

Outreach Strategies for Project Prioritization and Participatory Budgeting

NADO Research Foundation

June 2026

Public engagement, especially around project prioritization, can be very difficult when the public does not have a good understanding of budget constraints and long-term planning. In this document, NADORF has put together a number of examples of public engagement strategies focused on project prioritization and participatory budgeting at all levels.

Ballot Voting Method

California's Transportation Agency for Monterey County (TAMC) 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 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.

The steering committee decides the voting parameters, the projects on the ballot (Figure 1), and how voting will be held to make sure priorities and other things are aligned.

Following the ballot planning process, community residents voted on which SRTS proposals to fund. Steering committee members planned a kickoff event and promoted the election. Ballots were 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 members of their community. To learn more visit <https://saferoutesmonterey.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/TAMC-Participatory-Budgeting-Report.pdf>.

Key Takeaways

The ballot voting method can be used to illustrate real transportation budgets by including cost estimates with each project, the total budget available for projects, and any other pertinent information that the public may need. Beyond the SRTS program, this method could be used to prioritize any types of transportation projects.

**Safe Routes to School**

Salinas Valley Safe Routes to School Plan
GONZALES PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING BALLOT
VOTE NOW FOR SAFER STREETS!

VOTING RULES

- + Voting is open to all Gonzales residents or workers aged 16 and older
- + Only one ballot may be cast per person
- + You may choose up to three (3) projects on the ballot
- + Ballots must be submitted by the end-of-day May 18, 2024, to count

Mark what best applies to you (Check all that apply):

1. I live in Gonzales
2. I work in Gonzales
3. I do not live or work in Gonzales.

**INSTRUCTIONS**

1 Fill in the circle to the left of the proposal of your choice. You must blacken the circle completely.

☐ **Pedestrian Improvements on Rincon Road and 5th Street**
Cost Estimate: \$110,000



☐ **Pedestrian Improvements on 5th Street and Highway 101 on and off ramps**
Cost Estimate: \$84,000



☐ **Gonzales Slough Trail Extension between 4th Street and 6th Street**
Cost Estimate: \$195,000



For more information about the projects on the ballot, read the Voter Guide at: bit.ly/gonzalespb

Figure 1. Salinas Valley Safe Routes to School Ballot Page 1

The Dollar Game

The Dollar Game is a Participatory Budget strategy used by the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission in 2004 as a part of their “Destination 2030- The Future in Transit Forum.” In this exercise, roughly 150 local elected officials and decision-makers were shown budgets and descriptions for proposed projects and provided with five \$1,000,000 bills to invest in 16 defined transit projects and one additional "other" selection. Participants were asked to allocate their bills in million-dollar increments as a way of expressing their preferences for transit projects benefiting the region. Regional decision makers could allocate the bills any way they saw fit to the project or projects they believed had the greatest value to the region and which could be publicly supported. Participants spent \$733 million on a set of 16 defined corridor-level or system-wide transit projects and an adjunct list of about ten new projects. The list of "other" projects reflected valid preferences which did not receive enough support to be prioritized individually. Learn more at [https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/DD DVRPC FTA final report email.pdf](https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/DD_DVRPC_FTA_final_report_email.pdf).

Key Takeaways

Although DVRPC focused their engagement on decision-makers, this process can be used with the general public as well. By providing them with only enough bills to show the actual budget available and having a list of projects with projected budget amounts, the participants can spend their dollars to show project priorities in the region.

Interactive Online Tools

Several online resources allow for participatory transportation project prioritization with detailed budgets. Specific products and vendors are mentioned here only as examples of possible online participatory budgeting use cases, rather than as an endorsement.

One of those customizable tools is Maptionnaire, from the company Mapita. This online survey platform utilizes map-based and traditional surveys to engage with the public on multiple issues, including participatory budget prioritization. These needs can include exact budgetary amounts that can be allocated to specific projects throughout the area with their projected budgets. This allocated amount would then be subtracted from the total budget amount, allowing the public to have a detailed look and understanding into the prioritization process, and allow them to directly influence their region.

One vendor-supplied case study occurred in Lahti, Finland, in 2020. Lahti ran a pilot program with a budget of 100,000 euros for the city residents to vote on how to prioritize funds. Using the Maptionnaire participatory budgeting platform, Lahti was able to get 4% of the entire city population to participate in the planning process. The public was able to submit ideas and vote on

how the total city budget should be allocated. Learn more at <https://www.maptionnaire.com/blog/5-participatory-budgeting-examples>.

Another online resource is a tool titled PublicInput. PublicInput functions very similarly to Maptionnaire and has primarily been used to modernize the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) development process. PublicInput also allows for a customizable process and for detailed budget allocation participation. All the data is also shared in one place, allowing for a streamlined process. Through PublicInput's Budget simulator, seen in Figure 2 below, residents can directly vote on funding allocations with a set budget. Learn more at <https://publicinput.com/wp/2025/08/22/north-carolina-dot-modernizing-public-engagement-for-the-stip>.

