Phase 1

The Richmond People's Budget: Evaluation Report

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Introduction

In 2022, the Center for Public Policy at VCU's Wilder School began working with the Storefront for Community Design and the Richmond City Council's Participatory Budgeting Commission to create an evaluation plan that would be included in the rulebook for Richmond, Virginia's participatory budgeting (PB) process. Later, in early 2024, a second project was initiated to begin carrying out the evaluation plan. This new project consists of two evaluation phases:

- Phase 1: Conducting a literature review on promising practices in participatory budgeting, and evaluating the process during the initial idea collection phase (2024 – 2025).
- Phase 2: Evaluating the process after ideas have been collected (2025).

In this report, we present the findings of Phase 1, beginning with the literature review. We then share the results of our data collection process, including two focus groups and one survey that gathered feedback from PB participants. We conclude with recommendations based on these initial findings, as well as a discussion of what these initial findings imply for Phase 2 of this evaluation research.

Literature Review

While existing research identifies a number of common pitfalls and barriers to equity in participatory budgeting in the U.S. and elsewhere, scholars also find many reasons to be hopeful about how this relatively new process for community-led decision-making engages residents and broadens access to resources. One takeaway from past studies is that PB isn't just another government program that should be assessed through conventional cost-benefit analyses. In evaluating a process such as PB that is highly influenced by its local and geopolitical context, it's helpful instead to make judgments based on how well a PB process adheres to the core principles of "voice, vote, social justice, and oversight."[1]

Here, notions of "voice" and "vote" speak to the democratic participation that drives PB. "Social justice" refers to how PB may reduce inequalities in how important resources are doled out over the short and long term. And "oversight" speaks to PB's potential (as we will see, an often

unfulfilled potential) to make local governments more responsive to the preferences and needs of residents. To uphold these four principles, past research suggests that governments shouldn't just focus on increasing participation and ensuring the process is transparent. They must also rethink the fundamental relationship between residents and policymakers—an endeavor that can ultimately be transformational, deepening and expanding everyday possibilities for government by the people.

Democratic Participation

Scholars have come to differing conclusions about whether people's engagement in PB processes in Europe and North America increases their participation in other democratic practices, such as voting. One 2008 report—citing unnamed research—concludes that being part of PB does not make people more likely to vote in elections.[2] At the same time, more recent research analyzing voting records finds evidence that PB has a "spillover effect:" it is better than traditional democratic processes at engaging residents who have low incomes and/or who are young, Black, and Latine, and by mobilizing these groups, it increases their voter turnout.[3]

If the evidence regarding voting is mixed, the existing research highlights PB's substantial impact on other forms of democratic engagement. For example, studies find that PB can improve relationships between community members and local government officials.[4] This is especially true for residents who are not otherwise organized into civic organizations, unions, or other community groups.[5] According to researchers, PB enhances government transparency in three ways—by expanding access to information, ensuring that residents understand that information, and facilitating the creation of "shared meaning" (in other words, that residents are able to set the local government agenda for what is important, and why).[6] For example, a third-party evaluation of Chicago's 2013–2014 PB process concluded that it gave residents a platform for defining and communicating local needs, with 92 percent of PB participants who attended a neighborhood assembly and 74 percent of those who voted for initiatives indicating that they now "had a better understanding of the infrastructure needs in their ward"[7]

An evaluation of New York City's pilot year of PB also found various impacts on democratic participation.[8] Drawing from interviews, observations, and surveys linked to census and voter data,

the evaluators found that PB cultivated new relationships and connected residents with government officials, city council representatives, organizations, and other community leaders, thereby weaving a denser civic fabric. The process also equipped residents who had not previously been politically active with tools to understand the city's budget process more generally, participate in community problem-solving, and engage in local decision-making. The New York evaluation described these outcomes as particularly compelling in light of residents' general disillusionment with democracy. Two-thirds of participants surveyed had major concerns about the state of American democracy, and almost half had never contacted a government official before, the evaluators noted—"yet there they were, participating."[8]

Of course, the PB process itself is a form of democratic engagement. Here, there is evidence that the people who turn out for PB more closely match the overall demographic makeup of their communities than is the case for other forms of participation like voting. That said, certain groups are better represented than others. Across North American PB processes, Latine residents are typically underrepresented, while Black and white residents tend to be proportionately represented or overrepresented.[9] In Chicago, evaluators found little difference, generally speaking, in the demographic backgrounds of those who voted in PB and those who vote in regular elections. At the ward level, however, PB participants were slightly more representative of the population as a whole, and a significant number were ineligible to vote in traditional elections, which suggested that a new constituency was successfully engaged by this process.[10]

The New York City evaluation found that PB successfully mobilized hard-to-reach populations, especially in districts where officials targeted their outreach to these groups.[11] Both Black and low-income New Yorkers participated at rates higher than their shares of the city population, and 10 percent of participants reported speaking a primary language other than English. In addition, more women than men served as delegates, voted on the budget, and participated in neighborhood assemblies. This edge existed for women even though they reported less confidence in public speaking and negotiating, suggesting that a lack of PB-related skills (or at least a lack of confidence in such skills) did not deter participation. That said, the New York evaluation also found that youth participation was uneven. Young New Yorkers were much more active in districts where the city organized youth-specific assemblies to mobilize them.

Research also shows that getting people engaged in PB requires seriously considering resident *voice*—that is, community perspectives and expertise from lived experience.[12] For example, one of the major takeaways of the Chicago evaluation was the importance of meeting people where they are. Evaluators found that youth assemblies that took place during school hours were more successful at engaging and mobilizing young people than those that took place after hours. Likewise, having satellite meetings and voting locations in communities often left out of local decision-making helped reach residents with low incomes and people of color. Overall, the more opportunities that Chicagoans had to engage in PB, the greater their participation in the process.[13] An evaluation of the Durham PB process came to similar conclusions. To reach a truly representative segment of the population, evaluators stressed, localities need to address accessibility—for instance, making sure that potential participants have the childcare and transportation they need to get to PB-related events.[14]

While PB appears to be getting more residents involved in local decision-making, scholars have also flagged a key shortcoming of the approach: how its short-term cycle and neighborhood focus are disconnected from the long-term, citywide process of local government planning.[15] This disconnect, however, can also be an opportunity. By shining a light on what is going on right now in communities, the process can encourage local officials to make their long-term planning more responsive to residents' needs. In this way, PB can have a broader impact in making existing systems of democracy more inclusive. Furthermore, many community members who step up to help lead PB efforts in their neighborhoods end up getting involved in comprehensive planning later on. Nurturing these local leaders and voices helps bridge the communication gap between residents and city planners and ensures that the two processes inform each other. PB can be particularly helpful to city planners when concerns raised in the PB process affect multiple neighborhoods. Once brought to light, these concerns can then be incorporated into long-term planning around issues like drainage or flooding. If policymakers choose to tap the possibilities opened up by PB, the community engagement it generates can ripple out to influence a locality's long-rang approach to planning.

Equity Impacts

From its inception in Porto Alegre, Brazil, PB was meant to serve social justice goals by ensuring

that city resources are distributed equitably.[16] Research has found substantial evidence that PB accomplishes this in the localities where it has been tried. An analysis of PB in 20 cities concluded that the process met needs that would not have otherwise been considered. Furthermore, PB's effects compounded over time, meaning that over the years cities provided more consistent funding for poor neighborhoods and improved provision of basic services to these areas.[17] Across the board, PB enhanced funding for basic infrastructure, including transportation, bike lanes, drainage, water, sewer, waste management, and electricity.

