

CBAC Listening Sessions Core Themes

The following is a brief synopsis of the themes that emerged from the Community Budget Advisory Committees (CBAC's) listening sessions held in July 22, 24, & 27 2024. There were several pages of notes taken from the conversations and the participants provided diverse and compelling perceptions and ideas. The effort here is to provide a concise and clear organization of the information so that the transformative work ahead can be grounded in their individual wisdom and experience as CBAC members.

Please Note: *italicized text* is direct language taken from participants during listening sessions.

Schedule and timelines were a top theme as it impacts the scope of work and the ability of volunteers to provide insightful comments and recommendations. The *timing and reaction when the Chair has already released her budget* were a key concern.

The CBAC *existence revolves around the budget and should not. CBAC process improvement effort timelines should be framed cautiously; if there is a multi-year plan, be sure to focus on the front-loading of quick wins and "low hanging fruit" during FY 2025 to avoid the perception of lacking urgency;*

Monthly meetings that begin *well in advance of the county budget calendar and timelines in August and September would be helpful*. This scheduled time and timeline allow for understanding the impact of the work, and for feedback which should be done *prior to the release of the Chair's Executive Budget*.

This advance time could be used for;

- ✓ Recruitment; *participants from many different backgrounds are needed, time for outreach more channels, such as ethnic media, social media, maybe a video. Need to start this earlier and have the different departments appoint people earlier.*
- ✓ Economist presentation; *appreciated for context and very informative.*
- ✓ Budget training from staff; *where to find budget information and how to use it. A "Budget 101" training each year for CBACs would be helpful, including an overview of where to find Central Budget Office resources online. CBACs did not feel comfortable or understand where content is located and how to use it.*

- ✓ Training & onboarding; *Staff and prior CBAC members* are recommended to help train. Previously, *all new CBAC members went to the board room and received training. A little broader primer for the full county budget would be great.*
- ✓ Meeting in person; *touring departments and locations is helpful". Meeting with commissioners in each district, who should have more budget presentations and opportunities to engage.*
- ✓ CBAC members recommend *annual community convenings in each district (offered virtual and in-person), with opportunities for feedback.* (also, a recommendation of CIC to host Town Hall)

The Purpose of CBAC's and the Process of Volunteer Involvement were critical areas of concern. Generally, participants see CBAC's as *collaboration between government and community* that has a high value. *With minor tweaking and improvement, I think our input can be incorporated and make this better so that it can function in a positive way.* A former CBAC member stated they wanted to see them (CBAC's) come back and have the value they once did, as CBACs won an award for the National Association of Counties in past years.

There is a sincere desire to have *clarity of purpose, strong operational agreements; a level set, with role clarification.* Currently there seems to be some *uncertainty of what our role is. Staff wanted to use the CBAC as a problem-solving tool.* The need for consistency was mentioned in that *there are also dozens of CBACs across the county that operate differently, which leads to confusion.*

Some options to address this;

- ✓ Role clarity and the mission of CBACs
- ✓ Model of Library *advisory has a committee for CBAC*
- ✓ Training and onboarding that involves 'senior' level *CBAC members & staff*

Innovations around CBAC were also noted, in that CBAC may not be fully utilized for what they bring to the county, *and strategic opportunities for CBAC engagement* might be an additional impactful use of their knowledge and time.

- ✓ *CBACs should be leveraged for strategic planning outside of budget cycle*
- ✓ *CBAC volunteers should be engaged more deeply for strategic planning while another wondered whether or not CBACs should be involved in strategic financial discussions.*
- ✓ *Flag CBACs as they can help Department leadership with hard decisions.*

- ✓ *Department CBACs help to provide the community perspective to the Department Directors.*
- ✓ *Senior management needs to be involved, at director level.*

Communications seem to be a specific concern of the process design, and would help CBAC's have more confidence in the value of their input. *Lacking structure and communication raises questions of CBAC impact and relevance. Communication between CBAC members, the Chair, and the Board of County Commissioners needs improvement.*

Ideas to address this area included:

- ✓ *The acknowledgement of receipt when feedback is provided; how input is used and whether it is used. Visibility, transparency. (Feedback loop is also a recommendation of the CIC)*
- ✓ *CBAC members would like to see a crosswalk of how their recommendations are reflected in Department and Executive budgets.*
- ✓ *I like action steps. I want action steps. If we have something that can come out that shows what we accomplished year by year.*

The Budget Review itself is something that CBAC members take very seriously. They all genuinely wanted to provide added insight and input to the budget. There was an understanding that while *different people come to CBACs with different experience or acumen with accounting or understanding budgets*, each person brought lived experience and perceptions that were valuable. The budget is *structurally complex making the budget presentation very helpful.*

The *perception that budget decisions are already "set in stone" before CBACs are providing their input, having been more or less set in stone* means just *rubber stamping* and the groups were clearly against that.

General budget challenges included;

- ✓ *Participants noted a lack of guidance on how to interview Department staff during budget review*
- ✓ *It seems like there is very little that is discretionary, between labor union and federal + state grants and mandates, the bounty's budget is predetermined to a pretty considerable amount.*

- ✓ Future deficits: *when we are talking about adding to some Departments it means taking away from others.*

- ✓ Is their role *to take a look at all funding or only to make decisions on the general fund?*

Program Offers Challenges: {The current budget structure from which decisions are made}

- ✓ *Need to know how to interpret program offers.*

- ✓ *It has become apparent that not all POs are presented, there needs to be guidelines on how program offers are presented.*

- ✓ *Interest in the program offer and what was spent in the past year.*

Options:

- ✓ *A summary document with key reductions or changes in revenue - or Program Offers that are high profile - would be a beneficial resource for CBAC members with less experience working with budgets.*

- ✓ *Starting earlier (timeline) with knowing what current (FY) POs are, it appears that this is the missing link.*

- ✓ *Greater access to the existing program offers and how money is being spent, as CBACs can then work on next year's budget.*

- ✓ *Budget-to-actual comparisons for Program Offers*

- ✓ *Advance warning to CBACs of the key areas or Program Offers*

- ✓ *CBAC members would benefit from an annual outline of what Department dollars are discretionary vs. mandatory;*