CHAPTER 4

The Challenges of Neighborhood Assemblies

Abstract This chapter details observations related to attending idea-generating events labeled "neighborhood assemblies" conducted by council member offices in the late summer and fall of a PB annual cycle. We raise concerns about the difficulty in obtaining access for the ordinary community member, the lack of a centralized process or central information source (including a lack of transparency in meeting posting and design), the lack of a consistent process between council districts (and the variability of meeting experiences), the overrepresentation by governmental representatives as participants (ultimately demonstrating the limited ideas generated through the top-down involvement of various actors and agencies), and a lack of cooperation from governmental agencies.

Keywords Neighborhood assemblies, access · Transparency · Representative

By design, our research team approached observation as members of the public. We wanted to get as close to the citizen experience of PB as possible, without presuming to know what many of these processes would be like, at least from the outset. Some published research on participatory budgeting reflects collaboration between researchers and participatory budgeting sponsors. The implicit question raised in this project involves

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observation of the councilmember-sponsor in a natural setting. We hence wanted to limit collaboration as much as possible due to its potential to undermine observations. Our reports about transparency reflect the research experience under these circumstances.

Critical to this experience, PBNYC develops over multiple phases. The timing and exact form of implementation may vary by council district and by year. In general, the first phase is idea generation, which has multiple parts. In the 2018–2019 Cycle 8 in preparation for the FY 2020 budget, these parts included: (1) Sidewalk tables where members of the public could complete idea cards and, more generally, frequently circulated idea cards to be returned to council member offices; (2) websites located at http://ideas.pbnyc.org/ (in general for all participating council districts, with a mirror at https://shareabouts-pbnyc-2018.herokuapp.com/) and https://pbnyc39.com/idea-collection/ (controlled by Council Member Brad Lander's office); (3) idea-generating neighborhood assemblies open to the general public; (4) ideas brought by budget delegates in the second phase; (5) ideas generated in the budget delegate process; and (6) ideas otherwise communicated to the council member's office.

The second phase involves budget delegates who attend a delegate training session, meet with representatives of some city agencies, and then meet as delegates to formulate ballots. The PBNYC rule book describes this process as overseen by a district committee. The third phase involves promotional activities to advocate for projects on the ballot. Promotional activities could include various forms of communication, such as email from community groups that succeed in getting their projects onto the ballot, project expos (fairs where project advocates promote their projects), and advocacy at the time of balloting. The fourth phase involves voting, which occurs in two modes: (1) online and (2) at pop-up voting tables. For the 2018–2019 cycle, pop-up voting tables were scheduled between March 30 and April 7. The last phase involved the release of results and a related, celebratory event.

While these phases appear orderly and complete, the actual implementation is not. We observed that various council members omitted some elements such as neighborhood assemblies or project expos. In general, expos were conducted on the first day of voting at voting locations (which included schools that could have had projects on the ballot), while some districts may have omitted the expo altogether. Another researcher with whom the first author discussed this project at a conference suggested that some council member staff perform the budget delegate role. Also,

one council member's office that we followed through the PB process appeared to combine some budget delegate training meetings with the meeting with city agency representatives. More important, there was no central method of learning of planned meetings or events by a central organization, leading to some missed opportunities. If there had been a central coordinator who shared information, we would have been able to construct our research plan earlier, attend more neighborhood assemblies and possibly find delegate meetings once we learned that one council member refused access. At the end of the day, the decentralized nature of PBNYC presents a monumental challenge to organizing equitable participation and deliberation, often confusing more than enlightening. We'll explore this finding in more detail.

In this light, our research plan aimed for qualitative observation at all PB phases, including post-decision focus groups for, at a minimum, two council districts. We hired two research assistants to attend neighborhood assembly and delegate meetings, and to collect data during other phases of the development process.[1] The only strict criterion for selecting the observed districts was districts with council members who had been involved in at least one prior participatory budgeting cycle. We intended to follow two selected council districts, but in one case this proved unworkable.

