The City Manager's Guide to Better Budgeting With Community Engagement
Your budget is a short-term plan that serves as a statement of your jurisdiction’s priorities.
Introduction

As all local government professionals know, a budget is the glue that holds a city together. Without it, there’s no rhyme or reason, no order, no way of getting things done.

Budgets must balance a city or county’s priorities against available resources, and unlike capital improvement or strategic plans - which allow for big-picture visions without a direct correlation to funds - city budgets require dollar-for-dollar accounting. Created on either an annual or every-two-year cycle, it can feel like a city manager’s entire goal revolves around budgets, as often by the time one budget is approved, preparations are already underway for the next one. It’s a time-consuming process that not only requires deft balancing, but also leaves city and county managers most vulnerable to the tug-of-war of disparate interests: everyone has an opinion on budgets! In this eBook we’ll discuss some of the challenges around budgeting and why having representative community input can streamline an otherwise onerous task.
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The budget process for cities and counties

One of the biggest challenges local governments face is that available resources rarely match what’s needed to fund a jurisdiction’s initiatives or to solve every problem on hand. As a result, a budget becomes more than just a list of expenditures, it also serves as a statement of priorities.

The National League of Cities defines a budget as, "A political tool that: weighs policy priorities against available public resources; specifies the ways and means of providing public programs and services; [and] establishes the cost of programs and the criteria by which these programs will be evaluated for efficiency and effectiveness."

Complicating the issue is the way by which budgets are created and approved; while every jurisdiction has its own unique process, the NLC highlights several factors that tend to be common between them:

Planning

The task of creating a budget includes determining which initiatives to prioritize and how to allocate funds to different departments. Yet in order to prioritize, city and county managers must understand where services are lacking. And the more nuanced this understanding is, the more effective and efficient resource allocation will prove to be. Similarly, in order to allocate funds, local governments must forecast their revenues and expenditures in order to know which resources they will have available, whether through fees, taxes, enterprise funds, or specific levies.
Approval
A city or county budget, whether drafted by the mayor or city or county manager, will always need to be approved by council members or other elected officials. In some cases the city manager will work with council’s recommendations or a council-approved strategic plan, often resulting in a smoother approval process. Other times, council will make suggestions on the budget after it’s drafted, including reductions, enhancements, or reallocations, based on straw polls and community input from public budget hearings. While some veto power exists on both sides, it is ultimately the role of the council to approve the budget, after which it becomes a legally binding document.

Implementation
Once the budget is approved, the next step is its implementation by various city or county departments. This is done through programs, staffing, repairs, and more throughout the fiscal year. It’s up to each individual department to ensure that it’s working within the parameters of the budget and meeting its goals.

Evaluation
Budget evaluation is a method of performance management that looks at how effectively a budget was implemented, both on an ongoing basis and at the end of the fiscal year. When evaluation takes place during the implementation phase, it allows cities and counties to adapt and tweak their budget allowances and expenditures based on needs that arise. An audit performed at the end of the fiscal year can be used as a guide for the next budget cycle.
The Many Types of City & County Budgets

**Line-item budget**
A line-item budget is perhaps the most traditional form of budgeting for local governments. In it, each expenditure is grouped by broad subject, department, or fund. It often uses the previous year’s budget as a guideline, giving city managers a base to work from and making the process simpler and more time efficient. Yet the downside of the line-item approach is that jurisdictions often get stuck in a rut, without much room for reassessing priorities.

**Zero-based budget**
On the opposite end of the spectrum from line-item budgets, zero-based budgets have local government leaders starting with a clean slate each budget cycle rather than working off the previous year. The result affords city managers more flexibility in building their budget and allocating resources the way they see fit. However, without a model to base decisions on, zero-based budgeting can be an especially time consuming process.

**Performance budget**
*Performance-based budgeting* - also called results budgeting or budgeting for outcomes - links funding to expected results. It requires the active use of performance measurement to understand whether outcomes are achieved, and awards funds based on meeting specific targets. It is effective in that it can serve as a motivating factor for employees to drive results. Its downside is that it doesn't always award funding based on priorities and need. Furthermore, in order for results budgeting to be effective, there needs to be an easy way to measure performance in a standardized way across all initiatives - something which is often lacking.

**Program budget**
Program budgets organize budget priorities by program rather than by department, giving residents more transparency as to governmental operations. Whereas a line-item budget may provide too much information, overwhelming citizens with mundane details, program budgets aim to give citizens a broader understanding of where their tax dollars go. Yet program budgets also have their challenges: namely how to measure the full cost of programs in a consistent and effective way.

