

Vermont Workers' Center

Proposal for Public Participation in State Budget & Revenue Policy

August 30, 2012

The Administration of the State of Vermont has been tasked with establishing a public participation process for budget and revenue policy, grounded in the human rights goal of addressing the needs of the people and advancing dignity and equity throughout the State (Sec. E.100.1 32 V.S.A. § 306a). To assist the Administration in designing a process for meaningful public participation, the Vermont Workers' Center proposes a set of principles, along with specific ideas for implementation.

Meaningful public participation in policymaking is both a basic human right in itself and essential to advancing other human rights, including those relating to the fundamental needs of the people of Vermont. Participation is a tool both for addressing the democratic deficit and for increasing people's economic well-being. Any participatory process must itself be guided by the obligation to respect, protect and fulfill human rights and by the principles of universality, equity, transparency, accountability and participation, which serve to guide the conduct of the process and the achievement of outcomes.

Process Principles

1. The participatory process, its role in budget and revenue policy, and the policies themselves must be **transparent** and easily understandable.
 - We propose that the government prepare an accessible and easy-to-understand version of the budget and related documents.
 - We propose that public participation be established as a **formal, facilitated process** with defined goals and roles, controlled by the people and grounded in their experiences, and supported by an information and outreach strategy.
2. Participants in the public process must be able to hold the government **accountable** for acting on the proposals emerging from that process. Participants should be able to track the uptake of their proposals, how and when they were considered, why they were amended or rejected, and how they are reflected in the final budget.
 - We propose a **People's Council** responsible for designing, facilitating, overseeing and evaluating the public participation process. For the purpose of budget and revenue policy, it will serve as a liaison between the people and the Administration. A People's Council, initially comprised of independent appointees and later of delegates from the deliberative congregations, will help ensure the transparency of the budget process and the Administration's accountability to the people's proposals. The Council will evaluate both the participatory process itself and the implementation of people's proposals in the governor's budget and the final approved budget. The People's Council will also consolidate the public input from across the state and present the people's budget proposals to the governor.

3. A participatory process must foster open discussion and dialogue among participants, while using tools to enable agreement and decision-making. The process must be **collective, collaborative and inclusive**. Every person and every community must be able to have their voice heard and their opinion considered. Barriers to participation, such as geographic isolation, educational disadvantage, economic or financial needs, technological skills and access gap, information deficits, discrimination, accessibility issues, childcare needs, active discouragement, etc., must be addressed and overcome.
 - We propose the people's **direct participation** in state budget and revenue policy through establishing a permanent system of local or regional deliberative congregations, connected to existing local processes where possible. In a series of community meetings, culminating in a final assembly on a designated People's Budget Day each fall, participants will agree on **common budget goals**, guided by human rights principles and based on needs assessments, and propose **spending and revenue initiatives** to achieve those goals across the state. They will also review the previous year's budget outcomes and assess progress made in meeting goals. The proposals from the deliberative congregations will be sent to the People's Council for consolidation into a unified set of people's budget proposals.
 - In order to advance inclusion, we propose that **Committees for Equity** within local deliberative congregations, comprised of people from disadvantaged, disabled, marginalized and minority groups, will guide discussions to help prioritize issues relevant to communities most impacted by unmet needs.
 - To enable people to participate fully, we propose that **Local Assistance Boards** support the deliberative congregations. Local independent assistants will provide hands-on training and assistance to participants on an as-needed basis. Each region will have its own assistance board to support and build the capacity of the deliberative congregations.
4. Participatory systems, along with these guiding principles, should be formally embedded, or **institutionalized**, in the state's budget and revenue process. It is critical that the Administration is institutionally required to fund, facilitate, and collaborate with participatory mechanisms, and that it incorporates the proposals put forward by the participatory process.
 - We propose that the **Governor's budget proposal be based on the people's proposals**, after integrating the goals and measures identified in the public process with the budget requests from administrative agencies. The budget proposal to the legislature must seek to meet the budget goals put forward by the people of Vermont and include necessary revenue measures.

Outcome Principles

1. The participatory process must be designed to foster a budget and revenue policy that advances the **universal and equitable** fulfillment of people's needs and rights. Human rights principles should be explicitly used as normative and analytical guidance for deliberations, proposals and policy-making.

- We propose that the People’s Council be responsible for ensuring that the **principles of universality and equity**, as reflected in Sec. E.100.1 32 V.S.A. § 306a, are incorporated into the capacity building and training undertaken by the Local Assistance Boards, and into the work of all other bodies involved in the participation process.
2. Budget and revenue policies must address **people’s needs**, according to Vermont statute. This means a focus on fundamental needs must be a critical part of the participatory process. Within the deliberative congregations, special support structures for increasing the participation of disadvantaged groups (Committees for Equity, see above) will help identify and prioritize unmet needs. This must be accompanied by a systematic collection, assessment and reporting of quantitative and qualitative data on statewide needs, and a formal process for prioritizing unmet needs in decision-making.
- We propose setting up a **Needs Assessment Board**, an independent, appointed body that collects data and assesses progress on the state of needs and rights in Vermont. Organizations that provide services to help meet people’s needs should be represented on the Board. The Board will implement an accountability system that evaluates budget outcomes and reports on the state’s progress in meeting needs and rights. Its accessible and easy-to-understand reports will be distributed to the public and serve as guidance to the deliberative congregations.
 - We propose that in consolidating the proposals of the deliberative congregations, the People’s Council use a **needs-based budget matrix**, a system for spending decisions (or actual budget allocations) that recognizes the disproportionate lack of resources among some communities and directs spending according to the relative extent and severity of needs.
3. A participatory approach to state budgeting must include a discussion of revenue. Each spending initiative, once agreed upon, should receive **adequate resources**. Deliberative congregations should review and discuss the links between unmet needs, budget goals and revenue measures.
- We propose that the **deliberative congregations discuss, propose and prioritize revenue measures** for their agreed goals and initiatives.

