

HOW PHILLY WORKS : Getting Your Voice Heard During the City's Budget Debates

The city budget. Your eyes are probably glazing over already.

But pay attention, because the Christie-sized budget is really the government's plan on how to spend your tax dollars to solve Philadelphia's greatest problems. The public budget hearings are a chance to discuss the city's most pressing issues – everything from taxes to jobs to schools – and you can have a say in them.

Keeping up with (much less understanding) the city's annual budget process can be daunting – which is why the non-partisan Committee of Seventy is planning a series of **HOW PHILLY WORKS** to keep you up-to-date on the hot-button issues (and even some not-so-hot, but important ones) in this budget season.

To start off the series, this edition of **HOW PHILLY WORKS** gives you an overview of the budget process and lets you know how to tell City Council what you're thinking about the way your tax dollars are spent.

--March 6, 2013

I'm interested. How can I follow what's going on with the budget?

The action officially gets underway with the mayor's annual budget address – which, this year, is on Thursday, March 14 after the City Council session in Room 400, City Hall. City Council then puts out a schedule of public budget hearings on their [meeting calendar](#). We'll post it on our website, but keep checking in since the schedule tends to change around.

Where are the budget hearings held?

Most are in City Hall, Room 400. Last year though, City Council held four “neighborhood” budget sessions in different locations throughout the city.

Will there be neighborhood hearings this year too?

We hope so. But we'll have to wait until City Council President Darrell Clarke sets the schedule.

If I show up at a budget hearing, can I talk?

It depends on the hearing. Except for the neighborhood hearings, which are designed for input from the public, public testimony is only allowed at some of the hearings in City Hall. Keep reading. We'll tell you how to get your name on the list of speakers.

What if I can't make it to City Hall or the neighborhood hearings?

Don't worry. The hearings will be broadcast live (and later during primetime) on channel 64, the city's Government Access Channel. You can also watch the hearings by going to City Council's website [here](#). And last year, written testimony was accepted by the Chief Clerk of City Council for people who were unable to make it to a hearing. We will provide information about this year's process on our website as soon as it is available.

What are the budget hearings all about?

Public budget hearings are held by City Council every spring to review the city's proposed operating budget during the upcoming fiscal year – which, in Philadelphia, runs from July 1 through June 30. The operating budget spells out how the city will spend the revenue it expects to bring in (from taxes or other sources) for the services it provides (e.g., trash removal, fighting fires, policing). Council also reviews the proposed capital budget, which includes funding to construct and renovate public buildings and facilities. City Council also holds hearings on the School District's budget, but it isn't up to Council to approve this budget like it must do with the other two. (That job belongs to the School Reform Commission.)

How much is the city's annual operating budget?

Roughly \$3.6 billion. Check [here](#) to see how the city carved up its spending for the current fiscal year. The biggest chunks are for public safety (\$1.144 billion) and employee benefits (\$1.118 billion.)

Who decides what's in Philadelphia's annual budget?

Interesting you should ask. The budget is developed by the mayor. Last year, a number of City Council members expressed frustration about their lack of input at the front end. In the first City Hall budget hearing last March 26, President Clarke complained to the mayor's Chief of Staff Everett Gillison: "[T]here are what I believe to be good ideas had by members of Council, and it's always been relatively difficult to get our issues in [any] Mayor's proposed budget...What's the threshold that we as a Council have to meet to get something in this document?"

What did Gillison say?

That he thought the two sides were talking. And that they should talk more.

So the mayor gives Council his budget. Then what happens?

Council then holds public hearings on proposed spending by virtually every taxpayer-funded unit of city government, including the mayor's office, City departments, commissions, boards and agencies, and independently elected row offices over a six or seven week period.

I don't see City Council on this list.

That's because City Council doesn't hold hearings on its own budget. Council doesn't reveal their budget details either. (Seventy asks them to do this every year.)

You said Council has to approve the budget.

It does, by a majority vote. Then it goes back to the mayor for his approval. This must happen by June 30 – the end of the fiscal year.

Then the budget is set in stone?

Not yet. The annual budget – and also a five-year financial plan – must be approved by the Pennsylvania Intergovernmental Cooperation Authority (PICA), which is the state-controlled fiscal overseer of the city's finances. (We'll tell you more about PICA in a future **HOW PHILLY WORKS**.) The City Controller also plays a role by auditing the city's expenditures, certifying the city's debt limit to allow for future borrowing, and reporting to PICA on the credibility of the assumptions used to develop the budget.

You promised to tell me how I can speak at Council's budget hearings.

Once you see where in the schedule public testimony will be allowed – and, by the way, it is typically limited to three minutes – you can sign up in advance by contacting the Chief Clerk of Council's office at 215-686-3410 or 215-686-3411. You can also get your name on the list to speak in Room 400 of City Hall on the day of the hearing. Go early or you may find yourself at the end of a long list of speakers. Also remember to bring an ID to get into City Hall (the northeast entrance opposite the Courtyard Marriott).

One more question: Can I go to City Hall to hear the mayor's budget address on March 14?

Yes. The hearing will take place directly after the City Council meeting which begins at 10:00a.m. in Room 400. But you probably want to get there early, because seating is limited.

*You'll be hearing more about the budget in the coming weeks. If you have any ideas for topics you'd like us to talk about in future **HOW PHILLY WORKS**, please email us at futureofthecity@seventy.org.*