UCLA

Policy Briefs

Title

Whose Budget is it Anyway? Demystifying the City of Los Angeles Transportation Budgeting Process

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3k56t02m

Author

Stiegemeyer, Katherine

Publication Date

2020-07-21



Whose Budget is it Anyway? Demystifying the City of Los Angeles Transportation Budgeting Process

Katherine Stiegemeyer, MURP • 2020

Issue

A city's budget is simultaneously a technical process of estimating revenues and costs, while also a highly political process in which scarce resources are allocated across competing city priorities. Because of this tension, the budget is an area of city governance where critical decisions are made that have direct consequences for equity, but where there has historically been relatively limited direct public involvement. Previous research on public budgeting has largely taken the perspective of the city and how the city might improve its budgeting process. However, research is needed that might directly inform the perspective and expand the capabilities of community-based organizations working to advocate on budget priorities from outside the city government.

Working with Investing in Place, a transportation advocacy nonprofit, this research analyzes the budgeting process in the city of Los Angeles, and specifically the role of transportation funding in this process. The research attempts to answer two questions:

- What is the transportation budgeting process in Los Angeles?
- 2. What are the opportunities for community-based organizations to intervene in and advocate for the transportation budget in order to affect change?

Study Approach

This research uses a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Information was gathered through two methods: professional interviews with city of Los Angeles staff involved in or knowledgeable on the budget, and focus groups with a cohort of members of community-based organizations

interested in potential budget advocacy. The intent of the research process was to be iterative between interviews and focus groups. In this context, it meant that the needs of community-based organizations expressed in focus groups continually informed the direction and content of the professional interviews. These focus groups also provided essential insight and feedback in developing an educational tool for Investing in Place to use as part of future budget advocacy and coalition-building endeavors.

Research Findings

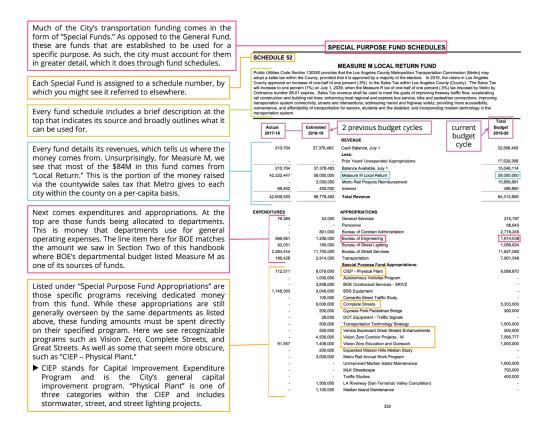
The budgeting process in Los Angeles is much more complex than the relatively straightforward timeline set forth by the city. There are many different actors across the city involved in the budgeting process at overlapping and dynamic times throughout the fiscal year. The ability to make changes in the budget, however, drops off dramatically after the mayor releases the proposed budget in April and power transfers to the City Council.

Change in the budget happens incrementally. From year to year, the city has limited capacity to make large changes to its 40,000-person organization. It is instead the cumulative effect of changes over several budget cycles that adds up to make noticeable differences.

Many City Hall actors believe that the budget implements existing policy and does not itself create policy. Because it is regarded as a tool of policy implementation, budget directors within the city may be resistant to public input on the budget that they see as attempting to make or change policy without going through the formal policy process.

Figure 1.

A page from the educational tool developed through this research process, "Easy Money: A Handbook for Reading and Understanding the City of LA's Budget Documents." The handbook provides an annotated version of key parts of the City's budget for first-time budget readers.



"Transportation" has a complicated role in the budgeting process because it is understood differently by competing parties. This makes transportation budgeting a very political process and leads to funding earmarked for transportation spread across many different departments and agencies.

Some aspects of the transportation network more readily receive funding because their outcomes are more easily translated into dollar amounts. Decision-makers in the city often show a preference toward these programs or projects because they feel more confident about where the money is going and the "return" on investment.

Recommendations

Start advocacy as early in the budget cycle as possible and find a City Hall staff member or agency to be an advocate on the inside. Throughout the process, it's best to speak in a unified voice with other community-based organizations.

- Ensure that a budget request is well-targeted to the intended consumer of that request. Advocates should emphasize how their request aligns with the decisionmakers' existing priorities and policies.
- Break down larger budget requests into smaller pieces that can be achieved through incremental changes from year-to-year, and know what a win looks like in one year as opposed to five years. Then, translate those budget requests into specific dollar amounts oriented around tangible outcomes.

For More Information

Stiegemeyer, K. (2020). Demystifying the City of Los Angeles transportation budgeting process (Master's capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: escholarship.org/uc/item/9hw833mb

This capstone project was also supported by the

