



# City of Oakland

Budget Advisory Commission

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To: Honorable Members of the Oakland City Council  
From: Budget Advisory Commission  
Date: September 30, 2025  
Subject: **Assessment and Recommendations, City Budget Process 2025-2027**

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## Executive Summary

Every two years, the Budget Advisory Commission, per the City of Oakland’s [Consolidated Fiscal Policy](#) (CFP), provides the city’s leadership with feedback on the budget process and recommendations to improve that process. Beyond attending budget forums and town halls, we hosted a community meeting on August 13, 2025, at the 81st Avenue Library to gather resident feedback, which we incorporated into this report.

The city made notable progress with straightforward communication about the structural deficit, sharing accessible budget materials with historical context, and fostering strong partnerships between the BAC and community organizations. BAC members organized and hosted two well-attended budget informational sessions with the City Administrator, SPUR, and the League of Women Voters.

Despite these improvements, residents reported feeling excluded from meaningful participation in budget decisions. The early budget adoption—two weeks before the deadline—compressed the timeline and created a perception that community input was sought only after decisions were already made.

## BAC Recommendations

1. Allocate more time to hear from residents, without comments or input from city council members. Residents expressed a need to know that their representatives were taking their experiences into budget considerations. Create time for them to share directly.
2. Make town halls and similar gatherings more accessible. For example, schedule town halls to accommodate seniors, families, and people with disabilities; provide interpretation as a default; and in larger districts, ensure geographic accessibility by hosting town halls in both “the hills” as well as “the flatlands.”
3. Schedule informational budget forums in tandem with the city’s internal budget planning.
4. Provide budget materials in advance of forums to enable informed participation.

5. Create ongoing education about year-round budget decisions and MOUs. The BAC would be happy to work with the city to share “budget bites” throughout the year to educate residents.
6. Follow up with residents in a timely manner, either through newsletters, webpage updates, or other communications.
7. Explore ways to evaluate each gathering to provide immediate, real-time feedback to city council and staff organizing events.

The Budget Advisory Commission looks forward to working with the city to implement these recommendations in the next budget cycle, with particular focus on timeline extension and ongoing community education. The goal is transforming the process from informational to genuinely participatory, ensuring residents can meaningfully influence budget priorities rather than simply receive information about predetermined decisions.

Success will be measured by residents' ability to see their input integrated into budget decisions and their sense of meaningful participation in Oakland's fiscal planning process.

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#### **ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT CYCLE**

The 2025-2027 budget process has been evaluated against the guiding principles listed in the CFP (pg. 14):

1. Inclusive Design
2. Authentic Intent
3. Transparency
4. Inclusiveness and Equity
5. Informed Participation
6. Accessible Participation
7. Appropriate Process
8. Use of Information
9. Building Relationships and Community Capacity
10. Evaluation

#### **What worked**

A strong partnership was fostered between community organizations, the Budget Advisory Commission, and the City Administrator's office that resulted in two informational budget forums. Resident questions and responses were posted online, improving transparency and accessibility.

The city's communication strategy represented a substantial shift from the previous budget cycle, with greater transparency and explicit acknowledgment of the structural deficit. This honest approach helped build trust and provided residents with a realistic context for budget discussions.

The city provided quality, accessible information through clear charts and foundational materials that helped residents develop a collective understanding of the budget process, deficit challenges, and participation opportunities.

City Council members took ownership of individual budget forums, creating direct connections with their constituents and ensuring district-level representation in the process.

The city co-hosted budget informational forums with the City Administrator and Finance Department staff in attendance. These two citywide gatherings were well-received and well-attended and provided residents much-needed information on the budget cycle.

### **Areas for improvement**

Residents reported feeling removed from meaningful budget participation. Small group discussions at forums weren't integrated into the process, leaving priorities unaddressed. The use of index cards for pre-screened questions created a perception of gatekeeping and made events feel like "public relations events" rather than genuine engagement.

Accessibility issues were widespread: interpretation services required advance requests, making events inaccessible to limited English speakers; evening weekday scheduling excluded seniors, people with disabilities, and families; and some locations were far from public transit. One resident reported having to make multiple bus transfers to attend her district town hall.

The timeline was compressed—the Mayor's budget was released four days late, and City Council adopted the budget three weeks early—creating the impression that decisions were already made before community input was sought.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Inclusive Design**

1. Adjust future town hall agendas to incorporate time for residents to share their budget priorities in the forums. This makes it possible for residents to hear from each other and for city council members to hear directly from their constituents. Residents expressed a perception of “cherry picking” questions to be addressed with index cards. While this may not be the case, it alienated residents and gave the impression that decisions were being made behind closed doors.
2. Organize listening sessions in advance of town halls, creating time and space for constituents to share their budget priorities.

