

Cole Has a Soul 2018: Participatory Budgeting Research and Evaluation Report Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Cole Has a Soul (CHAS) was one of the first participatory budgeting (PB) processes in Denver, CO, occurring simultaneously with [a process on the Auraria campus](#). CHAS launched in May 2018 and then went dormant for 3 months before restarting in August of that year and then concluding in December. In PB processes, residents directly decide how to spend a portion of a public budget through public deliberation, and CHAS participants collectively identified community needs, proposed potential solutions to those needs, and then voted for projects that allocated \$30,000 to Denver's Cole neighborhood.

Project Belay, a non-profit organization, coordinated CHAS with support from two other organizations: [Warm Cookies of the Revolution](#) and [Project Voyce](#). Although most PB processes are funded through tax dollars, CHAS allocated \$30,000 in community-improvement projects due to a grant from several area foundations: ArtPlace America; Arts in Society with the support of the Bonfils-Stanton Foundation; Hemera Foundation, and Colorado Creative Industries; and Colorado Art Tank with the support of Denver Arts and Venues and Denver Foundation's Arts Affinity Group. Cole residents formed a steering committee that identified explicit goals for the PB process: amplify all Cole voices, introduce and increase civic action, promote healthy community practices, and pilot a strong, replicable process in Northeast Denver. Organizers mostly succeeded in their goals, despite some challenges, and CHAS participants voted to fund three projects at \$10,000 each: a neighborhood farmers' market, a youth empowerment program, and a pop-up movie theater for free public film screenings. Below, we identify several key findings from our evaluation, as well as recommendations to improve future PB processes in Denver.

Key Findings

Overall, CHAS participants reported feeling more connected to their neighbors and community upon completion of the PB process. They also felt more empowered to affect community change either in future PB processes or through other means of civic engagement (e.g., contacting elected officials, participating in the neighborhood association, etc.). The process garnered significant participation from neighborhood residents, and the winning projects addressed historical inequities for the purpose of advancing social justice.

- 1. CHAS participants felt an increased sense of connection to their neighbors and their communities.** Upon completing the PB process, participants who submitted a project idea, served on the steering committee, developed a project proposal, and/or voted for projects consistently reported feeling an increased sense of connection to their neighbors and communities. CHAS provided an opportunity for residents to meet new people in the neighborhood and develop interpersonal bonds of trust through an intense, and, at times, challenging process. The process, therefore, played a significant role in increasing social capital for participants.

“I think that some of the issues that came up earlier was about engaging the community and figuring out the best way to do that. Do you flyer the neighborhood? Do you go to different businesses? It was trial and error that was successful. I think folks who lived in the neighborhood knew where to go and how to connect with others.” - CHAS Steering Committee Member

2. **CHAS successfully represented some demographic groups in the neighborhood, but other demographic groups were consistently under-represented.** More than 200 people participated in CHAS, and African Americans, Asian Americans, and Whites were represented proportionally to the neighborhood’s census demographics, sometimes even over-represented. Females tended to be overrepresented compared to neighborhood demographics, and people aged 25–44 participated at the highest rates in the process. However, residents who were Latinx, low-income, high school graduates without a college degree, under 18 years old, and over 65 years old were consistently under-represented.

“Maybe more Spanish representation would have been good. Maybe more effort toward making that happen. That is very difficult. I’m not sayin’ how to do it. [...] Because when I went out door knocking, I bet 75% of the people I talked with were Spanish speakers. I had with me Spanish speakers, so we were able to do it well. Because I had a crew with me that was separate from the steering committee. I hadn’t thought about that.” - CHAS Budget Delegate

3. **Participants reported feeling empowered after completing the PB process.** CHAS interviewees reported feeling as though they had more decision-making power in their communities. They also reported feeling better prepared to engage in other forms of civic engagement, such as becoming (more) active in their neighborhood association, lobbying local officials, and working with neighbors to organize meetings about issues of concern. The increased feelings of interpersonal connection were one factor that contributed to feelings of empowerment. The fact that CHAS was independent of local government support also was a point of pride for many participants, and their successful implementation of the PB process demonstrated to them that they were capable of taking care of their community without government support. This was a significant factor, given that the Cole neighborhood is majority-minority, and participants frequently discussed historical under-investment and exploitation by government actors. CHAS provided a pathway to improve the community without requiring engagement with what residents perceived as untrustworthy and patronizing government officials.

