

**"You Decide, Atlanta!"**  
**A Participatory Budgeting Framework for Atlanta**  
May 1, 2019



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## Participatory Budgeting (PB): At a Glance

### What is Participatory Budgeting?

PB works on annual cycles. A city sets aside a given percentage of its budget for capital projects selected via a PB process. The money is then subdivided (IE by district, NPU). How projects are selected and dollars spent in each of these subdivided areas occurs in the following distinct four phases:

1) *Idea Collection* - Residents propose ideas for projects that they think is the best use of the funds in their community. They may do so via an online portal. You may also submit your ideas in person. A city may, for example, go to the people and set up a stand at a MARTA station or NPU meeting and collect ideas. Notably, the age limit is not the same as a normal election. In most cities, kids as young as elementary schoolers are eligible to participate.

2) *Project Development* - The city filters out the submissions that are unlawful or unfeasible. This happens in concert with some form of resident board that distills the ideas down to a manageable ballot of the most impactful ideas.

3) *Voting* - Constituents vote, once again online and offline, on their favorite suggestion on the ballot. Residents get one vote, after validating that they are a resident of that district. The top vote getters win. This can be more than one project, up to the point that the total build comes under the financial set aside.

4) *Implementation* - The city gets to work building out the winning projects from each district using the earmarked funding. Depending on the city, construction is targeted for completion within 1-3 years.

The types of projects vary. Chicago has used PB to fund neighborhood playgrounds, murals, bus benches, crosswalks, and street lighting. Madrid has funded bike racks, tree plantings, and public restrooms. New York has used it to build computer science classrooms in their schools.

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### What are the Benefits?

#### *Improving Transparency*

Throughout PB, residents meet and work directly with elected officials, agency staff members, and other parts of city government. When Greensboro finished its first PB cycle in 2016, a majority of participants found it to be an easy, positive way to engage with city government.<sup>1</sup> Cities regularly tack and publicly post project ideas, their finalized proposals, and the implementation of winning projects.

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<sup>1</sup> All Greensboro data from the [2015-2016 Research and Evaluation Report](#)

## ***Increasing Civic Engagement***

PB not only increases civic engagement, but can encourage more engagement amongst historically underrepresented populations. A Seattle participant found that the PB process opened “the opportunity for small unheard voices to be loud.”<sup>2</sup> 85% of Greensboro PB participants were new to the city’s budgeting process. 70% had not previously been involved in other city or community endeavors. In New York, about half of 2014-2015 PB participants were not part of a community organization or group.<sup>3</sup>

## ***Promoting Equity***

Participants in Greensboro also more closely reflected the city’s racial makeup than typical decision making processes. 66% of residents in New York City Council Districts using PB identify as people of color, but only 47% of voters in the most recent local election identified this way. Amongst PB voters, however, 57% identified as people of color. Throughout the PB process in Greensboro, participants accurately reflected the city’s population not only in ethnicity, but also in income and gender.

## ***Growing Public Trust***

Following the completion of the program’s first cycle, Greensboro residents were motivated to want to do more in their city even outside of PB. This can manifest itself in local election turnout. The Participatory Budgeting Project has found that PB makes people 7% more likely to vote in local elections- a mark not just of civic engagement but of public trust. This increased engagement and trust often comes from the ability of residents to see and experience the tangible results of PB.

## ***Responsible, Responsive Growth***

PB is a process that turns simple ideas into meaningful community and city-wide impact. In New York’s 2017-2018 PB cycle, the City funded water fountains with bottle refilling stations, bus time countdown clocks, tree plantings, pedestrian safety improvements, and park renovations amongst many other innovative project ideas. A majority of Greensboro PB participants found it to be a positive change-making process. Participants in Cambridge, Massachusetts believe that the PB process promotes long-term and sustainable advancement for the City.<sup>4</sup>

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## **Lessons from Abroad**

Some truisms have emerged from months of research and travel to cities where PB is already in place. Here are a few:

***For PB to work well, the city needs to work to include as many residents as possible.*** You can’t just rely on residents who come to neighborhood meetings to drive

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<sup>2</sup> [Seattle 2017 Review Document](#)

<sup>3</sup> All New York data from [2014-2015 Research and Evaluation Report](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Cambridge 2017 Participatory Budgeting Evaluation Report](#)

participation, you have to bring PB to residents and make it easy to participate: online and paper ballot voting, social media, tables at festivals, intentional outreach to seniors, renters, kids, immigrants. and low-income communities, etc.

