

[Learning from COVID-19: Shaping a Health and Human Rights Agenda for our Region](#)
Community forum 4/30/20

City Budgets in Tough Times: Ensuring Equity and Justice. Speakers: Jamil Bey, Urbankind Institute; **Carl Redwood**, Hill District Consensus Group; **Laura Wiens**, Pittsburghers for Public Transit, Facilitator: **Jay Ting Walker**, Green Party of Allegheny County

*Recently Mayor Peduto warned of coming budget cuts in the tens of millions of dollars, calling on Pittsburghers to share the needed sacrifices over coming years. Yet, in “normal” times, public officials care little about equity and shared sacrifice, and low-income neighborhoods and communities of color have seen steady disinvestment and cuts to public services justified by government austerity. Those same communities are now disproportionately called on to perform the “essential work” needed to sustain life and livelihoods during this pandemic. A post-pandemic “normal” requires real equity in budgeting, where we **put the needs of those furthest behind first** when allocating public funds. For too long the scarcity narrative has dictated our politics. We’ve been told that government austerity is needed to support “economic growth” that will “trickle down” to benefit all. COVID-19 has demonstrated the fatal flaws of this system that fails to support the essential work of caring and providing for the basic needs of our communities. This forum will explore lessons from activism around economic development and equity that can help us reframe the new austerity conversation to prioritize the needs of those long neglected. By centering dignity, equity, and human rights in budget discussions, and by employing more democratic and participatory processes in development planning, we reinforce the robust foundations we need for resilient and just communities.*

- *We can’t return to status quo. Resilience and well-being requires dramatic improvements to public infrastructure and support for housing, food, & health security.*
- *The needs of essential workers need to be central in planning and resource allocations. Planning must put needs of “furthest behind first,” to ensure the well-being of all of us.*

KEY QUESTIONS

1) What are our community’s budget priorities?

Experience shows that City budgets have prioritized the interests of developers and (larger) businesses, with the idea that economic growth and investment are essential for our community’s well-being. But wealth hasn’t “trickled down,” and development has led to massive displacement of low-income and African American residents, and it has left huge segments of our City’s population vulnerable to crises like today’s pandemic.

2) Who determines our City budget?

The Allegheny Conference and Chamber of Commerce have been major players in shaping our City’s budget allocations. Residents are at a disadvantage due to the lack of transparency and the need for people-power to follow and engage with budget policy process. Volunteer groups lack capacity for this work, while business interests and foundations have paid staff that do this.

3) How must we re-think taxation and governance?

The immense and sudden loss of public revenues we're seeing at a time when residents need public support for their very survival shows that the status quo has failed to set up a system that ensures a secure fund of public resources that can help communities endure the various crises we know we now face. Fairer taxation policies are needed, and the City's large nonprofit entities (including foundations) must be contributing to our tax base rather than providing voluntary contributions to public projects and needs of their choice.

Participants raised concerns about how we can **frame discussions** of taxation in ways that don't fall into the familiar polarized debates. The pandemic also shows how important it is to have competent, capable, and functioning government. How can we overcome decades of anti-government rhetoric to build a broad base of support for transformative change?

4) How do we build power to shift budget priorities and ensure a public voice in budget and planning processes?

We need to counter the divide and conquer tactics that elites have used to divide people. We need to reject the artificial boundaries the policy process places on issues such as housing, food, transit, education, etc. Our identities and issues are intersectional and interdependent. Conventional electoral politics and policy processes create divisions that serve powerful groups and undermine community power. So we need to **work across issues and build coalitions**.

We need to move from the position of reacting to threats or initiatives driven from above and be pro-active in putting forward a vision of a real alternative. We need to **lead with our vision** of what kind of community we want, and develop blueprints and strategies for carrying them forward.

Possible Areas for Action

Policy Ideas

There's a need for much greater **transparency and accountability** in public budget process. City needs to do better supporting public participation in the process. Support in making documents accessible and legible to all residents and supporting **public capacity to effectively participate** in budget and planning.

