

The Charlotte County Budget Process

By Gordon Burger, Budget Director

On Oct. 1, 2013 Charlotte County government began its 2013/14 fiscal year with a net budget of \$564 million. I'd like to explain the process we went through to develop this budget. For local governments the budget is far more than just a list of line items of what is going to be spent. The budget is how strategic direction, policy and priorities are set; it's a long-range financial plan and an operations guide. As important as the budget is, the process is just as important. The purpose of the budget process is to help decision makers make informed choices about the provision of services and capital assets and to promote stakeholder participation in the process. This process has four major stages: establish goals, develop strategies, link the budget to the strategies, and finally evaluate and adjust.

Establish broad goals to guide decision making. The Board of County Commissioners (BCC) establishes these focus area goals and the role of administration is to ensure stakeholder input to guarantee that the board has the best information possible. This was facilitated through several efforts:

A citizen survey was conducted by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and the National Research Center. The National Citizen Survey is a standardized survey that makes use of statistically-valid methodology, questions and sample sizes. This survey was identical to ones done in 2007 and 2010, giving the county the ability to compare not only with those results but also with 500+ governments across the nation and 34 within the state of Florida. Additional citizen input was obtained through an online survey for ranking of services and through public input at meetings.

An online survey of our employees was conducted by "Business and Legal Reports, Inc., and the HR Daily Advisor." Approximately 61 percent of the organization responded. This survey provided us with an assessment of our strengths and weaknesses as well as a comparison with results from 2010 and other entities that participated.

To take advantage of the wide range of knowledge and expertise within the organization, we brought together subject-matter experts from county departments to conduct an analysis of our Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) categorized by BCC focus area. The exercise included a forecast of what they saw as the key issues for the coming years.

Armed with this input the BCC conducted a series of workshops where they reaffirmed their strategic focus areas and articulated 60 distinct goals within those areas. The strategic focus areas are economic development, growth management, public safety, human services, fiscal/financial planning, water resources, quality of life, and efficient and effective government.

Develop strategies to achieve those goals. During the month of March, the internal experts that participated in the SWOT analysis were brought back together to generate a list of what activities or strategies were already being deployed toward the BCC goals and what additional options were available.

In April each department met with administration to discuss their budgetary needs and further explore potential initiatives toward advancing the BCC goals.

During the month of May a series of Board workshops were held to present and discuss strategies and initiatives with the Board around these goals. Through those workshops the Board provided direction to the organization on specific initiatives to employ.

Link the budget to strategies. In preparing their budget requests, direction to departments was two-fold: maintain current levels of service, and work with fiscal services to develop costs around efforts that would advance the BCC goals. The fiscal division met with each department on a recurring basis to assist and ensure consistency and compliance. The product of this process is a balanced five-year projection for the County Budget.

Evaluate performance and adjust. The budget is not a static document, but one that is continually monitored and amended in an ongoing basis. The fiscal division updates departmental projections on a monthly basis and conducts quarterly business meetings with departments. In addition, each action brought for consideration to the Board of County Commissioners includes evaluation and budgetary amendments that would be necessary.

Charlotte County has moved to a two-year planning process and one of the strengths is that it allows us to conduct more thorough analysis in the second year; such as in-depth analysis of past efforts, in-depth review of proposals that were identified in the budget process, and update and review of metrics.

We continually strive to improve the budget process and one of our goals this year is to make budget information and the budget process more accessible and intuitive. Please visit our website at www.CharlotteCountyFL.gov and click the "Transparency" tab at the top to see what this looks like. Once you have checked it out we welcome your feedback by selecting the "Contact Us" button on the side of the page.