Notably, only three of the 20 localities considered in this study were located in Europe or the U.S. (the rest were in Asia, Africa, Brazil, and Latin America). This raises a question: does PB have different results in wealthier countries? It is worth reiterating here that PB as a practice began in countries with low and middle incomes and then spread elsewhere—the opposite of the usual flow of program design.[18] Furthermore, there is some evidence that when PB is implemented in richer countries, it does a worse job of improving equity in the distribution of city resources. This gap exists even though PB in wealthier parts of the world does lead to the benefits we have already mentioned of engaging marginalized groups and identifying needs not otherwise being met.

A related criticism of PB is its inability to alter existing relationships of power. For instance, one analysis finds that despite the benefits PB brings in enhancing government efficiency and local infrastructure, it does not usually lead to any improvement in the fundamentally unequal relationships between people and their governments.[19] Such power shifts are particularly elusive in rich countries. In the U.S., for example, cities have made clear strides in ensuring equity in communication and engagement around PB. At the same time, they have largely not given residents any more control of the local government bureaucracies responsible for implementing and administering policy—which was a typical outcome of early PB processes in Brazil and elsewhere.[20] Therefore, while more voices are being heard in the process than in other venues for democratic engagement in U.S. cities, PB has fallen short of hopes that it would give residents substantial political power—that is, the ability to directly allocate resources and guide governance decisions.[21]

A number of possible reasons might explain these limitations in wealthier countries. Some scholars

believe the small budgets of PB initiatives limit their impacts, preventing them from pursuing projects to address important issues like public housing that involve high costs.[22] Furthermore, some PB processes have not chosen to divide resources in a truly equitable fashion. A cornerstone of the original Brazilian model was giving more funding to districts with fewer resources, but many U.S. cities have implemented PB under a system where all districts receive the same amount regardless of need.[23] Another barrier to more equitable outcomes is that the PB process has not historically changed what types of services are prioritized and funded by local governments. As a result, even when the process successfully redistributes funds to poorer neighborhoods, it cannot ensure that they are effectively directed by residents for their own benefit.[24] This is a particularly relevant consideration when assessing Richmond's People's Budget. While additional funding is being allocated to Richmond districts with greater need, attention must be paid to how exactly the funds are being used, and whether city agencies ultimately follow through on promises.

Scholars have identified several ways to address these shortcomings. First, PB participants often have their own ideas about how to bridge the power gap between local communities and city bureaucracies. Therefore, they should be consulted about any attempts to democratize local government.[25] Second, residents should directly exercise decision-making power without intermediaries, which should help ensure the outcomes of the process are more equitable.[26] Third, the process should clearly and consistently communicate the roles and responsibilities of its various stakeholders, which will reduce delegate turnover and keep community leaders engaged.[27] In general, researchers emphasize how helpful it is to have an active, well-coordinated civil society already in place within a given locality before the PB process begins. Tapping these existing networks of nonprofit and community leaders is essential if PB is to successfully empower its residents, and not just engage them. Engagement can be an important step towards empowerment, but without concrete commitments from the government to implement ideas surfaced through engagement, it can also feel like an empty gesture designed to placate residents. In other words, PB is not just a top-down process. There is value in building up local organizations both in and outside the coalition of groups directly working on PB.[28] Indeed, a more equitable redistribution of resources can come about through policymakers just being involved in the PB process, which organically connects with more diverse stakeholders. The New York City evaluation, for example,

found that being a part of PB taught city council members about the needs and organizing efforts in their districts, which guided their future funding decisions outside of the process itself.[29]

Efficiency Improvements

Past research also highlights how PB can improve the efficiency of local government, including city service provision. Here, "efficiency" is defined as the ability of the government to seamlessly respond to resident requests—that is, how quickly and thoroughly it gathers feedback from people and then acts to meet their needs.[30] Scholars find that local governments typically do not modernize in this way unless challenged to do so by community leaders. PB generates new opportunities to push forward these reforms, nudging policymakers to make their institutions and services more responsive to local residents.[31]

PB can also play an indirect role in improving city services by providing a channel for additional fundraising. For example, Chicago leveraged PB money to raise $1.6 million in additional dollars from private and state sources earmarked for PB projects.[32] Past research underscores how PB funding can be used to attract additional funding and resources from all levels of government as well as the philanthropic and NGO sectors. This can compensate for the budgetary constraints that, as mentioned earlier, weaken PB's impact.[33] The fact that PB initiatives can spur further fundraising is especially relevant to smaller localities that struggle to generate sufficient resources to meet their needs.

The PB process itself can be made more efficient by modernizing its voting process. In the traditional "rank-and-select" method of counting votes, projects with the most support are selected in descending order until there is insufficient funding to cover the next most popular project. But this approach often leaves money on the table, researchers find. According to some scholars, a computational social science approach to PB voting can serve more people than traditional methods by identifying the most favorable combinations of projects.[35] Specialized voting platforms exist that can optimize the selection of projects. These platforms use algorithms to find the combination of projects that uses the maximum amount of available funds. They also factor in the total aggregate number of votes that different possible combinations of projects received, ensuring community support for the outcomes. For example, where a PB process under the

traditional vote-counting system may run out of funding after only a few popular and high-dollar projects, optimization programs can instead select more projects that more total voters choose. These platforms thus outperform rank-and-select methods not just in how much of the available City budget they use, but also in how much resident support they generate.[34] This area of innovation may have implications for other local voting processes given the interest of several Virginia localities in adopting ranked-choice voting.

PB processes are highly variable across locality and hemisphere. In North America, PB has tended to achieve goals of equitable participation and engagement more successfully than goals of empowerment. For PB to live into its original promise of building a stronger democracy fueled by powerful community leaders, practitioners must attend to the four pillars of voice, vote, social justice, and oversight. These principles inform this evaluation of RVAPB to determine success in terms of an equitable process and outcome. In the next section, we begin sharing the findings of our research, with a specific focus on promoting equity and inclusion in the PB process.

Survey Findings – Who is participating, and how are they engaged?

In addition to the focus groups, we also conducted a survey to gather feedback received from the Richmond community regarding the PB process. Questions from the survey can be found in Appendix B.

