The public engagement topic I researched is called Youth Voice, Youth Choice. It is a participatory budgeting process that took place in Seattle, Washington. The program is sponsored by the City of Seattle and the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods (Frankl). The process was aimed at getting the youth in Seattle more involved in the governmental decision making process. Participatory budgeting is a way for community members to vote on and decide how an allocated portion of a city’s budget will be spent. In the case of Seattle, the city gave the youth $700,000 worth of city funds to choose how to allocate best. In this paper, I will lay out the plan that the city took to implement the program from start to finish. I will then analyze and report my findings on the program. Finally, I will propose my recommendations for Seattle, or really any city who wanted to implement a participatory budgeting process like this, should do differently, or things they could change to make the program more successful in the future.

Case Description

Seattle had a very big task on their hands when they decided to implement a participatory budgeting program. There are so many different ways to go about implementing participatory budgeting that the city could have chosen. Many cities choose to implement participatory budgeting to get community members more engaged in their local governments and the decision-making process. Participatory budgeting usually involves voting age citizens and up. It was first started in Brazil in the 1980s but has spread to over 1,500 cities worldwide (Participatory Budgeting Project). Although there are several different variations that have spawned from the original one in Brazil, most participatory budgeting projects follow the same basic processes. They usually start with residents brainstorming different ideas for the money to be spent on, then a group of delegates develop different proposals based on those ideas, and then the government implements what they see as the top project (Participatory Budgeting Project).
Seattle choose to follow that same basic plan with a few tweaks. Seattle chose to focus their engagement on youth between the ages of 11 and 25 (Herz 2016). According to Jenny Frankl, Seattle’s Youth Engagement Strategic Advisor, the city took several months designing how the plan would be formatted. City workers also spent a great deal of time researching other cities who had implemented similar participatory budgeting processes to the one Seattle wanted to implement. Although Frankl did not elaborate on which cities exactly she stated that “Seattle drew inspiration from several different cities across the country, and we selected parts from each that we found valuable.”

According to Frankl the motivations to engage youth in the community rather than the community as a whole was made for a few different reasons. First, city officials believed that youth voices were not being heard as much as other age groups in the city. Second, they believed that by engaging these community members at a young age it would inspire them to continue to stay engaged into the future. Third, the youth are the future of Seattle and they wanted to make sure the city was moving toward a direction of meeting those younger generation’s needs. Fourth, the city has hopes that by engaging these youth community members that they will continue to not only stay engaged but also want to vote in future elections. She stated that Seattle has seen a big drop in voter turnout in recent years especially in mid-term elections. Finally, by specifically engaging the youth they would undoubtedly also reach the parents and families of most of the younger members therefore they believed that the whole process had the ability to reach more people than just older voting age community members.

The program got its start when Seattle Mayor Ed Murray and City Councilmember Nick Licata announced a participatory budgeting project back in July of 2015. Initially the Seattle City Council allocated $173,000 to develop and launch the project and an additional $500,000 of the
city budget to fund the various programs decided by the public (Office of the Mayor). This was later increased to $700,000 because the City Council believed so much in the process (Frankl).

The program was initially proposed by the Mayor and his office however the City Council had to vote on implementing the process. The City Council choose to implement an oversight committee that would oversee the project along with the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods also known as the DON.

According to Frankl the public engagement part of the program began with members of the oversight committee and DON going to 19 different community organizations who represented multiple dimensions of diversity in the community such as age, race, cultural background, neighborhood, and organizational focus. They gave presentations to the members of these community organizations about the proposed participatory budgeting program. They then asked youth members of those organizations between the ages of 11 and 25 to submit applications to be a member of the steering committee. The members of the oversight committee then vetted the applicants and chose a group of more than 70 members, however by the end of the program the number had dropped to 20 because some members found the committee to be too large of a commitment or their schedules did not allow them to participate in the process. The members of the oversight committee and the DON were still very pleased at the group of 20 youth (Frankl).

The steering committee was responsible for multiple things. Their first role was naming the program Youth Voice, Youth Choice. They then charted a course for where the program would go and what the process would involve. Later they set goals and outreach targets that the program should achieve by the end. They were also responsible for promoting the plan and encouraging other youth community members to be involved in the process by proposing their
own ideas and trying to get them to come out to the final vote on the project that would take place later in the year.

According to Frankl, the next step of the process, called the “Idea Collection phase,” was to have community members meet and brainstorm ideas for potential projects to be funded by the city. This phase involved a total of seven meetings beginning in late January and going to the end of February 2016 (West Seattle Blog). In these meetings community members brought up any issues they had with their community and verbally proposed projects they felt should be funded. Notes were taken while the community members were deliberating to help come up with potential topics. They also asked people at the meetings to write down these topics if they could remember. The purpose of the note taking was to ensure all topics were noted even if they weren’t written down by the community members. These meetings were rather informal and involved anyone in the community who wanted to participate and not just youth. There was also an online tool for community members to propose ideas if they could not make it to the in-person assemblies. According to Frankl though, the vast majority of the project proposals were received in person and not online. By the time the meetings and online suggestion service were done there were over 500 proposed ideas (Frankl).

