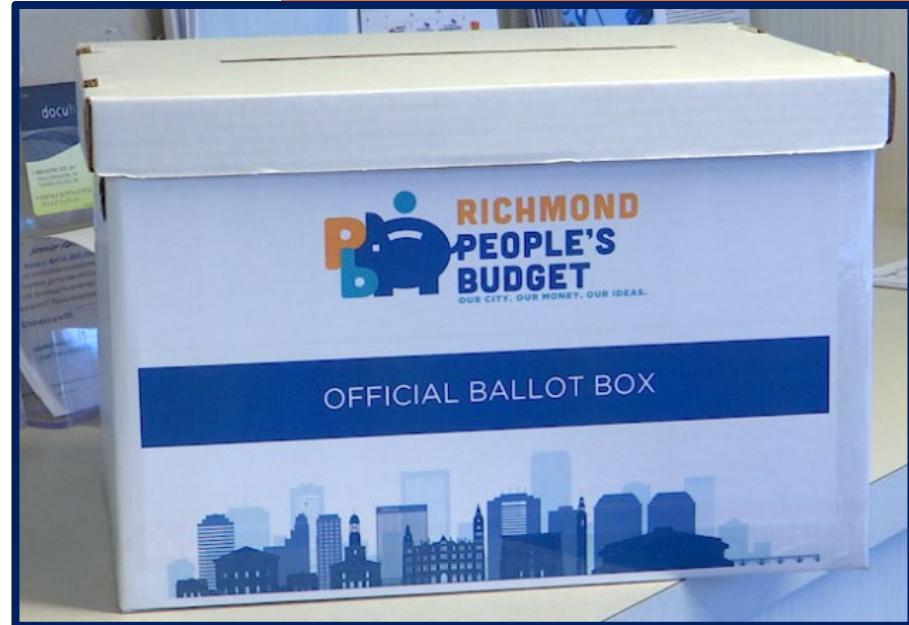


# Phase 2

## The Richmond People's Budget: Evaluation Report



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# Introduction

In 2022, the Center for Public Policy at Virginia Commonwealth University's Wilder School partnered with the Storefront for Community Design and the Richmond City Council's Participatory Budgeting Commission to develop an evaluation plan for Richmond, Virginia's participatory budgeting process. This plan was incorporated into Richmond's official participatory budgeting rulebook. Then, in early 2024, a second project was launched to implement the evaluation plan. This ongoing project was divided into two phases:

- **Phase 1:** Conducting a literature review of promising practices in participatory budgeting and evaluating Richmond's process during the initial idea collection phase (2024–2025).
- **Phase 2:** Assessing the process after the idea collection phase was complete (2025).

This report focuses on Phase 2 of the evaluation. We begin with an overview of participatory budgeting in Richmond and a summary of Phase 1 findings. We then share our methodology and findings from Phase 2, and conclude with recommendations for future participatory budgeting work.

## About the Richmond's People's Budget Initiative

In 2019, Richmond, Virginia's City Council passed a resolution in support of launching a participatory budgeting process in the city. This project was modeled after other participatory budgeting initiatives from around the world, and would allow Richmond citizens to have a say in how city funds are allocated. The process would allow citizens to brainstorm ideas, develop formal proposals, vote on their favorite proposals, and see their ideas implemented. To support this initiative, a Steering Commission was established in 2021 and officially began its work in 2022, with the aim of initiating the participatory budgeting process by Fall 2023.

In addition to the Steering Commission, several external partners were brought in to support Richmond's participatory budgeting initiative, including The Storefront for Community Design and the Center for Public Policy at Virginia Commonwealth University's L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs. The Center for Public Policy's primary focus was to create an evaluation plan, and later carry out the evaluation. This is detailed further in the following section.

## Past Evaluation Work

This report presents findings from Phase 2 of our evaluation work. During Phase 1, which took place throughout 2024, the Center for Public Policy conducted a literature review, survey (with 63 participants), and two focus groups (with 14 participants total) to begin understanding promising practices for participatory budgeting, the demographics of those involved in the process, and initial citizen perceptions of the participatory budgeting initiative.

