fact that our neighborhood has a significant portion of undocumented people. These community members cannot vote in city or state elections, and may feel unsafe in other interactions with governmental representatives (Hayduk, Hackett, & Folla, 2017). For these community members, PB can be the only way that they get to vote on government spending.

My PB experience extends to Senator Hamilton’s state level PB program, and two of council member Menchaca’s PB cycles (2018-2019 and 2019-2020). Each experience was somewhat different and will be discussed in more detail in the paragraphs below.

How the PB Process Works

PB requires two components to function: action and funding. In terms of action, PB is often led by volunteers from a local community working in conjunction with staff members from a local elected official’s office. With respect to funding, PB is typically funded out of a portion of the elected official’s discretionary funds budget (Su, 2017), and is usually applied to capital projects only (Citywide Council for Participatory Budgeting, n.d.). In New York, these discretionary funds can sometimes be combined with other funding sources, such as money from a Borough President’s office, or funding from private foundations or donors (Office of the Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams, 2019). Discretionary funding, however, is not guaranteed. In recent years, funding has been cancelled due to budget crises and political retribution (Shahrigian, 2020a, 2020b).

The PB process is generally broken down into several steps. First, there is idea solicitation, where ideas are gathered via a webform and by people writing them on paper or whiteboards during in-person meetings. Next, ideas are reviewed at delegate meetings, where volunteers analyze project ideas to make sure they comply with relevant rules and to determine which ones will be sent to the appropriate city agencies for agency review. At this point, project proposals are formalized, typically as written documents, and sent to city agencies for their feedback and review. Volunteers then review the agency feedback, and several feasible projects are collated together onto a PB ballot. Then, there is a week or more of voting, often both online and in-person at select polling sites or “pop-up” locations. Votes are then tallied, and the council member will attempt to fund and implement the winning projects.

Although New York City followed a general formula for PB, the grassroots nature of PB precludes it from following a strict formulaic process. Therefore, the process or even steps of the process can vary significantly from one PB host organization or official to another, and other agencies can attempt their own participatory budgeting programs with their own modifications (Cardinale et al., 2020; New York State Education Department, n.d.).

Who Participates in Participatory Budgeting?

To vote in New York's PB, one must live, work, attend school, or have a significant interest in the community. Volunteers and voters must be 13 years or older. In my experience, determining eligibility is done on an honor system. Because there is no formal voter registration process, community members must self-identify which district they will participate in or vote in, and some people may be involved in multiple districts where they could potentially vote. For instance, during one PB cycle, I met a teacher participating in a PB program who lived in one district, but worked at a school in another district. Thus, this participant was able to advocate for and vote in support of a project in the district where he worked, and also vote in his home district as a resident.

Generating Awareness

People are made aware of participatory budgeting through advertising and word of mouth. Usually, the organizing officials use newsletters, presentations at community meetings, tools such as mailings or email lists, and social media posts and advertisements. The volunteer focus of the process means volunteers can make additional outreach attempts. For instance, in one PB cycle, several participants asked the council member if they could do their own outreach on the WeChat platform, to which the council member's staff enthusiastically agreed.

Soliciting Ideas

Volunteers attend working sessions where they review ideas submitted from a webform. At initial in-person meetings volunteers also work together to generate additional ideas for consideration. In New York these ideas must be for projects done in conjunction with the city's government, specifically city agencies. Public authorities, like the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), which runs New York's subways, and the city's Economic Development Corporation (EDC), which manages a wide portfolio of city properties and services, typically do not participate. Winning proposals are usually required to cost at least \$50,000, but can cost as much as the elected official has allocated

(often \$500,000 to \$1 million) or more, especially if they can combine their projects with those of other council members, or other officials, such as a borough president.

The costs of government capital projects can sometimes shock new participants. For instance, installing a curb extension in NYC can cost \$625,000 (NYC DOT, n.d.), and renovating school bathrooms can cost between \$400,000 and \$560,000 (Johnson, n.d.; Levin, 2020; Preston & Hechinger Report, 2019). These high procurement costs, along with restrictive rules set by agencies, can limit the number of projects that can be completed in any given PB cycle, and even slow or stall project implementation. For instance, as of 2019, none of the winning projects from my district had even broken ground (Yates, 2019).