**Priority-based budget**
Combining aspects of several other budget types, priority based budgeting allocates funding based on strategic planning and the needs of the community. Similar to zero-based budgets, priority budgets tend to look at the resources available rather than at the previous year’s expenditures. And like program budgets, they strive to fund the programs needed rather than specific departments, providing a large amount of transparency. The biggest advantage of priority based budgets is that they seek to solve problems the community faces, often with deeper community engagement. But like zero budgets, they can be more time consuming in that they require organizations to start budgeting with a clean slate.
The Top Expenditures for U.S. Cities

As reported by the Government Finance Officers Association

Utilities 23.32%
Public Safety 18.8%
Other including Libraries, Judicial, and More 16.51%
Transportation 12.88%
Education 12.09%
Parks & Recreation 4.39%
Housing & Community Development 3.56%
Hospitals 3.4%
Welfare 3.09%
Health 1.96%

Source: Government Finance Officers Association
The Top Expenditures for U.S. Counties

As reported by the Government Finance Officers Association

- Intergovernmental Expenditures: 3.7%
- Public Safety: 15.97%
- Education: 14.69%
- Hospitals: 11.11%
- Welfare: 9.71%
- Utilities: 4.84%
- Transportation: 8.07%
- Health: 8.27%
- Other including Parks & Rec., Housing & Comm. Dev., and more: 19.25%

Source: Government Finance Officers Association
Why community input is necessary for effective city and county budgeting - and why obtaining it is often a challenge

While no two jurisdictions need to budget for exactly the same things, one thing every jurisdiction has in common is residents. The Government Finance Officers Association’s (GFOA) Best Practices for Public Engagement in the Budget Process states that “Good participation practices can help governments be more accountable and responsive to their communities.” Community input not only makes governments more responsive, it also makes them more efficient.

Yet obtaining representative input can be challenging. This is because community input is traditionally gathered in two ways, both which require residents to opt-in or take part either through town hall meetings or through community surveys. Both of these classic civic engagement methods have significant shortcomings in their current form.
Town hall meetings face a serious representation problem, and with only a small fraction of residents attending them, those who do have gained the nickname “the STP” or the Same Ten People. But while the STP voice is certainly an important one in local government, it’s only part of the story. Unfortunately, for a variety of factors including a lack of accessibility, knowledge, and trust in government, there is a participation gap outside of the STP, which is generally felt by already underserved communities. The result is that widespread community input isn’t achieved even when the best intentions are there to integrate it into budgets, often leading to biased conclusions and a disproportionate prioritizing of certain groups’ interests.

Community surveys are no different. Often conducted offline via mail and phone, with a random sample of residents, they result in low and non-representative (though technically statistically valid) response rates. Additionally, most community surveys are unwieldy, leading once again to participation problems which are most felt in communities where English is a second language or where residents simply don’t have time. Furthermore, surveys are traditionally conducted every 1-2 years, and getting results from these surveys takes a few months of processing, usually from an outside consultant, which means at the end of the day, traditional surveys often lack impact, timeliness, and relevance.

The following are some of the ways community input can improve each step of the budget process - and the challenges to obtaining it.
Three ways to use data to improve your budget process

When it comes to local government budgets, data is the tool that gives us insight into our past, present, and future, and ensures we move on the right path forward. If personal anecdotes provide hunches, data can reinforce those feelings or show they’re nothing more than one person’s voice. Here are three ways community feedback data can simplify your local government budget process:

1. **Demonstrate progress**
   Resident satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with certain initiatives over time can show how a city or county’s programs are moving the needle and whether your budget is working.

2. **Identify inequities**
   How does resident satisfaction vary within your jurisdiction? Are residents of certain neighborhoods more satisfied than others? Are there wide discrepancies by age group? This data can help you understand how to better allocate funds in support of equity.

3. **Streamline approvals**
   Budgets must be approved by elected officials such as council members. Showing resident feedback data around specific topics can help council better understand community priorities and get elected officials on board with fiscal recommendations.

Learn how to easily access community feedback data in support of your budget plans

See Zencity's technology in action →
Using community feedback in the planning process

Why it’s important

Whether a city or county is drafting a line-item or a priority-based budget, community input can help local government leaders align their funding with resident priorities. The result is a more equitable budget - one that represents the entire community’s needs - and therefore, ultimately, a more effective budget. With local government budgets notoriously underfunded, dedicating limited resources to the community’s expressed needs and priorities becomes more essential than ever.

