



CENTER FOR  
PUBLIC DELIBERATION  
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

# City of Fort Collins Budget Community Guides Summary Report

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# Executive Summary

This report synthesizes the comments from members of the Fort Collins community who engaged in conversations for our Community Guide process from July 14, 2022-August 30, 2022. In total, 7 Community Guides led conversations with 40 community members about budget priorities and how the city can best engage the community in the budget process in the future. Below, we report the primary themes that participants gave in response to five questions that asked them to reflect on their level of comfort interacting with the budget and priorities they had in specific outcome areas. Participants also provided feedback on things that could be improved in the budget itself and in the city's engagement efforts.

The analysis portion of this report contains four main sections: Reactions to the Budget Process, Discussion of Budget Outcomes, Reflections on the Engagement Process, and Advice for Future Engagement. The main themes from each section are briefly summarized below, though the full report provides a more thorough accounting of how community members expressed each theme.

## Reactions to the Budget Process

When asked to reflect on how they felt about the budget process and the outcomes and priorities, participants noted a few main themes:

- Difficulty understanding the budget process itself which often left participants feeling confused or frustrated. Many felt uncomfortable interacting with the budget, feeling as though they didn't have enough information or the correct resources to engage.
- Budget outcome areas and priorities that didn't seem to align with community sentiment in their small group conversations.
- Need for more access to the budget process in earlier stages and a need for more educational resources about how the budget process works.

## Discussion of Budget Outcomes

In each conversation, participants were asked to identify which outcomes/priorities felt most important to them and which ones felt less important. In our data, the following outcome areas were mentioned most often as most important:

- Environmental Health
- Neighborhood Livability and Social Health

While these came up most often as less important:

- Safe Community (specifically funding for policing)

- Recreation<sup>1</sup>

## Reflections on the Engagement Process

Participants raised several key themes when they discussed the engagement process itself:

- Lack of accessibility to the engagement process: participants felt the City's current efforts around budget engagement could be vastly improved and hoped more work would be spent on this engagement in future budget cycles.
- Value of small group, informative conversations: numerous participants noted they felt more informed and comfortable after their small group conversation with the Community Guides and expressed a desire for similar opportunities to share their input.
- Lack of transparency and communication of impacts: many participants noted concern that their feedback would not have an impact and hoped the city would be more transparent about how this information is used.

## Advice for Future Engagement

Based on the responses from participants when they discussed how the city could best engage the community in conversations about the budget, we identified several suggestions:

- More robust use of social media to keep the public informed about Council priorities and discussions.
- Improving community outreach by continued connection with groups like the CPD and other grassroots organizations throughout the community who are already doing some of this work.
- Consistency and accessibility: participants expressed a desire for the City to provide consistent and transparent updates about the budget process through various channels, provide multiple opportunities for people to engage, and implement compensation plans for those who participate.

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<sup>1</sup> Recreation and Culture represent one outcome area in the budget itself, but in these conversations, participants purposefully discussed only recreation when identifying outcomes that felt less important.

# Methodology

The Center for Public Deliberation solicited community members who were interested in hosting conversations on issues related to budget outcomes and priority areas. Community Guides completed a brief application and attended a four-hour training session that prepared them to conduct and facilitate conversations within their own communities utilizing a common questionnaire. They then hosted conversations throughout the City of Fort Collins. Generally, these were small group conversations with members of similar communities, though on occasion these were conducted in a one-on-one setting. Guides were instructed to ask participants to talk about their experiences according to each main question. These questions were designed by the Center for Public Deliberation with feedback from the City of Fort Collins. After each question, guides gave participants a few moments to write their reflections on provided worksheets.

The discussions and worksheets asked participants to respond to the following questions:

1. What are some initial reactions you have to the overall budget process?
2. What do you feel are the most important priorities for the 2023-2024 budget?
3. Which budget priorities feel less important?
4. How comfortable do you feel discussing and engaging with the city's budget?
5. What are the best ways for City Council to keep the community involved in decisions and ongoing conversations about the budget?

The data in this report was collected during conversations hosted by seven Community Guides conducted between mid-July and late-August 2022.<sup>2</sup> Guides who could connect with historically under-served populations were provided a small stipend for their work. The resulting dataset includes 40 surveys total. After data entry each comment was thematically coded by a team of researchers, who reviewed themes across questions and respondents. In the sections below, major themes are organized roughly according to the frequency with which they appeared in the surveys, taking into account that some Community Guides had conversations with a greater number of individuals and thus those communities may over-represented in the data.

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the work of the Community Guide program was disrupted by illness and scheduling issues. A few Community Guides had to cancel planned meetings due unforeseen circumstances. Others had a more difficult time soliciting participants due to a shortened timeline for engagement.

