

Participatory Budgeting

Community Solutions to Community Problems

Jesse Strecker

What does a community do when its needs aren't being met? When the government neglects it, when the tax dollars don't come, when the projects meant to solve its problems fall short, or miss the mark entirely?

Organize to make the decisions yourself, of course! Take as much of the public budget back into your hands as you can. Propose, research, and vote on your own solutions to the problems in your community. That is exactly what people living in cities across the world have been doing in greater and greater numbers, ever since Porto Alegre, a city in Brazil, opened up its budget for a process known as Participatory Budgeting in 1989.

After spreading across Latin America, Western Europe, parts of Asia and Africa, Participatory Budgeting (PB for short) has made its way to North America. Chicago's 49th ward has been practicing PB since 2010, deciding collectively how

to spend the neighborhood's \$1.3 million of discretionary funds. Following months of organizing by a coalition of groups in New York City, four city districts have developed and voted on their first round of projects in March of this year.

The results? A new van for Meals on Wheels in Harlem, new computers for a public school in Queens, and a community composting system in Brooklyn. Also, more than 4,000 people became actively involved in determining the future of their community. A recent survey found that 82% of participants plan to become involved with a community organization after voting.

PB isn't fixing everybody's problems. The amount of money residents can use is relatively small. On top of that, PB has no input on how taxes are raised. And given how wealth is consolidated in the hands of the 1%, PB runs the risk of making governments look like they invite democratic participation when in fact they do more to protect corporate wealth. If the process doesn't grow to take more control of how governments decide their budgets, it runs the risk of losing relevance as marginalized communities face more pressing matters.

But, hey, if we fight for it, maybe we could get control of a chunk of the city-wide budget... and then maybe the state-wide budget! Who knows what will be next?

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In 2009, Toronto Community Housing tenants decided how to invest \$9 million on ideas that will improve tenants' quality of life. Now they are in their 11th year of Participatory Budgeting. <www.torontohousing.ca/participatory_budgeting>.

**HOW WOULD
YOU SPEND
\$1 MILLION
OF THE
CITY'S MONEY?**