Democratic Budgeting Initiative FAQ
Neighborhood Assemblies

1) How do people get properly informed about the budget?
2) How is the agenda set for the meetings?
3) How often & where are the assembly meetings?
4) How do people make decisions?
5) How can NGOs & CBOs interface with the NAs?
6) How to encourage participation (especially of folk from marginalized groups)?
7) What does a typical meeting look like?
8) How to make sure people listen to/learn from each other?
9) How are the neighborhoods determined? How big are the NAs?

1) How do people get properly informed about the budget?

There are four ways. First, there will be time at meetings for presentations from city officials about both the overall budget and specifics pertaining to particular city departments/programs. Second, different NGOs and interest groups will naturally want to develop and distribute materials--via presentations, tabling, having local members advocate, etc.--related to their particular areas of concern. Third, delegates from various CWCs will regularly make reports. Four, over time, simply by participating in the various discussions, people will develop "collective wisdom" for not only the budget per se but also for the various interests, trade-offs, and perspectives on the issues.

2) How is the agenda set for the meetings?

Except for the once a year City Budget Vote, the agenda of the meetings is set by the Directors of each particular NA. Typically, Directors will set agendas based on decisions at prior sessions, the interests of community members, and the availability of presenters. As long as some part of the time is set aside for discussion of the city budget. the meetings are flexible. (Also see an example NA agenda included in this FAQ.)

3) How often & where are the assembly meetings?

Once a month, during at least 10 months of the year. They can choose to meet more if desired. Each NA may form various working groups, committees, etc. which may meet at additional times. The NA meetings are held at suitable locations provided or subsidized by the City.

4) How do people make decisions?

Members of NAs will make decisions based upon a majority vote, amendable later by the NA itself. Examples of decision making include but are not limited to electing directors, putting forth a proposal to any committee, or creating a committee or sub-committee. An opportunity for deliberation is required before voting. A quorum to make decisions is 30 voting members (i.e. neighborhood residents aged 16).

5) How to encourage participation (especially of folk from marginalized groups)?

First, our experience tells us that when people feel like their voices really matter, they are more likely to participate. So as folk see that they have the opportunity to decide how the city runs, on the basis of "one person, one vote" instead of "one dollar, one vote", they will want to participate.

Democratic Budgeting Initiative FAQ
Neighborhood Assemblies

Second, there will be dedicated staff--7 full-time Coordinators and 21 part-time Organizers--who will focus their efforts on promoting the program both city-wide and within targeted neighborhoods as needed. There will be periodic city-wide mailings and promotions, including inserts in other city departmental mailings,

Third, the Directors of the NAs are local leaders elected by people in their neighborhood. They will know their neighborhoods relatively well and will have incentives to promote wide-ranging involvement in their NAs. Moreover, each NA will have a budget for outreach.

6) What does a typical meeting look like?

A typical meeting might last 2-3 hours, and include, for example: cultural openers from local elders, reports from subcommittees, a presentation with Q&A from city officials, a panel with CBOs and local activists , and group discussions on neighborhood issues. (Also see an example NA agenda included in this FAQ.)

7) How to make sure people listen to/learn from each other?

The meetings are organized by 3-5 Directors, who will be provided with ongoing training in facilitation. Moreover, there will ample opportunity for individuals and organizations with expertise in group process to share their skills with the NAs.

8) How are the neighborhoods determined? How big are the NAs?

NAs will correspond to subdivisions of the current Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council (NCPC) districts. Each area will consist of 3,000-5,000 people, so there will be approximately 100 NAs in all. Basically, each NCPC will be divided in half, with the exact boundaries determined by the local residents

Democratic Budgeting Initiative FAQ
program administration

1) Who are the NA Directors?
2) Who are the DBP staff?
3) Who hires/oversees the staff?
4) How does the program evolve over time?
5) What will it all cost?
6) Is this legal? Is this constitutional?

1) Who are the NA Directors?

The Directors of the NAs are 3-5 locally elected volunteer leaders who organize the meetings and manage the NA operating budgets. They are the natural ambassadors & points of contact for their NAs. Directors are provided with training and leadership development opportunities--city-wide skill-building conferences, leadership retreats, etc. They serve on the city-wide Congress of Directors that oversees the overall Democratic Budgeting Program.

Directors are elected for 2 year terms. They cannot serve consecutive terms though they can stand again after a hiatus. There is some staggering so that incoming folk overlap with more experienced folk.

2) Who are the DBP staff?