Of those participants who provided responses to demographic questions, 52% identified as female, 35% as male, and 12% as gender non-conforming. Seventy percent of respondents identified their race as white, 15% as Hispanic or Latinx, 5% as black or African American, 5% as two or more races, 2% as Asian, and 2% as American Indian or Alaska Native.<sup>3</sup> Guides engaged participants between the ages of 19-69 in conversation. Forty percent of respondents were between the ages of 19-29, 25% were between 30-39, 7.5% were between 40-49, 2% were between 50-59, 2% were between 60-69, and 2% were between 70-79. When reporting household income, 7% reported making less than \$10,000 per year, 2% between \$10,000 and \$15,000, 17% between \$15,000-\$25,000, 10% between \$25,000 and \$35,000, 7% between \$35,000 and \$50,000, 12% between \$50,000 and \$75,000, 7% between \$75,000 and \$100,000, and 10% more than \$100,000.

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<sup>3</sup> Where the numbers do not equal 100, the remainder of respondents declined to specify.

# Reactions to the Budget Process

Participants began their conversation by discussing their initial reactions to the budget process itself. The following themes were identified in the data from this section:

**Difficulty understanding the process.** Participants across several guide conversations felt as though the information they currently had about the budget process was not enough for them to fully engage in conversation about it or make any clear decisions. Many wondered how community members were being plugged into the process and how each of the outcome areas were decided on. This limited information led to some frustration among participants, leaving some feeling as though the City wasn't being transparent in their engagement efforts or was not trying hard enough to get useful information out to different areas throughout Fort Collins:

*"The process is hard to navigate and be a part of. The people giving feedback are a privileged set of individuals that have ample time and energy! e.g. clicking multiple links to find the budget in the first place."*

Additionally, several participants felt as though the information provided for the outcome areas and different offers was too vague to fully understand. Here, there seemed to be a distinct tension between providing information that is too complex and confusing, and not enough information for folks to understand the true intent of each outcome area and its goals. In our data it appeared that the participants who had ample time and resources felt comfortable engaging with the budget and had a good working knowledge of the process, but those who had limited time did not know where to begin and felt uncomfortable and even sometimes overwhelmed engaging with a lot of the information. This tension is highlighted well with these two quotes from different participants:

*"I have only spent an hour or so going through some of the docs, and there are thousands of pages of budget docs—so not feeling like I have a high level of comprehension."*

*"[I am] somewhat comfortable, but it has taken about 2 years to have any good idea on how this process operates."*

**Outcome areas and priorities not in line with community needs.** There was also robust discussion among many Community Guide groups surrounding how the outcome areas were identified and priorities within them established. Numerous participants mentioned that these various outcomes and priorities did not fully reflect what the community needed, especially in conversation about the Safe Community outcome area. Here, participants felt that a safe community needed equal access to necessities like water, housing, and community wellbeing and felt those items being in other outcome areas did not make sense. Furthermore, some participants noted that the Economic Health outcome should include things like a living wage and support for job creation. They expressed some frustration that most of the items in this outcome area seemed to focus more heavily on the economic health of larger businesses and the City itself:

*“The community has different understandings/definitions of the budget outcomes. For example, Social Health to us (those present today) includes mental health, whereas we do not consider mental health a safety priority.”*

**Need for more, and earlier, access to the process.** Participants in these conversations also noted various barriers to their accessing and participating in the different stages of the budget process. Some of these reasons included: no access to childcare for working parents, limited English proficiency and lack of items available in other languages, limited access to reliable internet, and limited access to transportation. These reveal the continued barriers community members are facing when it comes to fully engaging in processes with the City and other entities about important issues. Some also felt the opportunities available to them were too time intensive and often required those who work full time to either miss out on the opportunities or try to get time off work, which for many is not possible. Additionally, folks noted they had not received much information about any opportunities prior to the Community Guide process other than a community survey. They expressed a desire for there to be more engagement on the front-end of the budget process and many were frustrated that their feedback was being solicited so late in the process when they felt as though it wouldn't have as much of an impact.

*“...the community engagement portion of this process needs to be less time intensive, compensated, and conducted by local leaders and organizations that are trusted by community and whose reach extends to diverse populations.”*

# Discussion of Budget Outcomes

In the next section, each participant was asked which outcomes in the budget felt most important to them (and their community) and which outcomes felt least important. In the data, we identified that Environmental Health, and Neighborhood Livability and Social Health were discussed most often in this section. There was also helpful and robust discussion about what each outcome area meant to the participants which allowed them to identify priorities and services they felt belonged in different outcome areas than they are currently listed in.