Why it’s a challenge

The GFOA’s best practices lays out methods to obtain community feedback, including public meetings, surveys, technology, and interactive tools. Yet at the same time, it emphasizes the need for inclusivity. Problematically, community outreach efforts often fall short, failing to reach underrepresented groups let alone a representative sample of residents. More than this, traditional community engagement requires opting-in. The result is lopsided participation, in which the same few people continuously make their needs heard, which leads to their priorities getting pushed to the top.
SPOTLIGHT ON:

Budgeting in Chattanooga, TN

In the Fall of 2020, the City of Chattanooga, TN (pop. 182,799), set out to establish budget priorities based on resident need. Active participation was low - the City was able to gather feedback from 160 residents who attended Zoom workshops and filled out online surveys - and so the City turned to Zencity to help them gather more broad reaching community input to ensure its budget priorities served all corners of the community.

Zencity collected and analyzed organic feedback about the City’s budget in the form of 18,827 social media interactions from residents across all 9 City districts. With insights from this, the City identified that resident strategic priorities included a need for improved police-community relations, better schools and youth programs, safer streets, stronger economic development, and better mental health resources. In a detailed report, the City then shared back with residents the results of its community engagement process, increasing accountability and transparency. Read the full report on how the City of Chattanooga used resident feedback to map out its budgeting priorities: Resident Input for FY 2022 Budget (PDF).

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City of Chattanooga @Chattanooga_gov · Jan 13, 2021

The massive amounts of input we received from the public last year about our upcoming Fiscal Year 2022 budget has been distilled into this report. Have a look and let us know what you think: cha.city/bfo22report

City of Chattanooga @Chattanooga_gov

Our public input process revealed several clear themes about where and how people would like to see the @Chattanooga_gov invest its resources:

✓ More resources for mental health
✓ Supplemental workforce development programs
✓ More after-school programs for community youth

12:12 AM · Jan 13, 2021
Leveraging data in the approval process

Why it’s important

Approval by council members, commissioners, or other elected officials is essential to every budget process. Data, such as resident sentiment on specific issues, is a powerful tool in getting this approval. Community feedback helps tell a story, exposes inequities, and helps local government leaders and elected officials make decisions.

Why it’s a challenge

Elected officials often hear from the same ten people (the STP). The STP tends to be vocal, but doesn’t necessarily represent the needs of the larger community. Having data in-hand that shows what the interests of all residents are, can help city and county managers better advocate for their proposed budgets, and makes for a faster and more efficient approval process.
WHAT IS ZENCITY?

Community insights & analytics for local government

Zencity helps cities and counties of all shapes and sizes understand the needs of their residents. Our cross-channel platform is the only civic engagement solution that aggregates and analyzes organic input alongside proactive surveys, transforming broad-reaching community feedback into actionable insights. We do this using cutting-edge AI and our team of expert analysts.

- **Get council on board**
  Zencity gives you the broad reaching, community input you need to make data-based recommendations to elected officials and to help council feel confident when approving your proposals.

- **Improve performance management**
  Zencity’s resident sentiment analysis provides a standardized KPI across all of your initiatives and services, allowing you to easily measure impact and pinpoint areas that need improvement.

- **Hear from all corners of your community**
  Gathering community input can be challenging. Zencity plugs into the organic conversations people are having across hundreds of data sources, making it easier to understand your residents’ needs.

- **Run ad-hoc & ongoing community surveys**
  Zencity’s end-to-end survey services provide temperature checks on specific initiatives, as well as ongoing, statistically valid, and representative community surveys with expert reporting.

- **Stay one step ahead**
  Real-time resident feedback helps you be proactive in responding to the community and expressed priorities. Automatic alerts about trending topics can also help you understand what’s a crisis and what’s just noise.

- **Act with data in hand**
  Zencity’s platform automatically transforms all of your residents’ feedback into actionable insights using AI and a team of experts, giving you the necessary data to budget, plan, and take action based on your community’s expressed input and priorities.

- **Benchmark your achievements**
  Compare your performance to that of similar cities and counties with Zencity’s Benchmarker and see where your community excels, and where you need to improve.

Plan, strategize, budget, and measure impact - across every department in city hall - with non-stop access to community feedback.

See Zencity's technology in action →

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THE ZENCITY SOLUTION

Getting community feedback has never been easier

We aggregate and anonymize millions of resident-generated data points from a variety of sources including social media, local news, 311, council meeting minutes, and more.

