

Civic Engagement in Budget Development

This year's budget development and adoption process has come and it has passed. Cross off another year of going through this annual tradition we all love. The Emporia City Council approved its FY18 budget earlier than in years past, with official adoption coming May 2nd. The legally required public hearing was held April 18th.

Leading up to, during, and after the April 18th public hearing I began thinking more about civic engagement (or lack thereof) in our budget development process. I sent my proposed budget to City Council on March 3rd. The proposed budget was put on the front page of our website for citizen review and perusal. No citizens called me to ask any questions regarding what was in or not in the budget, nor did I receive any calls or emails from citizens signaling their approval or disapproval of the numbers I had put together for Council's consideration. Council held several budget work sessions to review the budget. No citizens attended those meetings either. The April 18th budget public hearing was held. No citizens spoke during the public hearing. Council adopted its budget on May 2nd without any major fanfare.

Was the lack of citizen participation attributed to me not proposing any tax or fee increases? Was the lack of participation attributed to a general apathy amongst citizens as it relates to local government? Was the lack of participation attributed to the increased use of social media by citizens to voice public concerns in the privacy of their own home, on their phone, etc. without the accountability required in a public setting? Does the City offer viable alternatives for citizen participation to the legally required public hearing? The answers to these questions all factored into the lack of citizen participation during the FY18 budget development process.

In researching ways to increase citizen participation during budget season, I found an article written by Maureen Berner, UNC MPA Professor, titled "Citizen Participation in Local Government Budgeting." You can find this article at <http://sogpubs.unc.edu/electronicversions/pg/pgspr01/article3.pdf>. In this article, Berner examines the most effective and least effective methods of involving citizens in the budgeting process according to results obtained from surveying North Carolina cities and counties. Other than the legally mandated public hearing, local governments created other opportunities for interaction through special open/town hall meetings, citizen advisory boards, coffeehouse conversations, telephone surveys, mail surveys, websites/email, and visits to local civic groups. All of these methods provide alternatives that can be used to supplement our mandated public hearing requirements. The article also supports the need to involve residents early in the budgeting process for meaningful input.

Next year I plan to reference back to this article and the alternative methods discussed in order to elevate the level of public participation in our budgeting process (or at least create some dialogue). I hope you do the same!

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