



INFORMATIONAL MEMORANDUM

TO: **Finance and Governance Committee**
FROM: **Laurel Humphrey, Legislative Analyst**
DATE: **February 2, 2021**
SUBJECT: **2021-2022 Online Budget Survey**

ISSUE

As part of its work plan, the Finance & Governance Committee requested further discussion on last year's online community survey and how it informed the final budget.

SUMMARY

With every budget cycle, the city strives to conduct meaningful community engagement to ensure that public priorities and expectations for services are being met. This engagement has taken place in the form of in-person workshops, open houses, mailings, Council Chats, public hearings, surveys, and more. During the development of the 2019-2020 budget, the City did this by seeking public input onto the Strategic Plan priorities that had been adopted in 2013. This feedback resulted in the Council adopting [amendments relating to racial equity, gentrification, health, infrastructure, and technology](#).

Proposed 2021-2022 Budget

Community outreach on the proposed 2021-2022 budget looked different due to the coronavirus emergency – since in-person meetings and open houses were not possible, the City Council had to rely on virtual and online strategies, such as social media, email, virtual public comment and public hearing, virtual listening sessions, and an online survey. Not only were engagement opportunities limited, but the City Council was facing a very difficult budget reality due to the loss of revenues associated with the pandemic leading to the need to reduce services.

Survey Development

A cross departmental team convened last summer to develop an outreach plan including messaging, strategies, and a draft survey that asked participants to rank priorities in a variety of areas that staff had identified as possible service cuts. Staff presented this draft to the Finance Committee in August, who shared concerns about the approach including potential service changes that had not yet been discussed by the City Council. The Committee requested that the survey be redrafted to be higher level and more consistent. After further analysis, staff returned to the Finance Committee with a proposal to conduct a survey directly tied into the City's Priority- Based Budgeting framework that could be used and improved upon in future years – this idea was modeled after one used by the City of Evanston, Illinois, which also uses Priority-Based Budgeting. The Finance Committee approved this approach at its August 24, 2020 meeting. Staff then prepared a survey that listed the City's PBB Programs, not including those identified as legally mandated, grant-funded, self-sustaining, or internal services.

Participants were asked to select those programs they thought most important, those that could be considered for elimination or reduction, and were also given the opportunity to share feedback on open-ended questions about their priorities, opportunities for savings, and anything else on their mind regarding the budget.

Survey Responses

The survey was made available in five languages and posted from September 25 to October 23. It was advertised via all the City's media channels and shared by Councilmembers via their constituent networks. No requests for hard copies were made, although staff would have facilitated this opportunity. Participation was excellent with 288 individuals responding. For comparison, the City's 2018 Strategic Plan online survey had 23 responses, and the City's 2017-2018 online survey had zero responses. The open-ended nature of some survey questions made statistical data difficult to identify, but the priorities that emerged from the ranking exercise were community policing, equity, fire department community outreach, human services, park maintenance, police body cameras, school district partnerships, street maintenance and teen and youth programming. The Council took these priorities, along with public input shared via the virtual listening sessions and other avenues, as it deliberated the Mayor's proposed budget over the course of multiple work sessions and the public hearing.

Lessons Learned and Future Budget Surveys

Staff found this survey format to be an effective tool due to its alignment with Priority-Based Budgeting and could be used but improved upon in future budget cycles if the City Council agrees. Staff acknowledges that the timing of the survey was not ideal in 2020. Ideally, the public engagement process would start earlier in the year so that public feedback would be more integrated into staff's development of the draft budget. This can be implemented in 2022 as the 2023-2024 budget is being drafted. In addition, the City's programs identified in the PBB process need to be revisited and further refined so that there is more consistency across how departments defined them. The City's new Enterprise Resource Planning system will help staff and Council revisit the priorities in an effective way, and these priorities will in turn inform future budget public outreach.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff is seeking Committee feedback on the recent budget outreach to help inform improvements in the next cycle.