We need fair **taxation**. Corporations and large "non-profits" must support the infrastructure that we all depend upon. They need to pay workers living wages—which account for the cost of housing. Policies like a corporate head tax (proposed in Seattle) should be considered.

Federal military spending- vs. 'real security': Since people's immediate security needs are at stake, we should be questioning the allocations of nearly \$1 trillion annually to the military

industrial complex— U.S. Conference of Mayors [Resolution Calling for Hearings on Real City Budgets Needed and the Taxes our Cities Send to the Federal Military Budget \(2017\)](#).

Attention to outer boroughs—many of those displaced from the city due to housing costs or job losses are pushed to communities with even worse budget crises.

Framing

The pandemic makes clear the need to shift thinking and **discourse from market-oriented to people-oriented language**. Organizers and leaders in Jackson Mississippi have used the notion of [“human rights budgeting”](#). And the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has provided resources for [Realizing Human Rights Through Government Budgets](#).

Jobs vs. livelihoods – Development and planning tends to focus on “creating jobs” or “bringing jobs to our community.” But what we haven’t been asking is whether these jobs are providing what we need to live and thrive. And will they help existing residents, or displace them? For decades, workers have seen declines in both wages and in their ability to afford housing and other basic needs. Local and national governments have reduced spending for public housing, education, health care, and infrastructure. As shutdowns force many from their jobs, government is needed to help provide for people’s livelihoods so that everyone can follow physical distancing guidelines. The lack of adequate funding to allow people to meet these needs is driving pressure to re-open the economy before health officials deem it safe, undermining our ability to contain the coronavirus.

Countering **market “efficiency” logics** to advocate for public good/capacity/preparation & adaptation. We need government budgets with surplus capacity, just as we need hospitals with empty beds ready to accept patients. Market “efficiency” metrics pares down capacity to the minimum, reducing government capacity for planning, regulation/oversight, and adaptation. One-size fits all policies benefit large-scale business operations and fail to serve small/local operators and community needs.

Institutional context

Strengthened role for Commission on Human Relations?

Role for Gender Equity Commission? *Make sure budget cuts don’t derail this new Commission.*

----- Rough speaker notes

Laura:

- PPT campaigns have focused on providing emergency transit funding through crisis, amid the elite-led chorus calling for austerity and privatization. We need to counter these frames in public policy debates.

- To address crisis, County has enacted free fare system, which is something PPT has proposed, so there are opportunities to push for creative ways to address transit access and expansion.
- Port Authority budgeting process is not transparent, limits public participation and access
- PPT Fair Fares campaign- fare system discriminates against low-income residents – post-crisis we need to demand that this change.
- PPT work to gather rider input on transit planning has led to effective models for enhancing public knowledge about the system and generating rider input on routes, etc.
 - Pro-active work to advocate for rider blueprints for transit are needed for new status quo
 - *We need to lead with our vision of what is possible and necessary for our communities.* PAT planning has not incorporated community needs.
 - Need transparency in budget: Why does state divert transit funds to police?

Carl

- City, URA, Sports Authority will all be seeing major declines in revenue, and will be calling for austerity.
- Federal funding is likely to come through CDBG program, which has not been transparent enough to insure that funds actually are used –as intended—to support low and moderate-income residents.
- City needs to provide more transparent and detailed federal performance reports on CDBG spending. [DEMAND]
- Sports subsidies—are effectively advance loans to franchises based on anticipated future revenues from parking, entertainment taxes, etc. Those are now lost, and public is holding the bag. We need to consider how the losses can be more fairly shared with Penns/sports franchise. [Penns also have not fulfilled promises to city-regarding parking revenues, etc.] [Economic justice circle](#)- budget watchdog has been working to support these improvements.

Jamil

- **Funding priorities** for our community should consist of **equity in access to: Health, Housing, Transit, and Workforce Development.**
- In crisis, we see the central role that health and equity play in everyone's well being.
- Need to center the essential workers who support these priorities, and whose needs must be met if we all are to thrive.
- Attention to outer boroughs—many of those displaced from the city due to housing costs or job losses are pushed to communities with even worse budget crises.