Methodology

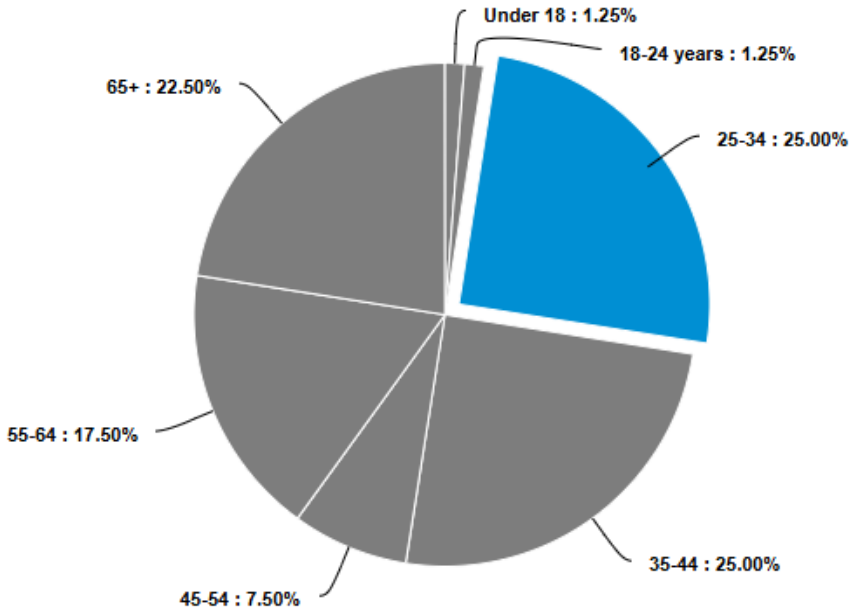
To conduct this part of the study, CPP worked with RVAPB to develop the survey questions (see Appendix B). CPP then built the survey in QuestionPro. A virtual version of the survey was sent out virtually by RVAPB to all PB contacts; RVAPB staff also offered PB participants who were providing ideas in-person the opportunity to complete the survey at the same time. In total, 63 individuals completed the survey.

Key themes and findings results from the survey responses are discussed in the following sections and, in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, all data from the surveys, including those taken online and those taken in person, are presented in aggregate.

Quantitative Findings

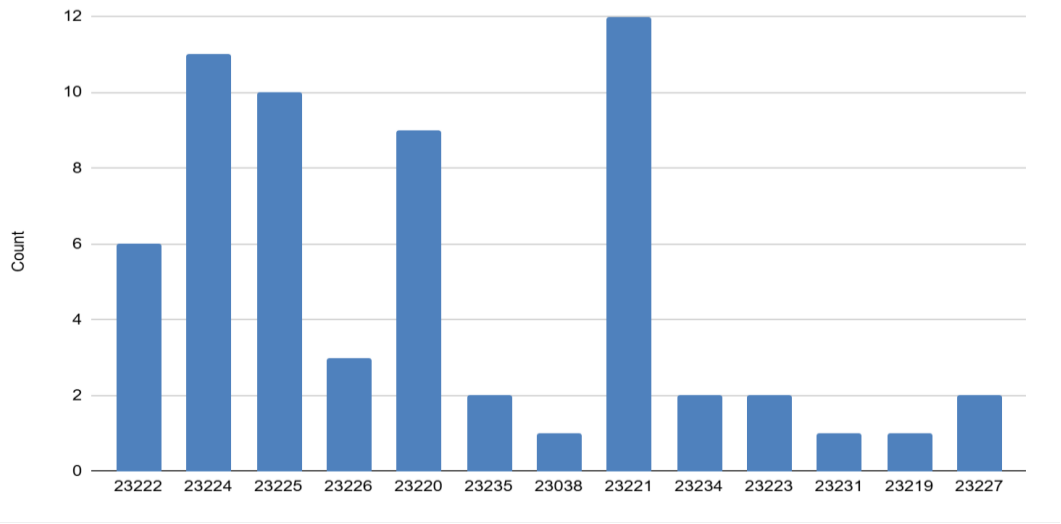
The survey was made up primarily of multiple choice questions. Responses are detailed below with descriptive statistics and charts showing survey completion rates, demographic and socioeconomic breakdowns of respondents, and participant perceptions of the participatory budgeting process and goals.

Age of Participants



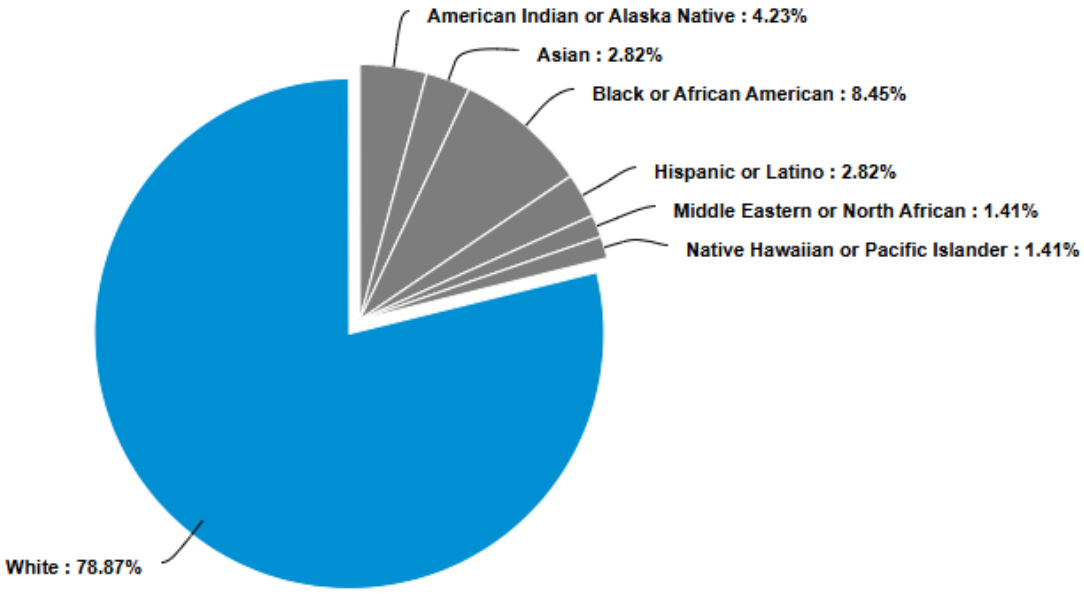
Respondents were concentrated among those aged 25-34, 35-44, and 65+, with only 2.5% combined coming from the lowest age groups (under 18 and 18-24)

Participant Zip Codes



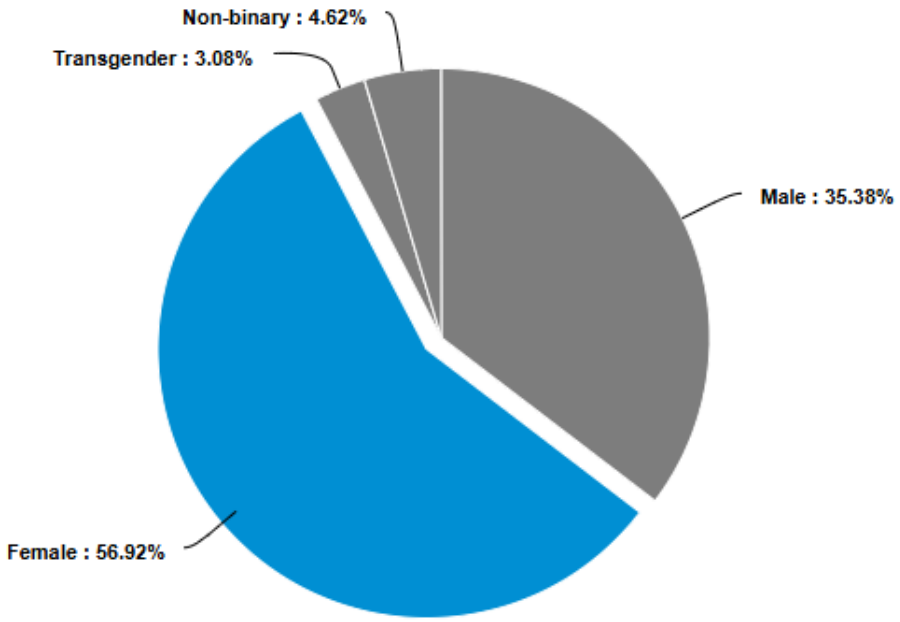
Respondents were largely concentrated in one of five zip codes: 23221, 23224, 23225, 23220, and 23222. While 23221 and 23220 generally represent relatively more affluent parts of the city, significant portions of 23224, 23225, and 23222 are less affluent, indicating that the responses received may be relatively representative of the City's demographic and socioeconomic diversity (depending on from where, specifically, within these zip codes responses were received).