The image shows a screenshot of the PublicInput Budget Simulator interface. At the top, it asks "How would you invest transportation dollars in North Carolina?" and provides instructions: "Use the sliders to show where you would like to see money invested. Amounts do not represent actual dollars or budgets; only that they are limited." Below this, it shows "Your remaining budget: \$50" with a "Minimum Spend \$500" label. The interface features three main categories for investment, each with a slider and an illustration:

- Accessibility & Connectivity:** Illustration shows people walking, a person in a wheelchair, and a bus. Description: "Close gaps in roads, sidewalks and transit links so all communities—urban, suburban and rural—can reach jobs, schools, medical care and other essential services." Slider range: \$0 to \$1,000.
- Safety:** Illustration shows a car, a pedestrian, and a cyclist. Description: "Invest in projects that reduce crashes, injuries and fatalities on our roads and highways. Examples include new guardrails, rumble strips, brighter signs and signals, marked crosswalks, and safer intersections for drivers, pedestrians and cyclists." Slider range: \$0 to \$1,000.
- Freight Movement:** Illustration shows a train, a truck, and a port crane. Description: "Improve the main routes used by trucks, trains and ports so goods move smoothly and on time. Projects include better highway interchanges, safer rail crossings and upgraded port facilities." Slider range: \$0 to \$1,000.

Figure 2 PublicInput Budget Simulator

The vendor-provided example of this tool was its use by the North Carolina State DOT, which received over 3,800 surveys and 1,100 comments throughout the entire STIP process.

Another resource available is the Participatory Budget Project. The Participatory Budget Project is an organization founded in 2009 that works with communities across the US and Canada to help decide how to best use public funds. It provides an extensive resource library that includes

studies, guides, templates, toolkits, fact sheets, and more for free on their website. They also provide technical assistance and workshops to assist communities with the participatory budgeting process. Learn more at <https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/>.

Key Takeaways

Online participatory budgeting tools give stakeholders a hands-on and flexible way to participate in the budgeting process. In-person events are limited to those that can actively attend the event, while an online tool could provide a way to have a wider outreach and therefore more participation across the region.

Piggybank

McHenry County, Illinois, brought a simple piggybank exercise to pop-up public outreach for its transportation plan. Planning staff invited passersby to allocate pretend coins to the piggybanks that best represented how they wished to spend transportation dollars. Investment options included public transportation, roads, bicycle facilities, and pedestrian facilities. For the county, this exercise revealed how the public valued entire transportation modes, rather than specific projects. Learn more at <https://njtpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Participatory-Budgeting.pdf>.

Key Takeaways

To make this engagement strategy more applicable to programming projects within constrained regional budgets, this exercise can be adapted as a smaller form of the Dollar Game described above. Each participant could be given resources that are equal to the total budget available. Rather than representing modes, each piggybank could be assigned a project and labeled with an estimated project budget. Participants would distribute their allocation of funding resources, such as pretend coins, according to their priorities and estimated project costs. To differentiate between participants' votes, agencies could assign each member in a small group (such as a committee) a different color or shape of the pretend coins or other items that represent funding.

Strings and Ribbons

In 2003, the Bowling Green/Warren County MPO used a public involvement process known as the strings and ribbons exercise during their urban planning process. The strings and ribbons exercise was designed by Dr. Lisa Beever when she was director at Charlotte County/Punta Gorda MPO in Florida. This consensus-building exercise can be used in transportation planning to teach citizens about needs, constraints, priorities, and funding flexibility.

The name comes from the materials needed for the exercise, which includes ribbon to represent one year of funding for roads (based on a scale); string to represent one year funding for sidewalks; paper cutouts of buses; and paper cutouts of other modes of transportation. At least three participants are needed for this exercise, and it is primarily used in sit-down settings. However, up to five or six groups can play if facilitators are available. Each table has a map, scissors and glue and display board. Three pieces of information are explained to the participants: allocations, funding flexibility and cost feasible mapping. Each participant is then given the opportunity to trade their strings and ribbons for other improvements. For example, individuals are given a length of ribbon that represents road funding for one year. They can use this ribbon to expand an existing road, build a new road, or trade it for an equal dollar amount with another mode.

Learn more at https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/processes/metropolitan/related_topics/rapidly_urbanizing/rapurbowl.cfm.

Key Takeaways

The exercise allows participants to develop their own version of a long-range transportation plan in an interactive format based on the tangible representation of the materials. Participants become aware that communities and regions typically have many transportation needs and not enough money. The exercise helps create citizen understanding and buy-in of the planning process.

This process may be limited due to types of resources and time constraints to add detailed project-level budget estimates into the process. However, this method could be used as an introduction to the planning process with more detailed participatory budgeting coming later.

Dot Voting

Buckeye Hills Regional Council utilized the dot method during its Digital Equity Outreach process in 2023 with funding from the State of Ohio. This exercise was performed across 22 counties over a 3-month span. The dot method utilizes sticker sheets of different dot colors, where the amount of dots given to each participant corresponding to the number of projects that need prioritized. The projects and information on each were then spread around the room on either large sticky notes on the wall or on tables. Each participant is given one of each color to prioritize each project.

Key Takeaways

This method helps with aligning prioritization with community need. This method can also be used online in whiteboard applications such as Padlet. To customize this method to ensure consideration of realistic funding amounts, each project could have its total estimated budget

written on the large sheets around the room. Each dot can also be assigned a monetary value and distributed according to the available budget, rather than a dot being considered a vote on the project's priority. To differentiate among participants in a small group, each individual could receive a different color dot.

Additional Resource

The New Mexico Department of Transportation provides a resource repository for public engagement on their website which can be found here, <https://www.dot.nm.gov/projects/public-involvement-portal/>. The repository includes several resources including guidance, templates, logos for those in New Mexico wanting to use the materials, and training resources.

About this Resource Sheet

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