***Among the outcomes: moderate over extreme projects and stronger communities.***

In both cities visited (Paris, Madrid), officials noted that even if a loud group campaigns for a project that might be a bit off the wall, it inevitably fails to win enough votes because when you engage a wide number of residents, a moderate center tends to drive decision-making. Moreover, people feel more connected to their street and neighborhood when they propose ideas and see them come to life.

***If city departments aren't made part of the process, winning projects can face delays in implementation.*** PB inherently asks city departments to follow the instruction of residents. In order to avoid an "us vs. them" mentality, success requires engaging city departments in the PB process so that everyone feels ownership over the outcomes.

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## **Why Is This a Good Idea for Atlanta?**

An effective local government balances the aspirational with the everyday; our most immediate problems with those on the horizon.

Of late, Atlanta has put greater emphasis on the grandiose end of the scale. The merits of any one project recently undertaken can be debated elsewhere. But what seems beyond dispute, is that residents are frustrated at a perceived lack of engagement and equity. They also feel that realizing grand plans has come at the expense of the little things that have the greatest impact on our everyday lives and on our individual neighborhoods.

PB represents a necessary counterweight. While City Council can be an effective voice for residents, PB gives more direct influence and power to individuals. This is important, because you ultimately know better than City Hall what your neighborhood needs. PB gives you the most direct say in how your tax dollars get invested in your immediate surroundings. What's more local or immediately impactful than that?

I believe that this would be a welcome and necessary change in our engagement strategy and that Atlanta can join the ranks of New York City, Chicago, Seattle, Porto Alegre, Paris, Madrid, and hundreds of others in embracing PB.

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## **Next Steps**

Proposed legislation from the District 2 office scales PB up from 1% to 1.5% to 2% of the general fund over a 3-year period. However, it does not ask for any money until FY2021.

The near-term goal is to build out a one-year pilot program at roughly \$600,000 (\$500,000 for projects and roughly \$100,000 for staff and administrative costs). We would use the money to try PB out in one, maybe two districts. With the model up and running and citizens bought in, then we could move to grow investment.

## Domestic Case Studies

### Chicago

*Date Founded:* 2009

*Budget Allocated:* Varies by Ward

*Learn More:* [PB Chicago](#)

*Notable Aspects:* Chicago was the first U.S. city to use PB. Chicago is also the only city to have used PB to allocate TIF dollars in the equivalent of a TAD. Each of Chicago's 50 wards get \$1.3 million annually to spend on infrastructure improvements within the ward. Alderman that decide to participate in PB let citizens vote how much of that \$1.3 million they want to allocate to the process. The program is run through Ward Offices.

### New York

*Date Founded:* 2011

*Budget Allocated:* \$1 million (20%) of each participating Council District budget

*Learn More:* [PB NYC](#)

*Notable Aspects:* New York was the second U.S. city to use PB, and now hosts the country's largest PB program in terms of dollars allocated. It started in 2011 with a pilot program amongst 4 of the City's 50 Council Districts, and today includes 32 Council Districts that together allocate over \$200 million through PB. During idea collection, participating council districts must dedicate at least four community meetings to targeting underrepresented community members such as youth, non-English speakers, seniors, and public housing residents. The program is run through the City Council's office of Participatory Budgeting.

### Boston

*Date Founded:* 2014

*Budget Allocated:* \$1 million

*Learn More:* [Boston Youth Lead the Change](#)

*Notable Aspects:* Boston's PB process is the first in North America by and for young people. Youth ages 12-25 submit ideas and vote for how the City should spend \$1 million of its capital budget. Past winning projects include water bottle refill stations, a performing and visual arts studio, and a digital billboard displaying resources available to homeless youth. The program is run through the City's Youth Engagement and Employment Department.

### Seattle

*Date Founded:* 2015

*Budget Allocated:* \$3 million (0.3%) of the City's Capital Budget (\$1.11 Billion)

*Learn More:* [Seattle Your Voice, Your Choice](#)

*Notable Aspects:* Seattle is the only PB program in the U.S. to have a nested structure where \$2 million in PB funding is distributed equally across the City's 7 Council Districts and then an additional \$1 million is allocated to particularly vulnerable areas identified through the City's Equity & Environment Initiative. The program is run through the City's Department of Transportation.

## International Case Studies

### Paris

*Date Founded:* 2014

*Budget Allocated:* \$100 million (5%) of the City's total budget

*Learn More:* [PB in Paris, Guide and Reflection](#)

*Notable Aspects:* Paris hosts the world's largest PB program in terms of total dollars spent and dollars spent per capita (\$50 USD per resident, compared to New York's \$5 per resident). Residents propose ideas on both a Council District level and on a City-Wide level. The City allocates PB funds evenly across the City's 20 districts before giving additional funds to the City's poorest districts.

