NEWS

In Durham, Participatory Budgeting Brings Power to the People

Participatory budgeting began in Brazil in 1989. Since then, it's been adopted by thousands of cities, school boards, and other institutions striving to give stakeholders a direct say in funding decisions

by **Jenna Spinelle**
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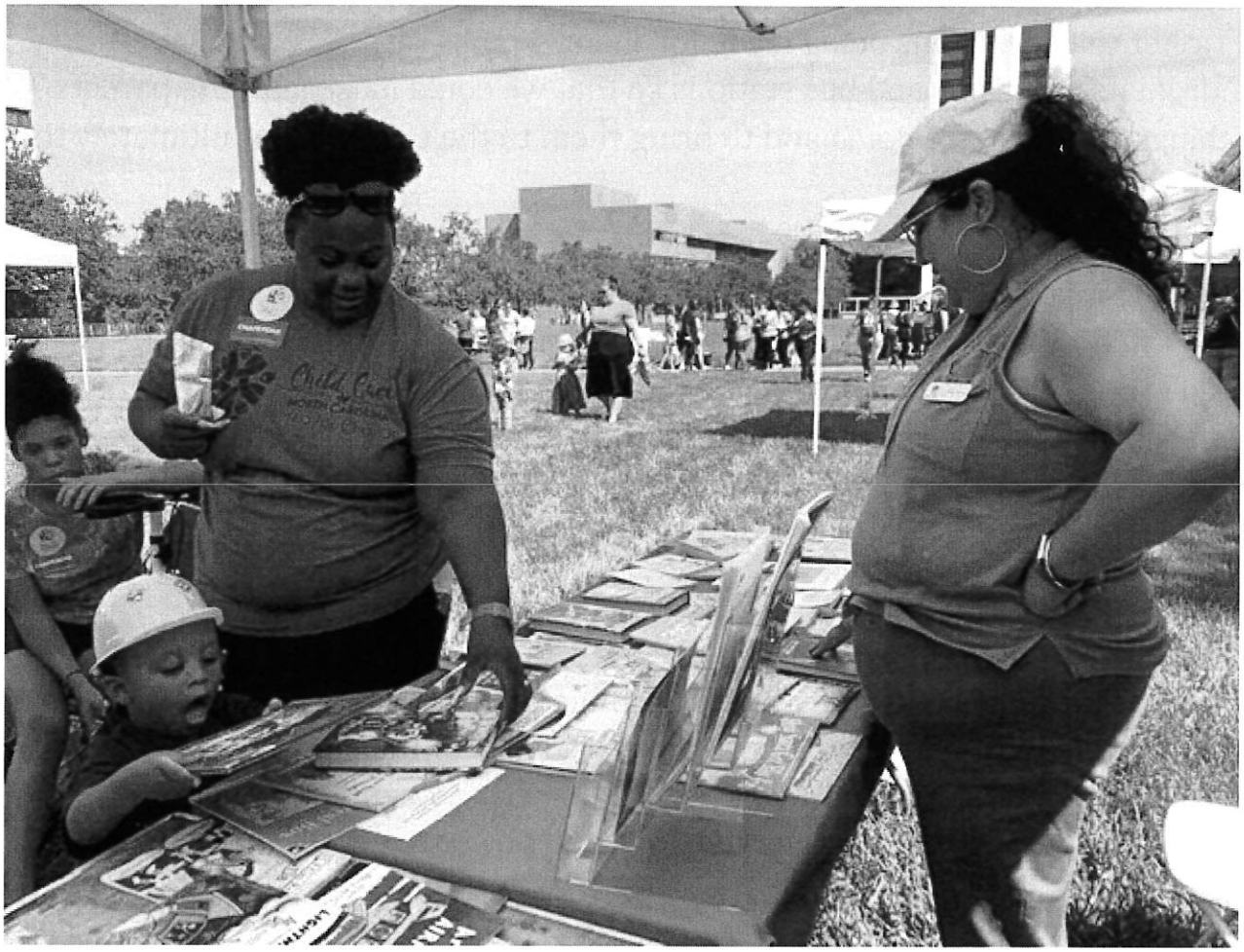

From a Book Harvest event at the NCGA this year. Credit: Courtsy of Book Harvest

hen parents from Book Harvest stood behind tables at the Child Care for NC event at the North Carolina General Assembly in April, they were there in part because of funding that came from

W their fellow residents in Durham.

