



MARCH-OCTOBER 2012

# AN EXPERIMENT IN LOCAL DEMOCRACY

**PEOPLE'S BUDGET REVIEW**  
10,000 VOICES STRONG



Darden Rice, President of the League of Women Voters of the St. Petersburg Area

## AMIDST A HIGHLY POLARIZED NATIONAL BUDGET

debate over revenues and spending cuts, The People's Budget Review was launched in March 2012 by a diverse coalition of neighborhood and community groups exploring new ways to engage residents in their local budgeting process. For years in St. Petersburg, the public was notably absent from one of the most important policy discussions facing any city: the allocation of common resources. In earlier years, it was typical for elected officials to outnumber residents

at the public budget summits as less than half of 1 percent of the population participated in the process at all. The most vocal were always special interest groups with direct ties to city funding and sponsorship. Among residents, there was a common sentiment that by the time the city was ready for public input, the most important decisions had already been made.

**For years in St. Petersburg, the public was notably absent from one of the most important policy discussions facing any city: the allocation of common resources.**



In the years following the collapse of the housing market, St. Petersburg had dealt with dwindling property tax revenues almost entirely by cutting services and city staff. As housing values continued to decline, residents saw their local tax burdens decrease year after year,

**WWW.PEOPLESBUDGETREVIEW.ORG**

# TAKE THE SURVEY

# HAVE A VOICE



along with their access to quality-of-life services like public libraries, clean parks, and pools. In the 5 years leading up to the launch of the People’s Budget Review (PBR), the city had lost over \$100 million in revenue as a result of declining property values, what Mayor Bill Foster described as a “true tax cut”.

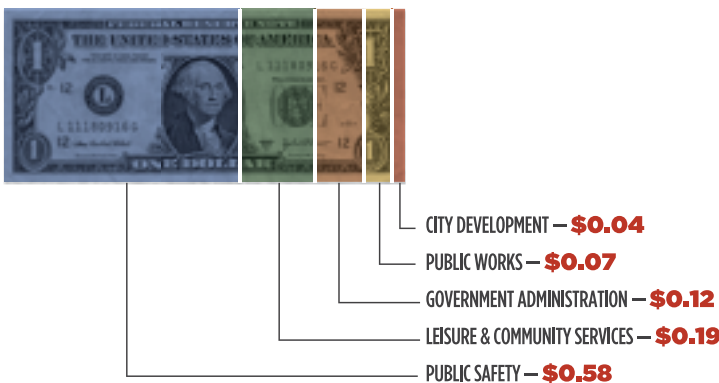
As another year of budget cuts loomed on the horizon, The People’s Budget Review kicked-off their campaign to take the budget process directly to city residents. Armed with a comprehensive survey designed to gather opinions and local priorities, volunteers took to the streets canvassing neighborhoods, interviewing residents, and educating people about the difficult

decisions facing their city. The survey used graphics and charts to break down city spending in a clear and accessible format while also asking respondents to allocate public resources based on their own vision for St. Petersburg. Residents had the opportunity to submit their own ideas and systematically rank support for various proposals on economic development, housing, public safety, government efficiency, and much more.

The coalition used social media as well as traditional “nuts & bolts” organizing strategies to bring the city budget to every neighborhood in St Petersburg. Canvassers knocked on over 5,000 doors while a local polling agency volunteered to carry out

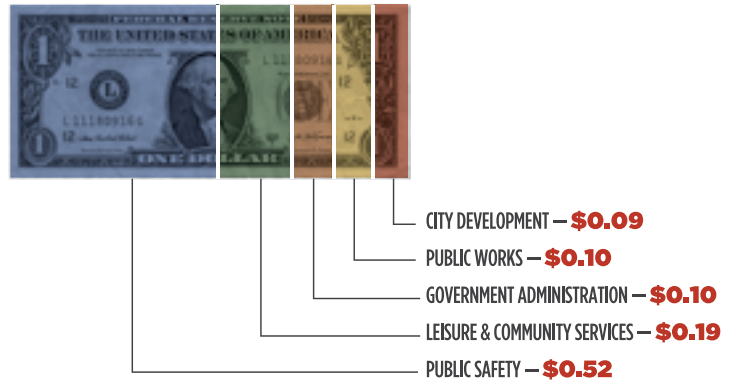
## CITY PRIORITIES

ONE CENT = \$2.85 MILLION



## RESIDENT PRIORITIES

ONE CENT = \$2.85 MILLION



### PUBLIC SAFETY

Law enforcement, fire control & prevention, EMS.

### LEISURE & COMMUNITY SERVICES

Parks and recreation, libraries, neighborhood organizations, housing and community development, administration, veteran/social/homeless services.

### GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION

Finance department, human resources, budget & management, legal department, mayor’s office, city clerk, audit services, city council.