“The next piece is about evaluating ideas. It speaks to keeping the community’s best interest at heart, not thinking about your own needs, but thinking about the community’s needs. We’ll figure out how to prioritize projects that meet people’s deepest needs.” - CHAS Budget Delegate

“I think that community folks got engaged and understood the power and the process of budgeting, and there was some knowledge attained.” - CHAS staff member

4. **Winning projects were intended to address social inequities.** CHAS organizers explicitly strove to advance social justice through their PB process, both by promoting participation of

historically oppressed community members and by funding projects that addressed social inequities. The three winning projects (a farmers' market, a youth empowerment program, and a pop-up movie theater) addressed issues of food insecurity, truancy and violence among young people, and under-investment in safe community spaces for families. The farmer's market and the youth empowerment program relied on local expertise, with contracts to implement the programs awarded to organizations based in the Cole neighborhood, thereby keeping money in the community and promoting neighborhood resilience.

5. **Participants believed PB should continue.** When CHAS voters were asked whether PB should be implemented permanently, 89% of respondents said "yes," and no one said "no" (11% of respondents indicated they were "unsure"). In interviews, steering committee members and residents who developed project proposals for the ballot overwhelmingly voiced support for repeating the process, and many of them expressed interest in participating again, if PB were renewed. Interviewees hoped that, at the very least, they would be consulted for their local expertise on PB before another process was implemented in Denver.

"Participatory budgeting can help keep people engaged, help them build the cities that a lot of them set out to build." - CHAS staff member

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we believe PB deserves to be repeated in Denver, and we recommend that a citywide process be implemented permanently. Our evaluation of the Cole PB process led us to develop several recommendations that should be considered when implementing future PB processes in Denver.

1. **Increase the amount of money allocated through PB.** Although CHAS participants were able to develop and fund several community improvement projects that hold promise for positive impact in the neighborhood, they were consistently hampered by the relatively small amount of money they could allocate. In 2015, the average amount of money allocated in North American PB processes was \$9.85 per resident, but the \$30,000 in Cole amounted to just \$6.28 per resident. Providing a large enough pool of money to allocate through PB is essential for attracting participation from residents and ensuring that approved projects can make significant impacts. Future Denver PB processes should allocate at least \$9.85 per resident (totaling approximately \$27.5 million as of 2019), and the funds should be tied to inflation so that future processes are not undermined.

"It'd be great if there were more opportunities. And honestly, way, way more money. \$30,000? Nobody minds throwing that out there. Capital improvements need way more than that. I was trying' to think what this would like if the city adopted \$1 million per district." - CHAS Steering Committee member

2. **Increase the timeline for the PB process.** CHAS launched in May 2018 but went dormant for 3 months before restarting in August and running through December. Thus, the process essentially lasted only 4 months. The compressed timeline left CHAS participants struggling to conduct effective outreach, identify inclusive and equitable rules for the process, and successfully develop

project proposals. Across North America, PB processes typically last 8–9 months. We recommend that future PB processes in Denver adhere to an 8- or 9-month timeline to provide adequate time for equitable rule making, targeted outreach, and project proposal development. A longer PB process would grant more time for participants to engage in deliberation and therefore develop their civic habits, skills, and knowledge.

