

Mayor Wants Public Input on Budget

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 Mayor Wants Public Input on Budget, Feb. 12



Lincoln Mayor Chris Beutler wants capital city resident's input when it comes to the city's annual budget.

Beutler announced Tuesday he's seeking your help before city officials sit-down to make the big decisions.

For the first-time in city history, the public will be involved in every step along the way to find out how capital city residents want their tax dollars spent.

If Teresa Ethen had a voice in Lincoln's budget she said she knows exactly where her tax dollars would be spent.

"It would always be education. Having a 4-year-old, that's getting ready to go to kindergarten here soon someday. So that would be my top priority at this point," said Teresa Ethen, Lincoln.

Soon, community members like Ethen will have their voices heard. That's because Tuesday, Mayor Chris Beutler announced a new budget plan.

"It's time for the city government to invite the public to the decision-making table. We must simply and straight-forwardly ask the public, "What do you want for Lincoln's future?" Beutler said.

The plan would allow citizens to give their input.

"I think that they might feel like they have some say in what goes on and it might spark some interest in the city council as far as new ideas," said David Adams, Lincoln.

The process will begin with phone surveys of 600 randomly selected people. Followed by public discussions and town hall meetings where the citizens have a chance to meet face to face with officials and ask questions.

Most of the research will be done with the help of the university's public policy center.

"We're looking for the average Jane and Joe in the community to tell us what they think about the priorities. We're not asking them to be budget experts. We're just asking them to tell us what they value, and then we'll ask them afterward why they value it," said Alan Tomkins, Director of the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center.

"From the public's comments, we will develop the city's first citizen-lead, outcome-based budget," Beutler said.

A process Ethen said she's excited to participate in.

"I'll try to put what input I can into it," she said.

Both city council members Dan Marvin and Robin Eschliman said this is a great step for Lincoln.

They say it's a great way to involve citizens and try to prioritize what the community really wants and needs now and not just base this year's budget on past needs.

"A lot of times the way the council takes a look at the budget is by looking at last year and listening to who screams the most, but this is a new way of addressing it," Eschliman said. "Instead we're going to shift the total paradigm and question everything we've done and whether what we've been doing has really been producing results."

The project stems from a book called "The Price of Government: Getting the Results We Need in an Age of Permanent Crisis," which deals with involving the community and working on budgets from the ground up to use tax dollars on only necessary expenses.

It has been used in Alabama, Ft. Collins and others.

"It's more than just a survey of the community. It will start involving people and trying to prioritize what the people of Lincoln really want," Marvin said.

Marvin also said the council also wants to make sure everyone's voice is heard, not just those with special interests.

"We're going to try to do it in a way that's more representative of the community so that we don't have the same groups of people we hear from on a regular basis," he said.

Marvin said sometimes it's hard to get an overall feel of the community and he hopes the project will improve that communication barrier.

Beutler is scheduled to make a decision on next year's budget in May.

This year's tax-funded City budget is more than \$130 million.

The City Council votes on tentative changes to the Mayor's budget in July. A public hearing is scheduled for Aug. 11, and the council is scheduled to adopt the budget Aug. 25.