During the time that the full community meetings were taking place meetings with the steering committee were also taking place. The members were paying close attention to issues they personally saw in the community and were asked to speak with their family and friends about what they saw as issues too. The oversight committee wanted to have as many proposed projects for the steering committee as possible. During their meetings, steering committee members formed their list of proposed projects to add to the list that the other community
members made. They were asked to take input from their family and friends and record anything at all they saw as needing to be fixed.

According to Frankl the steering committee spent the months of March and April going over the long and varying list of project proposals that was made in their previous meetings as well as the community meetings. They then began the process of paring down and shortening the list of 500+ projects. They looked at the merits of each proposal and who those proposals would benefit. They wanted to select proposals that impacted the most people and offered the most benefit to the community. They then selected the top 19 most valid and important projects from the list. With the help of the oversight committee, the DON, appropriate city staff, and budget delegate facilitators the steering committee turned those 19 project proposals into concrete proposals that they could take back to the youth members of the community for final voting (Seattle Department of Neighborhoods).

In late May, the final voting took place. According to Frankl, Voting was open to community members between the ages of 11 and 25 for a week appropriately referred to by the oversight and steering committees as “Vote Week.” Community members voted online or at one of over 60 voting sites (Frankl). The community members were asked to vote for up to 4 projects from the list of 19 proposed projects. They had a turnout of more than 3,000 youth members and had over 10,000 votes for different projects (The Stranger). Everyone involved in the project was elated at the voter turnout results (Frankl). Once the voting was tallied the steering committee came up with seven final topics to be funded based on votes and the amount of funding each of the project needed. They had to use their judgment to select projects that would fit into the overall budget given to them by the city. For example, if the seventh most voted for topic
required more funding than was left they would use the next most voted for topic that would fit into the budget.

   According to Frankl the topics, their funding amounts, and total votes are as follows: Houses for People Experiencing Homelessness, $128,500, 1900 votes, Youth Homeless Shelter Improvements, $42,000, 1828 votes, Job Readiness Workshops for Homeless Youth, $43,600, 1517 votes, Homeless Children and Youth Liaison Services, $70,400, 1515 votes, Wi-Fi Hotspot Checkout, $165,000, 1377 votes, Park Bathroom Upgrades, $205,000, 1307 votes, Safe Routes to Schools, $45,500, 1306 votes. The process of funding the above before mentioned projects began in June of 2016 and will continue into 2017 until all of the projects are fully funded. Obviously, projects like the youth homeless shelter improvements are going to take a bit of time to get these projects up and running. As of the writing of this paper all of the projects are in the process of being funded but none are completed or fully funded. Frankl was able to say that agreements have been signed for every plan and they will all be completed in 2017. She also stated that Seattle will do another Participatory Budgeting process next year.

Analysis and Findings

   In this section I will analyze a few of the projects in detail, the demographics of those who voted, how effective the project was at engaging youth, and how effective the project was as a whole.

   It is clear from the above data that the community wanted to combat homelessness and support those who are homeless in a big way. Of the seven chosen projects four of them involve the homeless or homelessness. The total amount being spent on homeless is over $280,000 and over 6,750 votes were cast for those projects. This means that almost everyone who voted had to have voted for one of the projects that dealt with homelessness. When asked, Frankl stated that
Seattle has a very bad problem with homelessness. She stated that there were two main reasons for choosing to fund homeless projects. The first reason is that in the past couple of years homelessness has become more visible to members of the community. There has been a lot more media stories about them recently too. The second reason is that there has been a recent extreme spike in housing costs in Seattle both in rental amounts and in home values causing more people to become homeless. She believes that seeing the homeless and their struggles has made the local youth more in touch with the problems they face. In a Seattle Times article written in January 2016 statistics were given about a recent “spike” in homelessness around the Seattle area. Each year there is one day where community members go out and count the number of homeless people they find in the city. Last year the community members found a total of 3,772 people this year there was a staggering 4,500 people which is over a 15% increase in just one year (Beekman 2016). The article also stated that there was a large increase between 2014 and 2015 too. This article definitely supports the idea that homeless has become a much bigger issue in the past couple of years and it is easy to understand why community members would like to see it come to an end.