In the initial course of this research, difficulties arose almost immediately, providing a glimpse of what would become the running theme at the heart of this book's argument. As mentioned, contact with the city council staff determined that there is no central point for information about PB or PB processes. The staff at the city council did not (during our data collection process) have a centralized source of information (and this appears to have continued into the next cycle). The dates and locations of neighborhood assemblies could only be learned from individual council members' offices. Telephone calls to all 51 city council offices on, or before, September 17, 2018, determined that 33 council members were intending to engage in participatory budgeting.[2] However, only 17 provided dates of scheduled neighborhood assemblies! Others either had

[1] Graduate assistants were hired during September 2018 after receiving final grant approval from the Samuels Center and were engaged in observation after receiving IRB human subjects approval.

[2] PBNYC communication says there were 32 engaged districts in this cycle. Nevertheless, we had 33 positive responses.

not scheduled meetings, did not have the information readily available at their offices, or did not intend to have neighborhood assembly meetings.

One neighborhood assembly had already occurred and a few more were over before it was logistically possible to attend. After additional efforts, prospective dates were determined for 21 council districts, concurrent to the contact date determined for one council district,[3] and one district reported a date for an "info session" (not reported to be an idea-generating session). Of the 10 remaining, at least two had no assemblies, while others did not provide information.

Event observations were generally recorded in two forms. First, every observer made the same or nearly concurrent notes of the events. Second, most events were audio recorded.[4]

Meeting Variations

There is no singular participatory budgeting project in New York City. Instead, there are numerous participatory budget projects, as many as there are council members who engage in the practice. In Phase 1 of our observations, of importance to the citizen experience of participatory budgeting, there was almost no uniformity in the scheduling of these meetings. For the 22 council offices that provided information on neighborhood assemblies, the dates provided ranged from one to five, with a median of three.[5] Initial dates ranged from 9/17 to 10/2; and final dates ranged from 9/20 to 10/17. Only three sessions were on a weekend. Two of the weekend sessions and one weekday session were mid-day, while all the others were all in the evening starting between 5:30 p.m. and 7:00 p.m., often on the same day for many districts. One council

[3] I.e., logistically, if we learn of an event on the day it is happening, we cannot actually make use of the information. One of the events we learned about was on the same day we learned about it.

[4] No recording device was available for the first event. Additionally, one research assistant had technical difficulties with recordings for delegate meetings and interviews (discussed later) that led to an inability to transcribe the audio and meetings involving large numbers of people engaged in simultaneous small group activity that created too much noise (crosstalk) to produce usable transcripts, so our data collection strategies shifted over the course of research.

[5] Names mentioned in meetings and interviews, including public meetings, have been redacted. However, names mentioned in news media and names of (or other means of identifying) council members, are not.

member scheduled five sequential weekday evenings, while a different council member had three meetings spread over a month.

These findings beg the question of why so much variation occurred between districts? Shouldn't a process meant to be as inclusive as possible be administered in a standard way, so that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate and be part of the decision-making? At the very least, one of the most remarkable initial findings as we set out to do this research covering the processes for PBNYC was that citizen experience with something as simple as scheduling could itself be incredibly disorienting.

Based on this information, the first author and two research assistants individually, or sometimes together, attended seven neighborhood assemblies in Manhattan (three assemblies in three council districts), Brooklyn (one assembly/council district), and Queens (three assemblies in one council district). An assembly was staffed by one or more council staff, one or more experienced community members (in those districts with prior year PB) and, in many instances, a PB fellow sponsored by the Coro New York Leadership Center. Council members attended and spoke at some of these events.