Running an Election

Elections are run by volunteers and council staff members. Typically, voters may vote online, or at one of several poll sites, which officials often try to locate throughout their district to ensure geographic diversity of voices in participation. Volunteers can also run their own "pop-up" poll sites at locations they think will attract voters, such as parks, schools, and churches.

Implementing Projects (or Not): PB Results

In the three PB cycles I experienced, none of the winning projects were completed as of this article's publication. This experience is not unusual. According to an analysis by Gothamist, less than 6% of all participatory budgeting projects have been completed (Khan, 2018). This, unfortunately, can have lasting effects. During one PB cycle, I saw volunteers recruit community groups to support and campaign for their proposed projects. This high engagement drew dozens of volunteers, and hundreds of PB voters, and the projects these champions proposed were approved by the voters and funded. However, a year later, they and several writers of winning projects met and discussed the previous year's projects. All of them reported a similar experience relating to the project not being completed. In these instances, each of the volunteers of winning projects kept in contact with the elected official's office. The elected official then arranged

a meeting with the relevant city agency, who met with the proposal writer, council member, and other constituents, and explained several reasons why it would not be done.

This kind of result sets a very dangerous precedent – not only does it discourage one year’s volunteers from participating in future PB cycles, but it also damages faith in governmental processes and/or representative government to meet their community’s wants and needs.

Discussion/Lessons Learned

As a participant, I observed a few things that might be helpful to officials or organizations running PB programs. First, I found that the contributions of volunteers were key in making the PB process work. Volunteers generate ideas that otherwise would not have been generated by an elected official or their staff. Volunteers also devote their time and energy to attending meetings, drafting proposals, and running poll sites, and can help organize community groups or individuals to champion projects. By gathering support, these volunteers can effectively demonstrate to elected officials how constituents would benefit from completed PB projects.

That said, while volunteers are a strong element of PB programs, in my opinion, paid staff of the elected official should have final say on PB processes. In one cycle, the process relied too much on the volunteers to generate ideas, schedule meetings, and write proposals. Taken together, this slowed down the process, and caused us to almost miss our agency review period. In addition, without strong supervision from the officials who will implement the projects, generated proposals can be infeasible, either financially, practically, or politically. These projects are thus more likely to be rejected by the relevant government agencies, either at the review stage, or after a project has already been approved. In other words, volunteers should feel willing to suggest many elements such as project ideas and poll site locations, but the staff of elected officials should be willing to firmly say that certain projects cannot, will not, or should not be done.

Also, while the PB voting period can last for a day, a week, or even a month, I advise limiting the total number of events surrounding PB voting. I found that too many poll sites, activity fairs, and other events can overwhelm a body of constituents and the volunteers working to expand PB in their communities, because voters faced without a deadline usually defer voting to another time and thus may end up not voting at all.

Participatory budgeting also provides an unparalleled opportunity for those who do not have significant experience working with governments to learn more about how their government works. PB gave me the opportunity to meet with the staff of elected officials, and even meet the elected officials themselves. This made me feel less intimidated by my city’s government, and more confident to ask for needs or wants in my community. Staying in touch with the elected officials also showed me the importance of maintaining contact with them on issues, since keeping a project going often involved using methods such as calling the office, sending emails, and reaching out on social media. It also gave me the opportunity to learn new skills, such as running a pop-up poll site, and introduced me to activists and voters from other parts of my community district as well.

It also taught me more about the role of institutions in politics. When elected staff and PB volunteers suggested that I run a poll site in my church, I was initially taken aback. My experience in my religious institution was that this church tried to limit the role of politics in its day-to-day functions. I had never seen representatives from an elected official’s office either speaking or running a table after Mass, though many community organizations did these things. When my council member’s staff suggested hosting a pop-up site in this church, I reached out to my church’s staff, and found out this was a normal thing at other Masses, as well as in other churches of the same denomination. Going through the PB process thus also helped me learn more about my church’s community and helped engage fellow congregants in discussions about community needs after Mass.

