

City picks up tips for making budget more people-friendly

By Russell Contreras, Globe Staff | The Boston Globe, April 23, 2006

LAWRENCE -- Seven months ago, a group of Lawrence residents put together a bilingual guide to understanding the city's budget.

The guide, residents hoped, would be used to get more people involved in city government.

This month, their efforts got the attention of city officials. Lawrence Mayor Michael J. Sullivan attended a community forum at the Senior Center with the creators of the guide and other residents who have been energized by it.

The forum, sponsored by Lawrence CommunityWorks, drew more than 200 citizens and a number of city department heads.

Featured at the forum were Alan Guard, finance director from Davenport, Iowa, and Gary Unger of St. Paul, Minn., who shared their cities' experiences with moving toward "citizen-based budgeting" -- a process that allows for more citizen participation during budget planning. .

"Citizen-based budgeting helps us develop a vision for our community," said Guard.

"We find out how citizens feel about city services. . . . What do we need to be working on?"

The Lawrence budget process has limited public participation. Only after the budget enters the final stages is the public allowed to make suggestions.

That's very different from how Davenport's budget process works, according to Guard.

Guard said Davenport city officials send out a citizen survey and hold community meetings and then use the information they gather to build the budget. This makes city government operate more efficiently, he said.

Sullivan said he got good ideas from the session, including how in Davenport residents get tax bills with information on how much of their money is going to fire and police protection.

"That way people know where their money is going," he said.

At the forum, residents met one-on-one with some of the Lawrence officials and department heads to discuss the budget.

Janice Vargas, a Lawrence resident who helped organize the forum, said that such communication was the goal of putting together the guide.

"So many more people are getting involved now."

Vargas said since she started taking the time to understand the city's budget and how money is spent, she feels she has more of a stake in the city.

Mike Sweeney, the city's planning director, said facilitating communication and participation are important.

"This is critical because we have to reach out to the community. There shouldn't be any mysteries" during the budget process, he said.

Sweeney said the forums are important so that city officials are clear on what type of services citizens want.

Sweeney cautioned that this year's budget may face challenges because of rising recurring costs and a limited amount of reserves.

Fire Chief Peter C. Takvorian, said the forum gave officials a chance to explain to the public what any pending cuts mean.

"A lot of people think that if my department gets a 10 percent cut, they'll save 10 percent on their taxes," Takvorian said.

"But what they may not understand is that the cut means we lose firefighters, and home insurance could go up because you have less protection."

Sullivan promised that the city will be inclusive when planning budgets in the future.

"A lot of people want to help," said Sullivan. "We've come a long way as a city."

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