Race/Ethnicity of Participants



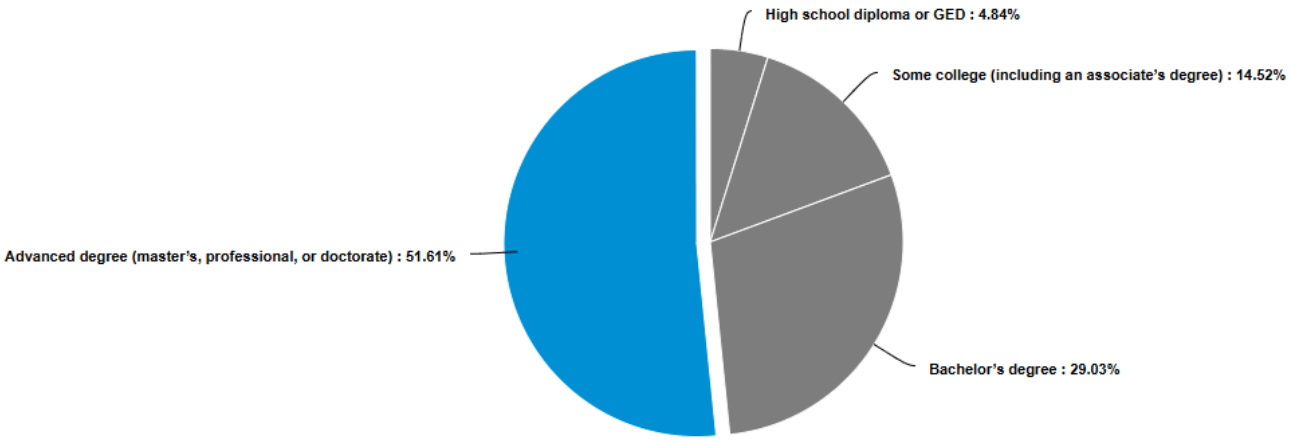
Respondents to the survey were overwhelmingly white, making up nearly 79 percent of the responses. African-American (8.5 percent) and Latino (2.8 percent) respondents are particularly underrepresented.

Gender of Participants



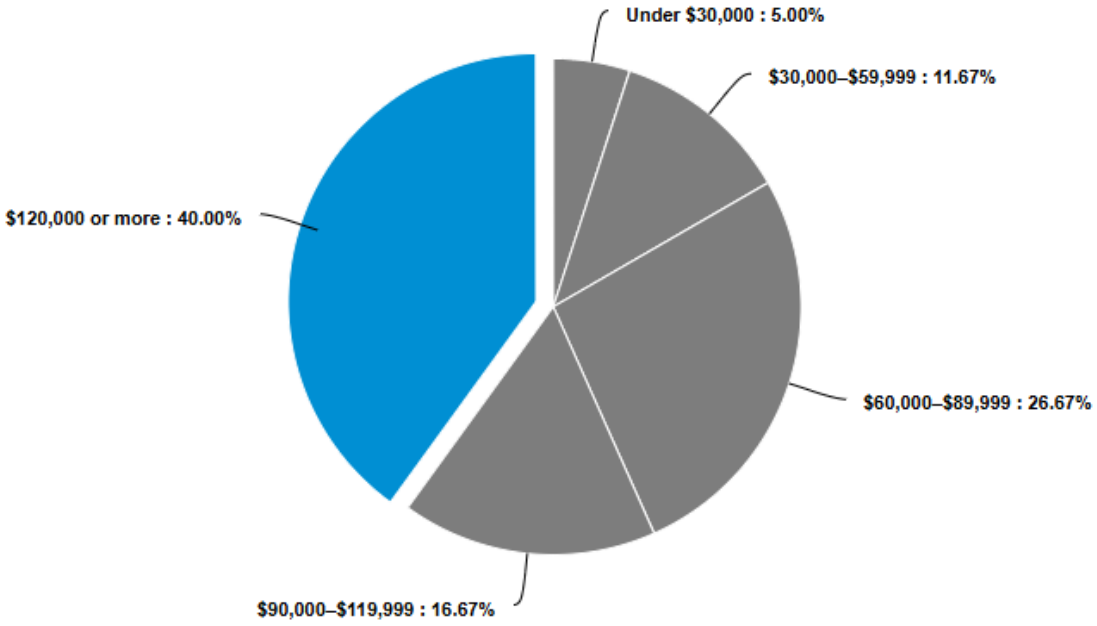
Females are well-represented in the survey responses, accounting for nearly 57 percent of responses. Males made up just over 35 percent of respondents, while non-binary (4.6 percent) and transgender (3.1 percent) were also represented.

Educational Attainment of Participants



Respondents overwhelmingly had completed at least a Bachelor's Degree, with Advanced Degrees overrepresented at more than 56 percent of respondents. This indicates that the survey undercounts those without a college education, and it did not receive a single response from those with less than a high school diploma.

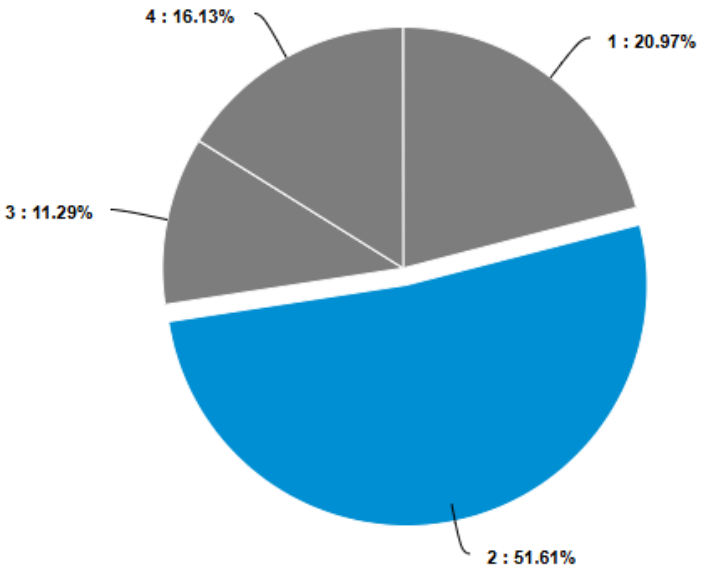
Household Income of Participants



Higher income earners are also over-represented in the survey responses, with 40 percent of

