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.

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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,

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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**

- **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.

### Resident Priorities
**One Cent = $2.85 Million**

- **City Development**
  - $0.04
- **Public Works**
  - $0.07
- **Government Administration**
  - $0.12
- **Leisure & Community Services**
  - $0.19
- **Public Safety**
  - $0.58

- **City Development**
  - $0.09
- **Public Works**
  - $0.10
- **Government Administration**
  - $0.10
- **Leisure & Community Services**
  - $0.19
- **Public Safety**
  - $0.52
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.

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 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.

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.

**PBR’s goal is to develop consensus among residents around a common vision for the future of St. Petersburg.**
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 or join the discussion on Facebook at www.facebook.com/peoplesbudgetreview and on Twitter, @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.