The assembly involved two activities. The first activity provided an overview of the participatory budgeting process and an explanation of the difference between capital budget items (eligible in all districts) and expense items (generally ineligible). In 2016, planning for FY 2018, Council Member Brad Lander began allowing $50,000 of his expense discretionary funding to be decided through the PB process, explaining that he had noticed that many good ideas brought up in earlier years were disallowed because they did not meet the criteria for capital funding (Venugopal, 2016). In 2018 (planning for FY 2020), Council Member Stephen Levin also began to accept expense project proposals (Hanrahan, 2019).[6]

[6] In the broader budget process, the capital budget is funded by debt and the expense budget is funded through current revenue. These two budgets follow separate approval and expenditure processes. In the expense budget, funds must be specifically committed during the fiscal year and (typically) must be expended no later than a fiscal quarter after the end of the fiscal year (basically, enough time for an item to be delivered during the fiscal year, a bill received soon afterwards, and the payment to be processed). Except for the United States federal government, this is a universal practice, although the length of grace for bill processing differs by locality. Funds not expended by the end of the fiscal year (and grace period) revert (the authorization to expend them expires) to whatever fund

At the same time, some elements were reasonably consistent across most of the seven neighborhood assemblies. There was a discussion of the PB calendar: mentioning idea generation including the neighborhood assemblies and, in most instances, a mention of an online website for posting ideas; discussion of delegate meetings and, in some instances, invitations to become delegates; and a description of the project expos followed by voting, which could be online or at a voting location.[7] Some assemblies had a slide show that included topics such as empowerment, transparency, inclusion, equity, and community (see Fig. 4.1).

they came from to be committed again. Because of a funky New York State law resulting from the 1970s fiscal crisis, reverted money in the General Fund is hard to spend, but the city has a practice of transferring these funds to other funds where they can still be spent. In the capital budget, a multi-year capital plan is made. The first year of the capital plan is the budget for the upcoming fiscal year. The approved projects are committed during this year, but may take many years to complete. Capital fund authorization typically does not expire until the capital project is completed, although we think the city may deliberately expire some underfunded projects (project for which the authorized amount is deemed insufficient). Otherwise the funds remain available until the project is completed. All of that was necessary to explain that the council treats expense and capital funding as two independent practices. Council members are allocated two separate sums of money for capital and expense discretionary funding. The general amount of the capital discretionary funding has been fixed at $5 million for years. The speaker has more money, the exact amount of which is never clarified to our knowledge. The base expense allocation is much smaller ($500,000 plus $260,000 constrained to two categories $110,000 to aging, $150,000 to youth). It is generally allocated in small sums to each project (averaging $5000–$30,000 depending on council member preferences). Because expense funds go to immediate spending, the allocation is more visible and provides a more immediate benefit to the recipient. At the beginning of PB, council members chose to only allocate capital funds. We were not informed of their reasoning, but they frequently and prominently refer to $1 million, which would not be a realistic amount for their expense allocation. It is also possible that they want more control over the ability to produce immediate visible impacts, even if small. In 2016 (planning for FY 2018), one council member chose to expand his many year practice of capital-only PB to allow a small amount for expense budget PB. The next year, a second council member followed on.

[7]Some readers may find an explanatory element for each step helpful: The council member's staff brought up the future elements of the PB calendar. They would sometimes mention future neighborhood assemblies. At most assemblies they provided information directing attendees to a website where additional proposals could be submitted. The officials described the role of budget delegates as the people who meet to more fully develop projects and prepare the ballot and, most often, the invite attendees to consider becoming a delegate. They describe the overall process as extending over the fall and winter into the spring, during which there will be an opportunity to vote for the projects. Some assemblies had a slide show or video that describes participatory budgeting. Some of the slides displayed are shown in Fig. 4.1.