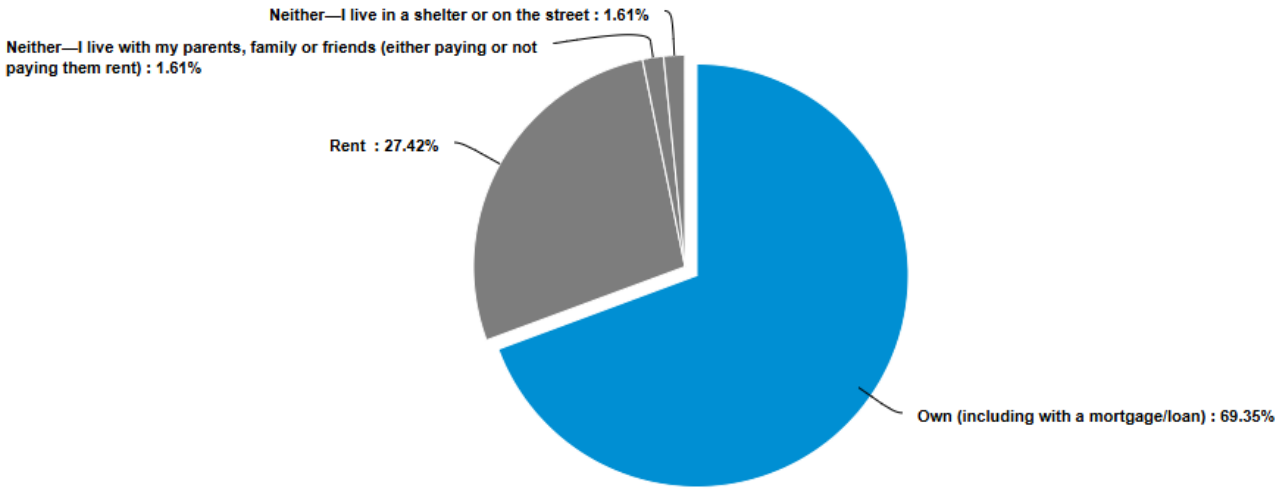
respondents reporting a total household income over $120,000/year. However, it is noteworthy that all income groups are represented in the respondents.

Household Size of Participants



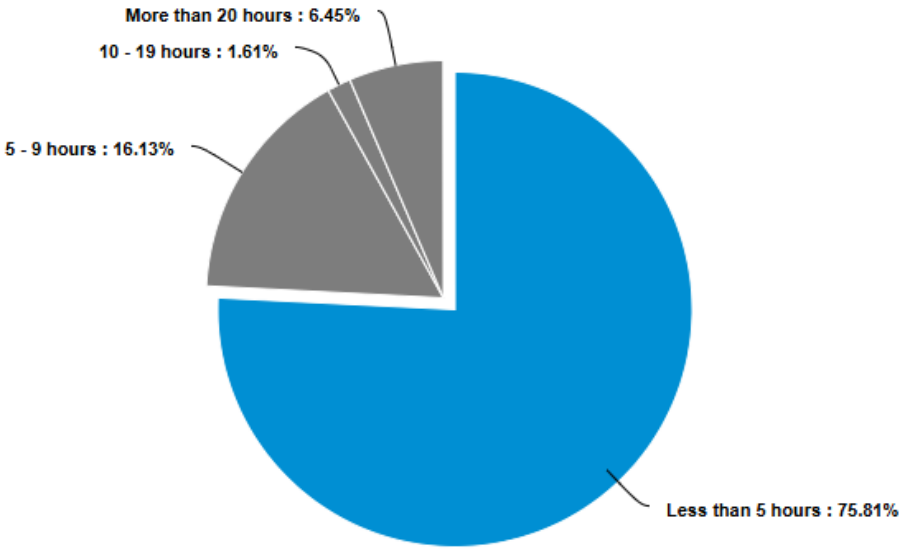
A majority of respondents (51.6 percent) come from two-person households, though one, three, and four person households are also represented.

Housing Status of Participants



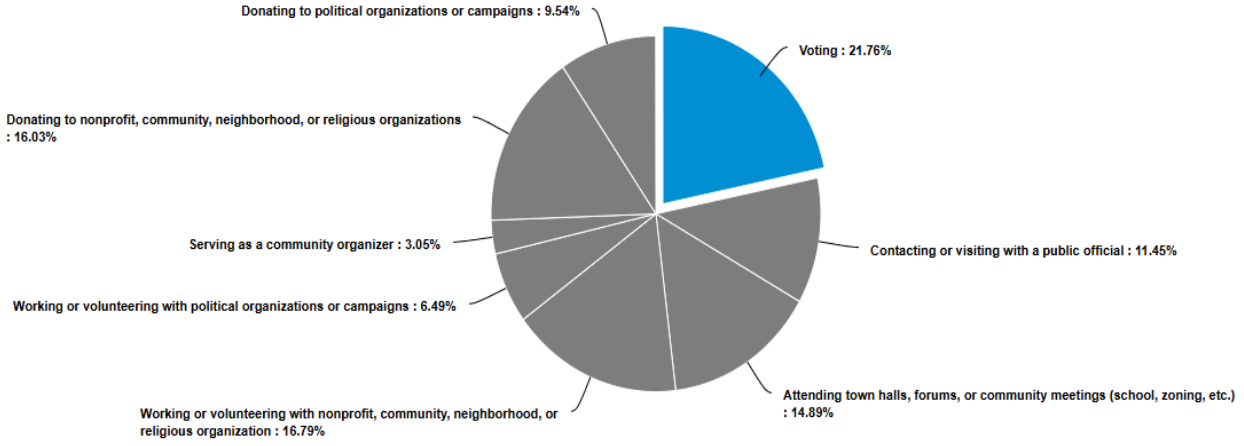
Nearly all respondents either own (69.4 percent) or rent (27.4 percent) their housing, though two respondents indicated that they are either houseless or living with friends or family.

Time Spent Engaged with RVAPB



More than three in four respondents have spent less than five hours engaged with the participatory budgeting process, with most of the remaining quarter (16.1 percent) having spent 5-9 hours.

