

Putting the people's budget into practice

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Vermonters should become more involved in the state's budgeting process and take a stronger role in asking lawmakers to focus on human needs rather than simply divvying up the spending pie, advocates said Tuesday.

The Public Assets Institute and the Vermont Workers' Center joined forces for a People's Budget workshop in Montpelier to call for spending decisions that are based on human rights and "participatory budgeting."

Lawmakers approved language in 2012 that says "the state budget should be designed to address the needs of the people of Vermont in a way that

advances human dignity and equity." And through a series of lectures and briefings in September, the Public Assets Institute and Vermont Workers' Center want to educate the public about their rights to participate in shaping the [budget](#).

The new language requires the Department of Management and Finances, which assists the governor in drafting his budget proposal and manages it through the fiscal year, to take input from the public. To that end, the state has scheduled two public forums this fall, said Jim Reardon, commissioner of the Department of Management and Finances.

Tuesday at the Unitarian Church in Montpelier, more than 20 lawmakers and advocates listened as representatives of the Vermont Workers' Center, the Public Assets Institute and the [National Economic and Social Rights Initiative](#) (NESRI), spoke on how to make budgeting decisions local.

The groups showed a [video](#) co-produced by the Vermont Workers' Center and NESRI. Vincent Villano from NESPRI also offered a presentation on the [Participatory Budgeting Project](#), in which 10 city councilors in New York City let community members decide how to use a small percentage of the budget through neighborhood assemblies.

"Here in Vermont there is a wonderful tradition of town meetings," Villano said. "Now how do we take on that tradition and scale it to a state level process?"

The Public Assets Institute has taken a more holistic approach to participatory government in Vermont.

If budget issues were anchored in the community and if people could weigh in on what should be included, bills such as Gov. Peter Shumlin's proposed changes to the Earned Income Tax Credit last year would never have been forwarded, said Jack Hoffman, senior political analyst at the institute. The EITC proposal created heated debate during the 2013 legislative session and was never passed.

The proposal, which was offered as a way to pay for childhood education, had never been aired in a public forum.



Vincent Villano, of the National Economic Social Rights Initiative, speaks about participatory budgeting in front of state legislators and advocates at the Unitarian Church in Montpelier on Tuesday. Photo by Viola Gad/VTDigger

“That’s the kind of thing where the public should be involved,” Hoffman said.

A change in attitude is needed to alter the way administrations look at budgets — and additional legislation might be needed to make that happen, Hoffman said. In the long term, the Public Assets Institute envisions regional councils where direct democracy can take place. The administration might not be able to fund all the needs of the people, but if the proposals come from the people there’s less chance for groups to be overlooked, said Hoffman.

“This isn’t about having everyone in Vermont having a say on every penny spent in Vermont,” Hoffman said. “But there are some issues where people could be more involved.”

There is a philosophical difference between the Department of Management and Finances and the Vermont Workers’ Center and the Public Assets Institute, Reardon said.

“They’re proposing that whatever the need we should meet it,” he said. “I don’t think they are grounded in fiscal and economic reality.”

State representatives who attended the informational meeting Tuesday were receptive to the idea of creating a more needs-based budget and the participatory practices, but they also saw challenges in getting people involved.

People don’t know that they can influence representatives, said Rep. Susan Hatch Davis, P/D-Topsham. “On voter’s night on a local level people are asking me ‘What are you going to do?’ and many times I will say, ‘I’m here to find out what you want me to do when I’m in Montpelier.’”