

20/20 & Baltimore's Budget: *The Pretense of Participation*



The 20/20 Vision & Democracy

Government must engage citizens and support their participation in democracy. And few decisions are as important to democracy as the budgeting of taxpayer money.

The Baltimore Housing Roundtable's 20/20 vision asks the City to commit \$20 million each year in its budget for permanently affordable housing and \$20 million annually for projects that deconstruct, demolish, and green vacant property by employing returning citizens.

This 20/20 vision primarily involves the "Capital Budget" also known as the "Capital Improvement Program", which generally funds construction projects and uses city borrowing (bonds) to cover costs. The Capital Budget combines with the Operating Budget --which funds salaries, services, and equipment, and uses the regular flow of taxpayer money, federal and state grants to cover costs—to form the entire City Budget.

The Mayor expressed support for the 20/20 vision during her campaign, and in May 2017, at a "United Not Blighted Rally" five months after her election. Our effort to hold the Mayor accountable to her 20/20 promise is hindered if we as taxpayers are excluded from the Capital Budget preparation process.



Budget Process Democracy

Baltimore does not afford the public meaningful opportunities to participate in budget preparation.

The City's "Executive Budgeting" process means the Mayor proposes the budget and the City Council has the power only to cut. Therefore, the formation of the Mayor's budget is the most important step in the budgetary process. Yet, the public has no opportunity for input during budget formation.

The Capital Budget blueprint and projects are decided upon through an information exchange process between city agencies, the Planning Department, and the Planning Commission during the months of October through January.

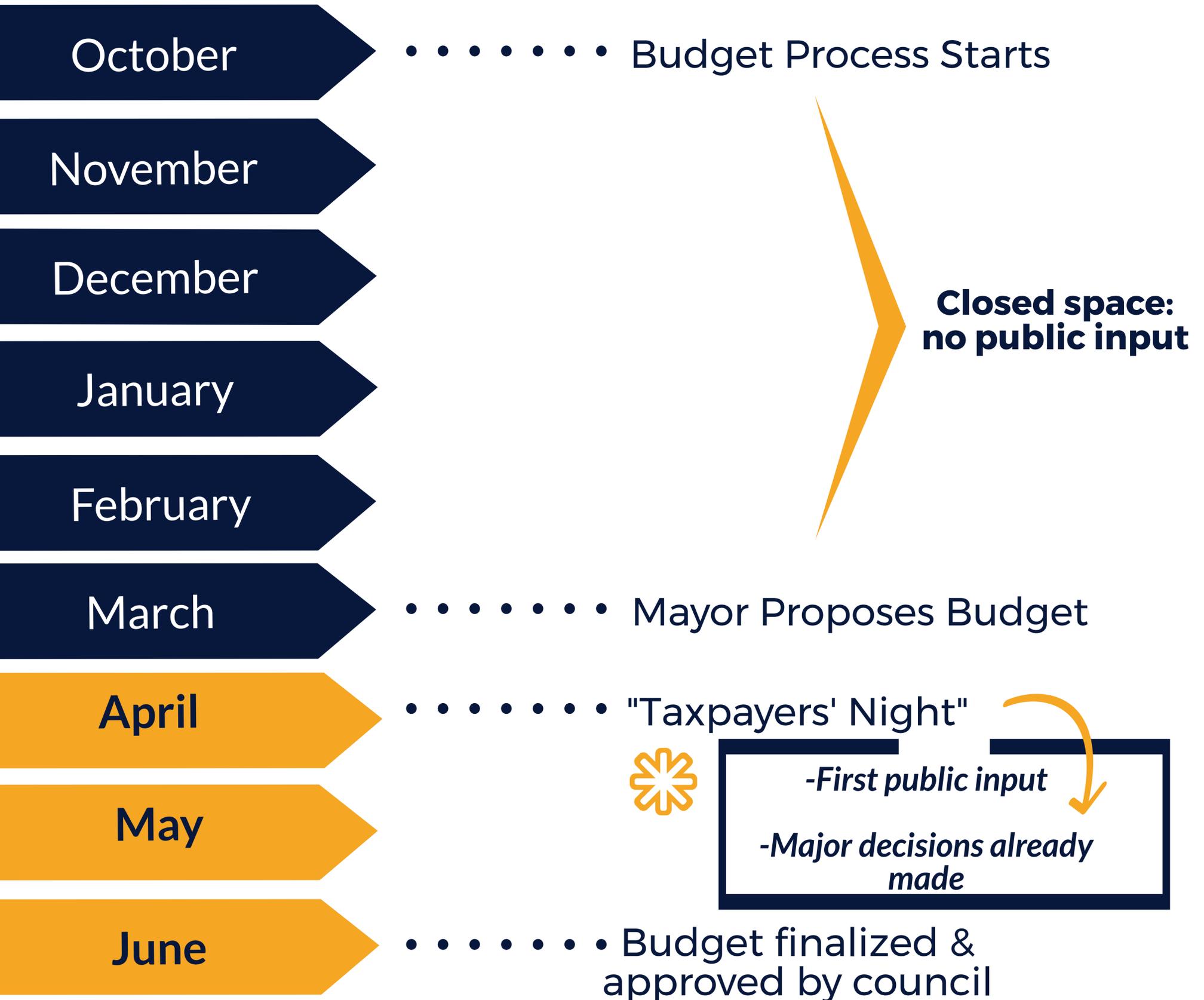
The proposed Capital budget then goes to the Board of Estimates (controlled by the Mayor) in April. Only then, seven months after budget preparation began, is the public invited to a Board hearing known as "Taxpayers' Night." This is not only the first opportunity for public input, but the last time anything new can be added to the Mayor's budget proposal! If 20/20 is not in the Capital budget at this point, there is little we can do about it at taxpayer night.