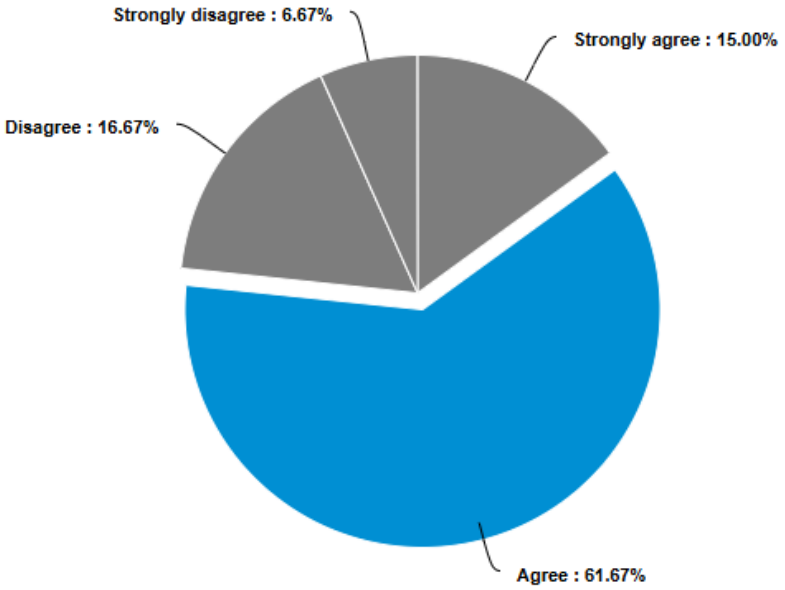
Community Engagement Practices



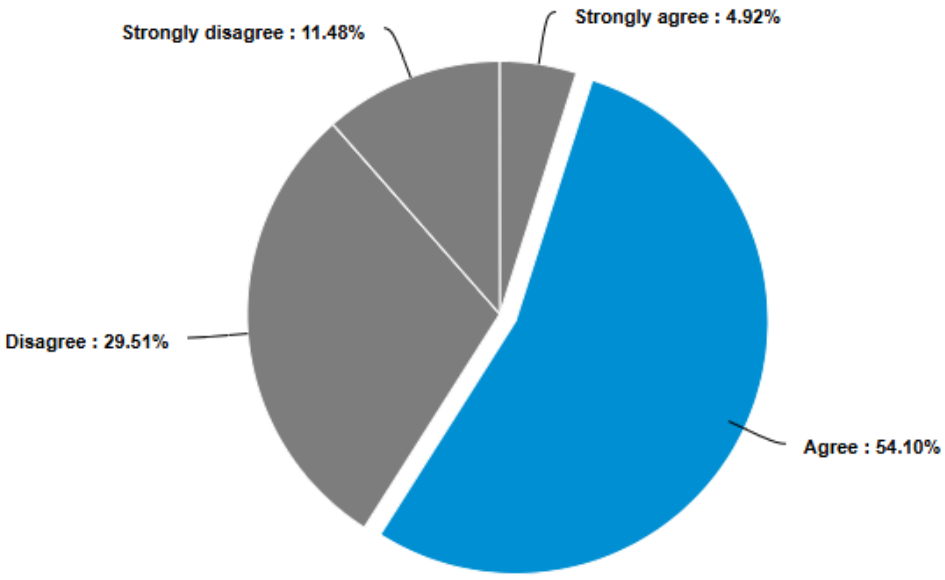
Voting (21.8 percent) is the most common form of community engagement among respondents,

followed by Working or Volunteering (16.8 percent) and Donating (16 percent) to nonprofit, community, neighborhood, or religious organizations.

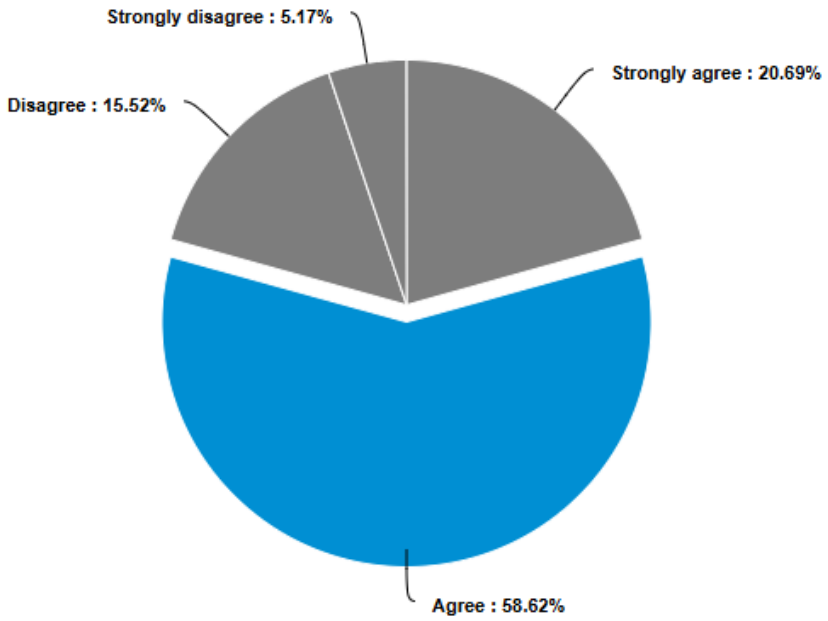
Perceptions of Feeling Valued in the RVAPB Process



Perceptions of Experiences with City Officials

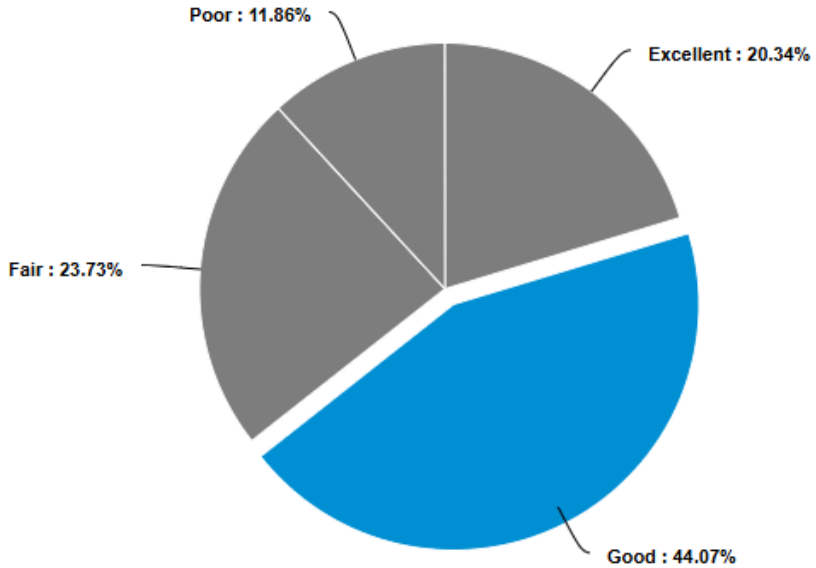


Perceptions of if RVAPB is Building Trust with the Government



Respondents tended to agree that the participatory budgeting experience made them feel valued, has been positive, and helps build relationships. There is some disagreement, in particular regarding respondents' feelings about their experiences with City officials (nearly 42 percent disagree or strongly disagree).

Participants' Overall Experiences with RVAPB



Overall, a majority of respondents said that they feel ‘Good’ or ‘Excellent’ about their experiences with the RVA People’s Budget, though more than a third (35.6 percent) rated their experience as ‘Fair’ or ‘Poor’.

Qualitative Findings

The final question of the survey provided an opportunity for respondents to give open-ended feedback on their experiences with the RVA People’s Budget: *Please share any ideas you have for how the participatory budgeting process could be improved, or let us know if there is anything else you would like to share about your experience so far.*

We have summarized their responses into six main themes:

1. Excitement and optimism: While constructive feedback was frequently offered, positive sentiments suggested a strong foundation of goodwill and community engagement that the program can continue to build upon.