The DBP will have two kinds of staff, Coordinators and Organizers. The Coordinators are 7 full-time staff--1 per council district--that support the DBP by maintaining databases, websites, promoting the DBP to the public, supporting the NA Directors, managing the DBP Organizers, and supporting the city-wide committees. The Organizers are 21 half-time staff--3 per council district--that promote the program at the neighborhood level and assist the Coordinators.

3) Who hires/oversees the staff?

Organizers, as assistants to Coordinators, are hired by them. Coordinators are initially hired at district-wide launching forums. Thereafter, their work is overseen by the Congress of Directors.

4) How does the program evolve over time?

Draft proposals to amend the program come from the NAs, & are developed by the city-wide Congress of Directors. The final versions are voted on by the people in the NAs.

5) What will it all cost?

About $2.5 million per year. This is less than 0.3% of the overall city budget, and includes staff pay, NA operating funds, etc.

6) Is this legal? Is this constitutional?

Passing a charter amendment means changing the law. In this sense, it is legal. Could we beat any lawsuits brought by those who want to maintain the status quo? Would the relevant courts agree with us? We hope so. From our legal research there is nothing that says we cannot do it. The law is always a matter of historical and political struggle.

Democratic Budgeting Initiative FAQ
Budget Vote

1) How does the budget allocation vote work?
2) How do program/department-specific proposals get made?
3) What will guarantee we don't get a whacked out budget in the end?
4) How to use the expertise that already exists in the departments/among city officials?

1) How does the budget allocation vote work?

There are two funds that voters have power over: general funds and special funds.

For the general funds, voters see a list of the departments of the city, with their current percentages of the general funds budget. Voters decide what they want the percentages to be. All the voters' choices are averaged. This becomes the general funds allocation for the following fiscal year.

For the special funds, which are constrained for more specific uses, CWCs with expertise in the relevant departments submit proposals for which departments should get which funds. Voters then choose between the CWC proposal and any alternative proposal from City officials. The allocation is the average.

2) How do program/department-specific proposals get made?

People who have ideas for specific programs or departmental changes they want submit their proposals to their NA. If the NA approves, then the proposal gets sent to the appropriate CWC specializing in that aspect of city operations. Each CWC discusses and synthesizes all the proposals they receive into an alternative budget for their department. Voters then decide between the budget submitted by the CWCs and any alternative submitted by the department. (The departments & CWCs use the allocations already set in the previous year as their baseline for program planning.)

3) What will guarantee we don't get a whacked out budget in the end?

A whacked-out budget is what characterizes the status quo. People in the NAs will certainly be no worse --and will probably be even better--at balancing diverse interests and hearing the voices of the disadvantaged than the special interests that dominate policy-making today. In any case, since the budget allocation vote is an average, extremes will tend to be balanced. This is just the way the statistics work out: While a few 'con-extremists' might say "I vote zero percent for department X!" and a few 'pro-extremists' say "I vote 100% for department X!", most people will tend to be somewhere in the middle. When the votes are tallied, the total will be reflective of the "average" voters, not the extreme voters.

4) How to use the expertise that already exists in the departments/among city officials?

City officials will be naturally motivated to share their insights and perspectives to and hear feedback from the public gathered at the Neighborhood Assemblies, and the space will exist to allow for and encourage dialog and transparency. Moreover, department officials will be encouraged to share information with the CWCs. This is again in their interest, as they would want to influence any alternative budget to be proposed by the CWCs. And finally, to the extent that city employees are also

city residents who will want to have their say at the NAs, there will be ample inclusion of the institutional wisdom & professional knowledge that exists within the various city departments.

Miscellaneous

1) How can NGOs & CBOs interface with the NAs?

Different NGOs, CBOs, and interest groups will naturally want to develop and distribute informational materials, make presentations, and hold workshops at NAs related to their particular areas of expertise. The exact manner for this will be determined by each NA or city-wide committee as appropriate.

Democratic Budgeting Initiative FAQ

Sample Neighborhood Assembly agenda

1. Opening music by women's choir

2. Welcome from Directors & shout-outs from visitors

3. Brief review of last month's minutes

4. Reports from subcommittees

    a. graffiti subcommittee

    b. street party subcommittee

5. Reports from city-wide committees (includes time for feedback)

    a. parks & recs (no delegate; video)

    b. library & after-school programs (delegate)

    c. fire (written)

6. Mid-meeting break; entertainment by local youth dance crew; tea/cookies generously provided for free by Maple's Catering

7. Presentation on police budget (2nd in two-part series)

8. Discussion of presentation

9. New proposals for subcommittees and city-wide committees

10. General discussion

11. Appreciation of note-takers and meeting assistants; task assignments for next meeting

12. Wrap-up