The Phase 1 survey found that, overall, participants in Richmond's participatory budgeting process were predominantly white, female, well-educated, and earned relatively high incomes. The majority were homeowners living in the 23221, 23224, 23225, 23220, and 23222 zip codes. They represented a broad range of age groups and were involved in their community through various forms of engagement. The survey also found that most participants had spent fewer than five hours involved in the participatory budgeting process.

The two focus groups conducted in Phase 1 found that participants generally felt that their voices were heard during the participatory budgeting process and reported mostly positive interactions with Richmond City officials, both in general and in relation to participatory budgeting. While some participants expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of the process and/or the trustworthiness of City officials, the majority remained optimistic and hopeful that this first round of participatory budgeting in Richmond would be successful.

In the following section, we present our methodology for Phase 2. Following that, we discuss Phase 2 findings and recommendations.

## Phase 2 Methodology

The initial plan for Phase 2 involved conducting three focus groups: one general focus group in which anyone could participate, one focus group that would be conducted in Spanish to better understand the perspectives of Richmond's Latino population, and one focus group that would be conducted in person at a public housing neighborhood to better understand the perspectives of residents in that area.

The general focus group was conducted virtually in July 2025 and had seven participants. A full list of questions asked during this focus group can be found in Appendix A. Invitations for the other two focus groups (Spanish-language and public housing) were sent via email, flyers, and word of mouth. However, we did not have participants sign up for either focus group and therefore the findings from this report reflect the perspectives of those who attended the general focus group.

## Phase 2 Findings

### Participant involvement with participatory budgeting

Seven participants attended this focus group. Three of them were delegates, two were representatives of local nonprofit organizations, one was an interested citizen, and one was a community organizer. These participants reported various types of participation, with the citizen sharing that they primarily participated by submitting ideas and voting, the community organizer and nonprofit representatives sharing that they were primarily involved in getting the word out with one nonprofit representative specifically discussing their involvement in educating the public about ranked choice voting. The delegates discussed their involvement in overseeing the submission and voting process and providing general support, in addition to submitting some ideas and casting votes themselves.

### Ease of involvement in participatory budgeting

We first asked participants about the extent to which they felt it was easy or hard to be involved in Richmond's participatory budgeting initiative, and if they had any ideas about what could make involvement easier for themselves or others. They noted that word of mouth was helpful in getting the word out, and that this was how many of them had heard about the initiative in the first place, but that other advertising efforts such as social media posts, having a table at events, and running commercials on basic network television could help reach more people. One participant noted that they as well as some of their neighbors had received a postcard in the mail about participatory budgeting, but that others in their neighborhood did not. They felt that it would be helpful to ensure that everyone received notice via mail, especially for those who may not regularly use social media or attend community events.

The delegates in the focus group said that they were happy with their interactions with Richmond's participatory budgeting team, and shared that they felt like trusted partners and appreciated that they were not micromanaged. They stated that this made involvement easier and a better experience overall.

Finally, participants had some thoughts on making the voting process a little more accessible. Some noted that it was challenging to find submitted ideas on the participatory budgeting website, and that they weren't always sure if an idea they were planning to submit had already been considered. They suggested posting ideas on the website as they come in, which they felt would allow people to have a better understanding of the process. They also felt that this would help generate excitement, increase engagement, and spark new ideas.

One participant suggested making the voting process more accessible by allowing online version. They said that *"if you want more people to participate, online is low hanging fruit. If you need*

*10,000 people to participant, it'll be a lot easier to get numbers with online voting...in person is obviously the gold standard, but you can reach more online.*" Others agreed with this assessment, and stressed the importance of ensuring that multiple voting methods, including both in person and online, are available to residents.

## Meeting resident needs

Participants were also asked to reflect on the ideas that had been submitted so far and to consider the extent to which they felt the ideas would meet the needs of Richmond residents. If they did not feel that the ideas fully met resident needs, they were asked what additional ideas they thought should be included.