**Important: Environmental Health.** Numerous participants across each Guide conversation listed environmental health in 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> on their list of most important outcomes. In these discussions, issues of water use, air quality, and sustainability in local business came up quite often. Overall, these discussions focused on how we can focus funding on services that help keep our local community clean, or air safe to breathe, and how we can deal with ongoing issues related to climate change. Here, as well as in other outcome areas, numerous participants noted that certain things under the outcome of Safe Community made more sense in the environmental and/or social health outcome areas of the budget:

*“I think that livable communities [are] huge as well as environmental health. I do not appreciate that things like flood mitigation and recreation management is lumped in with community safety.”*

**Important: Neighborhood Livability and Social Health.** Conversations about social health focused heavily on conversations on housing affordability throughout the city as well as how to make the community more connected. Here, numerous conversations also included issues of transportation and safety which are their own distinct outcome areas. Various participants noted that, at least for them, social health and livability of our neighborhoods hinged on the ability to feel safe and have access to robust transportation services throughout the city so that they did not feel disconnected from the rest of the community. Other participants noted that increasing diversity and access to cultural events was something they felt belonged in this outcome area as well.

*“Social health and environmental health. Not necessarily in the way the City describes them, but in terms of true sustainability, equity, and justice in terms of livable wages, land justice, [and] not putting profits and City awards over social and land/climate justice.”*

*“Social health: arts and social cohesion, mental health services. Neighborhood livability: mixed income housing. Many of these are not currently housed in these specific categories of the budget but should be. This further reflects incongruencies between City definitions and community definitions.”*



**Less Important: Safe Community.** When participants prioritized this near the bottom, they noted that while a safe community was something important to them, the way it was defined in the outcome and services being funded did not reflect what they felt “safe community” meant. The most common theme in discussions about safe community was the idea that policing did not make the participants present at these events feel safe and rather they wished more funding would be shifted into items like mental health care, housing affordability, and cultural connections. Here we see participants continued to find disconnections in how they viewed outcomes compared to the way the budget process currently organizes them. In various groups, there was also discussion about how funding could potentially be used differently to help communities feel safer:

*“Continuing to over-fund the police instead of redirecting those efforts towards social workers will only create a culture of fear. We need a culture of community based on qualified professionals designated to each issue.”*

**Less Important: Recreation.** Here, participants deliberately separated culture from recreation, which could be a larger reflection on earlier conversations about how budget outcome areas didn’t necessarily align with the community definitions of them. Many also felt that improvements in the overall culture of our community would come from increased investment in things like neighborhood livability and social health.

*“Recreation (keeping culture separate though), if culture, environment, and transportation are funded, recreation will occur naturally.”*

# Reflections on the Engagement Process

In their responses, participants identified various issues tied to the current engagement process as well as ongoing needs to feel more included.

**Lack of accessibility to the engagement process.** Numerous participants across conversations seemed to feel as though the City had not put the necessary amount of effort into engaging the public during earliest stages of the budget process. Much of the conversation focused on the idea that a large amount of the opportunities for engagement available required participants to physically go to a space or reach out to City entities to volunteer. They expressed a desire for more City representatives to go into communities and engage directly where they are rather than expecting them to continually show up to outside spaces where they feel less comfortable or have less access. Some participants also mentioned the community survey that was sent out to a random sample throughout the City, stating they felt this was not the most helpful way to gather feedback about such a complex process:

*“The initial survey, which I took, was designed to skew results and the options were vague enough to not prioritize what residents want. I also think that the accessibility of participation was not there. I wonder who was reached out to, how much time was required to participate, and how clear were the questions.”*

**Value of small group, informative conversations.** Respondents spent some time in their groups discussing how beneficial these small group conversations were not only for clarifying some of the complexities of the budget process itself but creating more accessibility and equity in conversations. Some felt as though the current, larger processes tended to privilege the loudest voices and often only reach out to what they called the “usual suspects”. Others noted that while the City did try to make sure to invite diverse audiences, they felt as though only “token minorities” were asked about their experiences. Many felt that small group conversations that included an informative element as well as an opportunity to discuss experiences and priorities were one effective way to try and work against some of these issues and barriers. Over a few groups, we saw mentions in notes that participating in the small Community Guide conversations helped people feel more informed about the budget and more comfortable interacting with it. One key here seemed to be that this process brought our Guides into various communities rather than the other way around.

*“[I’m] grateful that you would like to hear my voice; I urge you to continue listening to others without my privilege.”*

*“This method of sharing information with the community makes the budget more understandable and accessible.”*

**Need for increased transparency and communication of impacts.** This is a continued trend across various engagement efforts we have participated in throughout the last several years. Conversation among participants was similar in expressing a desire that the City communicate more transparently about how public input is being used to inform decisions. We see this often in small group conversations: participants feel wary about sharing their input because there is a lack of communication about how their voices will materially impact the outcome or decisions. Some participants in these conversations also felt the selection process for the community survey could have been communicated more clearly while others needed more information about how their input was going to be used by the City going forward. Additionally, folks shared their experience with previous input processes (whether they were organized by the City, CSU, or another entity in the community) and how they felt frustrated at the result.