Zencity analyzes the data with our award-winning AI to identify and classify resident discourse by topics, trends, anomalies, source, location, and sentiment.

Our platform and mobile app, paired with curated reports by our data analysts, provide visual, actionable insights so you can understand your community’s needs and priorities in real-time and over time.

Meet Zencity

Founded in 2015, Zencity works in partnership with leading organizations such as ICMA, NACO, ELGL, Mastercard, Microsoft, and more. Today, hundreds of state and local government organizations from across the U.S., and the globe, use Zencity as an integral part of their workflow to ultimately increase resident satisfaction and improve the quality of life of their residents.
Harnessing real-time feedback during implementation

Why it’s important
Understanding whether programmatic choices and initiatives are working during the budget implementation process is the key to improving services and increasing resident satisfaction, while laying the groundwork necessary for further evaluation. Having a real-time understanding of mistakes and unintended consequences gives local governments the opportunity to correct course without letting funds go to waste on unsuccessful initiatives. Resident feedback can provide that real-time evaluation that city and county managers need.

Why it’s a challenge
Gathering community input is challenging for many government agencies, especially outside of specific channels such as town meetings. Additionally, community engagement processes too often ask about priority areas either too early, when ideas are theoretical, or after-the-fact once the money is spent and the program is finished. While this feedback is valuable for performance management and the following year’s budget, it fails to provide the feedback necessary to pivot or improve a program that isn’t meeting expectations in real-time. And even when feedback is gathered during the course of a specific program, getting results that are actionable and implementable is another hurdle.

Evaluating impact through community input

Why it’s important
Understanding the success of a budget is important for several reasons: success can help determine funding allocation during the following budget cycle, it can give city and county managers insight into community needs, and it can be used for forecasting. Ultimately success in local government isn’t just about a balanced budget, it’s about improving quality of life for residents and resident satisfaction levels. To measure these things you must connect with residents and get their feedback. You must be able to understand if you are meeting their needs. While there often isn’t a standard metric for evaluating all of a city’s initiatives, resident feedback can serve as the great equalizer, providing a way to measure initiatives across the board.

Why it’s a challenge
Very few people proactively participate in local government, which leaves leaders with the same challenge of the STP, and as a result skews feedback towards the interests of a small group of people. Additionally, converting resident satisfaction into an actionable metric is no easy feat without the right tools and analytics in hand.
Weaving equity into city and county budgeting

How do we make our budgeting process more inclusive so that our programs and initiatives serve all residents?

The ICMA’s Equity and Inclusion Toolkit urges local governments to “consider issues of equity and inclusion that go beyond race, ethnicity, and gender, and include variations in age, sexual orientation, ability, economic status, educational attainment, immigration levels, and community size.” One way to do so is to ensure all voices are being heard during the city budgeting process by removing the barriers that may exist to resident participation. Among the barriers to participation that should be considered are:

- **Knowledge**
  Are your residents aware that they can participate in the city budgeting process? What means are you using to distribute information and encourage their participation?

- **Accessibility**
  Are your public meetings accessible to residents without private transportation? Can they be attended by shift workers, single parents, or other community members who may not be available in the evenings, and if not, what alternatives are provided? What other opportunities are you providing community members to have their voices heard?

- **Language**
  If your community is multilingual, is the information you’re disseminating available in more than one language? How are you communicating with non-English speaking residents?

- **Information sources**
  Are your residents more likely to respond to calls to action through official or unofficial sources? Can you utilize social media and community surveys to expand your reach?

- **Trust**
  How can you increase trust within your community, especially among community members who have historically been reluctant to engage with governments?

*Developing an equitable budget is as easy as having the right tools to hear your residents.*
Before you can plan expenditures, you have to know how much revenue you can expect. Enter forecasting. A forecast predicts future revenue based on past, current, and projected financials. Forecasting allows local government leaders to better identify priorities and to improve decision making.

To successfully forecast for your city or county:

- **Define parameters**
  Such as the length of the forecast and its objectives.

- **Examine historical data**
  such as demographic changes that may mean a shift in services needed.

- **Determine methodology**
  by choosing how to use your data to determine your forecast.

- **Consider volatility**
  such as recessions, natural disasters, or pandemics. These unknowns make budget forecasting infinitely more difficult.
How more resident input leads to stronger city and county budgeting

Best practices in budgeting for local government organizations focus on the importance of community feedback in the budgeting process. Without it, city and county managers have no way of knowing whether the areas they are prioritizing are in line with their residents’ priorities. But as has already been illustrated, gaining representative feedback can be difficult and often the voices of only a few residents rise above the rest. How then can city and county leaders ensure that their budgets serve the needs of all corners of their community?

