Participatory Budgeting Guide: Takeaways from the Transportation Agency for Monterey County

What is participatory budgeting?

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a democratic process where community members decide how to allocate part of a public budget. Participatory budgeting began in 1989 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and it has since been adopted by thousands of cities around the world.[1] PB has been implemented in California cities including Vallejo, San Francisco, San Jose, Oakland, Long Beach and LA, as well as Marin and Monterey Counties.

The Transportation Agency for Monterey County (TAMC) has implemented participatory budgeting as part of the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Program in Greenfield, Soledad, King City, Greenfield, and unincorporated North Monterey County communities. TAMC's participatory budgeting process is led by the SRTS Steering Committee with help and technical support from TAMC staff. The SRTS Steering Committee leads a community-wide election, and members of the public vote on their top priority safe routes to school projects. This guide describes TAMC's takeaways from PB in Monterey County and provides guidance to developing a PB process in your community.

Why participatory budgeting?

- Educate the public on democratic processes, improving transparency and accountability.
- Build relationships within the community.
- Empower community members and bolster overall community engagement.
- Implement projects that reflect the community's priorities.
- Reduce the time between planning and implementation.

How to Develop a Participatory Budgeting Process

1. Identify goals

Why do you want to implement participatory budgeting? Your reasons could include increasing overall public participation, hearing from historically underrepresented groups, or increasing civic pride in your community. Your goals will drive this effort.

TAMC's Goals:

- Improve Community Safety & Mobility
- Engage Our Community
- Foster Leadership

1 Schugurensky, D., & Mook, L. (2024). Participatory budgeting and local development: Impacts, challenges, and prospects. Local Development & Society, 5(3), 433–445. https://doi.org/10.1080/26883597.2024.2391664

2. Identify parameters

What time, budget, and resource constraints are you working within? For reference, US/Canada 2014-2015 PB projects allocated on average $1 million to a PB process, ranging from $61,000 to over $3 million. 8 months from vote to kickoff is typical.[2]

3. Establish a fund

A funding source and a clear agreement about what it can be used for (only the projects that are recommended by the community) must be established upfront. A flexible funding source that can be applied to the elected projects with minimal constraints is best.

TAMC funds the selected participatory budgeting projects through Regional Surface Transportation Program (RSTP) funds, and the administrative work of coordination with the steering committee is funded through Caltrans Sustainable Transportation Planning grant.

4. Form partnerships

Participatory budgeting is staff intensive, and requires a team to implement successfully. If your organization does not have the bandwidth or resources to implement all elements of the PB process, it may be useful to form partnerships with other organizations in your community. Consider the following:

- The type of partner depends on your community's needs. For example, if the public that you want to reach through PB is wary of the government, you should work with a non-government organization.

- Establish what role they will play in the PB process—it could be recruiting, facilitating, outreach, etc.

- Ensure that your partners share the values and goals of your organization, and that they have the bandwidth to commit to the extent that is necessary.

TAMC's PB was made possible through partnerships. The Monterey County Health Department provided strong community connections and resources to recruit and engage steering committee members. Ecology Action, a local non-profit organization, facilitated meetings.

5. Define roles and responsibilities

Discuss which tasks belong to staff, partners, and steering committee members.
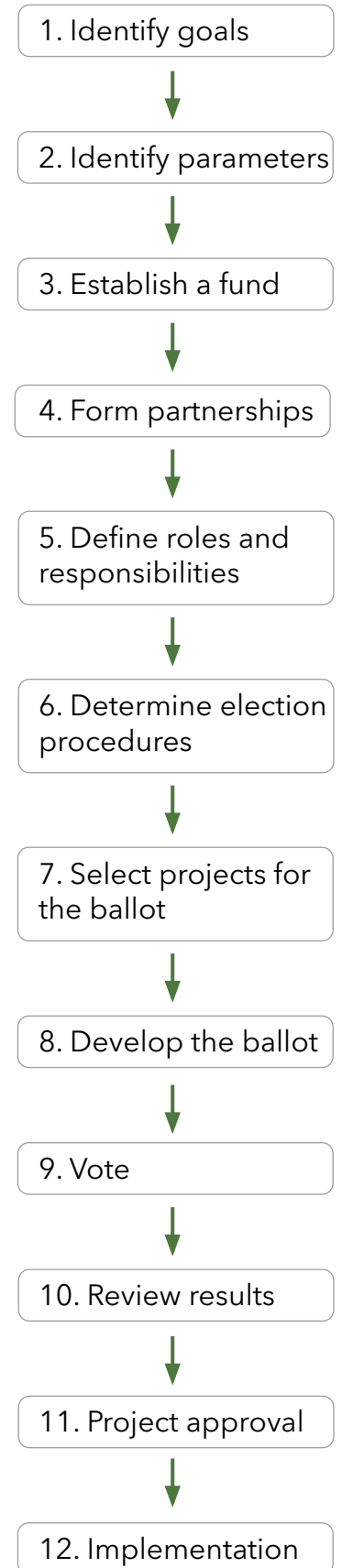
2 Hagelskamp, C. et al. (2016). Public Spending, by the People: Participatory Budgeting in the United States and Canada in 2014-2015. Public Agenda. https://publicagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/PublicSpendingByThePeople_PublicAgenda_2016.pdf