*“I love the fact that the City is organizing these sessions, but I do wonder if the information will actually have an impact.”*

*“Honestly, I love the idea of making changes and getting the public’s opinion, but this happened with the CSU stadium (survey was given to the public and the majority said no thanks but they built it anyway).”*

# Advice for Future Engagement

Our final question in this process asked participants to provide feedback on how the City could work to improve their engagement processes around the budget. The answers here were various, which serves to reflect the unique engagement needs throughout the community. As practitioners, we know there is not a single solution to many engagement barriers, but we were able to identify three main suggestions reflected in the data.

**More robust use of various media and personal outreach efforts.** Participants belonged to various communities throughout the City and because of this diversity, we heard a variety of answers tied to the type of media people were best able to engage with. Numerous participants shared social media as one of the best ways to keep people throughout the Fort Collins aware of engagement opportunities. However, various other participants said they interacted more easily with hard media like flyers and other items hanging in places throughout the City they visit most often. Some also expressed interest in an email list that would send updates when engagement reports are available or when specific changes are made based upon community input.

In addition to this, participants across several meetings also noted a need for City representatives to be more present within the local community. They mentioned that City leaders and others should prioritize time in examining which communities most need outreach and then intentionally working to build connections within those communities by visiting them in person and spending time talking about upcoming opportunities for engagement and information.

**Increase connections with grassroots organizations/community groups.** Another suggestion we saw often in the data encouraged the City to spend more time identifying grassroots and community organizations throughout the City and giving them the funding and tools to do engagement. Many noted that an expansion of the Community Guide process could be a useful tool to make this more successful. Participants stated that many groups within our community are already doing some of this work, but they often lack the funding or other resources to do in on the scale they would like to.

*“Work with community [organizations]. We have so many connections in the community, are doing work to help meet city priorities, and we’re always overlooked for the help we could provide. We’re here—use us!”*

**Consistency, accessibility, and transparency.** Overall, an underlying theme in most of our guide conversations was tied to needing more consistent engagement opportunities that were accessible to diverse populations across the City and maintaining transparency about the budget process itself as well as where community input goes and what material impacts it has. In terms of accessibility, participants had numerous suggestions like offering more virtual events, scheduling in-person events at various times during the week, offering childcare stipends, and making sure interpretation and translation services were available. The most common suggestion we saw throughout the data was the need for compensation/stipends for participant time. In many conversations, respondents noted how time intensive the budget process could be and highlighted how challenging it can be for many local community members to volunteer time in the process. They stated that one of the most effective ways to remove this barrier would be to make sure people who participate in engagement processes are compensated for their time.

Ultimately, participants in these conversations wanted to see what changes their input was making in local decisions and they were hopeful the City could be more consistent in communicating those impacts. The participants our guides engaged throughout this process expressed a strong desire to be more consistently included in engagement opportunities throughout the City, but wanted to feel like their time was valued, their voice would have an impact, and that the end result would be a reflection of their needs and input.

***A note on engagement fatigue.***

Throughout the community, we have seen a continued trend of engagement fatigue: community members wanting to have their voices heard and have an impact on local decisions, but also feeling overwhelmed by various overlapping engagement opportunities and perhaps frustrated at a lack of clear communication about how their input is having an impact. We have seen lower than average turnout in several events in last 1-2 years. This can be connected to several factors: continued impacts of COVID-19 on participant comfort during in person events, the complexity of the issue, over engagement across multiple channels, and various barriers like lack of transportation, lack of available childcare, etc. In the sections above, there are various recommendations to addressing these issues which are helpful to consider as we work to engage our community around important issues like this one. There is no one cause of lower attendance but recognizing these various issues and constraints while working to provide the most accessible engagement possible is vital. We can do this work by doing things like: utilizing a Language Justice model in our events, working to identify ways to provide compensation for participants, and identifying ways we can provide transportation access and childcare so more community members are able to participate.

# Conclusion

We would like to reiterate our deep gratitude to the Community Guides who participated in this process. We deeply value their dedication and the time they spent crafting their conversations, inviting participants, and coordinating data drop off. None of the work we do in these spaces would be possible without passionate and committed community members like these.

It was clear through the data that these conversations had a positive impact on their participants, and many left their conversations feeling more informed about the process itself. Most importantly, they were able to sit down together and have important conversations with others in our community. That is vital. Engaging the community on complex issues like the budget is incredibly challenging, but our participants also provided us with helpful feedback on how we can all continue to improve the work we do to in engagement spaces. We are hopeful this input is put to good use as the City continues to work on adopting the 2023-2024 budget.