

One of the Most Important Things Local Officials Do That Hardly Ever Gets Noticed – The Budget

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I heard a minister say once that we sometimes fixate on things that appear to be urgent while missing or neglecting things that are important. A good example is an elected official in a NC municipality (not my current employer) who questioned whether the long-observed tradition of pre-meeting dinners should continue for Council and staff. There wasn't much time between the end of the work day and the beginning of the evening Council meeting, so providing a meal at City Hall seemed like a convenient way to solve a simple problem.

In an effort to be fiscally responsible, the well-meaning official asked about the cost of the meals (about \$3,000 annually) and made a motion to end them. It seemed like a good idea, so the officials voted to do away with the practice and save a little money. A few meetings later, the meals returned after everyone agreed that they were worth the cost after all.

Compare that to a common scene in cities and towns across NC each spring and summer: multi-million dollar budget proposals--presented in public meetings--that attract little attention.

- Maybe we as citizens are too busy to be part of the process.
- Maybe we're not interested.
- But maybe, **we're not sure what to ask or where to begin.**

Here's some basic information that should provide a better understanding of how municipal budgets are created.

The Process

North Carolina municipalities (*and counties*) are required to pass a balanced budget each year. While practices and deadlines vary from place to place, some steps are common to almost every city and town.

To better understand the process, you need to know a little about how the local government is set

up. Most cities and towns in our state rely on the Council-Manager model. In this type of organization, the manager acts as CEO, handling day-to-day duties using input and direction from elected officials.

In many cases, a manager serves at the pleasure of the elected officials, meaning he/she reports directly to them. The manager also has department heads in place to help with operations of local government. Some common examples include Police, Fire, Parks and Recreation, and other departments.

In many cases, preparation of a local budget begins months ahead of the June 30th deadline. It's not unusual for some to begin the process as early as January. Department directors bring their funding requests to the manager, who in turn approves or denies them. For example, the Fire Chief may be requesting a new engine to provide fire coverage to a new subdivision. If the manager denies them, the requests either die outright or go away until next year.

If the ideas are approved, they move on to the committee level or perhaps even to full Council. After the committee has tweaked the proposals to reflect Council priorities, the overall budget proposal is presented in an open meeting for public input, usually in late May or early June. Generally, after considering input from the public, the budget proposal is finalized in a public Council vote prior to July first, the start of the new fiscal year.

The entire process is public. You have the right to be in the room when your elected officials are considering budget items. Local media are invited to the meetings so they can witness the process. Yet, many budgets go through this open, months-long process **without a single comment from the public.**

How You Can Take Part

If you'd like to be better informed about what's going on in your city or town, you can find a wealth of information at the municipal website. In most cases, meetings of the budget committee (sometimes called finance committee) are announced well ahead of time. The announcement will include the time and location. You are invited to attend and see the process yourself.

Expect several of these meetings to be called every spring. Generally, they don't include a time for public comment, but many elected officials are happy to talk after the meeting wraps up. They may use your input as the process continues.

In most cases, documents that are used during the budget process are public record. You can request copies before or after the meeting. Don't be surprised if you get them after the meeting as documents are often being tweaked in the days and hours before a meeting begins.

After several months of committee meetings, the budget proposal is presented publicly during the early summer. **This is your chance to have your say** in front of the manager and the elected officials. Don't be surprised if they ask you to state your name and address before you speak so the town clerk can add it to the record.

What you say is up to you, but remember that elected officials are people, too; if they immediately go into defensive mode, your input may fall on deaf ears. If they recognize you as a pragmatic person who has shown an interest early in the process, you're much more likely to be heard.

Putting together an annual budget is difficult and time-consuming. **It's one of the most important tasks local officials are obligated to complete.** It's also a reflection of the community. Citizen input and awareness go a long way toward ensuring that the priorities of local budgets match the priorities of the communities they touch.

Other recent blog posts about online budget information, and Greensboro's 2016 work on participatory budgeting are:

- [Neighborhoods Vote to Spend \\$500K on 30 Projects in Greensboro](#)
- [Open Budgets Ho! The Way Forward for Online Budget Engagement](#)
- [Financial Transparency is Essential, but not the Entire Solution](#)