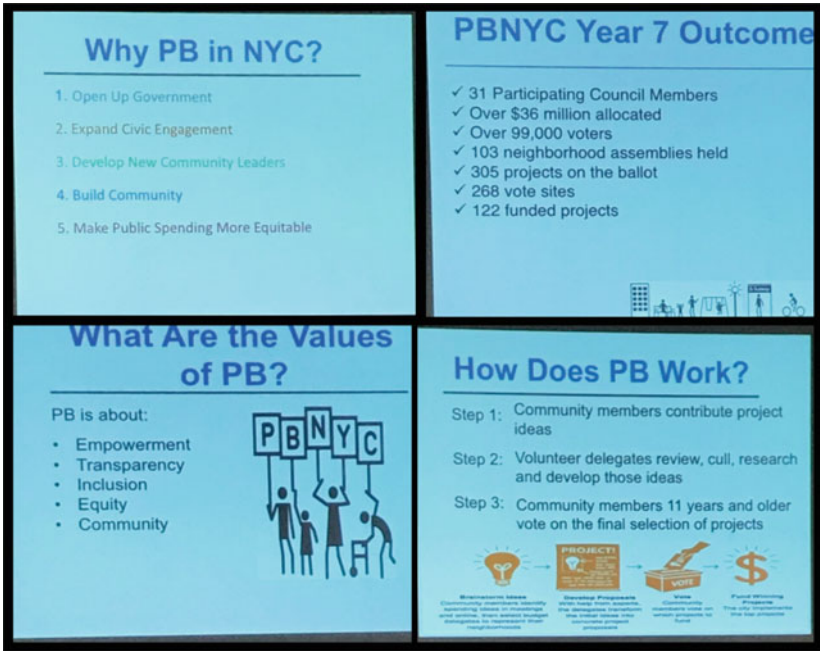

Fig. 4.1 Slides from a participatory budgeting meeting (*Source* Photograph by author)

Other slides included, for example, the prior year's results.

In the second activity, small groups meet, typically around tables, where the attendees propose ideas. Each small group is led by a facilitator, generally a community member who has been involved in prior years. Numerous ideas were proposed and added to oversize (roughly 25" × 35") paper posted near the tables, as shown in Fig. 4.2. But the tables were allowed to bring only a small fixed number (in some instances three) to a joint session at the end. At this joint session, a meeting facilitator (this role shifted several times over the course of this neighborhood assembly) called on a spokesperson from each group who presented their three selected projects to everyone present. While not overtly expressed, it was the observer's understanding that these projects would be carried forward to the delegate stage. As shown in Fig. 4.2, the selection was made through the use of stickers and hash marks.

