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PSPA 610

Moran - River City Reflection Essay

The River City budget simulation was successful in showing the power and value of a collaborative and transparent government budgeting process. I have long believed, and this class and this exercise reinforce, that the single most important action staff and the governing board do, is pass a budget. As we saw in this exercise, priorities and goals for the community are supported by how they appear in the budget. A community can talk about helping a specific group of residents, but if it is not supported in the budget, it is just “lip service”.

There were several components to the exercise that I found to be valuable, however, the most valuable for me is the realization that there are many ways to put together a city’s budget. Thus, it is important to utilize critical thinking skills to weigh budget decisions on various external stakeholder groups, while simultaneously weighing these decisions against the direction of the governing council, department heads, and other internal stakeholders. You are not always going to please everyone, so doing things fairly and transparently helps to build consensus with those who may have to compromise on their views to put the greater good in the best position possible.

This exercise tied in well with most of the reading from throughout the class. Of our assigned readings, the three most influential for me in making decisions in this exercise were:

Irvin & Stansbury (2004). Citizen Participation in Decision Making: Is It Worth the Effort?

Irvin and Stansbury summarized the importance of having informed and involved citizens involved in government. This reading provides support to the point of the exercise of learning about and understanding different priorities and perspectives involved in

decision making. The authors say the more transparent and inclusive the process, the more informed the residents are, and the more support they will give public policy. “A policy that is well grounded in citizen preferences might be implemented in a smoother, less costly fashion because the public is more cooperative when the policy is implemented,” (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004, pg. 56).

Bland & Overton, 2020

Making decisions that are sustainable over time is another critical part of the budget evaluation process. Choosing initiatives that cannot be paid for, or that cut funding to critical parts of government operations might have a short-term gain, but a long-term failure. Bland and Overton discuss long-term financial sustainability and the importance of having adequate resources set aside for the organization. They describe a reason to create a reserve fund as “to create a cushion against the vagaries of the economy”. Even though our group originally wanted to dig into River City’s reserves, it would have had devastating long-term effects.

Weikert Et al, Ch2 Budgeting as Part of the Planning Process

The administration’s role in budgeting is the delicate balancing act of taking in as much input from stakeholders as possible and delivering the best plan that aligns with the goals of the community and the desires of the residents. Weikert Et al describes budgeting as examining circumstances “to determine their resources and determine how to best use them.” (Weikart Et al, 2013, pg. 20).

My role as an activist in the simulation allowed me to take the side that I normally would not. Our group championed budget decisions that favored our stakeholder group, but they did not always present the best interest of the entire community.

My current work environment involves little participation internally, and minimal input is sought by external stakeholders and members of the public at large. As our village's communications manager, I continually stress the importance of transparency and education about our village's initiatives and priorities, especially surrounding budgeting.

The River City budget simulation underscored the significance of a collaborative and transparent budgeting process in local government. The exercise reaffirmed that a budget is not just numbers on a spreadsheet, but a policy document outlining a community's priorities and goals, serving as a tangible reflection of the government's commitments to its stakeholders. One major takeaway is the diversity of approaches to putting together a city's budget. This exercise highlights the need for critical thinking to balance external stakeholder interests with internal considerations, seeking a fair and transparent way toward consensus. In my current role, I will continue to champion transparency and education in our village's budgeting processes, taking lessons from this exercise to build a more inclusive and informed community.

Works Cited:

Bland, R., & Overton, M. (2020). Budgeting Guide for Local Government. ICCM.

Irvin & Stansbury (2004). Citizen Participation in Decision Making: Is It Worth the Effort?

Weikart Et al (2013), Ch2 Budgeting as Part of the Planning Process