### PUBLIC WORKS & INFRASTRUCTURE

Stormwater, pavement & traffic operations, supply management, engineering, administration.

### CITY DEVELOPMENT

Planning and economic development, codes & compliance, marketing, real estate and property management, transportation and parking, downtown enterprise facilities, administration.

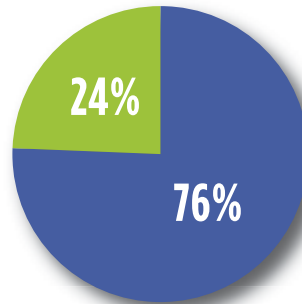


Over 100 residents at the first public budget hearing at J.W. Cate Recreation Center

phone surveys with more than 30,000 of the city's registered voters. Volunteers spent hours at bus stations conducting hundreds of surveys with residents using a simple pitch, "Would you like to have a say in how the city is spending your local tax dollars?" PBR volunteers from the University of South Florida even held workshops with local high school students to help explain how the local budget directly affects their quality-of-life through cuts to park funding, libraries hours, and summer youth jobs programs

## A Pivotal Shift in Public Opinion

In April, PBR's efforts paid off at the first of three public budget hearings where over 100 residents flooded the J.W. Cate Recreation Center for a standing room only crowd. The coalition released results from over 2,000 surveys that illustrated a definitive rejection of austerity policies and strong support for investment, not further cuts. The Mayor later noted, "I was overwhelmed by the community response at the first Budget Summit. In the midst of a standing-room-only crowd, dozens of citizens stepped forward to affirm their passion and appreciation for the quality-of-life services provided by the city, and all but a few expressed a willingness



**76% of residents supported a modest increase in the millage rate to maintain quality-of-life services, while 24% were opposed.**

# Residents: Raise tax rate

Nearly 30 spoke at a St. Petersburg budget meeting, most in favor of a property tax hike.

**BY MICHAEL VAN SICKLER**  
*Times Staff Writer*

**ST. PETERSBURG** — In Bill Foster's first two years as mayor, public meetings on the budget have been lonely affairs, where staff members outnumber the residents who show up. Not so Wednesday night. A standing-room only crowd of nearly 100 people crammed into the J.W. Cate Center on 22nd Avenue N to deliver a message to Foster and City Council members that suggests a turning point in St. Petersburg's history. It's time to raise property taxes. "Stop nickel-and-diming our residents on the way to balancing the budget," said Aaron Dietrich, a Historic Kenwood resident. "We have a mechanism in place that you need to use. It's called the property tax." St. Petersburg has gone at least 22 years without raising the rate, which dropped from \$9.25 per \$1,000 of taxable value in 1990 to its current rate of \$5.9125. But those who depend on city services said the rate needs to go back up. "People are cutting back their own budgets, where they're choosing between paying for the Internet or eating," said Ernie Coney, president of the Friends of the Johnson Branch Library on 18th Avenue S. "Nobody has a problem with millage going up. They need libraries to stay open so they can use computers, which they need to survive." St. Petersburg's property tax rate has been the same since 2007 despite an economic downturn that continues to drain city coffers. Property tax revenue has fallen a total of \$100 million during that time, causing the tax to bring in \$30 million less a year than it did in 2007. The city has handled the short-

**See BUDGET, B8**

Tampa Bay Times, April 25, 2012

**Volunteers spent hours at bus stations conducting hundreds of surveys with residents using a simple pitch, "Would you like to have a say in how the city is spending your local tax dollars?"**

to pay a little more, pennies a day, to maintain positive momentum and sustainability well into the future."

PBR's momentum was sustained into September when the final vote on the budget took center stage in local politics. The Mayor decided in July to introduce a so-called "Fire Readiness Fee" to generate the revenue residents were demanding. However, the fee proved a

**Criticized for being highly regressive, the Mayor's Fire Readiness Fee became a controversial issue on which PBR was compelled to gather public input.**



**PROPERTY A**

**\$22,032**

Bartlett Park

Millage: \$22/yr  
Fire Fee: \$78/yr



**PROPERTY B**

**\$127,536**

Disston Heights

Millage: \$127/yr  
Fire Fee: \$97/yr



**PROPERTY C**

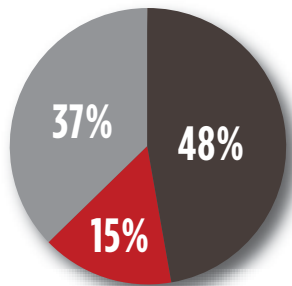
**\$1.5 million**

Snell Isle

Millage: \$1,500/yr  
Fire Fee: \$222/yr

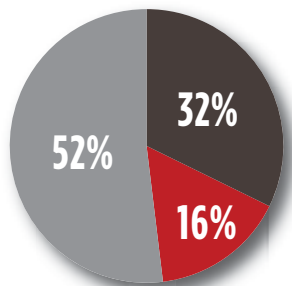


Louis Brown III of NAACP, (photo courtesy of Tampa Bay Times | Scott Keeler)