    - *"I have lived the creativity of the engagement process!"*
    - *"No ideas for improving but I really like the process and the community involvement. Very important these days."*
    - *"I have enjoyed sharing this with others so they get to participate too."*
    - *"It’s going great!"*
    - *"I think this process will result in us feeling RVA gov is more responsive to our needs/wants."*

2. Need for greater visibility and awareness: Participants repeatedly expressed concerns about the lack of awareness and outreach for the participatory budgeting (PB) process. Suggestions for increasing visibility and engagement were a common theme.
    - *"It can be difficult to get the word out. That said, I think there is more work to be done as many folks still do not know about or understand what a participatory budget is."*
    - *"If it weren’t for a post on social media I wouldn’t know about this topic."*

- *"I think showing up in as many places [as] you can will help. Also helping ease pathways to participation (aka library days where people can fill it out with help using the computers)."*

3. Desire for inclusive outreach: Many responses highlighted the importance of reaching underrepresented or historically disadvantaged communities and ensuring all residents have the opportunity to participate, and made suggestions as to how to improve in this area.
    - *"Go door to door in Southside because I do not think long-time residents and older people in this neighborhood know anything about it."*
    - *"I would suggest making a very heartfelt and concerted effort to ask citizens in public housing and in historically disadvantaged neighborhoods to contribute. Perhaps hosting listening events and having someone at community centers would help expose folks to this process."*
    - *"Letters, TV ads, canvassing, incentives for participation."*

4. Call for feedback and transparency: respondents expressed a need for better communication and transparency throughout the PB process, particularly after submitting ideas.
    - *"It's hard to know how the participatory budgeting process is going because after submitting an idea, you don't hear back about it."*
    - *"When an idea is submitted, provide an instant acknowledgment that it was received."*
    - *"Be even more transparent. Over communicate. People are still not trusting."*

5. Structural and procedural suggestions: Several responses included ideas to improve the process itself, such as shorter time frames, additional project categories, or different formats for engagement.
    - *"I think it just needs to be more visible, and maybe happen over a shorter time frame."*
    - *"The survey only allows you to submit one comment, but it does not warn you of this before taking the survey."*
    - *"Include means of engaging the public as part of those services both passively and actively. Provide examples relevant to those services that this budgeting could impact."*

6. Increased scope and funding: Participants expressed concerns about the limited scope of PB efforts, including the small percentage of the budget allocated and an emphasis on capital projects over maintenance.
    - *"It is such a small percentage of the overall city budget. I would like to see the amount committed to this effort increased over time."*
    - *"The focus on capital projects means citizens don't have a part in prioritizing maintenance needs like storm water, graffiti, and code enforcement. The city is investing millions in new capital projects while deferring maintenance on existing parks, schools, and infrastructure."*

Focus Group Findings – What do participants think of the PB process so far?

Through focus group conversations, the CPP team hoped to learn more about how and why people decided to get involved with RVAPB, their experiences with participatory budgeting and civic engagement in general, their perceptions of and trust in the Richmond City government, and their ideas as to how the RVAPB process could be improved in the future.

In the following section, we discuss the methodology for how we gathered data from the two focus groups. We then discuss key findings that arose from this research.

Methodology

To conduct this part of the study, CPP worked with RVAPB to organize one in-person focus group and one virtual focus group. Participants for both focus groups were invited by RVAPB via email. The in-person focus group took place at the Richmond Main Library on September 3, 2024, and the virtual focus group took place via Zoom on September 4, 2024. The in-person focus group had four participants, and the virtual focus group had 10 participants.

Appendix C provides the list of questions asked during the focus groups. The CPP team developed these in consultation with the RVAPB team.

Key themes and findings from these conversations are discussed below. In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, all data from both focus groups are presented in aggregate.

How are community members finding out about the RVAPB initiative?

We first asked participants to discuss how they found out about the RVAPB initiative. Our goal was to understand what outreach efforts had been more successful and where more outreach was needed. Overall, most participants heard about the participatory budgeting process through other organizations with which they were involved. These included other local government agencies, universities, their place of employment, and nonprofit organizations. Two participants said that they learned of the process through social media (i.e., Instagram).

Some participants had suggestions for how the process might reach more community members. These outreach ideas included:

- Increased collaboration with public transportation organizations to place flyers and signage about the RVAPB process at bus stops and on buses
- Empowering individuals already involved in the process to share information with their community and networks
- Holding additional activities or events around the Richmond area to spread the word

Why and how are community members involved in the participatory budgeting process?

Participants said that they chose to get involved with Richmond's participatory budgeting process for a variety of reasons. Overall, participants explained how they were excited by the idea of participatory budgeting and stated that they wanted to get involved in what seemed like a beneficial initiative. Other specific reasons provided by participants included:

- Wanting to know more about how government and budgeting works
- Wanting to increase trust between governments and citizens
- Wanting to center the perspectives of historically marginalized groups in the decision-making process
- Enjoying getting out into the community and working with others
- Wanting to be a part of making positive changes in Richmond

Regarding how participants have been involved in Richmond's participatory budgeting process so far, frequent responses included:

- Attending public meetings and trainings
- Attending RVAPB outreach events
- Canvassing
- Inviting RVAPB representatives to speak at their meetings
- Serving on the RVAPB commission

How are RVAPB participants involved with the community as a whole?

After learning more about why community members chose to get involved with the participatory budgeting process and their methods of involvement, we also asked participants to share other ways that they engage with their community. In both focus groups, we provided participants with a list of options from which to choose, as well as the option to write in additional methods of engagement outside of the PB process. The results are shown in the chart below.

As a follow-up question, we asked participants to share any specific causes in which they were engaged. Their responses included:

- City beautification and promoting green spaces
- Mutual aid work (e.g., food distribution and supporting a free store)
- Supporting reproductive rights
- Supporting the LGBTQ community
- Mentoring youth
- Working with civic associations
- Supporting public transportation
- Serving on task forces
- Serving on a planning team for historically marginalized areas

Perceptions of the Richmond City government

Next, we asked participants for their thoughts on the Richmond City government as a whole, with a specific focus on responsiveness and money management.

Regarding responsiveness, participants highlighted significant issues regarding low-income and public housing residents. Major concerns included:

- The perception that low-income and unhoused individuals often feel unheard and can be distrustful of authorities due to past decisions favoring wealthier groups. Participants described how Richmond has a history of systemically neglecting marginalized populations, keeping them "out of sight, out of mind."
- A sense that decision-makers and advocates lack an understanding of the challenges that those living in public housing face, including outdated buildings and inadequate repairs.
- A lack of diverse representation, including youth, in public housing councils and boards. Participants described how current councils often consist of the same individuals each year, while others who may want to join may feel that they wouldn't be welcome.
- A belief that Richmond City government responses slowly and inadequately to resident concerns due to a combination of insufficient funding and excessive bureaucracy, such as the lengthy approval process for infrastructure improvements like crosswalks.

Overall, the findings emphasize the need for better advocacy, more diverse representation, and a more responsive and better-funded system to handle resident concerns.

Regarding how responsible the City of Richmond is in using its money, most participants felt that the city was, generally, "wasteful." After one participant described the city's fiscal management as "a joke," others agreed, noting that grants offered by the city for community services often don't materialize. As a result, those working with nonprofit or community organizations frequently use independently raised money to fund projects, they said.

When asked how much they know about the city's budgeting process, no participants said they fully understood it. Participants described a need for more information and greater transparency, as well as a desire for more intentional efforts from the city to improve communication around funding and budgets.

Personal benefits of RVAPB participation

We also wanted to learn more about the personal benefits, if any, that participants may have experienced during their involvement with participatory budgeting so far. Participants were asked about the extent to which they thought their participation in the process makes a difference. Their opinions are shown in the chart below.