Planning through resident discourse: identifying priorities

Understanding the broader needs of the community is one of the greatest challenges local government leaders face. This is because public participation in local government is notoriously low, with only 19% of residents contacting elected officials, and only 25% attending public meetings. The statistics are even worse when looking at residents under the age of 35. The reasoning behind such low participation rates is varied - from distrust in government, to accessibility barriers, to a lack of knowing how to take part. The result is that the opinions heard and incorporated into planning represent only a very small minority of residents. Yet that doesn’t mean the majority of residents don’t have opinions on community priorities and how city resources could best serve their communities.

One solution is to broaden direct outreach: to make information on public meetings more available, and to increase awareness around the topic. Zencity takes that outreach a step further, and meets residents where they spend time: online. Through a mix of cutting-edge AI and expert analysis, Zencity aggregates organic discourse through unofficial online channels - such as social media and community forums - to identify trending topics and keywords within individual jurisdictions, and assess positive or negative resident sentiment around those subjects. This allows city and county managers to gain a better understanding of what is most important to all residents, not just the minority that makes its voice heard, and what services residents may be more or less satisfied with, in real-time and over time.
Budget approval through data: using community surveys

City or county budgets require the approval of elected officials. But with only 19% of residents contacting elected officials, city and county managers need access to better data, which shows whether the other 80% has different priorities. Surveys have long been used as a tool to assess resident priorities and satisfaction, yet they have their own challenges: when disseminated through traditional means, such as mail or phone, they still fall short of adequate representation.

Zencity’s ad-hoc surveys on specific topics, and community surveys on overall resident satisfaction, are disseminated online through sponsored posts on social media platforms and search engines. In other words, they reach residents who may otherwise have difficulty participating, lending a voice to their priorities. Zencity’s end-to-end survey solutions gather feedback in a scientifically valid but also representative manner, to provide local government leaders with the broad-reaching data they need to get their budgets approved and to ensure their budgets serve all members of the community.
COMMUNITY SURVEYS - REIMAGINED

A Community Survey for the World We Live In

The new Zencity Community Survey helps you hear from more of your residents using continuous, online polling for a representative, actionable view of your community - all in real time.

Reach more voices
Our dynamic online sampling reaches the full spectrum of your residents via the devices and sites they’re already tapped into, and uses census data to target a representative sample of your residents - allowing you to hear from across all corners of your community.

Year-round polling, 24/7
A community survey that’s always on means results that are always fresh. Zencity aligns feedback with your organization’s calendar, providing reports 2-4 times a year for impactful and effective performance management around your key services and initiatives.

Inclusive and accessible
Our short questionnaire has been purposely crafted to be accessible and inclusive, and to remove common barriers to participation - like time and language - so more resident groups can easily take part.

Actionable results
Derive meaningful takeaways fast and translate survey results into an action plan through ongoing satisfaction scores in your dashboard and a team of experts on-hand to deliver executive summaries and briefings.

Live free-text analysis
Draw immediate, meaningful insights from free-text fields. Our free-text analysis technology automatically processes, classifies, and scores free-text responses, quickly surfacing patterns in resident comments, displayed in a live feed.

Paint the complete picture
Zencity provides the most comprehensive civic tool on the market, displaying survey results side-by-side with an analysis of organic resident discourse.

Sit back, let us do the heavy lifting.
From survey design to reaching a representative sample, and from distribution to producing actionable takeaways, schedule a demo today and let Zencity take care of it all.
The Zencity Advantage

**Resident satisfaction metrics for better performance management**

Receive a quarterly or biannual aggregated score, depending on your organization’s needs, benchmarked against your prior performance and against similar communities.

**Overall satisfaction**

72%

- Change over time: ↑ 2%
- Cohort average: Above
- Total respondents: 1,632

**Least satisfied demographics**

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<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Education: High school degree</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age: 35–55</td>
<td>26%</td>
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**Eliminate the time-to-meaning factor**

Slice and dice your results with our clickable, actionable breakdown of data by demographics and geography - so you can quickly drill down to bottom lines and add context to survey results.

**A real-time stream of open-ended responses**

Free-text analysis and classification technology surfaces patterns in resident comments, transforming qualitative data into actionable, quantitative results, and enabling you to easily explore comments by topic and sentiment in a live feed.