### Madrid

*Date Founded:* 2016

*Budget Allocated:* \$100 million of the City's total budget

*Learn More:* [Decide Madrid](#)

*Notable Aspects:* Championed by Madrid's City Council, Madrid's PB program ties with Paris's in terms of total dollars spent. The City Council has been clear in its view that PB is essential to 21<sup>st</sup> democracy that ought to keep up with technology to allow greater civic participation and government transparency.

### Taipei City

*Date Founded:* 2015

*Budget Allocated:* Open-Ended

*Learn More:* [Taiwan Experiments with PB](#)

*Notable Aspects:* Taipei City has no specific budget cut-off for PB, although the winning projects tend to cost under \$6,000 USD, in contrast to projects in New York that must cost at least \$35,000 to receive funding. Every effort is made to include vetted project proposals into the current year's budget. Projects that cannot be accommodated within the current year's budget are included in the following year's budget. Council Districts conduct outreach year-round in strong partnership with local universities.

### Mexico City

*Date Founded:* 2011

*Budget Allocated:* 3% of each Council District Budget

*Learn More:* [Participatory Budgeting in Mexico City, Press Release](#)

*Notable Aspects:* While many cities limit their idea collection period to about 30 or 60 days, Mexico City allows residents to propose ideas anytime during a 100 day period. While Mexico City also originally used a 30 day idea collection period, it extended because of PB's popularity. The goal is to ensure that every resident can actively participate.



## List of Cities Using PB

Although PB is still relatively new in the United States, over 1,500 cities across the world are using PB. Below is just a partial list of cities that have used, are currently using, or plan to use PB. PB is also used to allocate funds on state-wide and nation-wide bases.

### Domestic Cities

Boston  
Cambridge  
Charlottesville  
Chicago  
Durham  
Greensboro  
Long Beach  
Madison  
New York City  
Oakland  
San Francisco  
San Juan  
Seattle  
Vallejo

### International Cities

Barcelona, Spain  
Berlin, Germany  
Bogota, Colombia  
Buenos Aires, Argentina  
Canada Bay, NSW, Australia  
Delhi, India  
Dieppe, New Brunswick, Canada  
Durban, South Africa  
Hiware Bazar, Maharashtra, India  
Kerala, India  
Leeds, England  
Lima, Peru  
Lisbon, Portugal  
Madrid, Spain  
Melbourne, VIC, Australia  
Mexico City, Mexico  
Paris, France  
Porto Alegre, Brazil  
Reykjavik, Iceland  
Rome, Italy  
Rosario, Argentina  
Seoul, South Korea  
Seville, Spain  
Solo City, Indonesia  
Taichung City, Taiwan  
Taipei City, Taiwan  
Tbilisi, Georgia  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
Victoria, BC, Canada  
Yaoundé, Cameroon

## Overview of PB Rule Books

Cities that organize their PB program by Council District (e.g. New York, Paris, Chicago, Greensboro) typically have a PB rulebook to govern the process uniformly across each district. The following provides a summary of what usually goes in these rulebooks.

### 1. The City's PB Goals

In addition to increasing government transparency, building public trust, and promoting civic engagement, PB often strives to make the budgeting process more equitable.

### 2. The PB Timeline

Rulebooks are updated annually to reflect the specific dates of each PB cycle. Below are examples of general timelines.

*Cambridge:* Outreach (May) → Idea Collection (June & July) → Project Development (August-November) → Voting (1 week in December) → Implementation (start of following FY in July)

*Chicago:* Idea Collection (October – November) → Project Development (December – March) → Voting (1 to 2 weeks in April or May) → Implementation (starting in June)

*New York:* Outreach (July-Early August) → Idea Collection (September\*) → Project Development (October-February) → Voting (1 month in April 2018) → Implemented (adopted in following FY Budget in June and implemented over the course of 3 to 5 years)

\*New York has recently announced that it will switch to year-round idea collection

*Seattle:* Idea Collection (January) → Project Development (March) → Voting (1 month across June & July) → Implementation (Start of the following FY)

### 3. Project Eligibility

Rulebooks typically state that in order to be eligible for funding, project ideas must:

- Benefit the public
- Be a capital expense, not an operating expense
- Involve property that is under the jurisdiction of the city
- Be proposed by either an individual or an entity connected to the community
  - Ideas are only eligible in Paris if they are proposed by a City Resident; New York, Seattle, and Chicago do not require this

Some cities also specify upper or lower limits on project costs. For example, project ideas in Seattle are only eligible for funding if they cost less than \$90,000. New York, however, requires projects to cost at least \$35,000.

