

“One Last Look”: A More Deliberative Budget Process

Mayor Landrieu’s administration introduced two welcome changes in this year’s city budget process. The Mayor first announced and then held community meetings to solicit input from citizens. He also announced and followed through with plans to deliver a proposed budget to the City Council on October 15, two weeks ahead of the normal November 1 schedule.

Most everyone agrees that the budget process in recent years had all the elements of a debacle, with too little chance for public input by affected citizens, too little time for the Council to evaluate a proposed budget, and too many last-minute changes that denied meaningful opportunities for the public to be heard on the final budget allocations. The Mayor addressed two of those three problems with his community meetings and the earlier delivery of a budget.

Now, the City Council has an opportunity—and a responsibility—to address the last piece by delivering its own proposed version of a budget before Thanksgiving, so that the press, the public, governmental research organizations, and numerous other stakeholders will have a meaningful opportunity to digest the final recommendations before the December 1 final vote on the City’s 2011 Budget.

The City Council would, of course, retain power to make further changes after Wednesday, November 24. Indeed, refinement of the budget may be advisable after the public weighs in on that proposed final version.

But citizens haven’t had a meaningful “last look” at the proposed final budget in previous years because the City Council typically voted through a flurry of substantial, last-minute changes in its December 1 budget approval meeting. This year, the City Council should do its part to further governmental openness and encourage citizen participation by presenting its own proposed final budget for a “last look” one week before the Charter’s December 1 deadline.

New Orleans welcomed new leadership into City Hall on May 3rd of this year. Since then, we’ve incorporated many new policies and procedures into city government. Now we’ve got the opportunity to usher into existence an exemplary model of open budgeting that will change the relationship between citizens and their government. We’ll be a stronger, better, more united and more open community if we continue to improve the dialogue between government and the governed by giving citizens a meaningful opportunity to have “one last look” at the proposed final budget before it’s adopted by the City Council.

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