



Putting the public back in public budgeting: Review of the 2015 Toronto budget process

BETTER
BUDGET **TO**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building on its [2014 consultation paper](#) which set out a broad agenda for improving Toronto's budget process, Better Budget TO (BBTO) conducted a review of the 2015 budget process to assess the city's progress in building an open, democratic budget process, and to recommend opportunities for further improvement.

BBTO's review assesses the 2015 budget process against four key principles: (1) participation, (2) accessibility, (3) vision and, (4) the use of evidence. While the City of Toronto is making progress on all four of these principles, there remains considerable opportunity to improve, especially when compared to other cities globally that are at the leading edge of open, democratic budgeting.

The report identifies a number of areas for action.

Participation

- Holding more public hearings and budget town halls, in different parts of the city, is encouraging. But there should be more consultation earlier in the budget process.
- There should also be more interactive online tools for residents to provide input on the budget rather than just sending an email to city staff.
- The three participatory budgeting (PB) pilots across Toronto are an exciting opportunity to get residents involved. Options should be explored to scale up PB across the city.
- [The Council motion](#), approved in late 2014, to develop a “comprehensive community consultation process” for the 2016 to 2018 budgets represents an important opportunity to rethink the budget consultation process. A staff report can be expected in late 2015.

Accessibility

- The city deserves credit for ongoing efforts to improve the accessibility of its budget products, including infographics, more user-friendly guides for the public on the budget, a “toolkit” for councillors (and potentially community groups) to host town halls, and more.
- Consolidate budget information into a single document, including both the tax- and rate-supported budgets for both operating and capital, following Council approval.
- Continue to improve budget data on the Open Data portal, making data more detailed, current, and machine-readable, providing a codebook to define expenditure and revenue categories, and engaging the “open community” on creative ways to use the data.

- Create tools for non-profit service providers, community centres and advocacy groups to help them educate, engage and empower residents around budget issues, particularly in marginalized communities where there is often distrust city government. It's not just on the City to create these tools of engagement, there must be room for community-based organizations, associations, and advocacy groups to play a greater role in organizing around the budget and in boosting budget literacy.

Vision

- Consider launching a long-term visioning exercise for Toronto, as Calgary has done.
- Clearly show how budget initiatives support the Toronto Strategic Plan's 26 Actions, and track measurable progress in achieving them.
- The City's initiative to integrate planning, performance tracking and multi-year budgets should be exciting for BBTO budget nerds and other citizens too. The next step should be finding ways to present this info to the public in understandable ways.

The Use of Evidence

- Building on international best practices in evidence-based budgeting, the city should seek new ways of incorporating evidence into budgeting decisions, including cost-benefit and value-for-money analysis.
- Performance measurement and benchmarking data should be closely integrated with the budget process, with greater focus on distilling this data into simple, actionable insights.
- The introduction of service-based budgeting represents an opportunity to ensure scarce public dollars are being allocated to the areas of greatest need

About Better Budget TO

Better Budget TO (BBTO) is a civic initiative made up of engaged city builders who believe a city's budget is more than just numbers on a page. City budgets determine direction. They help us achieve the quality of life we want for our neighbours and ourselves. They make a good city great. We are non-partisan, volunteer driven and committed to making Toronto a model of open, democratic and evidence-based budgeting.

Better Budget TO is focused on public education, policy and analysis around budget issues. We conduct reviews of Toronto's budget: how it's made, who it serves and who has a say. We compare it to best budgeting practices from around the world. We bring together Torontonians to discuss better budgets and what that means for us and our city.

Copies of the full report available for download at www.betterbudget.ca