Book Harvest, a Durham-based children's literacy organization, was chosen for funding as part of Durham's participatory budgeting program. The city began using Participatory Budgeting in 2018 and has since awarded nearly $3.5 million in city funds to projects chosen by residents. A third cycle that will allocate $2.4 million is currently underway, with funding decisions expected in August.

Book Harvest received $40,184 from Durham's second participatory budgeting cycle in 2021. Amy Franks, the organization's associate director of school and family engagement, says the funds were used to hire parents to work as ambassadors. Parents set up tables at neighborhood events, built a parent-to-parent network, and held events that allowed parents to connect with one another.

"We wanted to shift the power and decision making to parents and have them at the table from the beginning, rather than decisions being made for them," Franks says. "We were at grocery stores and laundromats and parks and bus stations so that we could make sure the parents were aware of things that we were doing and to bring them to the table so that ultimately they are leading the charge."

In many ways, what Franks articulates about Book Harvest's use of participatory budgeting funds is similar to the overall goal of participatory budgeting—to shift the power of the purse away from a small group of elected officials and city staff to the residents. As organizers in Durham and Greensboro have learned over the past decade, it's a goal that's sometimes easier said than done.

What is participatory budgeting?

Participatory budgeting, often referred to as "PB," began in Brazil in 1989. Since then, it's been adopted by thousands of cities, school boards, and other institutions striving to give stakeholders a direct say in funding decisions. PB is part of a larger set of reforms known as direct democracy that aim to give greater decision-making power to people who are not elected officials.

The PB process typically involves residents forming a steering committee to create the rules and an engagement plan to develop ideas for projects that the community wants to fund. Volunteer budget delegates from across the city turn those ideas into concrete proposals that

residents vote on. The city government then funds the winning projects from the overall pool of PB-allocated money.

Hollie Russon Gilman, a fellow in political reform at the New America think tank and author of *Democracy Reinvented: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation and America*, studies participatory budgeting and its impacts. She says PB's impacts extend beyond the immediate funding decisions of individual projects and lead to a greater appreciation for how local government operates.

"People are signing up to become budget delegates, which is my favorite part of the process because you get to really see how this sausage is made," Russon Gilman says. "And then those proposals get turned back to a wider group of residents for a vote. One of the great things about participatory budgeting is that it's more inclusive than traditional elections. So non-citizens, young people ... we're seeing some places as young as 11 or 12 are eligible to vote."

Greensboro: PB comes to North Carolina

Greensboro was the first city in North Carolina—and in the South—to implement participatory budgeting in the 2015–16 budget cycle. Conversations about bringing PB to the city began in 2011 and were led by the Fund for Democratic Communities, a progressive local organization.

Audrey Berlowitz, a teacher and doctoral candidate at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, joined the movement that brought PB to Greensboro through her friend Marnie Thompson, who founded the Fund for Democratic Communities with Ed Whitfield.

Berlowitz visited Chicago to see PB at work and was inspired by what it could mean for more democratic city politics. PB has the potential to reduce the influence from what she describes as the "technocrats and bureaucrats" on the city's council and staff.

"It seemed like a very open-ended, fluid thing," Berlowitz says. "And then it became interesting to discover people here wanted that. We also had to work to understand what kind of projects we could get through PB that would be approved by the city staff."

After years of lobbying from Thompson, Whitfield, Berlowitz, and others involved in the Fund for Democratic Communities, the Greensboro City Council approved PB in 2014. It passed with a 5-4 vote. Those who opposed it cited overlap with existing neighborhood assemblies and unnecessary spending on bringing in the Participatory Budgeting Project from New York City to act as consultants on the first round.

The steering committee report from that first year called the PB implementation a success at generating ideas and involving all parts of the community but noted communication breakdowns between the steering committee and city staff over vetting project ideas before putting them up for a vote, as well as difficulty reaching young people and non-English speaking communities.

Greensboro PB ran three additional cycles in the 2018–19, 2020–21, and 2022–23 budget cycles. Projects funded included the Hopper Trolley, a free transit service that operates Thursday through Sunday in downtown Greensboro.

Durham: Focus on equity and inclusion

Durham began its own journey with PB when the city's former manager learned about what was happening in Greensboro. Today, Andrew Holland, Durham's assistant director for strategy and performance, is part of the team that leads PB in the city's Office of Performance and Innovation.

"Our former city manager had communicated to us that he wanted the PB program to be a true reflection of Durham," Holland says. "And with our city council, especially during that time and even now, there's a focus on equity. Everything that we do as a city, it needs to be equity focused. So how we went about designing our outreach and communications plan, it was targeted to those underserved neighborhoods."

