



# Budget Review Task Force Report

## *Collaborative Budgeting for a Stronger Richmond*

***August 28, 2025***

### **Executive Summary**

Following the successful adoption of the Fiscal Year 2025-2026 City Budget, both City Council and City Administration recognized valuable opportunities to enhance the budget process. Building on this shared commitment to continuous improvement, Council President Cynthia Newbille established a collaborative Task Force to examine existing procedures and develop strategic enhancements.

### **Background and Task Force Formation**

The FY 2025-2026 budget cycle provided important insights into opportunities for process refinement. Recognizing the value of these observations, leadership decided to proactively evaluate current practices and develop meaningful improvements. The Task Force convened throughout June, July, and August of 2025 to conduct analysis and formulate strategic recommendations. The final work product was strengthened by feedback collected from Council colleagues, staff and administrative partners.

The Task Force maintained consistent core membership throughout its work. City Council representation included Vice President Katherine Jordan serving as Co-Lead alongside Finance and Economic Development Standing Committee Chair Ellen Robertson, with support from Council Chief of Staff RJ Warren and Council staff members. City Administration representation included Chief Administrative Officer Odie Donald, II, Mayor's Chief of Staff Lawson Wijesooriya, Mayor's Senior Policy Strategist Thad Williamson, and Meghan Brown, Director of Budget and Strategic Planning.

### **Task Force Focus Areas:**

#### **1. Schedule**

The Task Force received requests to increase the window for Council review of the



Mayor's proposed budget to improve collaboration, information sharing and deliberation between Administration, Council and the public.

## **2. Structure**

The Task Force identified Council budget work sessions as an opportunity to improve structure and efficiency and enhance Council and the public's understanding of departmental budget requests.

## **3. Operational**

The Task Force discussed the importance of early cooperative priority setting both internally within City Hall and externally via the annual legislative agenda. It also reviewed operating procedures for the Council amendment process.

## **Reform Recommendations**

### **1. Timeline**

The Task Force recommends advancing the Mayor's budget submission to the Wednesday following the first formal Council meeting, to improve budget review efficiency. This earlier submission will be formalized through a special meeting dedicated exclusively to budget presentation, ensuring appropriate ceremony and attention.

In election years, the timeline will be adjusted to accommodate transition periods, with budget submission occurring on March 27.

Following the ceremonial submission by the Mayor, the Chief Administrative Officer will remain available during the same meeting to present detailed information and respond to Council questions, creating immediate dialogue opportunities.

The timeline remains subject to future adjustment pending alignment of the City Assessor's Landbook evaluation schedule with the City's Fiscal Year timeline.

### **2. Public Engagement Framework**

To strengthen public participation, the Council will conduct an additional public hearing focused specifically on proposed Councilmember budget amendments. All efforts will be made to schedule public hearings during Formal meetings to maximize public accessibility and eliminate the logistical barriers created by special meetings. For additional public engagement, the Mayor will announce planned town halls throughout



the City in January and February to incorporate additional public input into budget development.

### **3. Work Sessions**

Council budget work sessions will be fundamentally reorganized around Deputy Chief Administrative Officer portfolios to ensure comprehensive and orderly review. This structure will encompass four key areas: Operations, Finance and Administration, Planning and Economic Development, and Human Services.

This portfolio-based approach will create clarity and ensure thorough examination of all City functions. The Chief Administrative Officer will act as the City's lead representative during work sessions and will coordinate the participation of appropriate City staff. Council agencies will have the opportunity to present their budget proposals and answer questions during budget work sessions or at an Organizational Development Standing Committee meeting.

### **4. Amendment Procedures**

Council will implement a standardized amendment process designed to promote efficiency and transparency. Amendments with multiple patrons will receive priority consideration through voting, organized in descending order of support to reflect Council consensus. Co-sponsors will be encouraged to demonstrate unified support, fostering consensus-building among members. Proposed amendments will be posted on the City website, including the names of requesting patrons, to keep the public informed.

Consideration will follow a sequential approach, identifying and addressing budget reductions first to identify funds available for other uses before considering budget enhancements.

### **5. Collaboration Framework**

The Task Force recommends establishing a public budget kickoff in September to encourage early coordination and shared community understanding. This September event will celebrate the launch of the City's budget development process and ensure transparent public engagement from the start. Councilmembers will submit district-



specific budget priorities to the Chief Administrative Officer early in the process, ensuring that local community concerns are integrated into planning.

A facilitated December meeting, conducted by a neutral third party, will integrate Council, City Administration, and the Mayor to identify five to seven shared budget priorities. These collaborative priorities will be formalized through a joint Council and Mayor resolution. This resolution will require a public hearing and Council vote to ensure the public has an opportunity to share input on the City budget before final submission.

