



**EXCEPTIONALLY WELL-IMPLEMENTED BEST PRACTICE:  
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE BUDGET PROCESS**

# Ada County, Idaho

## *The Ada County Budget Explorer*

BY HAGEN GURLEY



### About Ada County, Idaho

Ada County, located in southwest Idaho, has a population of 481,600 and is home to the capital city of Boise. The county is home to nearly 25 percent of the state's residents.



Ada County, Idaho, has made a new commitment to building trust within the community and giving the public open access to financial data in an interesting and intuitive format. To further this mission, the county developed an interactive tool, the Ada County Budget Explorer, to help citizens explore the fiscal 2020 budget. The tool helps citizens understand the budgeting process, demonstrates how the budget is distributed among service areas within the county, and illustrates the impact of these services on individual residents' taxes. Phil McGrane, Ada County's newly elected county clerk, explains, "The tool allows the user to access and analyze the budget on a broad level and hone in on information as specific as a line item."

"There is an enormous amount of data. How do you help an average user navigate the tool and find what they are looking for? The strength of the Budget Explorer lies in the narrative pieces that describe the budget processes," says McGrane. Wading through financial information isn't always easy or exciting, and Ada County's Budget Explorer has made the process more user-friendly, including incorporating interactive Tableau Dashboards to tell the story of Ada County's financial situation. McGrane credits his team—Chelsea Carattini, communications specialist; Kathleen Graves, controller; Daisy Lewis, administrative specialist; and Anthony Lock-Smith, data analyst and the architect of the Tableau Dashboards—with the success of the Budget Explorer. "Anthony really deserves so much credit, perfecting the tool after each round of feedback."

McGrane encourages other governments to do something similar. "Empowering citizens with information builds trust," he said. "Better access to information brings about increased transparency. The government gets fewer questions from residents, and citizens have a greater understanding for how they contribute to government services."

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Local governments grapple with issues of **transparency, public education, and public engagement**, particularly with regard to financial information. It is difficult to make complex financial information accessible, digestible, and engaging for the general public.”

—PHIL McGRANE, ADA COUNTY CLERK



The Ada County Budget Explorer gives citizens access to the county's entire budgeting process using interactive Tableau Dashboards.

### THREE MAIN TENETS

Ada County's Budget Explorer follows three main tenets to improve public engagement and transparency in the budget process.

- 1. Encourage public engagement.** As part of its commitment to transparency, Ada County has encouraged a broad array of perspectives. Central to this idea is communicating information to the public in a format that they can understand easily. The interactive Budget Explorer is easy to navigate as it details the steps of the budget process. It also provides more detailed information for users who want a better understanding of revenue sources and what expenditures are used for.
- 2. Provide the engagement medium.** The Budget Explorer provides all residents with online access to information about how every dollar of the annual budget is spent, along with detailed explanations for users who don't understand technical terminology. Hovering over each element of the budget process provides pop-ups that supply additional information to contextualize the budget elements. For instance, the county spends more than \$123 million on public safety each year. This number is tangible, but it makes a lot more sense when users realize that it constitutes nearly 43 percent of the annual budget.
- 3. Propose opportunities for future engagement.** Beyond engaging with the data provided through the Budget Explorer, Ada County citizens can also voice their concerns, ask probing questions, seek clarification, and suggest solutions to current budget issues, proposed budget items, and future resource requirements. County officials encourage participation at monthly board meetings, along with special meetings that primarily focus on the budget.

Ada County has improved the transparency of its budget process, along with citizen engagement, by publishing timely, relevant budget data in an easily understood format. Residents can use the tiles on the home page to quickly navigate to the county's budget process, drill down to specific revenues, learn about expenditure needs, and even meet the county budget team. The Budget Explorer has been hailed as a great stride forward.

### GFOA BEST PRACTICE

Ada County made use of GFOA's *Public Engagement in the Budget Process* Best Practice in creating its Budget Explorer. In the best practice, GFOA recommends that governments encourage effective and well-implemented public engagement budget processes, enabling the public to work with their government to help make beneficial budget decisions. Governments are encouraged to decide the purpose of public engagement, encourage people to engage, provide an engagement medium, and provide opportunities for future engagements.

### TOOLS AND RESOURCES

- The Budget Explorer is available at [adacounty.id.gov/clerk/budget-finance/budget-explorer](http://adacounty.id.gov/clerk/budget-finance/budget-explorer).
- You can see a video demonstration of the Budget Explorer at [youtu.be/LZvQLDeaVrw](https://youtu.be/LZvQLDeaVrw).

*Hagen Gurley is a graduate student at the J.M School of Accounting at the University of Georgia. He is also an intern working in GFOA's Research and Consulting Center.*