Holland says Durham's PB team and volunteers knocked on doors and visited bus stations to engage under-represented groups. They also made voting available on paper and iPads to accommodate varying comfort levels with technology.

One advantage of PB, advocates say, is that it gives residents a chance to present ideas that might seem trivial but have a large impact on day-to-day life, like which plants and shrubs should be part of their neighborhood's landscape or what kind of equipment a playground should have. Holland says this is exactly what happened with the city's Belmont Park and Drew/Granby Park.

"It was a very interactive exercise in which we wanted to make sure that the people who voted for the project had the opportunity to weigh in on what the park should look like," Holland says. "We wanted the project to be a true reflection of that community."

PB also caught the eye of Durham City Council Member Jillian Johnson. She made implementing PB one of her priorities and served on the PB Steering Committee.

"I've always believed that having more people's voices at the table is really critical. No one should worry about not having enough experience in politics," Johnson, who will retire from the council at the end of this year, told ***Elle* magazine** in 2017. "I didn't have any experience in elected politics, and I did it. I've learned that many different kinds of life experience translate well into what you need to know to be in an elected office."

Former Durham Mayor Steve Schewel learned about PB from Johnson. He says he was skeptical at first but came around once he saw the process in action.

"I was a big believer in Jillian and had a huge amount of trust in her, and she convinced me to give it a whirl," Schewel says. "I'm very glad that happened and it's proven to be a good decision."

Schewel says he knew that staffing would be essential to making PB work and committed additional funds to add staff to the budget office, including the position Holland now holds.

Schewel says some of the projects completed as a result of PB—including park enhancements and other public works projects—likely would have happened anyway but it was important to have community buy-in.

"It was gratifying to me that we got the increased democratic participation and opened up access to our budgeting process," Schewel says.

Book Harvest's Franks, a Durham resident, voted in Durham PB and says she saw equity at the forefront of the process.

"I put this question to a colleague and I agree wholeheartedly with what she said ... participatory budgeting is about equity and justice," Franks says. "It's by the people, for the people."

Benay Hicks, Book Harvest's associate director of communications and marketing, says the organization is often asked to participate in fundraising challenges or competitions that pit nonprofits against one another as people vote on which organizations to fund. She says Durham PB had a markedly different tone that she observed felt true to the goal of gauging

what the community truly wants rather than which organizations put on the splashiest marketing campaigns.

"It felt like we were all on one page. Nobody was bashing anybody and nobody was being obnoxious about it," Hicks says. "What's great about it is all of these organizations, whether they get voted for or not, are having a platform to share what they do. So even the process itself, by informing the community about these various organizations and initiatives, it's already doing great work."

What the future holds for PB

Voting for Durham's third PB cycle will begin in September. The process, however, appears to be on hold in Greensboro. On July 11, the city sent an email to its PB supporters saying the 2023–24 budget did not include funding for the projects approved in the most recent PB cycle, and the program will be reevaluated before it continues.

At the same time, North Carolina's legislature continues to make changes that impact voting rights and civil rights.

"Democracy is getting smaller in North Carolina," Schewel says. "We have to do everything we can at the local level to ensure access and participation. PB has been a great tool for democratizing the budget process, which is the most important thing we do in local government."

The Participatory Budgeting Project continues to work on PB processes in Seattle, New York City, Cleveland, and other cities across the country. But at a time when the political stakes feel so high—especially in North Carolina—is pursuing PB worth the time and energy?

Berlowitz says she thinks about this a lot, both in her efforts to bring PB to Greensboro and her current work to unionize faculty at UNC Greensboro.

"Our super-majority Republican legislature is introducing really draconian laws, culture war laws," Berlowitz says. "We need some power to push back against it and we've got to figure out how to organize for power."

Russon Gilman also hears this question a lot in her work studying PB. She says a common theme across cities that implement PB is that people feel more connected to their

communities, which can be the first step toward building political power and a way to combat America's loneliness epidemic.

"What's the alternative? Is the status quo going so well? Are there a lot of people who still think America is a beacon on a hill and our democracy is thriving?" she says. "You don't need to be a political scientist to think that we have some problems. If you ask people, across both sides of the aisle, they're very disaffected with their institutions."

Correction: This story originally identified Ed Whitfield as Marnie Thompson's husband. The two are not married.

For more information about Durham PB, visit ***pbdurham.org****. For more information about Greensboro PB, visit* ***pbgreensboro.com****.*

Jenna Spinelle is a writer and podcaster based in State College, Pennsylvania. She covered participatory budgeting as part of the podcast ***When the People Decide****.*

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