



County of Fairfax, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: DEC 19 2008

TO: Board of Supervisors

FROM: Anthony H. Griffin 
County Executive

SUBJECT: Summary of Input from the Community Dialogues and Employee Brownbags on the FY 2010 Annual Budget

Through 20 Community Dialogue meetings, 5 Employee Brownbags, and online and telephone forums for public questions, suggestions, and comments, the County has engaged in a more robust public input process at an earlier juncture than in any budget cycle in recent memory. Additionally, the parallel and highly visible Lines of Business process, with all associated agency presentations and documents available online, has brought an even greater amount of transparency than was already provided through the publication of all budget documents on the County website. The 20 Community Dialogues engaged 718 members of the public, and DMB has received overwhelmingly positive feedback from the public and staff. It should be noted that the evaluation forms asked participants 7 questions to assess whether the dialogues and resources provided were helpful, met their expectations, enhanced their understanding of the budget, whether their participation was valued and would they recommend the community dialogues to others. On a 5 point scale, the average response for each question exceeded 4. The Office of Public Affairs conducted an extensive amount of outreach, including 2 news releases, 2 Washington Post ads, 2 Fairfax County times ads, 1900 flyers distributed to school and community groups, and 300 posters posted 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. Public participation in the Community Dialogue meetings was somewhat demographically skewed. It should be noted that more than 55 percent of participants were between the ages of 36 and 55, 83 percent were Caucasian, over two-thirds were female, and the average participant had been a Fairfax County resident for 20 years. The most effective mechanisms for reaching the public, as reported by Community Dialogue participants, were through existing organizations, friends, coworkers, and local news coverage rather than paid advertising. This process was an extensive undertaking for staff, as the typical session required a commitment of 4-7 members of DMB (depending on the level of registration), 2 FCPS staff members, an OPA representative, as well as staff available at meeting sites for facility management duties, in most cases outside of business hours.

As part of the community dialogues, 72 facilitated small groups containing 718 total members of the public were asked 3 questions in their facilitated small group discussions. Detailed summaries have been provided on the County website. The top responses are summarized as follows:

Question one asked: Considering what you value about Fairfax County, what services do you: A. View as critical and oppose reductions that would change the quality and level of service. B. View as important but in this fiscal environment would support certain reductions. And, C. View as non-essential and are willing to do without. Top 5 group responses for County and School services are identified in the tables below:

1a. View as critical and oppose reductions that would change the quality and level of service			
County Services		FCPS Services	
Public Safety	43	Class Size	21
Human Services	24	Schools	19
Clinic Room Aides	19	Instruction	10
Homeless Services	14	Special Education	9
CSB	10	Adult Education	5
Mental Health Services	10	Teacher Salaries	5

1b. View as important but in this fiscal environment would support certain reductions			
County Services		FCPS Services	
Parks	17	School Transportation	11
Library hours	15	Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES)	6
Libraries	9	Language Immersion	6
Revitalization	5	Gifted and Talented Programs	5
FASTRAN	4	Schools	4
Parks Capital Improvements	4	AP and IB Programs	4
Park Hours	4		

1c. View as non-essential and are willing to do without			
County Services		FCPS Services	
Revitalization	4	Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES)	9
Travel and Training	3	Don't pay for AP and IB tests	3
Across-the-board Reductions	2	Language Immersion	3
Economic Development	2	County/Schools Admin. Duplication	2
Parks Hours	2	ESOL	2
		Full Day Kindergarten	2
		Project Excel	2
		Sleep Study	2
		Schools Transportation	2

While the comparably low number of responses to question 1c “view as non-essential and are willing to do without,” generated a comparably low number of modal responses, some common themes emerged. More than half of responses pertained to schools. Various parks programs, foreign language programs, gifted programs, hours of service, and other new programs and initiatives were identified multiple times in some manner.

Question two asked: Based on your group’s discussion surrounding question #1, what specific suggestions do you have to develop the FY 2010 budget? The top 10 responses are identified in the table below:

Based on your group’s discussion surrounding question #1, what specific suggestions do you have to develop the FY 2010 budget?	
Increase Real Estate tax rate to maintain taxes paid at current level	17
Explore revenue options	10
Increase volunteerism	9
Review services for inefficiencies	5
Streamline Schools transportation system	5
Consolidate transportation in school system and increase allowable walk to school distance and criteria	4
Increase real estate tax rate	4
Increase taxes and fees	4
Lobby General Assembly for increased revenue authority	4
<i>Seven responses tied for 10th</i>	3

Question three asked: What do you want County and School decision makers to consider before making their final decision on the FY 2010 budget? The top 10 responses are identified in the table below:

What do you want County and School decision makers to consider before making their final decision on the FY 2010 budget?	
Protect vulnerable populations	9
Increase Real Estate tax rate to maintain taxes paid at current level	7
Increase Real Estate tax rate	4
Increase user fees	4
Don’t allow across-the-board cuts without considering the impact in another area	3
Increase Parks fees	3
Schools	3
<i>Fifteen responses tied for 8th</i>	2

Additionally, the 5 Employee Brownbags engaged 197 employees, and have received very positive feedback as well. Employee satisfaction with the brownbags as measured by similar evaluation forms is consistent with the Community Dialogue feedback, as the average response exceeded 4 out of 5 for all questions. Employees were reached via Courier articles, newslinks, posters, and prominent placement on the infoweb among other mechanisms. More than 95 percent of attendees were full-time merit employees, while participation was evenly split between employees that have been with the County for more 10 years and those that have not. Employee brownbag sessions involved 4-8 members of DMB as well as the Director of Human Resources.