Process Overview

1. Identify goals

2. Identify parameters

3. Establish a fund

4. Form partnerships

5. Define roles and responsibilities

6. Determine election procedures

7. Select projects for the ballot

8. Develop the ballot

9. Vote

10. Review results

11. Project approval

12. Implementation

6. Determine election procedures

Kickoff the collaboration with the steering committee, beginning with an overview of the PB process. The steering committee decides the logistics and details (timeframe, in-person and/or online, etc.) for the voting process. The committee determines the following:

- *How will the committee make decisions? (by consensus? by majority?)*

- *How many projects should be on the ballot?*

- *Who should be eligible to vote?*

- *How should the projects/ballots/instructions be presented to the public?*

- *When should the election occur? How long should the public voting period last?*

- *Should voters need to prove their eligibility to vote?*

7. Select projects for the ballot

The steering committee selects the projects that the public will vote on. There are always some parameters for using the funds and meeting project goals that limit which projects are eligible for selection. It is the organization's job to identify and communicate these limitations.

It is typical in participatory budgeting for the steering committee to come up with project ideas from a blank slate. TAMC's Participatory Budgeting was limited by the specific guidelines that only Safe Routes to School projects could be selected, the technical nature of transportation projects, and grant-related time constraints. Because of these limitations, the steering committee selected projects from a list of consultant-recommended projects that had been pre-approved by Public Works. In North Monterey County, the steering committee determined high priority areas which informed the consultant's list that the committee members then worked from.

8. Developing the ballot

The steering committee develops the ballot with the selected projects and procedures. The steering committees in Greenfield, Soledad, and Gonzales allowed the public to vote on each individual project, while the steering committees in King City and North Monterey County decided to create proposals including multiple projects to optimize the budget.

9. Vote

Community residents vote on which proposals to fund! Steering committee members plan a kickoff event and promote the election. Ballots are shared online, at community locations, and events. Community election participation came largely from coordinating with existing in-person events that were already well known by the community. Steering committee members set up a booth with Voter Guides and maps and walked the event with clipboards and ballots, talking directly to their community.

Gonzales Paper Ballot, Page 1

10. Review results and develop recommendation

The steering committee reviews the election results and creates a recommendation for the City Council. In cities where the community voted on individual projects, the steering committee decides on which combination of projects optimizes the budget and community preferences.

11. Project approval

The steering committee members present a recommendation to fund the winning projects to the City Council (or the County Board of Supervisors, in the case of North Monterey County). After the City Council agrees to implement the projects within three years (a condition of RSTP funding), TAMC's board approves the programming of the funds.

12. Implementation

Identify future opportunities to engage with the steering committee. During the last steering committee meeting, a celebration is planned, and the future of the steering committee is discussed.

It is the city's responsibility to implement the recommended projects, and TAMC sends out an annual progress check in form. TAMC hosts update meetings with steering committee members.

Key Factors & Considerations for Success

📣 Partnerships

- Monterey County Health Department's **community relationships** were critical in several ways:

    - Recruiting steering committee members.

    - Representing the community's perspective when reviewing presentation slides and other materials before steering committee meetings.

    - Providing additional opportunities for engagement through hosting office hours with steering committee members.

- The facilitator played a key role in guiding conversations. Having a bilingual facilitator eased communication barriers.

- Each city played an active role in the process and implementation.

- Beyond contracted partnerships, relationships with organizations such as the school districts were critical for connecting with the community.

🚧 Remove barriers to participation

- Always provide full meals during meetings, especially at dinnertime.

- Compensate steering committee members for their time. TAMC provided $50 for each meeting attended.

- Provide childcare if necessary.

- Use more visuals than text to communicate ideas.

- **Language:** Ask the steering committee what language they would like to receive information in.

  - Meetings were held primarily in Spanish, with English interpretation available, as well as Mixteco in North County.

  - All materials were created in Spanish and English.

- **Hybrid meetings with Zoom translation:**

  - All steering committee meetings were hosted in person with an online option. An interpretor joined all meetings on Zoom, and all participants were able to join either the Spanish or English channel to hear the translations. Participants in the room could choose to wear headphones to listen to the translation.

  - Pros: **affordable** and **effective** method for providing translation, online option allowed more people to participate.

  - Cons: dependence on functional equipment, requires a skilled interpreter that can switch between languages and channels, less participation from those on Zoom.

