

“COMMUNITY ASSEMBLY FOR A PEOPLE’S BUDGET”

First Unitarian Church of Portland

May 5, 2012

SUMMARY OF THE DAY’S WORK



Assembly Sponsors:

Service Employees International Union Local 49, Occupy Portland, American federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, Local 88, Portland Central America Solidarity committee, International alliance of Theatrical State employees, Local 28, Organizing People/ Activating Leaders (OPAL), International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 48, Economic Justice Action Group (First Unitarian), Laborers’ Local 48, Jobs with Justice, Communications Workers of America, Local 7901, Right to Survive, and several others.

OPENING

The Assembly opened with an introduction and welcome by **Megan Hise**, communications coordinator for Laborers' Local 483 and member of the Portland Central America Solidarity Committee. She thanked participants for engaging this opportunity to explore a "community-shaped budget." She summarized the core reason for coming together--we are all tired of being asked to absorb more and more of an economic crisis that we did not create. Many groups are sponsoring and participating to find out how to build grassroots, collective coalition strength against cuts and layoffs. Our strength lies in collective action. Together we can develop and propose real alternatives to "cuts only budgeting."

"It's our budget, our money, our city."

In participatory budgeting, regular folks decide how to raise public money and how to spend it. This first Assembly will not create a budget, but rather to begin the dialogue that will build relationships and agreement on priorities and solutions.

FRAMING



Kari Koch, media spokesperson for Occupy Portland and a member of the Portland Liberation Organizing Council framed the intent of the Assembly as a shift from "fighting over crumbs" to rising up in collective action. While we all have our own issues, interests and priorities, together we have the potential for coalition strength. More and more people throughout the world are seeing the realities of austerity policies and are stepping up to take control of their lives. Kari sees that we are beginning to change our narrative, beginning to see we aren't isolated individuals. We are beginning to reject the story that hardship is our own fault and that the elites must know what is best for the rest of us.

All over the world, "austerity" is the imposed solution of the 1%. Some governments call it "structural adjustment," others call it "curbing government spending." Whatever we call it, it is another manifestation of a system that operates intentionally for the 1%. Participatory budgeting means that communities are in control, have voice, and collectively decide

what works. Our work can be the beginning of reclaiming our collective ownership.

FIRST TABLE GROUP DISCUSSION

Participants sat in table groups of 6-8 people. In the first discussion, participants identified the issues we must discuss if we are to shift budget priorities. Following were the themes mentioned:

a. How to build unity

How do we learn each others' issues, know each other's resources and expertise, and build strength in numbers?

b. How to define common priorities

What are the common needs and how will we work together?

c. Issues & challenges

- Inequities
- underserved neighborhoods
- underserved and vulnerable populations
- the push toward privatization of public services

- the assault on labor and public employees
- the need for an overhaul of public safety and a system of voter owned elections.

We're tired of being told we have to pay for an economic crisis that we did not create.

d. Solutions / changes

Top choices to learn more about today:

- new sources of revenue
- redirection of current revenues
- the strategies and processes that can shift us from a "cuts only" perspective to democratic determination of budget priorities.

e. First steps on community budgeting:

Participants want to learn more about the current budget process and how to demand transparency and access.

(See chart paper records for more details)

PARTICIPANT PRESENTATIONS—CURRENT CAMPAIGNS, AFFECTED PEOPLE

Assembly planners had identified five issue areas that are important to all the participants. Community members and organizers with current campaigns and efforts to fight austerity spoke about their work.

1. Housing / Un-housed

Chani Geigle-Teller, organizer with Sisters of the Road Café, described the housing crisis and its history--on the local, state, and national level. In 1978, housing at the federal level was at its peak. Housing has been going steadily downhill ever since. In 1983, housing budgets were cut by 77%.

Anne Trudeau described the direct action by Right to Survive on National Homelessness Day, which established the residential

The United States government created the homelessness we have seen over the past three decades.

occupation of Right to Dream Too (R2D2) at the corner of NW Fourth Avenue and Burnside. Since October

10, 2011, R2D2 offers people without houses a place to rest or sleep in safety. R2D2 offers a way to get food, clothing, and other resources. The City fines this shelter monthly for violating its ban on camping.