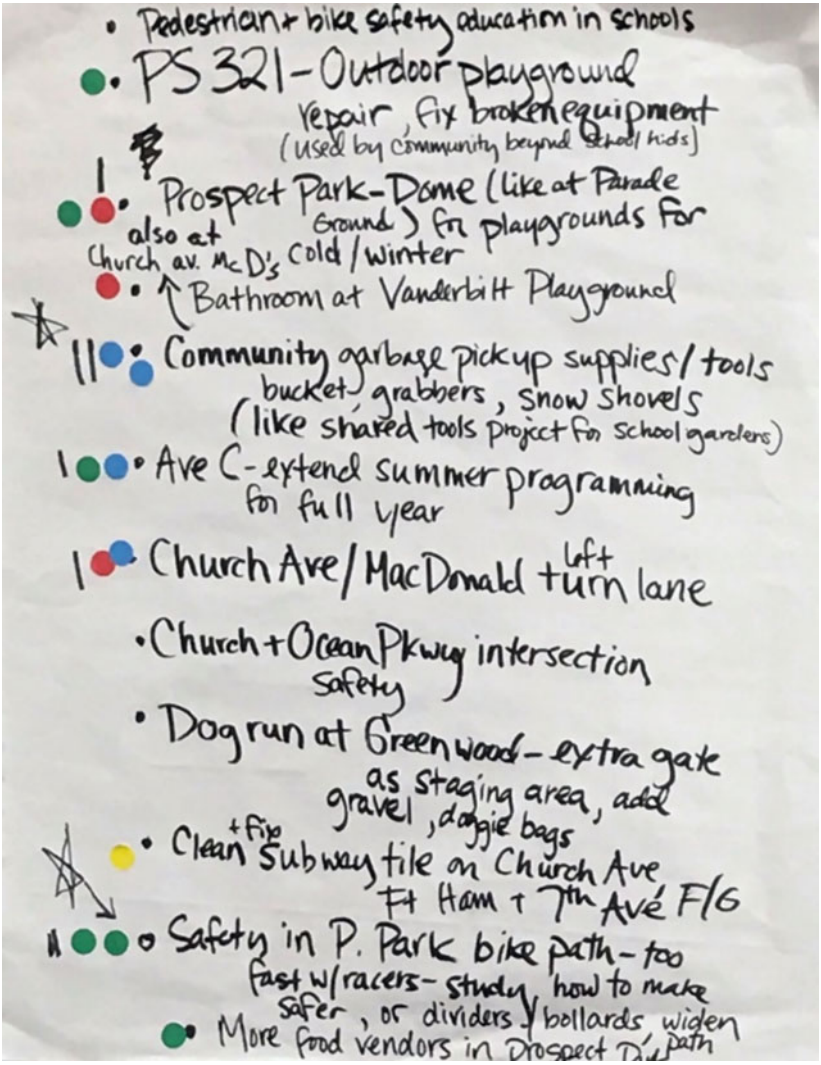

Fig. 4.2 Ideas generated (*Source* Photograph by author)

The observers were able to attend only one of these small groups during each of the neighborhood assemblies. Two of the events differed from this design. In one, only a handful of people attended, so the entire process was with the whole group and only a few ideas were generated. At another meeting, it became apparent that the neighborhood assembly was a precursor to a meeting for another purpose. Many people were at least somewhat confused about the meeting, as they had arrived for the other purpose: a discussion of a city project that was causing disruption in the neighborhood. Rather than having small group meetings, the representatives of the council office handed out idea suggestion cards. There was no final summarizing activity at this neighborhood assembly.

Top-Down Involvement

To gain a deeper sense of the multiple obstacles citizens might encounter, relative to issues such as potential clientelism, expert-driven decision-making, and more, observations at a variety of meetings in Phase 1 also presented some jarring findings relative to the larger entities citizens had to deal with in their deliberations. As we discussed in the introduction, the first neighborhood assembly we observed (in Manhattan) was held in a community center. Although a poster about participatory budgeting was visible from the street, the actual entrance was difficult to find. This meeting was brief and sparsely attended. Of the five neighborhood attendees observed, two were especially interested in becoming budget delegates. One of these two identified himself as a teacher.

At all three of the Queens neighborhood assemblies, the meetings were thematic, although at the last one there was permission to also propose any other capital project. The council office scheduled the meetings with themes attached, *thus predetermining the scope of projects*. The themes were schools, parks, and libraries. At the schools meeting most, if not all, attendees other than council staff and the observer were school employees. The attendees proposed projects focused on their own schools even though there were many other schools in the council district.[8] Experts appeared both as participants and as agency representatives in the vetting and costing process. The Queens neighborhood assemblies were focused on particular categories and attendees at each included, or

[8]With 1700 total public schools in New York, there are an average of 33 per council district.

in the case of schools, were dominated by experts from that domain. At both of the other meetings, there were a mixture of employees with interests related to the theme, and other individuals. Right from the get-go, we were left with the clear impression that many such meetings involved the usual suspects—those who had clear stakes in the theme (and rightly so), but in the absence of broader citizen topic selection and input, we couldn't help but feel that there was a type of "gamed" aspect to what was happening.

While you'd never find these types of messages in any official communication about PB, a surprising expectation for quid pro quo sometimes emerged in these seemingly deliberative forums. At the parks-themed neighborhood assembly, a facilitator, who is also a parks employee, said that "You need to make deals with other people to support each other's ideas."[9] This isn't to forgo the relationship building that is at the heart of getting work done in politics, but it did raise a question for us about what norms for idea generation, inclusion, and other opinions might be operating beyond such clear interest group-related remarks—threads we followed throughout the remainder of our research.