Schools can also be key partners in successfully running a PB process. First, it was extremely encouraging that some of the most active volunteers in each cycle were

middle and high school students. That said, schools might be seen to have an unfair advantage in PB, as teachers can take class time to encourage whole classes to vote, and some schools even have assemblies where hundreds of students can vote at the same time, often on projects in support of their own school. In two cycles, I found that schools initially dominated the proposed projects, and in one case, won all the projects on the ballot. To address this outcome, the staff of the elected official running that PB cycle had to work hard the next year to solicit projects that were not only related to schools in order to ensure that constituents without minor children were still inclined to participate.

Finally, with budgets ranging from \$50,000 to \$1,000,000, the sums involved in PB can be insufficient for any city council or state senate district to fix the issues in their district. Indeed, some of the most popular types of projects, such as adding air conditioning systems to schools or fixing dilapidated or inaccessible bathrooms, seem to reflect a systematic failure to maintain public facilities by New York City's government (Gelinas, 2017; Lerner, 2018). In addition, I saw projects that cost-wise might seem to fit in a PB budget, like adding a soccer dome or pool "bubble," but which could not be implemented because of complex city procurement processes, bidding restrictions, lack of local expertise, and other factors that do not become visible until somebody proposes this type of project. While these challenges may be surmountable, they can require an elected official to have strong political will and demonstrate dedication to fighting for these projects over a period of what is likely to be years. Finally, communities within the same district can have distinct goals and different populations. For instance, the 38th City Council District, in which I live and vote, includes the neighborhoods of Red Hook and Sunset Park, which are two demographically different and largely physically disconnected communities.

A Role for Librarians in PB?

Librarians can be a particular asset in PB. As an information professional I had a general idea of what types of information New York City and local community organizations and media outlets published.

I was able to use my research skills to comb through these sources and find proposals from other districts that were previously funded, as well as budgets and other related documents that assisted with preparing PB proposals. In addition, I had done some grant writing for initiatives, such as the American Library Association's Muslim Journeys series and the National Endowment for the Humanities' Created Equal program. Thanks to these and other library writing assignments, I felt well prepared for writing project proposals according to city specifications.

During the research and writing process, I also became concerned about the city's barriers to information. At certain points, information that should have been available, such as the location of a closed subway entrance, was said by the Metropolitan Transit Authority to be unavailable, or in another case, that the city agency involved was not willing to provide the requested information. Because of that, I had to learn new information seeking skills, such as filing Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) requests, which helped me to better understand common obstacles faced by citizens and media outlets seeking access to government records in New York City. These barriers were especially challenging to me, because in my work as a librarian, I spend a lot of time helping patrons find the information they need for a wide variety of purposes. Having experienced how patrons can struggle to find information such as reports, statistics, or proposals, I tend to think that organizations and government agencies should make these kinds of materials easily discoverable and sharable. But the bureaucracy required to obtain these types of records showed me that other people who work for city and state governments do not feel the same way. Seeing that critical information often cannot be obtained without engaging in bureaucratic processes like FOIL requests has made me much more likely to file these in the future, as I know that FOIL requests must be acknowledged, and that timelines to return foiled documents can take between weeks and years. Therefore, any request that could potentially require FOIL should be filed early to maximize chances that records are returned before a project is completed.

Conclusion

While not without its challenges, I found taking part in PB to be a worthwhile process. It helped me and other participants learn how the government functions and introduced us to elected and appointed officials. PB can also generate new ideas for city projects or services that elected officials and government agencies would otherwise not be aware of and can also be a great tool for bringing community groups together to lobby for projects or sponsor poll sites.

I believe that librarians should consider working with and volunteering for PB efforts in their communities. The PB process can educate both staff and patrons about the roles and processes of government and may even be a tool for obtaining funding for their own libraries.

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