

Engaging Citizens

The City of Chesapeake's Initiative to Engage Citizens in the Budget Process

Presented by

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Setting the Scene

- Housing market run-up in values then decline
- Citizen concerns about tax burdens
- Citizen increased requests for services
- Cost of services rise
- Diverse community with many voices
- Hard choices with no sense of priorities

Setting the Scene

- Formal budget hearings for citizen input occur in April and May
- Changes to proposed budget to address citizen concerns caused other adjustments
 - Reduce other services
 - Increase fees or other revenues
- Limited time for staff to address questions and develop funding alternatives based on citizen concerns
- Public perception that hearings were cursory—input did not make a difference

Directive

Get the citizens involved early



Goals

- Acquire citizen feedback to use during budget development.
- Make citizens partners in the process.
- Create an environment that made it easy and convenient for all citizens to participate.
- Ensure that even if they didn't participate directly, citizens could still be involved.

Audience

- Chesapeake citizens
- Civic leaders
- Opinion leaders
- Business community
- Non-departmental/
outside agencies



Philosophy:

Identify every barrier to involvement and knock it down.

- Meet in neighborhoods
- Offer online, telephone, email, live television
- Have staff members from every department on site



Goal to Action

- Neighborhood meetings on four consecutive nights created a buzz
- Community wide meeting with City Council live on television and online
- Produced television program (clip)
- Complete information online (show surveys)
- Easy contact by telephone and email

Community Meetings

- Flexible
- Informative
- Easy



Encourage Participation

- Extensive promotion on WCTV-48 (City's television station): 48NEWS, PSAs, Bulletin Board
- Promotion on CityofChesapeake.net (City's web site)
- Email invitation to Talking Points subscribers (City's email newsletter)
- Flyers in all community centers
- Flyers in all libraries
- Notice to Clipper (The Clipper is a newspaper supplement targeted to Chesapeake.)
- Clipper double truck
- Four 3¼" X 7" ads in local newspaper
- Story pitched to local newspaper
- Flyer sent home with elementary school students
- Printed bookmark in all books checked out of public libraries

-- more --

Encourage Participation

- Business card-sized announcements of all meetings distributed to citizens by City Council members and City staff at meetings and other events
- Invitation mailed to presidents of all civic leagues, graduates of Chesapeake Neighborhood Leadership University, and Chesapeake's Boards and Commissions
- Invitation distributed via email to members of Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce, Chesapeake Division.
- Invitation distributed to the email list of the Chesapeake Economic Development Authority
- Signage at and near each meeting site
- Buttons distributed at each meeting (these were *very* popular)

Budget and Use of Outside Resources

- City Clerk's Office
- Budget Office
- Department of Public Communications

What Made the Difference

- **City Manager support**
- **Creating a buzz.**
- **Accessible staff**
- **Focus was budget but every issue raised was “heard”**
- **Viral marketing by City departments, outside agencies, and community groups**

Challenges

- **Uninformed responses**
- **Survey stuffing by groups**
- **Reaching people who don't normally participate.**
- **Creative Promotion**

Lessons Learned / Improvements

- **Adequate lead time is critical to success**
- **Council and staff participation is critical**
- **Need new ways of reaching community**
 - **Have budget staff visit community events**
 - **Make citizen meetings multi-purpose**
 - **Use more types of media for outreach**
- **Increase internet use for input**

Outcomes for Budget Process

- **Less frustration from citizens over proposed budget**
- **High priority projects and services were funded**
- **Staff has more time to research suggestions and provide information to Council**

Outcomes for Budget Process

- **As resources declined, staff and Council had a better sense of what mattered most**
- **Council and staff were able to provide citizens the context of the budget**
 - **Economic environment**
 - **Five year overview**
 - **Limitations of funds**
 - **Clarification of reserves, one time resources, etc**
- **Better understanding of the budget among engaged citizens**

Outcomes

- Citizens more positive about City staff's interest in their needs
- Staff of more departments are getting to hear citizens
- Citizens and staff are engaged with more of the year
- City services and projects are being viewed in context of budget

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION