

Introduction

Douglas County, Nevada, in partnership with the Center for Priority Based Budgeting (CPBB) and Peak Democracy, is using a priority-driven participatory process in developing its budget. An innovative undertaking, Douglas County’s shift from an incremental approach to budgeting to a priority-driven budget invariably involved members of the public. The following case study illustrates how Douglas County involved the public using Open Town Hall as a major component of their community outreach strategy.



Overview of the Process

Shifting from an incremental approach of budgeting to a priority-driven budget is a complicated process. It involves government leaders and the public asking about what the purpose of their local government is. What government does, in priority-driven budgeting terminology, is referred to as a ‘community result’.

The participatory-budgeting process started and ended with the same series of questions that ask: why does our local government exist; what is the essential purpose of our local government; and, if our local government didn’t exist, what services and functions would be needed by the residents of the community it served?

First Steps

The first steps involved Douglas County developing a strategic plan in which they identified key priorities. Douglas County’s priorities or ‘results’ are to: provide reliable, well-maintained infrastructure; spur economic vitality; create a safe community; preserve the natural environment, resources and cultural heritage; manage growth and development; and provide financial stability (governance). The County involved the public, Council and staff to identify these results.

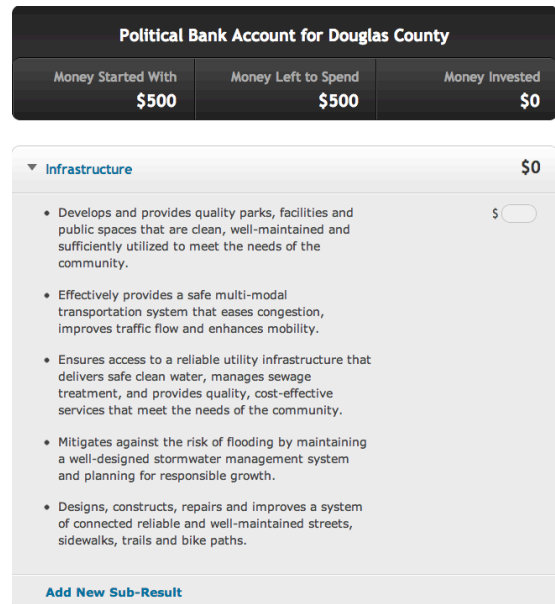
Enter CPBB, which used the strategic plan as a starting point in its



work with the County. The results identified in Douglas County’s Strategic Plan can be interpreted in a myriad of ways. For instance, a safe community could mean a place in which people feel comfortable walking at night and elsewhere it could mean a stronger law enforcement presence. CPBB facilitated workshops with County Commission and staff to expand on what exactly each priority, or community result, meant for Douglas County. They created approximately 4-6 sub-results for each community result, that together fully defined Douglas County’s purpose.

Public Engagement

With Peak Democracy’s Open Town Hall Priority 500 Budget Widget residents were invited to participate in an online participatory budgeting exercise. Respondents spent an imaginary \$500 in either a short version, allocating their funds to the 6 community results, or the extended version, allocating funds across all sub-results. Respondents were instructed to put a value on the community results that they thought were most important to Douglas County by spending the \$500. By spending no money on a community result, or sub-result, respondents were literally informing the County that they should stop providing services of any kind to meet that community result. Even a ‘small’ investment in any community result indicated that respondents believed that the County should strive to achieve that community result, even if it wasn’t their top priority. Additionally, respondents had the opportunity to add new sub-results and provide comments about why they allocated funds as they did.



In this way, the County collected invaluable data from respondents whose identity and location were verified. Community results were instantaneously compiled and available for download. And, comments were moderated to ensure that civility guidelines were met. The tools that are part of Peak Democracy’s Open Town Hall platform subscription enabled the County and CPBB to complete this part of the public engagement process effortlessly.

At the same time as respondents were allocating their \$500, County Staff were busy grading their programs based on how well they contributed to achieving the community results and sub-result identified.

Final Steps

Full circle, Douglas County came back to the same set of questions that was asked at the beginning of the process. What is the purpose of their local government? What should it be doing? Except, during this round of discussion Douglas County asks these questions in the context of much more

information. They can now look at the ranking of programs as reviewed by staff and their projected revenues for the coming year.

Additionally, they look at the community results from the Priority 500 Widget. By using the insight tools developed by Peak Democracy for Open Town Hall, Douglas County can look at how the imaginary \$500 was allocated over all respondents, drill-down into comments using the word cloud tool, and export the data instantly for staff reports.

Conclusion

Now, Douglas County has the information it needs to develop its first priority-driven participatory budget by making decisions to choose which projects and programs are of high enough priority to receive funding.

For more information visit:

<http://www.peakdemocracy.com>

<http://www.pbbcenter.org>