#### **4. The Process**

Because some cities require Council District Offices to oversee their own PB processes, rulebooks may dictate steps that each District must take to ensure adequate public accessibility. For example New York's rulebook details the number and location of idea collection and voting events in each district, as well as the requirement that volunteer budget delegates who sort through project ideas reflect the demographic and geographic diversity of the district.

#### **5. Participant Eligibility**

Participant eligible typically centers around residency and age, and may vary between each stage of the PB process.

##### *Idea Collection*

While Paris requires that those proposing ideas must be a resident of Paris, most U.S. cities allow anyone to propose an idea regardless of residence. Seattle does this in recognition of the City's affordable housing crisis and with the understanding that many people who work, go to school, and otherwise contribute to Seattle may not actually live within city limits. Most cities have no age limit, unless the ideas are submitted online in a state that regulates internet use by age.

##### *Project Development*

While New York, Seattle, and Chicago allow anyone to propose ideas, they require those who sort through and prioritize project ideas to have a meaningful connection to the district (i.e. to live, work, attend school in the district).

##### *Voting*

While Seattle allows people to cast votes for projects across multiple districts, New York and Chicago require voters to be district residents. Chicago's rulebooks provide a list of acceptable documents to prove one's residency. New York's previous rulebooks also provide this list, but the City recently changed its PB voting procedures so that voters only have to sign an affidavit confirming their residency.

#### **Links to Recent Rule Books**

[New York 2017-2018](#)

[Greensboro 2017](#)

[Chicago 2015-2016](#)

## A Pilot for Atlanta

*Across the world, PB is transforming the public budgeting process. It is deepening democracy, engaging communities, and allowing the city to respond to resident priorities in meaningful ways. It can do the same in Atlanta. A PB program for Atlanta, known as “You Decide, Atlanta!” was designed using best practices from across the world. It conducts the phases of PB as follows:*

Scaling up from 1% to 1.5%, Atlanta ultimately sets aside 2% of its capital funds. Using FY 2019 as a guide, that’s roughly \$13.2 million dollars. Each city council district receives \$1 million, another \$1 million goes into an at-large account, while historically under-resourced districts receive whatever dollars remain in addition to their initial allotments based on a mutually agreed formula.

1. *Idea Collection* - Idea collection occurs over two months in July and August both online and offline. It is important to have different outreach methods as studies have found that different methods engage different communities.<sup>5</sup> Online, participants use an idea map to identify exactly where they want their project idea to happen. Offline, the City partners with MARTA, APS, NPUs, Neighborhood Associations, and Atlanta Public Libraries, to get the word out and collect ideas on simple palm cards. Anyone, regardless of age or residency, can submit an idea. Since District residents and workers will choose the best ideas in a vote, it does not matter where those good ideas come from.

2. *Project Development* – Interested residents apply to serve on a committee that meets regularly to sort through their District’s project ideas. District offices choose committee members that reflect their district’s demographic, socio-economic, and geographic diversity. These volunteers prioritize projects using criteria such as scope of public benefit and equity. They create a short-list of projects that is vetted by the City, to determine feasibility and legality. The vetted short-list of projects goes on a final ballot with cost per project included.

3. *Voting* – District residents vote for their three favorite projects in order of preference. Votes are scored based on that order of preference. Like idea collection, voting occurs both online and offline. For offline voting, the City partners with the same organizations from idea collection. Voting occurs over the entire month of January to allow interested participants plenty of time to sort through and pick their favorite project ideas. To reduce voting barriers, those wishing to participate only have to sign a legal document affirming their residency and/or employment in the district. Anyone over the age of 13 can vote. Voters can only cast one ballot. The winning project can be plural, if multiple ideas can be funded with the \$1 million set aside.

4. *Implementation*- Winning projects are funded in the following year’s budget using the earmarked funds. To ensure continued transparency, the departments responsible for project

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<sup>5</sup> [New York 2014-2015 Research and Evaluation Report](#) ; [Seattle 2017 Review Document](#)

implementation (e.g. the Departments of Parks and Recreation and Public Works) track and publicly report project progress.

5. *Evaluation* – Atlanta should add the fifth step of evaluation to the PB process. Using optional participant surveys and focus groups throughout and after the PB cycle, city officials can determine what is and what is not working for community members. They can then make adjustments for the next cycle. This will help Atlanta track its goals of promoting transparent, inclusive, and responsive public budgeting.