  - Most effective if Zoom is set up properly: ensure the room is visible (360 degree conference camera is useful), the chat is visible on screen in person, and the facilitator pauses to invite online participants into the conversation.

Sufficient staffing

- A large staff is necessary to facilitate meetings, especially when using breakout groups.

- Partner organizations can provide staffing.

Steering committee size

- A large steering committee can be more representative of the community, but it requires more staffing and extends the time it takes to make decisions.

- The ideal steering committee size is as many people as want to be there!

Steering committee approach

- It is useful to review values and agreements for decision making before beginning work.

Resources

- TAMC used the [Stanford Participatory Budgeting Platform](#) to host the online ballots for free.
- The [Participatory Budgeting Project](#) creates and supports PB efforts.

Learn More

- [Best Practices for Inclusive Participatory Budgeting - Urban Institute](#)
- [Impacts of Participatory Budgeting - People Powered](#)

Reach out to TAMC staff with questions! Contact Aaron Hernandez aaron@tamcmonterey.org

About TAMC's Participatory Budgeting

Participatory Budgeting was incorporated into TAMC's two most recent Safe Routes to Schools Plans: Salinas Valley and North Monterey County. The Salinas Valley program included four separate PB cycles for the cities of Greenfield, Soledad, King City, and Gonzales. North Monterey County SRTS implemented one PB cycle for unincorporated communities of Pajaro, Las Lomas, Prunedale, Echo Valley, Elkhorn, and Castroville. Learn more here: Saferoutesmonterey.org, Salinas Valley PB Handbook, North Monterey County PB Handbook

Greenfield

June 2022 – January 2023

244 ballots: 156 paper, 88 digital, 132 Spanish

Meeting Syllabus | Voter Guide | Ballot

Elected projects: 12th St sidewalk installation (project #4+13), sign upgrades around schools (#19), crosswalk and signage (#6)

Soledad

October 2022 – June 2023

246 ballots: 212 paper, 34 digital, 127 Spanish

Meeting Syllabus | Voter Guide | Ballot

Elected projects: Pedestrian and intersection improvements (project #3, 6, 5, 12)

King City

May 2023 – December 2023

754 ballots: 721 paper, 33 digital, 324 Spanish
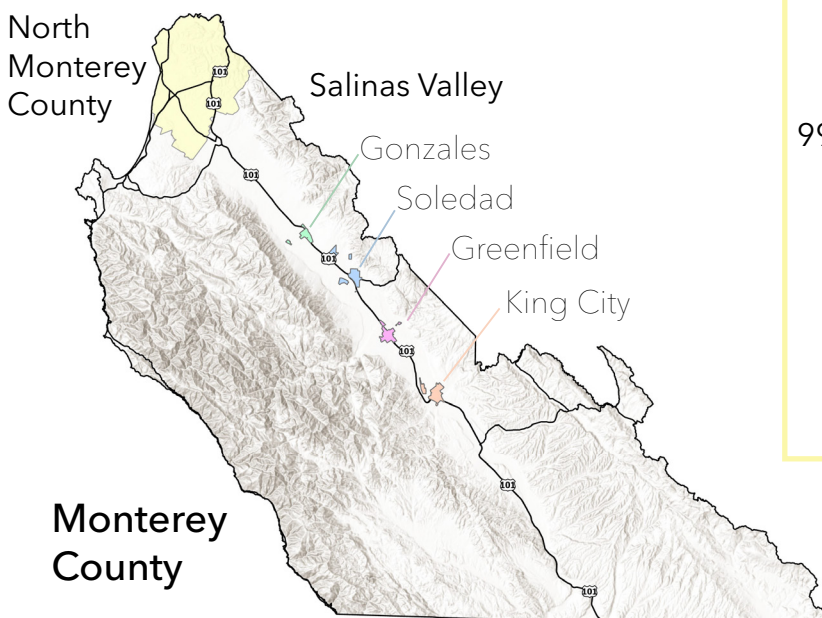
Meeting Syllabus | Voter Guide | Ballot

Elected projects: Crosswalks and curb ramps throughout the city (proposal #2)

Gonzales

September 2023 – May 2024

492 ballots: 466 paper, 26 digital, 337 Spanish

Meeting Syllabus | Voter Guide | Ballot

Elected projects: Pedestrian improvements (project #2+1)

North Monterey County

August 2024 – June 2025

999 ballots: 739 paper, 260 digital, 541 Spanish

Meeting Syllabus | Voter Guide | Ballot

Elected projects:
Pajaro: Proposal #1
Las Lomas: Proposal #1
Prunedale: Proposal #2
Echo Valley & Elkhorn: Proposal #2
Castroville: Proposal #3

North Monterey County

Salinas Valley

Gonzales

Soledad

Greenfield

King City

Monterey County

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