



CENTER FOR
PUBLIC DELIBERATION
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

City of Fort Collins Budget Process Summary

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Prepared for the City of Fort Collins by the Center for Public Deliberation



Executive Summary

On Wednesday, September 28th, the Center for Public Deliberation (CPD) and City of Fort Collins partnered to host an event for community members to interact with budget offers and work through an activity-based budget process with other participants. 29 community members attended this event and approximately 20 CPD students serviced as facilitators, note takers, and in some cases stayed to observe or participate in the conversations themselves. Each table also had one City employee whose task was to help clarify or explain specific budget offers as participants worked through the activity.

During the meeting, community members worked together to select an outcome area they wanted to discuss and then CPD student facilitators led them through an activity which asked them to look through current funded and unfunded offers in the recommended budget and decide where they might shift funding. The process utilized colored poker chips: green for funded offers and yellow for unfunded offers which were separated into two piles. In each outcome, there was a maximum number of offers that could receive funding and each group's task was to decide which offers to fund and unfund through group consensus. Once decisions were made, participants could move chips over into the pile of funded offers. After the activity, participants were asked reflection questions about the process itself and also how the City could better engage the local community conversations about the budget.

This summary will focus on recommendations for future engagement that were taken from table notes, student comments in their process reflections, and responses to a post event survey sent to all participants.

Advice for Future Engagement

Utilize Language Justice Consistently. We translated all participant materials and surveys into Spanish for this event, and incorporated Language Justice interpretation during the event. Five Spanish speakers registered to attend, though a few had to cancel their RSVP on the day of the event due to conflicting responsibilities. Reflections in the table notes show that Spanish speaking participants generally still feel excluded from numerous City engagement opportunities, and this is especially true for opportunities around the budget due to lack of available Spanish resources. For example, none of the budget offers or budget summaries were available in Spanish, the CPD had to translate these various materials for the purpose of the activity. Going forward, it may be useful to make sure all public-facing aspects of the budget can be available in both English and Spanish.

Additionally, Spanish speakers at the table noted their frustration in having to request Spanish interpretation at City events rather than simply having it available. The table discussion and student reflections of the process noted how this often creates additional barriers for community members who want to engage but are unsure events will be accessible to them. It also places the burden on our community members to make sure they have the interpretation services they need rather than having the same access as English speakers.

Incorporating Language Justice into community engagement events takes considerable time and effort, as well as the associated cost, but in our work throughout the community we have seen how offering translation and interpretation as a standard practice has increased access to our events and has helped many participants who often feel unwelcome or uncomfortable feel as though they can truly have a voice in important community discussions.

The Value of Activity Based Interactions. In table conversations, student reflections, and the post event survey, participants discussed ways the City could better engage the community around the budget. Invariably we heard “more events like this”. The process itself was complex and at times confusing (which reflects the complexity of the budget itself) but participants at each table noted they felt the exercise and conversation element helped them understand the complexity a bit better. Additionally, for some participants it helped them understand how much they didn’t know about the budget.

Many participants also noted the value of having this activity to help them understand the difficult decisions that come with funding various services and offers across the City. At one table, their decisions were made more difficult by the realization that many of the offers listed had jobs attached to them. If they removed funding, they would also be removing a job. The activity helped participants not only understand the complexity of the budget itself, but also the human element behind many of the offers. Some groups were only able to move one chip or reallocate funding from 1 or 2 budget offers. Participants noted this was because once they fully understood what the offer was funding, it became incredibly difficult to grapple with the potential tradeoffs of removing funding.

Others noted the activity and collaboration element helped diffuse tensions that sometimes come up in conversations about the budget and participants were grateful for the work done by table facilitators to ensure all voices were heard and everyone had an opportunity to learn from one another.

After the event, a brief survey was sent to all participants to better understand their experiences and solicit advice for how we could improve our activity for future events. Participants were asked to rank their responses to the following questions on a 4-point scale:

1. The process helped me understand the budget a bit better: **Average 3.27**
2. The facilitated conversation felt useful and robust: **Average 3.45**
3. City officials at the table helped clarify complex points: **Average 3.63**

As of 10/4/2022 we had received 11 responses to the survey.

Overall, participants felt this activity was a good use of their time and they left the event feeling more informed. Many also mentioned that having City officials sitting down amongst participants at tables was encouraging; they appreciated having the ability to have a face-to-face interpersonal conversation. This is reflected not only in responses to the post event survey, but also in table notes and student comments about the process.



A Need for More Accessible/Less Complex Information. During the activity, participants often struggled to figure out what each budget offer was funding, and they mentioned the names of the offers were quite confusing. Many mentioned it would be helpful for the names to be a bit clearer so folks could understand them briefly without having to reference other materials. Across numerous tables, our participants mentioned a need for more accessible information to the innerworkings of the budget so they could then work together to make a more informed decision. Often, we heard our participants say they simply did not have enough information about what each budget offer meant to truly decide about whether it should be funded or not. This was echoed in facilitator reflections as well. Our student facilitators noted a big challenge in making sure the conversation continued flowing and didn't become a question and answer session with the City official at the table. This was a struggle because of the complexity of many of the offers. Most of our facilitators mentioned this process would have been easier if the names of the budget offers were more self-explanatory or if there was a single-sentence explanation of each offer so they could rely less on the City experts and spend more time in the activity.

There was a strong desire to have this information condensed and clarified in a way that would be accessible for the average community member, not only in the language used but in the time it takes to read through all of the material that is currently available. Overall, participants were

pleasantly surprised at how transparent the City was being about information in the budget, but they wanted that information to be simplified considerably.

Additionally, numerous participants noted they weren't aware of all the ways they could learn about and engage around the budget, so they hoped for more clear communication about all those opportunities as well. This was especially true about earlier stages of the budget process. Participants at this event asked often how they could become involved in these engagement opportunities before the budget offers were set and the recommended budget was created. Going forward, it will be helpful for the City to clarify those opportunities and perhaps provide more activity-based events to help community members interact with the budget throughout the creation and adoption processes.

When asked how the City could communicate this information more effectively, participants mentioned a variety of modes: social media, newsletters, a larger presence on CSU's campus and hard media in grocery stores and other areas.

Final Thoughts

In our Community Guide conversations over the summer and during this event, we recognized the passion many in our local community have about discussing the budget as well as the various reasons why they are unable to fully engage during different stages of the process. We are hopeful that the time our community members spent in these important conversations and their feedback will be considered as the City continues to work on improving engagement around the budget and numerous other issues.



A word cloud of participant feedback words. The words are arranged in a roughly circular pattern. The words are: illuminating (green), community (pink), compromise (dark blue), elaboration (dark blue), collaborative (dark blue), complex (green), appreciation (green), complexity (green), union (green), engagement (dark blue), culture (pink), and confusion (pink).

After the budgeting activity, each table was asked to provide three words to describe their process. They are reflected in the above image