The lack of affordable housing in Portland is the result of millions and millions of dollars per year being diverted from affordable housing to large development projects. “Workforce housing” is a term that implies housing for people in need. In fact, residents making \$90,000 per year live in the “Headwaters Apartment” complex¹ in Southwest Portland, which was built as a “workforce housing” project. Anne cited as a second example the current proposal for the PSU urban renewal project. The proposed high rise is not “green” and it diverts money from those who deserve it.

Chani pointed out that we need to discuss some of the distrust that exists, as we seek to build coalitions. For example, when working with housing advocates, she has heard people refer to the call from labor unions with suspicion. The concern is that once the unions achieve their goals, they will forget about their common cause with housing advocates...

2. Public Services & layoffs

Erica Askin and Jerry (JJ) Johnson described the City of Portland’s efforts to use service cuts and layoffs to balance the budget, involving 60-100 workers who maintain streets, sidewalks, parks, sewers, community centers. Since November, Laborers have waged a campaign against this austerity strategy that will result in reductions to street sweeping, paving, trash pick up, and the closing of some of the community centers. Since the union knew that the City had money, they fought back, held rallies, testified before City Council, walked off their shifts, and joined with neighborhoods to talk about their common needs.



JJ described his public service role as “a steward of this beautiful city.” Each year, the new rounds of cuts reduce even further the workers ability to maintain services for the community. Being a steward of the city means going out every day to do the best we can and take home the pleasure of preserving the value of the assets of the City.

3. Portland Public Schools—Harriet Tubman Middle School



¹ Headwaters Apartments: Portland-owned property exempt from taxes but open to residents making \$97,200 http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2011/12/headwaters_apartments_city-own.html

Jyothi Pulla described the struggle that she and other parents and teachers have waged to fight against the closing of Harriet Tubman Middle School. This all girl's school emphasized math, science, and leadership. It served about 200 students, mostly young women of color. Harriet Tubman's programs were closing the achievement gap, and preparing the workforce for the jobs we need in the US, jobs that the US now outsources. Jyothi described her surprise that US schools, funded by property taxes, have divided the schools into rich schools and poor schools. In India, all public schools get equal resources.

Medhi, Jyothi's daughter and a student at Harriet Tubman, described their organizing effort. After following the PPS process, their most recent organizing was to join with the Grant High School students in their march beginning at the Administration building and ending in Pioneer Square, as well as the Upset march planned for May 11.

Holly ____, also a parent, spoke about the mindset that keeps decision makers from investing over the long term in an innovative program. She compared the school district's judgment that Harriet Tubman was not growing with a metaphor about growing oranges. It takes five years for a productive yield, and each year builds what comes the next year. The school board was not able to see that they were judging the program without giving it adequate time.



4. Transportation—Tri-Met Board

Khanh and Hector



To meet a projected 12 million shortfall, Tri-met has proposed a budget with devastating fare increases and service cuts. This hurts primarily low and moderate-income people. Organizing People / Activating Leadership (OPAL) worked with its members to develop budget alternatives. Through this effort, OPAL was able to influence and push the Tri-Met Board. The Board could see that OPAL had come up with 12.5 million dollars in revenue. This was a very successful alternative budgeting model that may be used with the city, as well.



OPAL needs to show there is broad based support in order to continue to put pressure on the Tri-Met board. Bus riders Unite has its monthly meeting at the Center for Intercultural Organizing. The Board meets May 23, 9 am in the Portland Building. For more information, see www.opalpdx.org. The organizations here at the Assembly represent hundreds of individuals; we should be able to show up in force. The next two months are very critical.

5. Equity

Kayse Jama



The Center for Intercultural Organizing (CIO) is a multi-ethnic, multi-racial organization, focused on public policy advocacy and community organizing. CIO was involved in the development of the Office of Equity. This effort required difficult work with the city council and the Mayor's Office. The goal was to get the City to invest 1 million dollars to create an equity policy and practice that works for all. Every effort to persuade decision makers to invest in community is always an uphill battle.

