



County of Fairfax, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: JAN 13 2010

TO: Board of Supervisors

FROM: Anthony H. Griffin 
County Executive

SUBJECT: Summary of Input from the Community Dialogues and Employee Forums on the FY 2011 Annual Budget

Through 15 Community Dialogue meetings, five Employee Forums, and online and telephone forums for public questions, suggestions, and comments, the County has built on last year's efforts to engage in a robust public input process at the beginning of the annual budget process. The 15 Community Dialogues held this fall engaged 1,087 members of the public. To publicize the dialogues, the Office of Public Affairs conducted an extensive amount of outreach utilizing news releases, flyers distributed to school and community groups, and posters displayed at Schools and County facilities, extensive use of Channel 16 and social media public service announcements and prominently featuring the budget landing page on the County's website throughout the fall. Of the total participants, more than 64 percent were between the ages of 36 and 55, 81 percent were Caucasian, 71 percent were female, and the average participant had been a Fairfax County resident for 20 years. Additionally, 64 percent of participants indicated that they had children in Fairfax County Public Schools. Feedback from participants on their experience in the meetings was very positive. At the end of each Community Dialogue and Employee Forum, participants were asked to complete an evaluation form. The evaluation forms asked participants six questions to assess whether the dialogues and resources provided were helpful, provided an understanding of where to seek additional information, met their expectations, enhanced their understanding of the budget, whether they felt their participation was valued and would they recommend the community dialogues to others. On a five point scale, the average response was a 4.2.

Results:

As part of the community dialogues, participants were asked two questions in their facilitated small group discussions. Detailed information will be provided on the County website. The top responses are summarized as follows:

Question 1 asked: Based on your experience, which FY 2010 budget decisions were a) most acceptable? and b) least acceptable. The top group responses for County and School services are identified in the following tables:

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| 1a. Most Acceptable (FY 2010 decisions) |
| Real Estate Tax Rate increase |
| Reduction in Library Hours |
| School transportation savings |
| Slight increases in Class Size |
| No compensation increases |
| Holding School Transfer flat |
| Fee increases |

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| 1b. Least Acceptable (FY 2010 decisions) |
| Real Estate Tax Rate increase (not enough) |
| Reduction in Library Hours |
| No compensation increases |
| Class size increases |

It should be noted that in most cases, members of the public were more interested in weighing in on Question 2, which pertained to the budget framework for FY 2011. Participants generally indicated comfort with the FY 2010 budget decisions, but considerable anxiety over potential reductions in FY 2011. This was particularly true after the release of the Superintendent’s List of Potential Program Reductions and/or Eliminations for FY 2011 also known as the “strawman”. After release of the “strawman”, the vast majority of participants in the dialogues had children in FCPS and were primarily concerned with proposed reductions to FCPS programs.

Question 2 asked: Budgeting requires a balance of priorities based on what community members value about Fairfax County. Considering what you heard as part of your group’s discussion for Question 1, discuss strategies and, as a group, recommend a framework and rationale for balancing the FY 2011 budget that addresses your group’s priorities. Top responses are shown below:

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| 2. FY 2011 Framework |
| Increase Real Estate Tax rate -Every group that took a position supported at least a real estate tax rate increase which will keep the average homeowner’s bill flat -About half supported the average homeowner paying more -Pre-strawman sessions tended to favor increasing the tax rate to keep the average homeowner’s bill flat, while post-strawman sessions tended to favor increasing further |
| Implement Local Vehicle Registration Fee -2/3 supported |
| Meals Tax referendum -1/3 supported |
| Protect Language Immersion Programs |
| Protect Elementary School Band and Strings |
| Further Schools transportation reductions |
| Reduce Schools Administration |
| Lobby State to increase funding formula for schools |
| Maintain overall quality of life |

Additionally, the five Employee Forums engaged 95 employees, and have received very positive feedback as well. Employee satisfaction with the forums as measured by similar evaluation forms is consistent with the Community Dialogue feedback, as the average response exceeded four out of five for all questions. Employees were reached via newlinks, posters, and prominent placement on the infoweb among other mechanisms. More than 85 percent of attendees were full-time merit employees, while the average participant had been with the County for about ten years. Employee Forum sessions involved several staff members of DMB as well as the Director or Deputy Director of Human Resources.