Responses to these questions were mixed. While participants thought that, overall, the submitted ideas were helpful, they also expressed some disappointment that the majority of ideas related to infrastructure (e.g. sidewalk additions or repairs, curb bump-outs, bus shelters, and pedestrian safety measures). There was no disagreement that all of these things were needed, but most participants thought the ideas would be "*bigger*." They talked about going into the process and expecting to see "*big ideas*" such as pedestrian bridges and murals. As one participant noted, "*Those [infrastructure ideas] are rights that we should have access to already.*" They also noted that many of these infrastructure ideas were too expensive, and were therefore not feasible even though they were very much wanted.

In addition to the large number of infrastructure requests, participants also discussed service requests that were submitted (for example, dying sidewalk trees that need removal and/or replacement). They noted that this showed some miscommunication about what Richmond is already doing, as these types of requests should be submitted through Richmond's 311 system (website or app). Participants felt that initiatives should be made to better inform residents about what types of ideas should be submitted through the participatory budgeting process, and what types of ideas could be better addressed through other methods.

On a more positive note, participants were happy with the mix of ideas they saw across all districts. While infrastructure was still the primary request, they described how all of Richmond's districts also received some "*fun*" ideas as well. As one participant noted, "*it wasn't just water parks for the rich districts and sidewalks for the others. All had fun, all had infrastructure. People could vote for fun or utilitarian things in each district.*"

## Improving the process

Following our more specific questions about the ideas and the idea collection process, we wanted to get a sense of what participants thought, overall, could be done to improve Richmond's

participatory budgeting process in the future. Participants discussed several communication and logistical challenges that they felt limited the initiative's effectiveness and reach.

First, participants felt that outreach efforts were insufficient and that organizations already engaged in community canvassing could have been better utilized to spread the word through face-to-face discussions. Delegates reported that they lacked essential information at the beginning of the project (e.g. exactly how much money was available, and where that money would come from), and they felt that this lack of knowledge hindered productive discussions and made meetings less efficient. There was also some confusion about what types of projects were eligible for funding, what was already planned by the city, and what fell under public versus private responsibility. Participants suggested that, next time, the Steering Commission could host an initial orientation session (in person and/or virtually) to clarify these issues and prevent repetitive questions. Participants also wished for additional information and feedback as to why some ideas were included in the final vote and other ideas were not.

In addition, several participants emphasized the importance of transparency and trust-building. There were a few concerns about potential non-public decisions by the city, and suggested publishing feedback and holding public discussions about why certain ideas didn't advance. They also said that consistent updates through the participatory budgeting website, social media, news coverage, word of mouth, event appearances, etc. to build trust with residents and to celebrate the work being done with participatory budgeting.

There were also questions about the initiative's timeline. Participants described how, after months of hearing about participatory budgeting, delegates ended up having a very short window to complete their work; they felt that they did not have quite enough time to prepare. Many wanted clearer data on project costs and budget limitations, with one participants suggesting a "menu" of example costs to inform decision-making.

Overall, participants expressed enthusiasm for the program's potential to build trust and civic engagement but felt that clearer communication, transparency, and more time would have made the process more meaningful and effective.

## Trust in government and increased civic engagement

After discussing the process, we also asked participants about the extent to which the participatory budgeting process helped to build their trust in government and the extent to which they felt it boosted their willingness to civically engage. As was the case during Phase 1, participants expressed some hesitation in trusting Richmond City government along with hope that the participatory budgeting process would be a success and would lead to positive impacts.

One primary area of concern involved funding. All participants stated that initially believed that participatory budgeting funding had already been secured for 2025, but later learned it was

actually allocated for 2026, with City Council expected to find additional money. This discrepancy decreased trust among delegates, as they questioned if funding would actually be found or if the project would be cancelled. Participants also questioned if additional funding would be available for future rounds of participatory budgeting, noting that people would be more engaged if they knew that money was already secured and guaranteed to be used as the people wish. Combined with the aforementioned short timeline for delegates, the lack of confirmed funding made it difficult to develop budget requests that they felt would end up being successful.