Another project that was voted that I found interesting was the Wi-Fi hotspot checkout. It was something I had never heard of. What the project entails is small Wi-Fi hotspot modules that people can check out at the public library, just like they can a book, and take with them wherever they please and they will have wireless internet. This was a plan originally implemented by a grant from Google a few years ago but the grant was about to run out and the project would have been shut down. What the community members voted for was to continue to fund these modules for the foreseeable future and expand the number of available hotspots from 700 to 750 (Read 2016).
This project was very successful at engaging a diverse group community members. When analyzing the demographics of people who voted and there the votes were cast it becomes apparent that the project did a very good job at getting a diverse population. The following data comes from information that Jenny Frankl shared in an email. When looking at the racial makeup of the voters 3% were Native American, 16% were Asian, 21% were Black or African American, 13% were Hispanic, 4% were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 38% were White, and 5% were any other race. That population is extremely diverse therefore every race should have been able to get an issue that affected them sufficiently voted for.

When looking at the voters by age 25% were between the ages of 11 and 13, 52% were between the ages of 14 and 17, 15% were between the ages of 18 and 21, and 8% were between the ages of 22 and 25. While the ages are not as diverse as the racial makeups the target age range of this program was members ages 11-18 and they were by far the largest group of people who voted. When looking at the gender of those who voted they had roughly 64% girls voting, 31% boys, 2.5% transgender, and 3% other. This is the only demographic that was very skewed to one category but when you look at the projects that are going to be funded they don’t really have much to do with different races and the program was still able to get a moderate amount of diversity.

In the area that the voting took place seven out of the ten public high schools participated (Frankl). 40% of voting took place at high schools, 21% at community organizations, 19% at middle schools, 17% online, and 3% at community centers. From this data and the fact that they got over 3,000 youth to vote I think that they did a good job at engaging youth in the area. According to their research the average participatory budgeting voting rate for eligible voters is about 2.6% and they managed to have 3% of eligible voters turn out (Frankl). When it came to
the programs target age range of 11 to 18 year olds the program got over 8% of them voting which is much better than the average.

When asked if they are going to continue to do participatory budgeting in the future Frankl responded “Seattle will be doing Participatory Budgeting again this year – but the scope and audience will change. The projects will deal with Seattle’s parks or streets this year.” This means that the city and the Mayor’s office saw enough turnout to deem this participatory budgeting program a success and he is willing to continue it for another year.

Overall I think this program was successful. When you look at the various statistics on how diverse the group of people who participated in the program were and compare it to the diversity of Seattle, the participant group is actually more diverse than Seattle. It proves that the program was successful to reaching out at racial minorities and youth as a whole. I think that by going to community outreach programs initially, the oversight committee was able to appoint members to the steering committee who were very diverse and in turn they brought people from all backgrounds into the voting process. By engaging the youth and having only them vote in this program it helps ensure that the city will be set up for them in the future. They are, after all, the future of the city and the mayor and community members recognized that.

**Recommendations**

While I feel that the project was successful I think that there are definitely some things that could have been changed to make it better. I think that this particular process did a very good job at reaching out to minority races to have them participate in the process. It showed in the statistics of who voted in the final round to choose what projects were going to be funded. The things I would recommend changing in the future are making the process open to more than
just youth, I would change the way voting is done, I would try to advertise the program more, and I would also try to reach out to different economic classes.

My first recommendation would be to have the Participatory Budgeting process be open to more people. If they wanted the youth to be involved they could have had the youth be involved but still had older and more experienced members of the community be involved also. I think it is not the smartest thing to have the youth between the ages of 11 and 25 choose what such a big amount of money is spent on. I definitely would open this up to the general public and make sure that everyone had a chance to vote. After all these projects are going to affect everyone. I completely agree with the way they started the program going through the local community youth outreach programs but they should have also looked at adult outreach programs too. I think if they would have adults also take part in voting, the topics chosen might have been a bit different.

My next recommendation would be to change the way the voting was done. The majority of voting in this process was done by paper voting at a set location. That might have worked for this project but I probably will not in the future. While they did have online voting open, the number of people who voted online versus on location by paper voting were two very different numbers. I believe they could have had a much bigger turnout had they focused more of their resources on online voting rather than having 60 or more individual voting stations.

Another recommendation I would make is that the city could have done a much better job at publicizing and advertising the program. When asked, Frankl stated that the city did not really advertise the program they relied on their interactions with members of the community and the steering committee to get people involved. I think that they might have had better voter turnout if they had engaged people more by advertising. We learned in class that you cannot expect people
to go to the cities website every week to see what is going on, the city has to make these projects known to community.

My final recommendation would be to try to reach out to different economic classes. Although I could not find any data about the economic standing of the participants online, in my interview with Jenny Frankl she stated that it was mainly youth from lower class and lower middle class families that participated. I would have tried to gain some representation from some of the different economic classes to ensure that everyone’s opinions were being heard and were getting covered in this process.


Frankl, Jenny (Youth Engagement Strategic Advisor for the city of Seattle) in an E-Mail with the author, December 2016.


“‘Youth Voice, Youth Choice’: Participatory budgeting, round 1, with West Seattle gathering.”