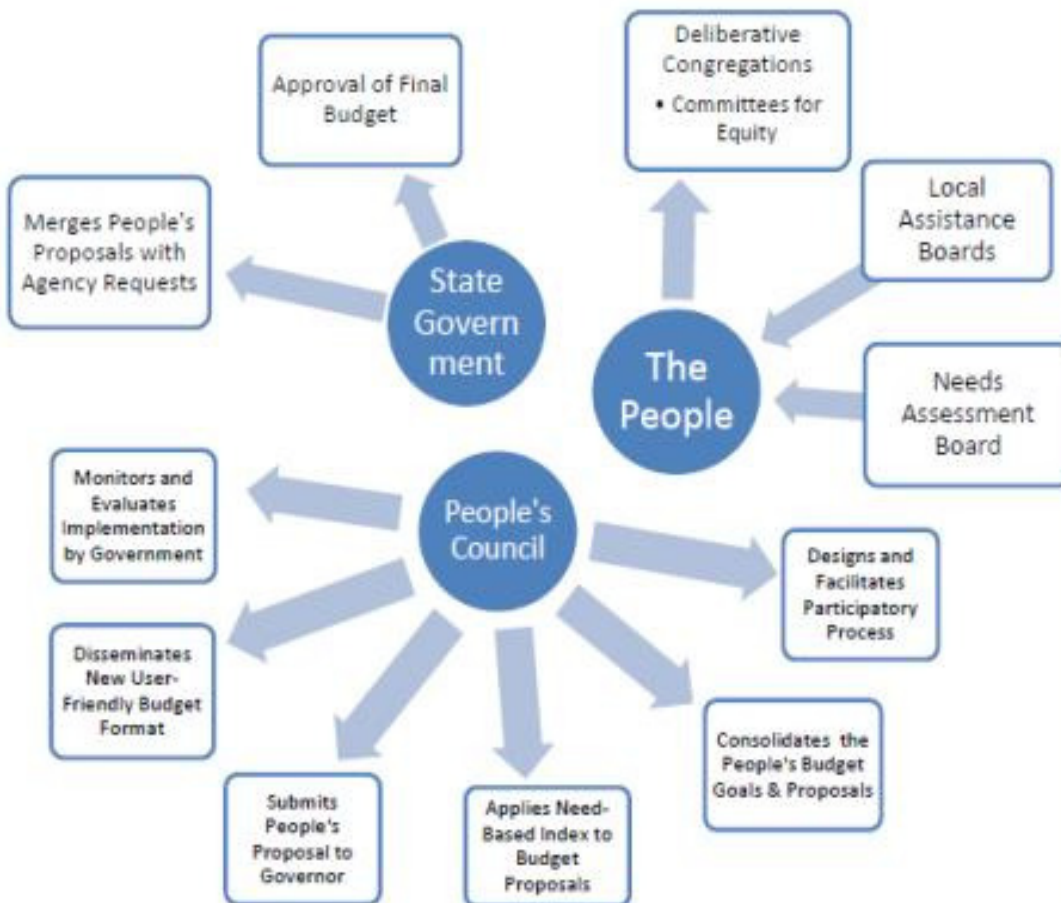
Next Steps

Instituting a fully functioning, meaningful process of public participation in Vermont’s budget and revenue policy requires preparation and funding. A number of the proposed elements can be built on existing participatory and support structures (which we outline in our background paper). Below we propose a series of first steps to be introduced by October 2012:

- Set up a People’s Council to plan and pilot the participatory process and begin an outreach campaign to raise awareness about new participatory opportunities.

- Develop an accessible and easy-to-understand budget format and publish the FY 2014 budget in this format.
- Convene one-off budget participation sessions in each region this November to enable an initial discussion of needs and goals, prior to establishing a permanent system of local deliberative congregations. Representatives from the Administration, including Budget and Management Division staff, and the legislature's appropriations committees should attend. Public input received should be considered in the preparation of FY 2014 budget proposals, followed by a report on how public input is reflected in the budget proposals.
- Prepare a feasibility study for expanding existing online initiatives into eParticipation in budgeting, and develop proposals for online platforms for budget discussion and decisions.
- Prepare an action plan for meeting all of the requirements of 32 V.S.A. § 306a.

Roles and Responsibilities



Vermonters will participate in state budgeting through a system of local or regional **Deliberative Congregations**, where they will create proposals for budget goals as well as for spending and revenue initiatives.

Committees for Equity will be comprised of disadvantaged and marginalized groups and will prioritize the needs of those groups throughout the congregations' discussions.

Local Assistance Boards will provide hands-on training and assistance to deliberative congregations to build capacity.

The **Needs Assessment Board** will provide participants with state-wide data on needs based on human rights standards. It will also assess budget outcomes against indicators to hold government accountable.

The **People's Council** will be comprised of delegates from deliberative congregations, and will serve as an intermediary between the people and the state government.