As part of the Employee Brownbags, 19 facilitated small groups containing 197 total employees were asked 2 questions in their facilitated small group discussions. Detailed summaries will be provided on the County infoweb. The top group responses are summarized as follows:

Question 1a asked: What specific suggestions for reductions do you have to help develop the FY 2010 Budget? Duplicated responses are identified in the table below:

1a. What specific suggestions for reductions do you have to help develop the FY 2010 Budget?	
Consolidation	9
4 day work week	4
Look at increased electronic publication and dissemination of all County publications	3
Compensation increases	2
Eliminate take-home vehicles	2
Hiring Freeze	2
Increase use of teleconferencing	2
Library Hours	2
Management	2

Question 1b asked: What programs and services are essential and should result in minimal reduction? Duplicated responses are identified in the table below:

1b. What programs and services are essential and should result in minimal reduction?	
Public Safety	8
Human Services	4
Schools	3
Services to vulnerable populations	3
Health Department	2
Mental Health services	2
Public Safety core/emergency functions	2
Public Works	2
Schools – Instruction	2
Senior Services	2

Question two asked: What do you want School and County decision-makers to consider before making their final decision? Duplicated responses are identified in the table below:

2. What do you want School and County decision-makers to consider before making their final decision?	
Protect vulnerable populations	4
Don't allow across-the-board cuts without considering the impact in another area	3
Increase Real Estate tax rate	3
Reinstate decals	3
Don't balance the budget on the back of employees	2
Preserve the safety net	2
Workforce reduction	2

Generally, employees participating in the Employee Brownbags were eager to point out areas for potential reduction within their own agencies, rather than pointing to different services and agencies for reductions. The vast majority of those participating took ownership of the process, using the forum to provide real suggestions and willingness to bear some share of the pain, rather than a venue for complaints.

As of December 5, DMB has processed 1,497 distinct comments via telephone and web submission, including 663 comments primarily addressing the County, 718 addressing the Schools, and 116 addressing both. Preliminary totals for the 5 most common County topics with the number of comments were compensation (74), taxes (55), community and recreation (52), expenditures (47), and health (37). As of December 9, DMB has published responses to 72 combined questions and suggestions from employees and the public, in addition to 52 Board of Supervisors inquiries. DMB is currently working with agency staff to respond to more than 60 additional employee, public, and BOS suggestions and inquiries.

Parallel to the extensive public input process, every general fund or general fund-supported agency in the County has presented reduction options totaling 15 percent of general fund expenditures to the Board of Supervisors over the course of 9 meeting days through the fall. Presentations included many innovative proposals for efficiency and cost-saving initiatives, reductions in levels of service, and alternative recommendations for use of other funding streams. This process has required a high level of commitment from the Board of Supervisors, agency directors and fiscal staff, DMB staff, the Office of the County Executive, OPA, and many others.

The telephone hotline and web comment form will be taken down on December 19 for consideration in the FY 2010 Advertised Budget Plan. To date, the public input process for the Adopted budget process has yet to be determined. DMB fully anticipates going through the normal spring process at a higher volume, including public hearings, budget presentations to community organizations, and responding to Board inquiries. While budget decisions will at that point be in the hands of the Board of Supervisors, it would be prudent to discuss at this time what other steps, if any, DMB should take to solicit and/or facilitate public input in the spring.

A number of lessons can be drawn in looking back on the enhanced public input process that was provided for the FY 2010 budget process. First, the community dialogues and employee brownbags required many staff hours. This effort would not have been possible without the commitment of a substantial amount of personal time from staff of DMB and other agencies. DMB staff participated in two full days of facilitation training in preparation for the community dialogues, and a team of staff engaged in five months of planning before the first community dialogue. Second, the volume of input coming from the web required an extensive amount of staff time to review, categorize, and respond to suggestions and comments. This required an extensive amount of work from both DMB and agency staff, as the Board of Supervisors' Q&A process from the spring was essentially brought to the fall, requiring responses to extensive public and employee Q&As in addition to the added workload of Board-initiated Q&As coming from the LOBS meeting, and LOBS reduction presentations concurrent with the budget submission and review time frame. Third, participants were very happy to be engaged in the budget process at a higher level. However, many participants were disappointed and uncomfortable to not have a proposed budget to respond to. Participants often struggled to grasp the more abstract exercise of identifying and categorizing discrete services with a limited familiarity of the budget. Consequently, much of the input received was more successful at outlining broad categories or principles, which in most cases closely matched Board priorities, than identifying specific areas useful for the purpose of making budget reductions. Finally, while online comments were somewhat more negative in tone than community dialogue groups, comments were by and large positive regardless of the medium.

It is safe to conclude that to this point, the enhanced public input and LOBS process have been overwhelmingly successful. We look forward to the continued involvement of the community once my budget proposal for FY 2010 is released in February through the public hearing process and opportunities for online community input.

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