Despite these questions, participants did say that being involved in the process made them more comfortable interacting with Richmond City government in the future. As one participant stated, *“[Participatory budgeting] is great for people who have never been involved to get involved and to learn about how stuff in the city works. When you’re at the table, your voice is making a direct impact. It’s cool that so many people are interested in making where we live better.”*

Lastly, a few participants noted that this process made them more appreciative of their community and neighbors. One mentioned that they were able to meet people who they wouldn’t have met otherwise, and another said that *“[Participatory budgeting] me very much appreciate people in the community who do this work and who are part of these processes. It made me very thankful for my neighbors and made me feel good about Richmond.”*

## Future involvement in participatory budgeting

Finally, participants were asked if they would like to be involved in Richmond’s future participatory budgeting efforts. Most participants said yes, with one participant saying maybe and no participants saying no.

One of the delegates said that they would like to try a new role next time, such as being a member of the Steering Committee, to allow someone else to have a turn at being a delegate. The nonprofit representatives said that they would like to continue being involved and spreading awareness, and that next time they would like to be able to be involved earlier in the process. They felt that this would allow them to reach more people, make connections, and help the participatory budgeting team find more volunteers. Overall, participants seemed to look forward to continued involvement and were interested in making Richmond’s participatory budgeting process more streamlined, more inclusive, and even more successful.

## Recommendations and Looking Ahead

Phase 2 focus group participants, including delegates, nonprofit representatives, a community organizer, and residents, shared generally positive experiences with Richmond's participatory budgeting process while also identifying some potential areas of improvement.

Overall, they appreciated the collaborative relationship with members of the Steering Commission and the opportunity for civic engagement, though many found communication and outreach efforts to be insufficient. Participants highlighted issues such as suboptimal public awareness, confusion about funding, timelines, and proposal eligibility criteria, as well as limited time for delegates to complete their work. While infrastructure-focused ideas were seen as necessary, participants shared how they had hoped for more creative or "big" ideas in future rounds of ideas submission and voting. Participants also shared how involvement helped them to feel more connected to the Richmond City government and to their communities, and most expressed interest in participating again, with suggestions for a more transparent, accessible, and inclusive process moving forward.

## Appendix A: Phase 2 Focus Group Questions

1. Please describe your involvement with the People's Budget so far. In what ways have you been involved?
2. Overall, what are a few key things that you think the City has done well with this process?
3. Overall, are there things that you think could be improved about this process?
  - a. What would you suggest?
4. How easy or hard has it been for you to be involved so far? Why?
  - a. Do you have any ideas that could make it easier for you or others in your community to get involved?
5. To what extent do you think the proposed ideas reflect the needs of Richmond residents?
  - a. Are there any things that you don't see in the idea list that should be included?
6. To what extent do you feel that your participation in the People's Budget has made a difference?
7. What do people in your community or in your personal networks think about the People's Budget?
  - a. Are they aware of it? What sorts of opinions do they have about it?
8. Do you think that all voices were heard during the idea generation phase, or were some groups favored over others?
  - a. Who was left out?
  - b. What do you think could be done in the future to address this issue?
9. Have you cast your vote?
  - a. If so, what did you think about the voting process?
10. So far, do you think that all Richmonders have been equally able to access the voting process, or are some groups being favored over others?
  - a. If some groups are favored over others, who is being left out?
  - b. What do you think could be done to address this issue?
11. To what extent do you trust that the City of Richmond will follow the wishes of participants in using these funds? How strongly do you feel this way?
  - a. Why do you feel that way?
12. Has getting involved in this process made any difference in your life? How so?
  - a. Has getting involved in this process changed your attitudes about the City of Richmond?
  - b. Do you feel any more or less comfortable about interacting with the city government?
13. How much do you know now about the City's overall budgeting process?
14. What have you learned so far through your participation in this process?
  - a. Have you learned anything about the City of Richmond? About how city government works? About communities other than your own?

- b. Have you learned about the work of any local groups or organizations through this process?
- 15. The City hopes to continue this process in the future. If given the opportunity, would you like to be involved again?
  - a. Why or why not?
  - b. How would you like to be involved in the future? Is this different from your current involvement?
- 16. Is there anything else that you would like to share?