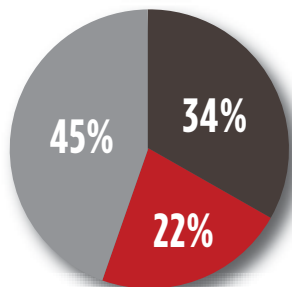
**Raise the Millage Rate?**

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know



**Introduce the Fire Fee?**

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know



**How Much Revenue?**

- Enough for Deficit
- Enough Plus Surplus
- No Revenue

very controversial alternative to the obvious option of raising the millage rate, which had not been increased in over 20 years. Considered a highly regressive revenue source by many residents, the Fire Readiness Fee became another important issue on which PBR was compelled to gather public input. The coalition developed another survey to explain the complex details of the proposed "Fire Fee". The survey gathered data using a comparison of the potential financial impact facing high and low-income households in the city (above). This phase of the project was officially launched on the steps of City Hall with several City Councilmembers joining the coalition in support of their efforts to engage the public on these difficult political decisions.

Like those preceding it, the final budget hearing was very well attended and residents echoed a consistent theme of increased investment and efficiencies. PBR released their results days earlier to the *Tampa Bay Times* showing a majority of the public supported a millage increase over the Fire Readiness Fee. Interestingly, results also showed that a near majority supported generating

more than enough revenue to close the current deficit in order to help deal with long term budget issues.

After a contentious and unpredictable 5 hour hearing, St. Petersburg finally decided to raise property taxes for the first time in 22 years. City Council voted 6-2 to eliminate the Fire Fee and adopt a more equitable increase in the millage rate, amounting to roughly \$8 a month for the average household and raising approximately \$10 million to close the city's 2013 deficit. At the end of the day, over 6,000 residents had participated in the FY2013 budget process, and as a result, quality-of-life services in St. Petersburg have been protected and paid for according to the will of the people. Indeed, it was the most democratic budget process in the recent history of the Sunshine City.

## What's Next for The People's Budget?

A balanced budget with no cuts to public services is certainly an accomplishment in our current economic climate, but the coalition's efforts will not be stopping there. Unfortunately, the current budget lacks a comprehensive vision for the future. Many of St. Petersburg's most important challenges are not being addressed and for that reason the People's Budget Review will be taking on important issues like housing, education, economic development & job creation, public safety, government efficiency, and much more.



Christian Haas of Awake Pinellas speaking at the first Public Budget Summit

**PBR's goal is to develop consensus among residents around a common vision for the future of St. Petersburg.**



Christain Haas (Awake Pinellas), Bill Hurley (Awake Pinellas), Jasmine Carter (Occupy St. Pete), Timothy Martin (CONA), Aaron Dietrich (SEIU-FPSU), Kofi Hunt (Awake Pinellas)

PBR's goal is to develop consensus among residents around a common vision for the future of St. Petersburg. It is with this spirit that the coalition intends to explore resident's opinions on long-term questions of investment and quality of life; questions about what sort of city local residents want to live in. PBR is now planning a community summit to bring together residents interested in exchanging ideas and building relationships around shared perspectives for a stronger city. PBR is also looking to step up its organizing efforts by fostering more neighborhood volunteers to continue developing an infrastructure for direct, local democracy that can tackle other issues beyond the city budget.

## Never before in the history of St. Petersburg have so many everyday people had their voices heard in how their local tax dollars are spent.

The People's Budget Review is just getting started. To get involved you can volunteer on the official website at [www.peoplesbudgetreview.org](http://www.peoplesbudgetreview.org) or join the discussion on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/peoplesbudgetreview](http://www.facebook.com/peoplesbudgetreview) and on Twitter, [@PeoplesBudgetSP](https://twitter.com/PeoplesBudgetSP).

We would like to thank all those residents and volunteers who have made the People's Budget Review project a success. Never before in the history of St. Petersburg have so many everyday people had their voices heard in how their local tax dollars are spent. Thank You.



Residents filling the Manhattan Casino at the final public budget summit.



The iconic PBR pin was passed out to residents before the public budget hearings

92%

Support a local ordinance requiring banks to help pay for the upkeep of foreclosed properties

89%

Support increasing efficiencies and cost savings without cutting services or service providers

84%

Rate economic development (workforce training, increased job opportunities, and support for local businesses) as an important City service

78%

Are opposed to further cuts in quality-of-life services provided by the city

75%

Support establishing health clinics to save on insurance costs for public employees

66%

Are in favor of requiring that city funded contracts be completed by local residents and local businesses