

The 2017 Innovation in Governance Awards Program

Contact Information:

Municipality: BOROUGH OF FREEHOLD

Population: 12,000

County: MONMOUTH

Address: 51 WEST MAIN ST

City: FREEHOLD

Zip: 07728

Contact Name: RONALD GRIFFITHS | KEVIN KANE

Title: COUNCILMAN

COUNCILMAN

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Project Information

Initiative Title: NEW JERSEY'S FIRST PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING PROJECT

Description: SEE ATTACHED

The judges will be looking for successful innovative efforts by a municipality or a partnership among several municipalities or a municipal/county joint effort. Innovations must have been implemented during the time period June 1, 2016 - September 30, 2017

Project Specific Details: *(Please explain your innovation. Include up to 3 supplemental pages if needed.)*

- How has this initiative successfully met the local needs of your municipality?
- How have the stakeholders benefited & responded to this initiative?
- Are there any measured savings or program improvements?
- Please include whether the innovation is temporary or permanent
- How can this innovation be replicated in other communities across the state?

Please Attach a Supplemental Sheet(s) Noting the Details of Your Initiative.
(Supplemental Attachments NOT to exceed 3 pages)

Application Deadline: Applications must be received no later than Monday, October 2, 2017. Mail applications to NJLM Innovation in Governance, 222 West State St., Trenton, NJ 08608 or send by email to CBradley@njslom.org

*If you have any questions, please contact Ciara Bradley at the League of Municipalities
609-695-3481 ext.128 or CBradley@njslom.org*

THE 2017 INNOVATION IN GOVERNANCE AWARDS PROGRAM

NEW JERSEY'S FIRST PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING PROJECT

Date: 09/28/2017

Freehold Borough formed an Innovation Committee a few years ago. This is an "ad hoc" group, established to study local issues and make recommendations to the governing body. After an initial success improving our website; the committee was tasked to establish a Participatory Budgeting Program. We felt this could have a positive impact on some serious issues.

The issues are not singularly germane to Freehold Borough.

The first two concerns were voter apathy in local elections and the low approval ratings of government. We also have a diverse population which is approximately 40% Latino. We recognized a need to bring this population into the community.

Based on a Portland State University 2016 study of local elections, we learned the median age of voters in America's 30 largest cities was 57. We knew we had to engage our younger population in local government. That study showed ten major cities had a voter turnout of less than 15%.

There is no panacea for this national malaise.

Democracy requires energy, enthusiasm, engagement and an informed electorate. We wanted to increase interest, knowledge and active participation in local government and elections. Toward this end, we permitted fourteen-year-old persons and undocumented individuals to make proposals and vote.

Our Participatory Budgeting Program was discussed at council meetings and reported in local newspapers. As a first-year program, we knew we must build a strong foundation in 2017.

In many large cities using P.B., the budget allocation comes from discretionary funds. We are a small community of 12,000. We don't have those kinds of resources. We decided to use a portion of our capital budget for the program. The sum of \$200,000, plus some soft cost funding, was approved by the governing body.

We didn't increase property taxes or the capital budget. We simply allowed the public to tell us how to allocate a portion of the budget.

We defined acceptable projects as: capital projects with a life of at least five years, low or no maintenance and located on public property. This included public right of ways.

The committee marketed the program to the community before opening a proposal period. The target audience included: Freehold High School Student Council, our Borough Youth Government Organization, Casa Freehold, senior citizens and business owners who we consider major stakeholders.

We received 33 ideas from the public. Some of these did not meet our capital project definition and were eliminated after vetting by the Innovation Committee.

The committee forwarded the remaining ideas to our professionals. It was the job of the purchasing agent/business administrator and engineers to develop feasibility and cost estimates. During this stage, more proposals were eliminated.

Everyone who submitted an idea that wasn't accepted received a letter of explanation and our thanks for their participation.

We held town hall meetings for persons submitting capital projects to "sell" their idea to the public. We didn't have SRO crowds for these two town halls, but the attendance far exceeded our regular council meetings.

The last town hall was held the evening of September 11th and that was the night we started voting. The voting ended on September 17, 2017 and we announced the results the following week.

The thirteen submissions on the ballot were: water fountains at Lake Topanemus, concrete chess tables in parks, new trash/recycling containers, additional street lighting in the business district, a fishermen's floating dock on the lake, hydration stations downtown, a Free WIFI zone, an off-leash dog park, large "Welcome to Freehold" signs, digital speed warning signs along at a school zone, a pedestrian bridge over the lake's spillway, a sidewalk repair program with borough/homeowners sharing the cost and the installation of a sidewalk on a street without one.

The results of the election produced three public safety project winners. The sidewalk repair program, the additional street lighting and the pedestrian bridge to allow fishermen to cross the spillway without walking in the heavily trafficked roadway.

The announcement was made via a video on our website. The video is still available at <http://www.freeholdboroughnj.gov> and clicking on the link to Participatory Budgeting. It was also reported in traditional print media and posted on social media.

It is obvious our program was not designed to yield cost savings. The goals were more altruistic. Our data is limited to this year's baseline numbers of project ideas, attendance at town hall meetings and the number of residents and stakeholders voting.

A total of 346 votes were cast by paper ballot and online. That total may appear small. However, it compares very favorably with non-election day local elections, such as fire district and board of education elections for similar and larger communities in our area.

Our parameters for assessing the program will now be more analytical. We will collect data regarding the number of: proposals, attendees at town halls, voters in this program and in our general elections. Currently, we are satisfied with the anecdotal responses we have received. This feedback has been extremely positive.

This program can be replicated in other municipalities. It does take significant amount of both effort and time. Our volunteers put in several hundred hours.

Participatory Budgeting is currently active in more than 3,000 cities worldwide. None of those were in New Jersey, until now. We were not aware of this when we embraced the program. Our pioneering role in New Jersey was confirmed by Josh Lerner of the Participatory Budgeting Project. Information about this national organization can be found at:
<https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/pbps-story/>

We are indebted to the P.B. staff in the finance office of Cambridge, MA who assisted us in our infancy during several teleconferences.

There are additional benefits to the P.B. program. Many of the proposals that didn't meet our capital project definition were indicators of public concerns. Traffic safety problems were identified. Many of these were on county or state roads where we lack jurisdiction. We will raise these to proper parties for action.

The Participatory Budgeting Program will be continued. The Innovation Committee will meet September 28th to discuss "lessons learned" and to create a survey for resident feedback. The new cycle will begin soon after the New Year.

Submitted by the Borough of Freehold, New Jersey 07728 with the approval of Mayor J. Nolan Higgins

Contact Information: Councilman Ron Griffiths rgriffiths@freeholdboro.org 908 670 0829

Councilman Kevin Kane kkane@freeholdboro.org 732 618 4349

Innovation Committee Members: Joseph Deroba, Ron DeMarco, Annette Jordan, Joan Leuth, Riemer Leuth, Joe McArdle and Don Schaffner