Effective Budget Communication Strategies

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Great leadership is in our nature.

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Welcome & Framing the Reality

What this session will do for you:

- Help you explain budget decisions with confidence and clarity
- Reduce friction with elected officials, staff, and the public
- Strengthen trust during high-stakes budget conversations

Why Budget Communication Breaks Down

Key realities municipal leaders face:

- Budgets are technical. Emotions are not.
- Most people only engage when something feels like a loss.
- Silence gets filled with assumptions.

Knowing Your Audience Before You Speak

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Three Audiences. Three Messages.

- Elected Officials
  - Decision-focused
  - Politically risk aware
  - Short attention window
- Staff
  - Operational impact focused
  - Concerned about workload and capacity
  - Frontline staff often answer questions first
  - Need simple, consistent talking points
- Public
  - Outcome focused
  - Personal impact driven
  - Distrust grows when information feels withheld

Key takeaway: Same budget. Different story.

Small vs. Large Community Realities

Small and Rural Communities

- Relationships are personal
- Budget decisions feel immediate
- Limited staff capacity increases visibility of tradeoffs

Mid to Large Cities

- Complexity creates distance
- More formal processes and layers
- Harder to humanize decisions

The Budget Narrative Framework:

Move From Numbers to Narrative

Introduce a simple narrative structure managers can reuse:

- **Context:** What pressures or conditions shaped this budget?
- **Choices:** What options were on the table?
- **Tradeoffs:** What could not be funded and why?
- **Outcomes:** What residents and staff will see or experience?

Key point: Transparency is not about volume of data. It is about explaining decisions and tradeoffs clearly.

The Budget Narrative Framework: Examples

Instead of saying:
"The General Fund increase reflects contractual obligations and inflationary pressures."

Say:
"This budget prioritizes keeping core services stable while managing rising costs we cannot control."

Quick activity: Ask participants to rewrite one sentence they commonly use.

Visual Tools That Actually Work

What Makes a Budget Visual Effective

Effective visuals:

- Show direction, not just detail
- Answer “why” before “how much”
- Can be explained in under 30 seconds

Avoid:

- Overloaded tables
- Screenshots of spreadsheets
- Charts without context

Budget Communication Toolkit

Introduce a toolkit mindset, not a single slide:

- One-page budget summary
- “Where the dollar goes” graphic
- Service impact visuals
- Capital investment timelines

Small community tip: Fewer visuals, more repetition
Large community tip: Consistent visuals across departments

High-Stakes Moments. Millages, Bonds, & Major Investments

Why These Conversations Are Different

- Updated framing and emphasis
- When additional revenue is involved:
- Trust matters more than persuasion
- Residents are evaluating credibility, not math
- History always enters the room

Key shift: From selling to explaining. If you feel like you are selling, your audience feels like they are being sold to.

What the Public Needs to Hear

- Focus messages on:
  - What the department, building, or team does today
  - What challenges they face doing that work
  - What the future could look like with the right tools, space, or equipment *(or not)*
  - How investments protect service quality and community safety over time

Do not lead with the financial ask. Lead with the people, places, and services residents already care about.

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Effective strategies 6–18 months ahead:

- **Offer monthly or quarterly department tours**
  - Allow staff to be the experts
  - Showcase real constraints. Space. Technology. Equipment
  - Example: an aging police facility that no longer supports modern operations
- **Host informal, community-centered events**
  - “Meet the Parks” days
  - Grill-outs, open houses, family-friendly gatherings
  - Share hopes and long-term plans without referencing a ballot question
- **Use visual storytelling for capital needs**
  - Example: “Anatomy of a Fire Engine”
  - Highlight features and explain how staff actually use them to save lives
- **Build a one-year storytelling plan ahead of the request**
  - Monthly check-ins with department leaders
  - Identify stories about people, buildings, equipment, and service delivery
  - Allow residents to build personal connection well before a funding conversation

High-Stakes Moments. Millages, Bonds, & Major Investments

Information vs. Advocacy

Most municipalities **cannot** advocate for a millage. However, you can:

- Explain conditions
- Share operational realities
- Provide context for future decisions

Your role is to **create informed residents**, not to tell them how to vote.

Applying the Framework

Discussion Prompt:

Think about an upcoming or recent budget decision.

Answer and discuss with a neighbor:

- What was the hardest question you received?
- Which part of the narrative was missing?

What To Do Monday Morning

Three Actions to Take Back:

- Rewrite one budget message using the narrative framework
- Identify one visual you can simplify or retire
- Find one frontline employee and share a budget message or narrative with them. Ask them to explain it back to you. If they cannot, the message is not ready for the public

Final takeaway: Clear budget communication does not eliminate disagreement. It builds understanding and trust when it matters most.

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