Many comments reflected the role of experts and top-down agency involvement in the meetings as well. At the parks-themed meeting, a fair amount of the discussion focused on trees and tree guards. An observer note refers to an expert who "is a tree researcher at [a well-known university] and has some very convincing stats that tree guards significantly increase the longevity of urban trees." Notes from that meeting show that tree guards were included in the projects referred from the neighborhood assembly to the delegate process. These data show the moderate influence of experts-as-participants in some districts. More important, though, at the parks-themed event, there are several comments reflecting decision shaping by the Park's Department:

Speaker 2: Is there any way to know what projects are in the [existing plan]….
Speaker 3: Parks has all the documents. They have a whole list on their website….
Speaker 2: Yeah, I wish they had that here for us right now….

[9] This quote is from observer notes, as it occurred during a noisy portion of the meeting.

The observations reviewed included many references to the influence of agency representatives. These included substantial concern over the lack of access to information. The positioning of needed resources with the Park's Department was only the beginning of what turned out to be a larger deference to the agency during the deliberations. In the following remarks, notice the anticipation with which speakers expected the department itself to involve itself in PB input. While passive influence is concerning, more concerning is the unexplained exercise of agency discretion[10]:

Speaker 4: if you want a water fountain in your park and there isn't one, the Parks Department is not going to see it that way….

Speaker 1: So that's what we have to find out. You're going to fight Parks…. Even when we go through this whole thing, they're going to say, "No, no, no, no."[11]

We were left with the impression that, even amid the small budget allocations that PB projects sum to, larger entities were expected to have a say and stake in what should matter to citizens. Amid these conversations, real money and real power seemed to come with limitations and qualifications.

In one part of the conversation, the costs attributed to enacting citizen budgeting allocations—whether perceived or real—were expected to be subject to top-down, exclusive judgments as well.

Speaker 1: I would think it wouldn't fit with our budget constraints, yeah.

Speaker 3: Just for one department issued [crosstalk].

Speaker 1: Everything requires so much money. It's like they think [it's the] Taj Mahal.

[10] Agency discretion can be correctly exercised because proposed projects may be genuinely beyond agency capacity or, as the capital budget is funded through municipal bonds which are federally regulated, they may be ineligible for such funding. The concern is that the comments noted do not reflect awareness of these sorts of explanations.

[11] All emphases (italics) in transcripts have been added.

Speaker 3: Because at one point, we're like, "We'll help pay for it," and they were like, "It's going to be $300 thousand dollars." "Well, we don't have the money."
Speaker 1 It's ridiculous.

So PB meetings are not as simple as generating and choosing among options (and, as mentioned, sometimes options are limited from the outset). Cost attributions figure into this picture as well, and citizens do not get to decide what kind of costs comparisons could be made when one agency that already has a lot of power of these matters gets to decide pricing. One participant noted how "if one of the Parks [representatives] could tell us what's in the pipeline, what's being done already, so we could have an idea … that might be helpful." Each step of the way, we found that the problem for citizen experience was not so much that there were park-related matters to deliberate over, but that the continuous invocation and deferral to parks' experts and representatives was needed to even have the conversation. In a way, the park acted as a kind of phantom interest group.

In fact, so much of this meeting was about what the parks department might or might not think about a change that speakers struggled to find an appropriate reach for a project that would neither be perceived as too small nor too big. Note in the following passage how the conversation begins and ends with the Parks Department's potential responses:

Speaker 4: I don't want to knock out your [named] Park, but we're going to put it up to vote on the thing, but I've been hearing everybody, from you, and from Speaker 5, that it seems like it was dead a few times over already. [crosstalk]. We're talking about doing the thing before [crosstalk] are they refusing [to fix it]?
Speaker 3: Not refusing to fix it. That they're not responsible to fix it, I think. I think you have to go to the Council people. So, that's why I was here.
Speaker 1: Yeah, with Parks, they're going to refuse everything anyway. Put everything down [crosstalk].
Speaker 4: I misheard. I thought he was saying that he was aware of it, because you guys were talking, and it seemed like it wasn't happening in the Parks end. That's why I said they serve underserved neighborhoods. They're focusing on that. They're doing a lot, so they might not want to look

at that right now. But I thought that he was specifically told that. That's cool, if you weren't.