As part of the Employee Forums, ten facilitated small groups containing 95 total employees were asked three questions. This included the two questions asked at the Community Dialogues, as well as one employee-focused question. The employee-focused question was designed to gather input on alternative means of employee recognition, given the elimination of all compensation increases in FY 2010 that will most likely be continued in FY 2011. Detailed summaries will be provided on the County infoweb. The top group responses are summarized as follows:

Question 1 asked: Based on your experience, which FY 2010 budget decisions were a) most acceptable? and b) least acceptable. The top group responses for County and School services are identified in the tables below:

| |
|--|
| 1a. Most Acceptable (FY 2010 decisions) |
| Increased Real Estate Tax rate to keep bills flat |
| Held School Transfer flat |
| Balanced Revenue and Expenditure Adjustments |
| The overall budget process (included recommendations from agencies, participation of public and employees) |
| No compensation increases |
| Internal efficiencies identified |

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| 1b. Least Acceptable (FY 2010 decisions) |
| Lack of equity of reductions (libraries specifically mentioned) |
| Held School Transfer flat rather than reduced for parity in reductions |
| Unintended cross-agency impacts |
| Treatment/categorization of Exempt Limited Term employees (many employees were unhappy ELTs were not included in position reduction totals to fully represent staff reductions required) |
| RIF Policy/Process (many felt that the current policy resulted in the loss of high performing newer employees) |
| No compensation increases (concerned if for more than one year) |

Question 2 asked: Budgeting requires a balance of priorities based on what community members value about Fairfax County. Considering what you heard as part of your group’s discussion for Question 1, discuss strategies and, as a group, recommend a framework and rationale for balancing the FY 2011 budget that addresses your group’s priorities. Top responses follow:

| |
|--|
| 2. FY 2011 Framework |
| Increase Real Estate Tax rate (most groups supported keeping bills flat) |
| Implement Local Vehicle Registration Fee (most – 80% of groups) |
| Explore opportunities for consolidation/efficiencies |
| Equity in future furloughs (include Schools and Public Safety) |

Question 3 asked: Recognizing that compensation increases will not be provided in FY 2011 based on the projected fiscal forecast, what other means of recognition and/or total compensation (i.e. leave, professional development, awards) would you value as an employee and like the Board of Supervisors to consider. Top responses are listed below:

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| 3. Recognizing that compensation increases will not be provided in FY 2011...what other means of recognition and/or total compensation would you value...? |
| Additional leave and/or holidays |
| Reevaluate pay for performance system |
| Support professional development |
| Consider tying additional benefits/bonuses to PFP rating (i.e. leave, retirement calculation, retirement eligible date) |
| LiveWell Programs |
| Explore and publicize County employee discounts |

Generally, employees participating in the Employee Forums offered more specific suggestions and reductions based on the knowledge of their own business area. The vast majority of those participating again took ownership of the process, using the forum to provide numerous suggestions and willingness to bear some share of the pain, rather than a venue for complaints. However, it is clear that employees are concerned about continued budget reductions and multiple years without a compensation increase.

As of December 14, DMB had received 2107 distinct comments via telephone and web submission, with 83 percent of comments pertaining primarily to the FCPS, 13 percent pertaining to the County, and 4 percent both. The telephone hotline and web comment was taken down on December 14 for consideration in the FY 2011 Advertised Budget Plan. All comments have been posted on the budget website. Top County and School comments received online are listed in the following table:

| County | FCPS |
|--|---|
| Increase Real Estate Tax Rate | Save elementary school band and strings |
| Implement Local Vehicle Registration Fee | Save Foreign Language in Elementary Schools / Language Immersion Programs |
| Protect the Libraries | Save All Day Kindergarten |
| Protect the Parks | Save Arts/Music programs in the schools |
| Protect services for the most vulnerable | Increase taxes to protect Schools programs |
| Incentivize early retirement | Reduce administration/management |
| Reinstate compensation increases | |
| Implement furloughs | |
| Reduce lighting at County facilities to achieve energy savings | |

Conclusion:

A number of inferences can be drawn in looking back on the enhanced public input process that was provided for the FY 2011 budget process. Participation increased significantly (more than a 50 percent increase in community dialogue attendance and a 40 percent increase in online comments) in the FY 2011 public input process over FY 2010, even in the absence of the publicity associated with last year's County Lines of Business review. However, it is clear from trends in online comments, registration, participation, and demographic data this increase in participation came in response to the Superintendent's strawman. By comparison, based on the timing of the County Executive's budget release, very few specific program reductions on the County side had been identified. The exceptions were libraries and parks. In both FY 2010 and FY 2011, it is clear that response is driven to some degree by the publicity associated with specific reduction targets. Subsequently, the response received must be viewed in part as a reflection of those areas of reduction covered in the local press.

However, it is fair to conclude that the input received through all channels expressed high levels of overall satisfaction with the level of services offered in Fairfax County, and widespread support for revenue adjustments to offset the level of reductions. Participants were also very happy to be engaged in the budget process both for the FY 2010 and FY 2011 budget. Similar to last year, participants were generally not as comfortable in laying out a comprehensive budget framework while outlining discrete services for reduction with a limited familiarity of the budget. Participants expressed some disappointment with not having a full budget proposal to respond to, as is available in the Spring. Consequently, much of the input received was more successful at outlining broad categories or principles, which in most cases affirmed current Board priorities, rather than identifying a specific overall framework or programs for elimination. Finally, while online comments were again somewhat more negative in tone than community dialogue groups, comments were by and large positive regardless of the medium.

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