3. **Provide sufficient staff support while honoring and respecting resident expertise.** Some CHAS participants remarked that they would have liked more structure from process organizers and facilitators for implementing their PB process. The mostly hands-off approach from facilitators left participants struggling to understand what tasks were necessary to complete the process. Furthermore, a lack of participation from city staff members during project proposal development—despite participant reports that it was empowering for them—posed significant barriers for ensuring that projects were cost-effective and feasible. Future PB processes in Denver ought to provide robust staff/facilitator support to residents, especially with regard to preparing meeting agendas, implementing outreach strategies, and coordinating the various resources needed for the process. However, staff support should not undermine resident control of the process so that PB remains resident-led rather than staff-led. Lastly, future PB implementers ought to acknowledge and respect the expertise of CHAS residents, for now that they have completed one cycle of PB, they possess important experiential knowledge that could benefit future citywide processes.

“I think being intentional and deliberate about providing the necessary tools and resources so that whatever community it is implemented in, they’re able to have some chance at succeeding in it.” - CHAS staff member

4. **Implement a robust targeted outreach program:** The steering committee of future PB processes ought to spend time before the public launch of the process developing a robust targeted outreach program for residents that, historically, have been marginalized, oppressed, or excluded from civic affairs. These outreach strategies should be culturally appropriate and may require means of participant recruitment that are novel to city officials. For example, door-to-door canvassing, network recruitment, and hosting idea collection events in places that are significant to participants (e.g., in schools and places of worship) may be helpful. Targeted idea collection events (e.g., youth only, Spanish-speakers only, etc.) could increase participation among residents under 18 and for those whose first language is Spanish. Because of PB’s emphasis on promoting social justice outcomes, PB processes should strive, at least, for participants to reflect the demographic breakdown of the city, even over-representing underserved populations when possible. The expertise of resident steering committee members may be essential in developing the targeted outreach plan.

Cole Has a Soul At-A-Glance: Demographics & Survey Response Rates

| | Steering Committee | Idea Submitters | Change Makers | Voters | Cole Census |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|---------------|--------|-------------|
| Age | | | | | |
| Under 18 | 0.00% | 4.35% | 0.00% | 5.26% | 25.59% |
| 18-24 | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 10.52% | 4.38% |
| 25-34 | 17.00% | 39.13% | 20.00% | 24.56% | 26.70% |
| 35-44 | 17.00% | 8.70% | 20.00% | 36.84% | 20.69% |
| 45-54 | 33.00% | 17.39% | 40.00% | 8.77% | 9.09% |
| 55-64 | 17.00% | 21.74% | 20.00% | 10.53% | 6.93% |
| 65+ | 17.00% | 8.70% | 0.00% | 3.51% | 6.62% |
| Gender | | | | | |
| Female | 83.00% | 73.91% | 60.00% | 72.00% | 49.00% |
| Male | 17.00% | 26.09% | 40.00% | 26.00% | 51.00% |
| Transgender | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| Non-binary | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 2.00% | 0.00% |
| Different Gender Identity | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| Household Income | | | | | |
| Under \$10,000 | 0.00% | 14.29% | 20.00% | 10.91% | N/A |
| \$10,000 - \$24,999 | 0.00% | 14.29% | 0.00% | 9.09% | N/A |
| \$25,000 - \$49,999 | 50.00% | 23.81% | 40.00% | 18.18% | N/A |
| \$50,000 - \$74,999 | 16.67% | 9.52% | 0.00% | 16.36% | N/A |
| \$75,000 - \$99,999 | 16.67% | 14.29% | 20.00% | 7.27% | N/A |
| \$100,000 or more | 16.67% | 23.81% | 20.00% | 38.18% | N/A |
| Race | | | | | |
| American Indian or Alaska Native | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 3.08% | 0.04% |
| Asian | 33.00% | 3.85% | 17.00% | 6.15% | 0.00% |
| Hispanic or Latino/a | 33.00% | 7.69% | 0.00% | 23.08% | 51.58% |
| Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| White | 0.00% | 61.54% | 33.00% | 46.15% | 64.88% |
| Black or African American | 33.00% | 19.23% | 50.00% | 16.92% | 13.97% |
| Other (please specify): | 0.00% | 7.69% | 0.00% | 4.62% | 17.91% |
| Total Surveys Collected | 6 | 23 | 5 | 73 | |
| Response Rate | 75% | 11.56% | 100% | N/A | |