Speaker 1: But one of the jobs, they're not really interested in doing it. For whatever reason, maybe too small, maybe they don't bother. Parks put the kibosh on everything.

This isn't to obviate the very real difficulties of costs and implementation—and the Parks Department's role in fostering or hindering (or acting as a check and balance) against the citizen deliberation. But what's interesting is the spirit of chronic opposition testified to in each speaker's remarks. If there is real money and real power at play, it is far from unlimited.

Compared to the Queens meetings, the Brooklyn neighborhood assembly reflected a very different tenor. We found ourselves asking why. It had a sophisticated organization with numerous well-organized volunteer leaders and direct links to an external nonprofit organization (the NYC-based Participatory Budgeting Project). While almost all meetings had an overview session followed by an idea-generating session, in council district 39 (Brooklyn), it had a more professional flavor. The examples drawn and discussed in Figs. 1 and 2 are from this meeting and demonstrate some of the procedures used.

The obstacles we observed continued across jurisdictions, most notably due to the ad hoc, hastily assembled feel of many of the meetings. The second Manhattan neighborhood assembly appeared to be inserted, possibly opportunistically, before another meeting on a different topic. There was no public signage indicating that a PB meeting was occurring. Many attendees appeared confused about what was happening (one of the researchers recollects that people were saying things like "What's this about?" and "Where is the meeting about the L train?"). The meeting was held in a location where people were required to show an ID to enter—an additional barrier. However, as it progressed an alternate door was opened allowing attendance without an ID.

Some organization did exist for citizen input. An observer note indicates one member of the public asked for planning material so that ideas could be coordinated with what the city is already doing. At several meetings, "Idea Cards" (see Fig. 4.3) were distributed to attendees. This was the only form of idea generation and gathering at the second Manhattan neighborhood assembly.[12]

[12] The card is also available in Spanish on the reverse.