The City Council does hold agency hearings and has its own "Taxpayers' Night," but its power is limited. Major decisions about the contours of the budget have already been made—the Council can only cut budget line items. Under the City Charter, the Mayor and Council must pass a budget by June 30 each year.

In short, when it comes to spending our taxes, we are merely consultants—called in briefly to give the veneer of public input, but denied the opportunity for meaningful participation.



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20/20 Vision for Baltimore

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What Are Our Options?

In *Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis*, John Gaventa identifies a continuum of “spaces” for community participation:

Closed Spaces

are where decisions are made by a set of actors behind closed doors, without any pretense of broadening the boundaries for inclusion. (This is the budget preparation process in Baltimore.)

Invited Spaces

are those into which people are invited to participate. They may be regularized and ongoing, or more transient, through one-off forms of consultation. (Taxpayer night is a space to which we're invited for a one-time consultation.)

Claimed Spaces

are those that emerge out of common concerns and may come into being as a result of people coming together and creating spaces where their demands can be heard and considered.

Public participation in securing a 20/20 Capital Budget will require us to either trust the Mayor in closed spaces, hope we're heard in our one invited space, or take action ourselves to create spaces where our vision is recognized.

The Baltimore Housing Roundtable is ready to claim space in the budget preparation process. Over the last six months, we have secured over 18,000 citizen petitions for 20/20. A crowd-funding campaign to renovate one vacant house-- a microcosm of 20/20-- has raised almost \$20,000 in only four weeks. Attendance at monthly BHR meetings has grown exponentially, and seven City Council members have endorsed 20/20.

We have the momentum to make ourselves heard in this closed budget process if we create and claim our own spaces. You are needed for that--your ideas, feedback, energy and time. Our power together is the means to claim our 20/20 vision for Baltimore.

Join us, by contacting amanda@unitedworkers.org, 410-259-6074 or peter@nesri.org, 301-639-2561.

--Peter Sabonis

National Economic and Social Rights Initiative
Baltimore Housing Roundtable Member



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