Following this collaborative session, in January, the Council Chief of Staff will distribute a comprehensive budget review timeline detailing the Mayor's budget submission, work sessions, public hearings, and anticipated votes. This timeline will enable all stakeholders to plan accordingly and allocate appropriate resources.

It is also recommended that in the future, Council and City Administration collaborate earlier to identify and establish legislative priorities for the upcoming Virginia General Assembly Session, ensuring these priorities can be incorporated into the City's budget development process.

## **6. Non-Department Changes**

In response to the City Auditor's February 2025 report on the City's current non-department process, City Administration is restructuring its charitable grants program from the City directly administering grants to an intermediary-based model to improve efficiency and leverage specialized expertise. Rather than City staff managing all grants directly, the City will competitively select expert organizations to handle grant distribution in specific focus areas like Arts & Culture, Education, Economic Mobility, and Health Equity.

While City Administration will lead this change, Council and staff will participate in key decisions throughout the implementation process.

## **7. Annual Review**

To ensure continuous improvement, the Task Force will reconvene annually after budget adoption to assess implementation progress and identify enhancement opportunities. While future modifications may be more targeted in scope, the commitment to ongoing



evaluation demonstrates the City's dedication to effective governance and fiscal responsibility.

## **Implementation Strategy**

### **1. Immediate Actions Required**

Upon Council consensus, Council staff will begin drafting the necessary ordinance to establish the March 11, 2026, special meeting for budget introduction.

### **2. Short-term Implementation Initiatives**

Over the next several months, Council staff will develop comprehensive Standard Operating Procedures governing submission of Councilmember priorities, budget work sessions, budget review processes, and amendment deliberations. This manual will serve as a guide for all participants and ensure consistency across budget cycles.

Simultaneously, the Council Chief of Staff and Chief Administrative Officer will collaborate to schedule and organize the December joint budget priority meeting, establishing the foundation for improved inter-governmental cooperation.

## **Outstanding Considerations**

Several issues remain under consideration and require additional analysis:

- **RPS Funding Formula Development**
  - Res. 2025-R023, adopted June 23, 2025, *To request that the Chief Administrative Officer cause to be established a work group to work in collaboration with Richmond Public Schools to develop a funding formula for allocating General Fund revenues annually for school operating expenses and a plan for implementation in the Fiscal Year 2027 General Fund Budget.*
  - At the time of this report, the work group is currently being established to complete the requested funding formula.
- **Department-Level Budget Requests**



- Ord. 2025-100, currently pending before Council for consideration, *To amend City Code concerning the form of the budget submitted to Council, to require publication of a side-by-side comparison with the Mayor's proposed budget submission with agency-level budget request documents and to amend ch. 12, art. I of the City Code by adding therein a new section 12-25, concerning publication of agency-level budget requests, for the purpose of requiring submission of agency-level budget request documents.*
- According to the ordinance patron, this proposal would enhance Council's budgetary oversight responsibilities by following the state's successful model of requiring agency-submitted budgets. The patron emphasizes that publishing these documents would improve transparency and keep Council better informed of staffing and infrastructure needs essential for City service delivery. The patron has indicated that both Councilmembers and the public deserve to know when the Mayor's proposal differs from agency directors' original requests. The patron noted that when proposed funding falls short of what agency heads deem necessary, then further explanation is necessary. Conversely, when the Mayor's budget exceeds or includes items not requested by agency directors, those additions merit scrutiny before final approval.
- While the Task Force shares the commitment to increased budget transparency and public engagement, it has concerns about potential unintended consequences of mandatory publication of department requests. The Task Force believes that requiring public disclosure of initial departmental submissions could incentivize inflated budget requests, as directors may assume higher initial requests will be reduced during negotiations. This dynamic risks creating unrealistic public expectations and unfairly characterizing administrative leadership as unresponsive when fiscally responsible prioritization becomes necessary within revenue constraints. Instead, the Task Force's comprehensive process reforms including September public kickoffs, enhanced Council input mechanisms, collaborative December priority-setting, expanded public engagement opportunities, detailed March budget presentations, and structured portfolio-based work sessions achieve meaningful transparency while preserving the collaborative culture and administrative discretion essential for effective governance.



### **Conclusion and Future Direction**

The Task Force's recommendations represent substantial improvements to the City's budget process, emphasizing enhanced collaboration, structured procedures, and meaningful public engagement. Successful implementation will require sustained commitment from all participating stakeholders and careful attention to the operational changes outlined in this report.

These reforms establish a foundation for transparent, efficient, and collaborative budget processes that better serve the residents of Richmond while respecting the distinct roles and responsibilities of all governmental participants.