Giving Residents a Say in City Spending

Five years after its U.S. debut, participatory budgeting is growing. Informal opinions suggest this is good for residents, who gain new insight into community needs, what makes local government work, and why planning is integral to that process.

It's good for planners, too. "It alerts planners to the needs and desires of people and places in communities," says Rachel Weber, an associate professor of urban planning and policy in the University of Illinois at Chicago's Department of Urban Planning and Policy. "We don't have too many systems in place intended to provide that kind of information."

Vallejo, California (pop. 115,942), on the northern shore of San Francisco Bay, is the latest place to employ participatory budgeting, having adopted it in 2013 following its emergence from municipal bankruptcy. It is the country's first citywide application of PB. In February, Vallejo began its second cycle under the PB scheme.

"It's great from an educational point of view as far as learning what goes into planning," says Andrea Ouse, AICP, planning manager of Vallejo's Economic Development Department's Planning Division. "We've found it's a good process to convey the importance of planning very early on in a project."

PB began in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989, as a way to overcome inequality and improve living standards in the city's poorest neighborhoods. The notion has since spread to hundreds of cities worldwide.

Chicago's 49th Ward was the first U.S. jurisdiction to adopt it, for the 2009-10 fiscal year, followed by three more wards, eight New York City districts, and one district in San Francisco.

The Obama administration approved PB in December 2013 as a legitimate public input vector for determining how to spend federal Community Development Block Grant funds. This year, Boston launches "Youth PB," in which schoolchildren will decide how to spend $1 million.

PB works roughly this way: A steering committee organizes neighborhood assemblies to solicit project ideas and volunteers to vet them. The volunteers determine viable projects and their estimated price tags, and place them on a community ballot. Winning projects receive funding, giving residents control over a portion of the city's actual budget. (More on the process is at www.participatorybudgeting.org.)

Marti Brown, the planner who brought PB to Vallejo when she sat on the city council (she stepped down in January), says she found it while researching alternative budget methods and thought it could help heal rifts between citizens and city hall.

The city is beginning its first general plan update since 1983, and "it'll be interesting to see, especially this year, now that the general plan is on everybody's mind," how experience with PB affects that undertaking, Brown adds.

Brown, who is the executive director of the North Franklin District Business Association in Sacramento, is trying to bring PB to California's capital, but "the politics are very different than in Vallejo," she says.

—Jon Davis

Davis is a Chicago-based freelance writer. He is a volunteer on the PB49 Leadership Committee, which helps steer the participatory budgeting process in Chicago’s 49th Ward.