We know we don't have a budget crisis; we have a revenue crisis. We need a fair tax structure; we need to force the City to stop giving corporate tax breaks. As coalitions, we need to follow and pressure the city budget every year. Kayse comes from Somalia, a very poor country. But, Somalia, before the civil

war, had free health care and free education. If the poorest country can do this, imagine what this country can do. Kayse encouraged the participants at the Assembly to come out to support the four teachers who are the school liaisons to immigrant and refugee families. The school board proposes to cut all four positions.

If the money is not spent to solve these problems, it is criminal neglect.

REVENUE STRATEGIES & IDEAS

Shamus Cooke described the shift in thinking that we have to do to solve the “budget crisis.” A shortfall is not an excess of services or spending; it is a shortfall of revenue. Instead of cuts, we need to focus on revenue. We don’t want to tax working people for this revenue; working people have been taxed enough. We want to go to where the money is, to the 1% and to big corporations. Examples include the tens of millions currently trapped in urban renewal. Another example is the recent success (and expiration) of measures 66 & 67, which saved hundreds of millions in cuts to services. But the deeper problem is a lack of democracy. We are locked into a “cuts only” conversation. We can look to Porto Alegre in Brazil as an impression example of participatory democracy at work. Tens of thousands of people define the spending priorities. The government did not give them this power. They fought for it.

TABLE DISCUSSION—PRIORITIES & STRATEGIES

Priorities—Education topped the list, followed by housing, parks, infrastructure, streets, transportation, well paying jobs, and health care (see “Records from Chart paper” for details)

Coalition building—table groups listed ideas for building coalition strength to press for these priorities.

- Be wary that the 1% and decision makers will drive wedges between us
- Preempt that by forging broad alliances that are poised to take action on each others’ issues
- Manage our own media to ensure that a new narrative gains currency in the community.



Funding—

Participants shared their ideas for funding these priorities ranging from new, progressive tax structures (including a real estate transfer tax, higher tax rates for the rich, and a carbon tax) to democratic processes for insisting on “no cuts” budgeting.

Anti-austerity is more than specific measures and actions; it is a shift in thinking. Part of the

shift has to be toward a systemic view of causes and consequences. For example, incarceration rates are correlated with cuts to parks. A six-hour workday (no reduced pay) would increase the number of jobs and taxes paid, and improve the economy.



Another part of the shift in thinking is to empowerment: believing we have the right to transparency and accountability, and demanding it loudly.

Demands should include:

- PDC money made available to the community
- Access to decision-making boards that will allow us to weigh in equally to the forces that keep the status quo—i.e., developers and contractors.
- Insistence that the boards have more tools than “cuts only.”

Another shift in thinking that we have to make is from “Development is sexy” to “maintenance is sexy.” Maintenance is green. Maintenance is invisible to the 1%, while for the rest of us it is quality of life. Once infrastructure is deliberately neglected, the privatizers come in and say, “Look, public management doesn’t work. It’s time to privatize.”



“WHERE’S THE MONEY?” PRESENTATION

Toby Green explained the “crisis.” When we go into an economic downturn, we hear that we are all suffering. The call goes out for “shared sacrifice.” We’re told that we’ll go into the downturn together and we’ll come out of it together. In fact, the real crisis is political. The crisis is “Austerity,” the policy choice that the political elites make. The choice is to have the people bear the brunt of revenue shortfalls.

“We’re going for the money!”

Corporate profits continue while governments slash local budgets. Local governments offer incentives to corporations in the form of tax breaks. We don’t hear how these incentives work to remove public revenue that should be spent on services. We hear only that we have to cut services and close schools. Intel, to take only one example, does not have to reveal what it paid in taxes.

We don’t have to have a budget crisis. We have this “crisis” because austerity is an undemocratic reaction to reduced revenue. The people who are sacrificing do not get to make the decisions.

