

Building Sustainable Community Development Initiatives: Participatory Budgeting of Binghamton University's Community Impact Fund Through the City of Binghamton Neighborhood Assemblies

By Brianna Cea and Garrett Shor

Roosevelt @ Binghamton University

THESIS

To create an inclusive participatory policy process, Binghamton University and the City of Binghamton should allocate the Community Impact Fund of \$200,000 per year, for the next five years, to reconvene the city's neighborhood assemblies.

BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

In 2006, the City of Binghamton launched the Neighborhood Assembly Project, which originally consisted of seven neighborhood assemblies. These organizations hold public community meetings to develop ideas for neighborhood projects and were given an allocation of \$70,000 from the Neighborhood Project Development Fund, which came from a portion of Binghamton's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding. The funds were spent based on the recommendations of these assemblies. The original neighborhood assemblies spearheaded projects such as Fresh Cycles, which gave underprivileged children bicycles and taught maintenance skills, created community gardens, and established a new farmer's market in the Northside.¹

Currently, 97 percent of Binghamton's CDBG funds benefit programs for low- to middle-income individuals. Proposed federal cuts to the CDBG program will eliminate \$1.7 million from the City of Binghamton's budget,² so it is imperative that alternative sources of impact aid is directed to the City of Binghamton for the use of community development projects. In February 2017, Mayor Rich David announced that Binghamton University will contribute \$200,000 per year, for the next five years, in an "impact funding" program.³ The impact funding program allows municipalities to receive funds directly from universities and tax-exempt entities to mitigate the costs of community development projects. Hence, due to the proposed cuts to CDBG funds, the cumulative \$1 million of the impact fund will help to offset the \$1.7 million in federal cuts.

TALKING POINTS

- The active engagement of community members through local assemblies and panels has been demonstrated to yield better legitimacy for government decisions, a growth in civic skills for residents, and a greater diversity of represented views.⁴
- Participatory budgeting is proven to improve community connections, create a more reflective budget of community priorities, and strengthen the relationship between the municipality and its residents. Moreover, participatory budgeting of Binghamton University impact funds can strengthen its relationships with community members.⁵
- By opening the budget process to all citizens, participatory budgeting improves government transparency and accountability.

POLICY IDEA

Binghamton University's Town-Gown Advisory Board (TGAB) should allocate the Community Impact Fund equally among the current neighborhood assemblies and reconvene the inactive assemblies for community development initiatives. Residents will propose new projects, then present these ideas to the Binghamton Department of Planning and Community Development, where they will undergo further development. Lastly, competing projects will be voted on for a final decision. Binghamton University should enter an interlocal agreement with the City of Binghamton to ensure that the funds are appropriated to the neighborhood assemblies and used in a manner that benefits neighborhoods.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Participatory budgeting has been instituted in various forms in cities across the globe. The first to fully implement it was Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989. Since then, other cities, including New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, have implemented forms of participatory budgeting. These cities have portions of their city budget dedicated to projects developed based upon recommendations of public bodies.⁹ According to the Urban Justice Center, the New York City Council districts that adopted participatory budgeting saw growth in participation among groups, which typically are underrepresented in ordinary elections.¹⁰ Similar results have been found in cities such as Buffalo, New York, which adopted participatory budgeting in 2014.¹¹

According to the Scholars Strategy Network, participatory budgeting leads to the allocation of resources for underserved community needs.¹² As Binghamton University attempts to expand its community involvement, it has the potential to enable community-controlled projects that might otherwise be ignored.

The assemblies, which already follow a similar model, will function similar to those in Buffalo, New York. The program features public community meetings in which spending projects are brainstormed, and then budget delegates will be elected by the assembly to develop their ideas into well-defined project plans in conjunction with the city planning department. Following this, all neighborhood residents are invited to a last round of voting to make the final decision of which projects to fund.¹³ In this manner, Binghamton will have opened up the budget process to all citizens and ensured that community development is done with community input.

NEXT STEPS

The City of Binghamton and Binghamton University will make a public commitment to allocate the community impact fund to the Neighborhood Assemblies through an interlocal contract. The City Planning Department will next send representatives to meetings of the Northside Assembly, Southside Assembly, and Westside Neighborhood Association, where the funding source will be outlined. All residents of the neighborhoods will be allowed to attend these meetings and have input. Additionally, public notices will be put out for meetings where public deliberation is to take place. The participatory budgeting process laid out in the analysis section will be carried out, and the community development projects will commence. Additionally, steps will be taken to revive the neighborhood assemblies which have become inactive by holding new community meetings and making new public notices.

KEY FACTS

- In New York City, 57 percent of participatory budgeting voters identified as people of color, compared to 47 percent in the general election.⁶
- In Chicago's 2013-2014 participatory budgeting process, at least half of the voters in each district had never been members of community organizations before the budgeting.⁷
- Greater citizen participation in democracy increases public engagement, encourages people to listen to a diversity of opinions, and contributes to a greater sense of legitimacy of decisions.⁸

ENDNOTES

- 1 “Neighborhood Engagement in Binghamton NY: Building Sustainable Regions through Collaborative Planning and Community Development.” Progressive Cities and Neighborhood Planning (PCNP). Accessed April 29, 2017 (<http://progressivecities.org/cities/other-cities/>).
- 2 Schwarz, Hannah. 2017. “Federal CDBG Cuts Could Cost Binghamton \$1.7 Million.” *Pressconnects*. Accessed April 29, 2017 (<http://www.pressconnects.com/story/news/local/2017/03/20/federal-cdbg-cuts-cost-binghamton-17-million/99410062/>).
- 3 Schwarz, Hannah. 2017. “Five Takeaways from Mayor David’s State of the City.” *Pressconnects*. Accessed April 29, 2017 (<http://www.pressconnects.com/story/news/local/2017/02/27/state-city-speech-binghamton-ny-mayor-richard-david/98494032/>).
- 4 Michels, Ank and Laurens De Graaf. 2010. “Examining Citizen Participation: Local Participatory Policy Making and Democracy.” *Local Government Studies* 36:4, 477-491, DOI: 10.1080/03003930.2010.494101.
- 5 Jabola-Carolus, Issac. 2015. “How Participatory Budgeting Strengthens Communities and Improves Local Governance.” Scholars Strategy Network. Accessed April 29, 2017 (<http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/brief/how-participatory-budgeting-strengthens-communities-and-improves-local-governance>).
- 6 “A People’s Budget: A Research and Evaluation Report of Participatory Budgeting in New York City.”
- 7 Jabola-Carolus, “How Participatory Budgeting Strengthens Communities and Improves Local Governance.”
- 8 Michels and De Graaf, “Examining Citizen Participation: Local Participatory Policy Making and Democracy.”
- 9 “PB Map and Process List.” Participatory Budgeting Project. Accessed: April 29, 2017 (<https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/pb-map/>).
- 10 “A People’s Budget: A Research and Evaluation Report of Participatory Budgeting in New York City.” PBNYC Research Team, Urban Justice Center. Accessed April 29, 2017 (https://cdp.urbanjustice.org/sites/default/files/CDP.WEB.doc_Report_PBNYC_cycle4findings_20151021.pdf).
- 11 “PB Map and Process List.” Participatory Budgeting Project.
- 12 Jabola-Carolus, “How Participatory Budgeting Strengthens Communities and Improves Local Governance.”
- 13 “Participatory Budgeting Buffalo: How the City of Buffalo Can Increase Resident Equity and Engagement in its Budget.” Participatory Budgeting Working Group, Buffalo Common Council, Accessed April 29, 2017 (<http://www.pbuffalo.org/>).