As can be seen above, the majority of participants felt that their involvement with participatory budgeting does make a difference in the community. We asked a follow-up question about specific ways participants felt that the participatory budgeting process was making a difference in their lives. While two participants said that they did not feel the process was affecting them personally in this way, others gave the following responses:

- Learning more about governmental processes
- Learning more about the perspectives of others
- Improving public-speaking skills
- Generating excitement about the possibilities that participatory budgeting can generate
- Building relationships with others in the community
- Gaining a sense of fulfillment
- Getting to try something new and interesting

Finally, we asked if their involvement with participatory budgeting had changed how people interact with the government in general. A few participants said that it had made a change in this area, primarily by increasing their knowledge of how government agencies operate. In turn, they described how this led to a sense of empowerment when interacting with government officials and advocating for various causes.

Ensuring equity in the participatory budgeting process

Finally, we asked participants to share their thoughts on ways that Richmond's participatory budgeting process could be improved, with a specific focus on equity. The primary recommendation was to get the word out more to ensure that as many people as possible know about the process. As was discussed above, this could include signage placed strategically around the city, encouraging the use of social media and word of-mouth to share information, and hiring local people to serve as RVAPB ambassadors.

Participants also stressed the importance of ensuring that all parts of the city are represented in this process. Many noted that some areas, such as public housing developments and the South Side of the city, do not receive the same level of attention and commitment as other parts of the city do. Some participants also mentioned the need to increase youth involvement, with one person suggesting coordinating with Richmond Public Schools to ensure that all high school students have

access to the idea submission form. Another mentioned the importance of soliciting input from Richmond's unhoused population and those living in senior housing. In all of these efforts, focus group participants stressed the importance of using inclusive language and ensuring that all RVAPB participants are seen and referred to as equally valuable players in this process.

Overall, the general sense was that outreach and resident engagement need to be prioritized to make Richmond's participatory budgeting process the best that it can be. Participants noted that this would mean pursuing additional and targeted outreach efforts, which would help ensure a truly inclusive and equitable process. As one participant said, "It should be more of taking it to the people, than people coming to you."

Looking Ahead

Overall, participants in Richmond's PB process tended to be white, female, highly educated, and high income earners. Most also owned their own home in the 23221, 23224, 23225, 23220, and 23222 zip codes. Participants were from a wide range of age groups, and also engaged in the community in a variety of ways. Considering PB specifically, most participants were engaged for less than five hours so far. Participants tended to feel that their opinions were valued during the PB process, and had mostly positive experiences engaging with Richmond City officials (both in general and relating to PB). While some expressed hesitation that the PB process would work, or that City officials could be trusted, the majority of participants felt positive and hopeful that this first round of PB in Richmond would be a success.

Beginning in Spring 2025, the CPP team will collaborate with the RVAPB team to continue collecting data on perceptions of the participatory budgeting process. By this point, participants will have begun to learn about which ideas are being considered for implementation. The Phase 2 report will build upon what has been presented here and will place a greater focus on the idea consideration and implementation processes, ultimately informing the RVAPB team how they can work to make Richmond's PB process a successful, positive experience for all involved.

Appendix A: Literature Review References

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Appendix B: Survey Questions

1. What is your zip code? [open-ended]
2. What is your race or ethnicity? Select all that apply.
    a. American Indian or Alaska Native
    b. Asian
    c. Black or African American
    d. Hispanic or Latino
    e. Middle Eastern or North African
    f. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    g. White
3. What is your gender? Select all that apply.
    a. Male
    b. Female
    c. Transgender
    d. Nonbinary
    e. I identify as: _____
4. What is your age?
    a. 18–24 years
    b. 25–34 years
    c. 35–44 years
    d. 45–54 years
    e. 55–64 years
    f. 65+ years
5. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
    a. Less than a high school diploma
    b. High school diploma or GED
    c. Some college (including an associate's degree)
    d. Bachelor's degree
    e. Advanced degree (master's, professional, or doctorate)
6. In 2023, what was your total household income?
    a. Under $30,000
    b. $30,000–$59,999
    c. $60,000–$89,999
    d. $90,000–$119,999
    e. $120,000 or more
7. How many people, including yourself, live in your household?
    a. 1
    b. 2
    c. 3
    d. 4
    e. 5 or more
8. What is your housing status?
    a. I own my house

    b. I rent my house
    c. I am currently houseless
9. About how much time have you spent being engaged with Richmond's participatory budgeting process?
    a. Less than 5 hours
    b. 5–9 hours
    c. 10–19 hours
    d. More than 20 hours
10. In addition to the participatory budgeting process, in which ways do you engage with your community? Select all that apply.
    a. Voting
    b. Contacting or visiting with a public official
    c. Attending town halls, forums, or community meetings (school, zoning, etc.)
    d. Working or volunteering with nonprofit, community, neighborhood, or religious organizations
    e. Working or volunteering with political organizations or campaigns
    f. Serving as a community organizer
    g. Donating to nonprofit, community, neighborhood, or religious organizations
    h. Donating to political organizations or campaigns
11. I feel that my perspectives are valued in Richmond's participatory budgeting process.
    a. Strongly agree
    b. Agree
    c. Disagree
    d. Strongly disagree
12. My experiences with the Richmond City government and city officials have been positive so far.
    a. Strongly agree
    b. Agree
    c. Disagree
    d. Strongly disagree
13. The participatory budgeting process is strengthening the relationship between the Richmond City government and Richmond's residents.
    a. Strongly agree
    b. Agree
    c. Disagree
    d. Strongly disagree
14. Overall, how would you rate your experience with Richmond's participatory budgeting process?
    a. Excellent
    b. Good
    c. Fair
    d. Poor

15. Please share any ideas you have for how the participatory budgeting process could be improved, or let us know if there is anything else you would like to share about your experience so far. [open-ended]

Appendix C: Focus Group Questions

1. How did you find out about the Richmond People's Budget initiative?
2. In what ways have you been involved in the Richmond People's Budget process?
3. Why did you decide to get involved in this process?
4. How have you been involved in your community or in city life as a whole, besides being involved in Richmond's participatory budgeting process?
    a. Have you recently worked on any specific problems in your community? How so?
    b. Are you involved in local politics? How so?
    c. Are you involved with any local groups or organizations? Which ones?
    d. Do you vote in every election? Why or why not?
5. Generally speaking, do you feel the City of Richmond is responsive to the wishes of its citizens? Why or why not?
6. Does the City of Richmond use its funds wisely? Why or why not?
7. How much do you know about the City's overall budgeting process?
8. Who or what do you think is being left out of the City's current budgeting process?
9. To what extent do you agree that your participation in the PB process makes a difference?
10. Has getting involved in this process made any difference in your life? How so? Has getting involved in this process changed your attitudes about the City of Richmond? Do you feel any more or less comfortable about interacting with the city government?
11. What have you learned so far through your participation in this process? Have you learned anything about the City of Richmond? About how city government works? About communities other than your own? Have you learned about the work of any local groups or organizations through this process?
12. So far, do you think that all citizen voices are being heard equally in this process, or are some groups being favored over others? Who is being left out? What do you think could be done to address this issue?
13. To what extent do you trust that the City of Richmond will follow the wishes of citizens in using these funds? Why do you feel that way?
14. Overall, what are some things you like about being involved in participatory budgeting?
15. In what ways could the participatory budgeting process in Richmond be improved?

16. Do you feel you understand how the Richmond People's Budget process works? What, if anything, is unclear?
17. Does the timeline so far feel rushed, too slow, or just right?
18. Is there anything that could be done to make participation easier?
19. Is there anything else that you would like to share?