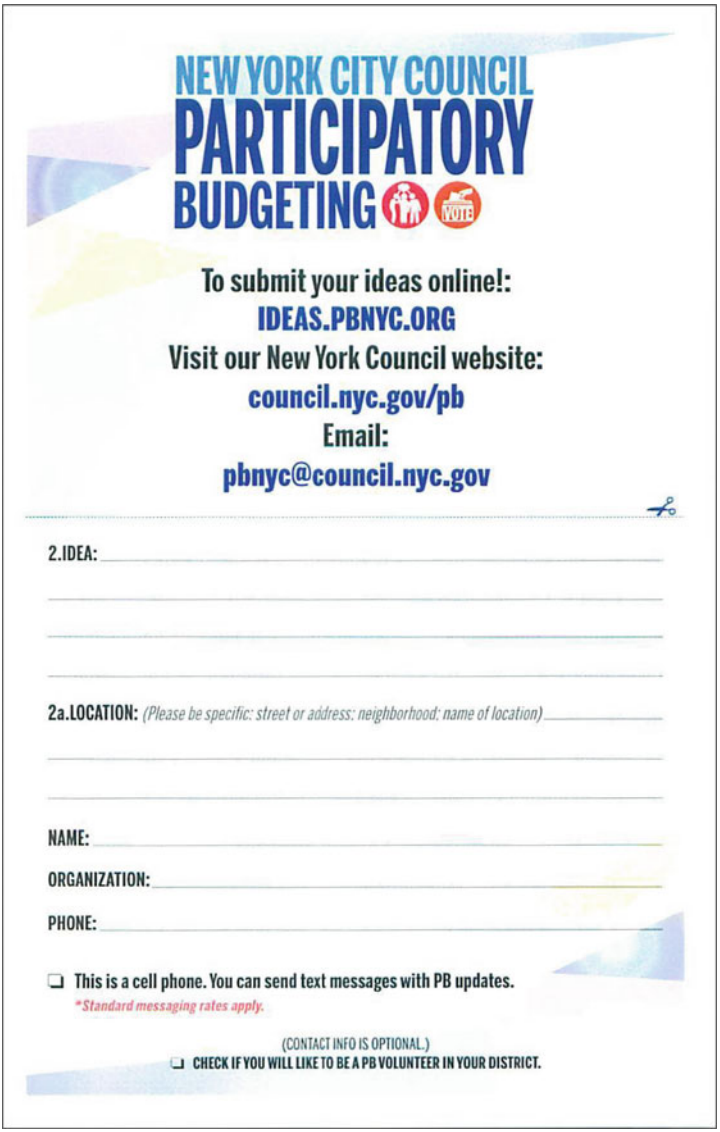

Fig. 4.3 Idea card (*Source* Distributed at neighborhood assemblies)

At several meetings, attendees were also encouraged to review a map of the council district to determine whether they were potential participants and, perhaps, for them to consider where projects might be considered.

In these meetings, again the top-down involvement—and the exclusivity of this involvement—returned as a theme. Particularly around matters of cost setting, the procedures that are laid out for citizens are subject to the influence of usually one centralized authority. At the third Manhattan neighborhood assembly we heard the following exchange:

> Speaker 6: And is that … are these amounts that get approved based on like a bid or?
>
> Speaker 2: So, what would happen is, you would come up with sort of the general idea in the budget delegate meetings and work on all that and then we would send them to the various city agencies. So, say it's something resurfacing … actually, no, let's go with … yeah, like resurfacing the NYCHA sidewalk repair. We would come up with idea and then we would send that idea over to the DOT. We would send it over to DOT. DOT would look over that idea and come back to us with a price estimate for that. So, that's how we get the price estimates.

Although the citizen deliberation is expected to be replete with proliferating ideas and expanded choices, when it comes to the actual numbers allocated for particular projects, ironically, there's little choice. Without any competitive bidding, the room for someone at an agency to set a participatory budgeting agenda by deeming one project too small and insignificant a cost to undertake, or too large and expensive, is actually quite large here. Even more important is the sense from those at these meetings that this isn't minimal oversight—top-down entities are expected to exert a great deal of influence over the PB stages.

From each of the seven meetings attended, we noted that the following ideas that were approved at the neighborhood assemblies in Table 4.1. Manhattan 1 was sparsely attended, only one idea is shown in observer notes. Manhattan 2 did not include a summary session and focused on idea cards, the contents of which were not shared, so we excluded that meeting from our analysis.

Table 4.1 Ideas approved at neighborhood assemblies

Manhattan 1	*Manhattan 3*	*Brooklyn*
Renovate school playground	Playground renovation School entry renovation Garden space/greenhouse Convert empty lot Camera security for park Increase public building accessibility	Traffic redesign Cleanup supply "share closet" Park bike path safety issue iPads for 5th grades Renovate school bathrooms Traffic calming Stop sign Outdoor seating at library High speed internet
Queens 1 (Schools)	*Queens 2 (Parks)*	*Queens 3 (Libraries and open call)*
Tech upgrade (2 schools mentioned) Gym equipment Hydroponic garden/science lab Auditorium upgrade	Workout equipment at a park Basketball court at a park 50 tree guards Enhance a park with dog park (2 parks mentioned) Enhance a park with skate park Phone charger fixtures at a park General renovation of a park (2 parks mentioned) Enhance a park with greenspace	Upgrade a public library (2 libraries mentioned) Improve a school library Add a second floor to a library Add a rooftop garden to a library New stage equipment at a school Greenspace at a playground Countdown clocks at a bus stop Auditorium upgrade at a school

Source Observer notes

In the next chapter, we look at the challenges of the next stage of the PB process. By seeking to gain access to and embed ourselves in many of these events, we gained a number of insights focusing on the ideals versus the reality of PB.

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