

Gerisch: As the governor starts preparing the next budget, who should be at the table?

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Commentary

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Editor's note: This commentary is by Mary Gerisch, the president of the Vermont Workers' Center, which is holding a series of People's Budget workshops across the state from Sept. 16-20. To attend the events, which will include the screening of a short animated film, call (802) 861-4892 or visit www.workerscenter.org.

Far from the political limelight, around this time each fall the governor is getting ready to prepare next year's state budget. Guided only by a revenue forecast released in late July, the governor will ask state agencies to propose what public services and programs they plan to provide for the people of Vermont.

While this may sound unexciting, it affects all of our lives. In fact, most budget decisions are made now, not during legislative debates at the beginning of the year. Will Vermont seek to ensure that every child has healthy food, help people from shelters into homes, support teachers, and fix roads? We hope so, but we don't know, as the administration's budget discussions happen behind closed doors. Moreover, the governor has no sure way of predicting what his budget will be able to accomplish and how it will impact the people of Vermont. Because at this point, no one in government has a real grasp of what exactly people's needs are, and what it would take to meet those needs.

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There is a serious disconnect between the state's budget policies and the realities of people's lives. We, the people, have not been involved in an assessment of what we really need, nor have we been able to discuss goals and priorities for our budget and tax policies. Yet we do know that people in our state are suffering from increasing inequity and poverty, and that our budget has a lot to do with that, despite policymakers' good intentions.

Vermont needs a different way of making budgets; we must shift the budget process from managing to the money to managing to people's needs.

A People's Budget based on human rights principles would accomplish that, and the Legislature took a first step in that direction by revising the budget laws in 2012. The new purpose of our state budget is "to address the needs of the people of Vermont in a way that advances human dignity and equity." What are those needs? "Spending and revenue policies will ... recognize every person's need for health, housing, dignified work, education, food, social security, and a healthy environment." These are our basic human rights that enable all of us to live with dignity.

As the governor is starting to prepare his budget proposal, how can we hold his administration accountable for accomplishing the purpose of our state budget? Last year, the administration all but ignored the budget's purpose and put forward contentious proposals that threatened people's dignity and widened the gap between rich and poor. The Legislature then struggled to reverse measures that would have heaped additional hardship on people least able to weather it.

Instead of fighting rearguard battles every year, what would it look like if we started the budget process with a comprehensive assessment of people's needs? And a measurement system that helps us understand whether we make progress toward meeting needs and reducing inequities?

Last year's acrimonious budget debates provided a perfect example why we all need to pay more attention to the early part of the budget process. Now is the time when key decisions get made, yet neither the people nor our representatives know what's happening or have a say. This is despite the new budget law's requirement that the "administration shall develop budget and revenue proposals as part of a transparent and accountable process with

direct and meaningful participation from Vermont residents.”

Let's come together to figure out a way of making participation a reality in Vermont. What would a budget process look like that engaged communities in a dialogue about budget and revenue goals?

Our budget is not about complicated spreadsheets or boring calculations. It is about us and the way we live our lives. Vermont's budget must put people first, and we should be part of making this a reality in our state.

Remaining workshops include:

Wednesday, Sept. 18, 6:30-8:30 p.m.

St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Bennington

This workshop will train leaders to conduct their own People's Budget workshops.

Friday, Sept. 20, noon-2 p.m.

Vermont Worker's Center, 294 N. Winooski Ave., Burlington