

The City of Menlo Park: *Your City/Your Decision* Case Study

The Problem

In the spring of 2005, the City of Menlo Park forecast a \$2.9 million gap between revenues and expenditures in the General Fund for the upcoming fiscal year 2006-2007. After having gone through years of trimming the budget, it was still not in balance. Difficult but necessary decisions lay ahead, regarding service reductions, revenue increases, and alternate ways of providing services at lower costs. The City required a sustainable solution, but wanted to implement a solution with community support.

What We Did

The City of Menlo Park enlisted the help of Community Focus to develop a process to not only solicit and gather community input, but also to educate residents about the important budget issues at stake. The resulting process was called *Your City/Your Decision*.

There were two phases to this community conversation process. The first phase gathered information about the priorities of the community through a survey that asked residents to balance the budget. Each household and business received a survey with information about City services, their current net costs, the potential impact of reduced net costs, and potential revenue options. The respondents were then asked to give input on their particular priorities by using net cost reductions and/or revenue increases to balance the budget.

From this data, the City staff developed a list of possible budget-balancing strategies (e.g. various levels of net cost reductions, alternative ways to provide a service, revenue increases, etc.) to address the community's priorities. In the second phase, the City presented these strategies in three Community Workshops. Residents were arranged in small groups to simulate what a City Council might experience. The small groups deliberated over the possible strategies, with each group voting for or against each presented strategy and finishing with a balanced budget solution. The City Council was then able to use this information to develop a balanced budget.

Why We Chose this Process

Conventional community feedback processes (town-hall meetings, public hearings, etc.) are often limited in their effectiveness. Not only do a small number of community members participate, but the feedback received is often general, one-sided and uninformed. This type of information is often not particularly useful for policy decisions.

The process used in *Your City/Your Decision* delivered specific and usable information for policy-making. Phase I gave community residents background information in order to elicit an informed opinion. An informed opinion is more stable and reliable than one without background

information. In addition, the budget-balancing exercise forced community residents to make necessary trade-offs in describing their priorities for city services. This information gave the City a much clearer picture of which services are most important when all services are considered together in context. Phase II elicited feedback about specific budget-balancing strategies, once again, in a trade-off context. The input evolved through a group process of deliberation that challenged individual community members with other perspectives as they were required to develop budget solutions as part of a group.

Both phases offered education about the complexity of the budget shortfall and how City services are funded. They demonstrated that there are no easy solutions, and difficult decisions are sometimes necessary.

The tools used in this process – the survey and the workshops – were complementary in their strengths. The surveys offered a community-wide reach and methodological strength. The workshops offered opportunity for deliberation, live dialogue and group creativity. Combined in this process, they create a more powerful tool in eliciting community input and developing community support regarding a sustainable, balanced budget solution.

The process was implementation-oriented. A community engagement committee was established to help oversee the outreach process. They were not only a planning committee, but also implemented the community engagement plan. An implementation focus utilized available resources (stakeholder time and energy) to help successfully carry out the project without over-extending City resources.

This process gave the City of Menlo Park community input on the immediate difficult decisions that were necessary to bridge the budget shortfall. Long-term solutions were also discussed by the community engagement committee, but the focus was on the urgent budget-balancing decisions facing the City.

Community Focus directed all aspects of the project, working with the City's lead project staff: the City Manager, Assistant City Manager and the Finance Director. Community Focus also coordinated the subcontractors, facilitated an Outreach Subcommittee of the community engagement committee in order to design the project outreach plan, and developed outreach materials for the process. The City's lead project staff worked with internal staff to develop *Your City/Your Decision* project materials with input from the Community Focus team. City staff also implemented outreach through a variety of City programs and resources. Community Focus also advised on navigating political and community issues.

Results/Outcomes

- Successful community outreach resulted in the City receiving over 1,600 responses to the Phase I survey
- An estimated 225 residents participated in Phase II Community Workshops
- 93% of the workshop groups chose to balance the budget using a combination of net cost reductions and taxes; 7% chose to balance the budget through net cost reductions only

- On average, workshop participants “raised” \$1,573,000 through net cost reductions, and \$1,314,000 through increased taxes to erase the \$2.9 million dollar deficit.
- The process developed community support and understanding for the difficult decisions which may be necessary

Lessons Learned

1. **The community does care.**

It is often assumed that community members do not care enough to participate in a complex community engagement process. The success of this process demonstrates that when given a meaningful opportunity to participate with an adequate level of background information, community members will invest thoughtful time and energy into an urgent community issue.

2. **Enlist community members to help with civic engagement.**

A community engagement advisory committee with invested stakeholders can provide a great deal of practical support in project implementation.

3. **A committed City staff and City Council are important.**

In any civic engagement process, the conveners of the process must be ready and committed to helping make it work. That includes reaching out to as many members of the community as possible, providing background information that clarifies and educates, and most important, being there to listen to and seriously consider the input when it is given.

4. **There are a variety of ways to engage the public’s participation, and a variety of tools to get information from the public.**

Different people engage in different ways; some go to meetings, some prefer interacting online, others will fill out a survey. In addition, multiple information-gathering tools (e.g., questionnaires vs. community workshops) offer a broader scope of information to use in policy-making discussions.

In Closing

Your City/Your Decision offered the City of Menlo Park a process in which the City was able to gather specific and informed community input on service priorities as well as specific budget balancing strategies. It was an important and significant enhancement of an existing process that also utilized the expertise of City staff and the deliberations and final decisions by the City Council. This process also supports the existing budget process by developing community support and understanding for potentially unpopular decisions that may be necessary down the road.