Erica Askin and Luis Brennan provided information on the share of taxes paid proportionately by the rich and by the poor. In Oregon, 16.3 percent of families live below the poverty level. To add to the burdens that low and middle-income people share, services are cut further and further each year.

Revenues are in fact down. But the city still has more than enough money to avoid the cuts they are imposing. Luis and Erica described two ways that money is trapped or made unavailable for this use.



First, the city holds pockets of money outside the general fund reserves. Worth investigating are the “internal service funds” which contain surpluses available for any legal purpose. The unrestricted net assets in the internal service funds stood at \$120.6 million as of June 30, 2011.

Urban Renewal Areas (URAs) trap tens of millions of dollars, in the form of reduced taxes that are restricted to use only within the URA. Erica and Luis explained how urban renewal displaces low-income people as it develops a business area. Tax rates are reduced, and tax revenues from the rising value within the URA is restricted to use only within the URA. This “bubble” over the URA (known as Tax Increment Financing) can stay in place for as many as fifty years. As property values rise and property taxes grow, the city only receives the level of taxes in effect at the time the URA was created. For example, South waterfront has been in a URA since 1974. Any growth in that URA is taxed as if it were still 1974.

Discussion--The issue is not whether or not to build. The issue is that the development plans of the city do not include a plan for meeting the service needs of the city’s residents. The City does not have a plan that does not require robbing funds from public services and the people who use them. This is a rigid model. While we are asked to be flexible with service cuts, we have no choice as citizens in the locking away of millions that could be used for services.

Luis noted that the temptation is to push for tweaks, to pressure for some PDC fund transfers to schools. But is important that we make visionary, long-term demands as well, that will “change the game.”

Erica noted that “access” to the review boards is not enough. No matter how many good citizens are on them, their hands will be tied if the “cuts only” narrative is allowed to continue.

The longer-term solution is fair taxation and democratic determination of how the money is spent and invested. Anne Trudeau pointed out that those who currently control these decisions have a long-term plan: privatization of public services. When infrastructure is not maintained, it paves the way for the pitch that “the public sector is not working.” Elected officials begin pushing to privatize public operations.

CLOSING

When you fight,
you can win.

Toby Green summarized the day, emphasizing the need for lasting solutions, not just Band-Aids. The key challenge for us is to build strong coalitions.

This is a long-range campaign for along range vision. We want a democratic process for deciding how to get the money to work for us.

The next immediate steps are to discuss the summary report of what we concluded today, and use it to build on as we go. From there, we will meet as a Continuations Committee to decide how we will go forward.

We are a fair-sized group, but we need to bring in our communities. We have a deep responsibility to share this information and enthusiasm with our communities.

We see a three-pronged approach: first, to build a strong coalition among us. Second, to create a democratic decision process to counter the undemocratic, purchased decision process. Third, to take direct action to challenge issues and decisions that we need to expose and oppose. We can take inspiration from OPAL’s current budget proposal to the Tri-Met board and from the recent amazing direct action taken by the NE Black Working Group, which helped return Alicia Jackson to her home. Actions and meetings like this put the 1% on the run. When we’re educated, we have the confidence to see past their game and to change it.

No one in this room
thinks we can do this
individually, on our
own. We have to
work together.



Thanks to everyone who spoke to individual struggles. Join us in taking the next steps toward building a strong coalition!

Contact: peoples-assembly@googlegroups.com

Web page: <http://pdxpeoplesbudget.wordpress.com/the-community-assembly/>



Assembly Participants included:
individuals from

- Portland State University
- Center for Intercultural Organizing
- Sisters of the Road Café
- Harriet Tubman Leadership Academy
- Right to Dream Too
- NE Black Working Group
- Womens' Affordable Housing Forum
- Working in America
- Portland Alliance
- Partnership for Safety & Justice
- Oregon Save our Schools
- Occupy Portland Working Groups
- Parkrose Faculty Association
- Empower Oregon
- OPDX Elder Caucus
- Move On
- Portland Green Party
- SE Portland Assembly
- Wild Salmon Nation
- Empower Oregon
- KBOO
- Multnomah Democrats
- Bus Riders United

...and others...