#### **Transparency**

1. Communicate how resident input will be followed up by city council members; address concerns or priorities at the budget town hall or through direct channels of communication, such as digital feedback forms.
2. The city's budget process begins in the fall with city departments creating their budgets. Kick-off the informational sessions in tandem with the city's process to allow for substantive resident input before key decisions are finalized.

### **Inclusiveness & Equity**

1. Remove advance registration barriers to increase accessibility and spontaneous participation in budget forums.
2. Organize more than one budget town hall per district to give residents more opportunities to participate. If a district straddles both the “flat lands” and the “hills” make an effort to host a town hall in each area - or host a town hall where the most vulnerable constituents reside.
3. Expand beyond traditional engagement methods to ensure comprehensive representation of community voices and priorities. For example, partner more closely with community leaders and organizations in districts that are not as well represented, i.e., D5 and D7 had the fewest number of responses to the BAC budget priorities survey compared to other council districts in the city.

### **Informed Participation**

1. Create ongoing resident education about budget decisions that occur throughout the year, clarifying the relationship between various funding streams and decision-making processes.
2. Establish processes to inform residents about MOUs and other commitments that impact the budget. This should include noticing tentative MOU language.
3. Disseminate "budget bites" prepared for council members by the Finance Department. City Council members could share these in their newsletters, on social media, etc throughout the year.
4. The CFP requires the city council to receive a five-year forecast for budget planning. BAC received this forecast last cycle but not this year, limiting our ability to see the comprehensive budget picture needed for informed recommendations.

### **Building Relationships and Community Capacity**

1. Share information to be presented prior to each town hall or budget forum. This gives residents time to absorb the information, develop their questions and concerns, and arrive at the meetings informed and ready to participate.

### **Evaluation**

1. Evaluation immediately after each gathering gives everyone feedback in real time, including residents, organizers, and city council members. We recommend a short (3 questions, and room for comment) online survey and paper evaluation, or even a quick thumbs up/thumbs down activity would be helpful to understand how to improve future gatherings.

### **NEXT STEPS**

Oakland's budget engagement process reflected meaningful improvement in transparency and accessibility. BAC members recognize a notable improvement from the last budget cycle. The recommendations above focus on creating earlier, more meaningful engagement opportunities

while maintaining the successful elements of increased transparency and distributed leadership.

Our collective goal should be transforming the process from informational to participatory, ensuring residents can meaningfully influence budget priorities rather than simply receive information about predetermined decisions. To this end, there continues to be a need to address structural barriers that limit substantive resident input.

We recommend the City Administrator's office and City Council consider these recommendations for implementation in the next budget cycle, with particular attention to timeline extension and ongoing community education initiatives.



As members of the Budget Advisory Commission, we offer our expertise and assistance in implementing these recommendations in partnership with the city.

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**BAC 2023-2025 RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION**

The following illustrates the recommendations from the last budget cycle (2023-2025) and the improvements that satisfied the recommendations. The blank areas note where there was no improvement, recommendations were not adopted, or did not apply due to policy changes.

2023-2025 Recommendations	Implementation Status	Notes
Present information in a consistent form that allows comparing and contrasting of budget figures and trends.	✓ <b>Completed</b>	Materials and information presented at the informational budget forums and district budget town halls were consistent across the city.
Adopt a budget schedule which prioritizes early decision making and avoids excessive compression late in the budget cycle.	✓ <b>Completed</b>	The budget forums organized several months prior to the Mayor's budget release date were well-attended and offered comprehensive information on the city's budget process as well as BAC's budget survey results.
Provide a complete picture of the City's budget, including historical information, i.e, "how we got here."	⚠ <b>Partial</b>	<p>The city was transparent with information posted online before and after the budget process.</p> <p>The information provided at budget forums explained the</p>

		<p>historic nature of the deficit, how Oakland compares to other similar cities, expenses and revenue changes over time. This was very helpful information.</p> <p>BAC did not have a five-year forecast presented for this latest budget cycle.</p>
Ensure district town halls are accessible to all individuals by offering interpretation, including American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, and translation of all materials	 <b>Partial</b>	See recommendations under “inclusiveness and equity”
Offer recordings of town halls for district residents who cannot attend.	 <b>Partial</b>	Unclear if town halls were recorded and how these recordings were made available to residents.
Report on how consolidation of departments impacts residents.	<b>X Not Implemented</b>	Based on a recommendation in the Mayor’s Budget, which was later pulled from consideration.
Share the City’s racial equity analysis related to the budget at town halls, a process that involves all City departments as well as each City Council member.	<b>X Not Implemented</b>	BAC community engagement ad hoc committee will include this in its workplan for the 2025-2027 budget process.
Attach all relevant reports regarding the City’s Other Post-Employment Benefits (OPEB) liability to the budget.	<b>X Not Implemented</b>	