**Engage residents on current initiatives and hot topics**

Our standardized questions enable you to benchmark to yourself and your peers, but our add-on topics ensure you can ask about what’s most important to you and your community now.
3 Understanding implementation: real-time resident sentiment

Accessing real-time resident sentiment is a powerful way for local government leaders to understand the success of their initiatives. More importantly, it’s a way to correct course on missteps, before valuable dollars go to waste.

Zencity’s project dashboards let city and county managers track resident sentiment on specific subjects in real time and over time, showing both the volume of discourse and how public opinion is changing. Government leaders can then harness that data to understand the progress of programs and initiatives and understand how they are performing. Additionally, Zencity’s ad-hoc surveys on any topic, initiative, or policy, provide real-time broad-reaching feedback on the issues that matter most.

4 Benchmarking successes: performance evaluation

How does one evaluate a budget’s implementation? Knowing how successfully programs and initiatives perform aids in budget forecasting and helps local government leaders determine which areas to prioritize in the next budget cycle.

With Zencity’s benchmarking tool, local governments can evaluate their programs over time, comparing them to their own past successes by seeing how resident satisfaction has changed. Additionally, governments can use the Zencity Benchmarker to evaluate their programs in comparison to initiatives in neighboring or similar cities to better understand how their efforts compare to those of other cities around them. That’s what the Borough of State College, PA, did in trying to evaluate their efforts around winter storm management. In benchmarking against similar cities, they learned that negative sentiment was 3x higher in other jurisdictions than it was in State College, showing them that their efforts were on the right track.
Federal relief funding allocations through surveys

How do you ensure the meaningful impact of federal aid on your community? This is what the City of Decatur, IL, was grappling with in early 2020 as it sought to determine the most pressing needs of its residents to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, and provide the most equitable and effective reach of its CARES Act funding.

The Challenge

In deciding how to distribute its CARES Act funding, the City of Decatur faced two main hurdles. First, the City wanted to understand - with enough time to incorporate feedback into the planning process - where residents thought fiscal resources would be most beneficial. Second, with the need for City Council approval, Decatur had to gain a broad resident perspective beyond the input expressed by a small but vocal minority, or STP (Same Ten People).

The Zencity Solution: Community Surveys

In addition to using Zencity's dashboard to monitor public discourse, the City of Decatur issued a Zencity “COVID Awareness and Impact” ad-hoc survey. Zencity’s team of expert analysts combined these survey results with feedback from organic discourse, and provided insight into the data. By breaking down qualitative responses into key themes, the City was able to build a well-informed grant program around the allocation of its CARES Act funding – including setting specific parameters for business relief grants – that reflected the expressed needs of its residents.

Resident input regarding further steps and measures

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<th>Topic</th>
<th>Feedback Level</th>
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<tr>
<td>Local businesses operation</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masks</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reopening</td>
<td>Medium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Request for enforcement</td>
<td>High</td>
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<tr>
<td>Testing</td>
<td>High</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stricter measures</td>
<td>Medium</td>
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<td>Social distancing</td>
<td>Medium</td>
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<td>Help businesses</td>
<td>Medium</td>
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<td>Use of open spaces</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<td>Nursing homes</td>
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Once it formed a proposed allocation plan, the City presented the aggregated and analyzed data to Council. The result: City Council adopted the proposed CARES Act funding allocations.

After announcing its grant programming and allocated funding, the City Manager’s Office continued to measure its impact by using Zencity data as a barometer of public opinion towards the City’s pandemic response. In doing so, the City was able to see 57% positive sentiment around its allocation efforts.

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Data is so important, in large part because we’re constantly competing against a personal story. There are individual stories our council hears and that has a tremendous amount of impact. So how do you use the data you gather to make the case for that particular story or to prove your story or disprove it? We leverage data and the multiple media modalities out there to ensure we have a broader perspective. We use Zencity on a daily basis to get a barometer of the public view on specific issues.

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"Jon D. Kindseth
Deputy City Manager, Decatur, IL"
Conclusion

Budgeting processes will always be a part of local government: they’re what make cities and counties function. But while their frequency can make the budget process seem onerous at times, with the right data and better community engagement, budgets don’t have to be. They can simply be another step in a city’s path to a better future.

With a simpler process, budgets can transform from a task to an invaluable opportunity for improvement - improvement of services, of programs, of community relations, and of equity.

Zencity works with local governments to help inform budgeting decisions with community input and ensure budgets are commensurate with resident needs. See how Zencity can improve your budget process by making it easy to incorporate voices from across your community.