

Participatory Budgeting Program

Freehold Borough initiates efforts to involve the public in town spending

By Ron Griffiths and Kevin Kane,
Councilmen, Borough of Freehold



This small central New Jersey borough is less than two square miles with a diverse population of 12,000. The borough faces the same serious challenges as many New Jersey municipalities: a burgeoning school population, an aging infrastructure, and the lack of appropriate funding from both the state and federal government.

We won't make significant progress unless our residents are knowledgeable about, and interested in, their community. A few years ago, Councilman Ron Griffiths shared the idea of a technique he read about, Participatory Budgeting (PB), to Mayor J. Nolan Higgins and Business Administrator Joe Bellina. PB is a democratic process allowing community members to decide how to spend a portion of the town's budget.

The rest of the council and borough professionals were briefed on the concept, and all favored reaching out to the community. The borough had previously established an ad hoc Innovation Committee (IC) consisting of volunteers. It was decided to again utilize these members for this program.

The IC was briefed on the concept and history of PB, and our goal to increase resident participation.

Active Inspirations



Empty Voting Booths

A 2016 Portland University study clearly showed a significant problem with voter apathy.

30 largest cities showed local election turnout was dismal.

57 median age of the voters

15% Percentage of registered voters who exercised their constitutional right to vote in cities like Dallas and Las Vegas.

Inspired by these numbers, Freehold Borough's Innovation Committee is determined to engage residents.

Participatory Budgeting

With Councilmen Kevin Kane and Griffiths acting as facilitators, the committee set guidelines, created definitions, and established timelines as well as the methodology for developing the program. Business administrator Bellina was in contact with a New York City District using PB, and we held conference calls with a fantastic group in the Cambridge, MA, finance office about their program. With their help we began to shape our version of PB.

Hearing the public

We don't have a discretionary budget large enough to underwrite PB. Instead, we used our capital budget to fund it. However, we didn't increase the capital budget, deciding we could and should delay some of our plans to accommodate projects proposed and voted on by our residents. The total amount was to be approximately \$200,000 plus some possible soft costs.

All projects were proposed by the

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Attorneys at Law | 15 Mountain Boulevard, Warren, New Jersey 07059

Phone: (908) 757-7800 Fax: (908) 757-8039 Web: www.dbnjlaw.com Blog: www.dbnjlawblog.com

Participatory Budgeting

public, defined as anyone age 14 and above who are residents of the borough, or involved stakeholders. Our population is approximately 40% Latino, many are citizens and many are not. We are dependent upon volunteer firefighters and EMS. As calls increase and volunteers are harder to enlist, we can't afford to ignore this large segment of our community. When asked why we were including non-citizens, the reply was simple. If your house is on fire, are you going to ask if a firefighter has a green card?

“When we began the project, we learned that we were the first to initiate a PB program in New Jersey.”

Likewise, questions were raised about 14-year-old participation. In reply we cited our goals of engaging and empowering the public. Giving them a voice in the decision-making process. Educating our younger population about the power of the vote is important.

Some people asked why we, the elected officials, were giving up our responsibilities to allocate tax dollars. We agreed that was part of our job. However, that didn't make us the smartest people in town, and just maybe others have even better ideas than we do. Fortunately, the naysayers were few and the public embraced the PB program.

Process in progress

The IC members went to various organizations to promote the PB program. All the normal media outlets were utilized. When the marketing phase was done, we announced the dates for making proposals. These could be submitted online at our

website, or by “hard-copy” for those without computer access.

For a fledgling program, we are happy with our results. There were 33 projects proposed. The committee had vetting rights to ensure the programs met our definitions as infrastructure projects, low maintenance, on public property and have at least a five-year life.

Then the proposals were forwarded to BA/Purchasing Agent Bellina and our engineers to determine feasibility and develop cost estimates. The total number of acceptable projects was 13.

These included: shared costs for a sidewalk repair program, water fountains in a park and downtown, concrete chess tables in the parks, new and more trash/recycling receptacles, improved street lighting, a floating fishing dock and a pedestrian bridge at Lake Topanemus, an off-leash dog park, borough welcoming signs, free WIFI in the business district, sidewalks on a street that lacked them, and digital speed warning signs near a school.

On the evening of September 11, a Townhall meeting was held to allow the persons proposing the final projects to present their ideas. It wasn't a standing room only crowd, but there were more people than at any normal council meeting.

Voting took place from Sept. 11 to 16, and resulting in 346 votes cast. That may seem like a light turnout; however, it compares favorably with other local elections not held on Election Day. It is more votes than larger neighboring towns get for fire district and school board elections.

The winning projects were announced on Sept. 26, 2017, in a video posted on our website. Top vote-getting projects were all public safety issues. Our residents, given the opportunity to choose, selected improvements they felt were needed, including the shared cost sidewalk repair program, additional street lighting, and the safety pedestrian bridge at the lake.

Since the vote occurred, the financing has been approved by the governing body. The procurement process has begun, and the IC has met to review “lessons learned.”

Requirements List

Participatory Budgeting Projects were required to be:

Capital improvements to our infrastructure

No, or low maintenance costs

Constructed on public property

Have a life-expectancy of at least five years

Getting started in your town

Participatory Budgeting is not an easy program to initiate. It starts with the support of the mayor, governing body, and the town professionals. You need strong advocates, and we had those in Mayor Higgins and BA Joe Bellina. You need devoted volunteers, especially if you don't have a paid staff to carry the workload.

Our IC committee met at least 25 times and dedicated hundreds of hours—and the work continues as we develop our baseline data. We have also sent out a survey to assist us in making improvements for future years.

When we began the project, we learned that we were the first to initiate a PB program in New Jersey. We are confident the program will expand in NJ, and we have been asked to meet with another town interested in PB. Without committee members Joseph Deroba, Ron DeMarco, Annette Jordan, Joan and Reimer Leuth, Joe McArdle, and Don Schaffner, this wouldn't have been possible. 🍷

Addendum: The Freehold Borough Participatory Budgeting was an honorable mention award winner in the 2017 New Jersey Department of Community Affairs and the New Jersey League of Municipalities Innovation in Governance Awards.