

County of Marin Summary of Community Budget Forum March 23, 2010



Forum Overview

As part of the FY 2010-11 budget process, the County conducted a community budget forum on March 23rd in San Rafael. This forum provided the public with an opportunity to hear an overview of the County's financial challenges and proposed budget reductions to balance next year's budget and to ask questions and share ideas. The forum was promoted primarily through the County's email distribution lists and website and the *Marin Independent Journal*. The forum was webcast live on the Marin County Government Channel at www.marinchannel.org and San Rafael and Novato Public Access Television and also allowed for online submission of questions and comments through the County's Twitter and Facebook accounts.

The forum was put on by the County Administrator's Office and held from 6:30-8:30 p.m. at the Board of Supervisors Chambers in the Marin County Civic Center. It was attended by approximately 50 people from throughout the county.

Purpose and Format

The overall purpose of the forum was to:

1. Provide information about County's financial challenges and recommended reductions to close next year's budget shortfall
2. Receive and understand public input on these challenges and recommended reductions
3. Get creative ideas and ways on how the County can adapt to the changing economic times

To accomplish this purpose, the forum format was designed to create an environment for attendees to learn more about the County's financial challenges, ask questions and of the share comments with County officials, and work together to identify and share creative ideas to help the County adapt to the difficult economic conditions.

The forum began by with a welcome by Supervisor Susan Adams and asking the audience what brought them to the forum. Attendees then heard an overview presentation by County Administrator Matthew Hymel. Following this presentation, three department heads (including Health and Human Services Director Larry Meredith, Chief Probation Office Mike Daly, and Interim Parks and Open Space Director Clarissa Daniel) spoke to the audience about how the budget reductions impacted their specific departments. Following a Q&A period with the speakers, attendees broke into small groups to brainstorm creative ideas and solutions to help County government adapt to the challenging times.

Overview and Results of Small-Group Brainstorming

One of the goals of the community forum was to generate constructive ideas and solutions to help inform the County's budget decisions. To gather this information, three groups of attendees (with approximately 3-7 people per group) worked together with County staff facilitators to brain storm answers and arrive at their top suggestions. Attendees were divided into the small groups in the Board Chambers and adjacent rooms based on colored dots affixed to nametags. To begin this brainstorming process, attendees in the small groups were asked a general question:

"How can we adapt to the changing economic times while preserving Marin's legacy?"

Common themes from the small group discussion were:

- Develop creative ideas
- Explore other ways to generate revenue
- Encourage greater volunteerism in County government
- Consider other funding options for Mediation Services

Below is a more detailed reporting that identifies the brainstorming ideas and the top suggestions by each of the three groups.

Group 1 (Red Group)

Brainstorming

- Cost Reductions
 - Consider elimination of certain trainings (Covey)
 - Reduce paper use – get more electronic
 - Election/voting process – can it go electronic to save \$?
 - Non payroll expenses – group purchasing Countywide
- Income Generators
 - Revenue-generating community (and trusts)
 - Fee increases that don't negatively affect the poor
- Creative Ideas
 - Go back to social security/pension benefits similar to private sector
 - Ask retirees to volunteer
 - Going solar
 - Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) expansion
- Accounting/Financial Oversight
 - Countywide prevention plan with communities as partners
 - Dynamic real-time task force to monitor underlying substance to financial models
 - Regular review of fees by BOS
 - Countywide audit – asset based
 - Look at best practices/business models by departments
 - Furlough days credited to their (department) own cost center
- Questions
 - Marin Energy Authority – is it saving \$ and creating jobs?
 - What is pension unfunded liability at this time and moving forward for next 5 years? Is it coming out of General Fund?
 - Mediation services – can they keep non-General Fund \$?

Group 2 (Orange Group)

Brainstorming

- HHS
 - Transitioning out case managers is a complex issue (maternity clinic). Clinic employees need to be in dialogue with clinic taking it on and the head of HHS.
 - Feasibility of Marin Community Clinics (MCC) doing the billings, but services being provided HHS? Or contract with HHS through MCC?

- Mediation Services
 - What is the County doing to generate income? Why have Mediation Services not had a fee increase? Sales leaseback?
 - Mediation is a cost cutting service. Mediation and DA may or may not be a good fit.
- Volunteerism
 - Problem with coordination with public agencies. Serious volunteers run into “union” type conflict. How can we encourage volunteerism?
 - Volunteerism is an adaptation – but we have to get past liability.
- Other
 - Administrative overlap and excessive duplication, redundancy, top-heavy
 - Q: Who is taking care of Disaster Preparedness?

Group 3 (Blue Group)

Brainstorming

- Income Generators
 - Use our \$ opportunity makers
 - Strategically use Friends of Marin Center (FOMC); make Marin Center work better for us
 - Have weddings at exhibit hall
 - Bring new/young/\$ audiences
 - Parks
 - Outdoor music
 - More marketing
 - Marin County Fair – bring big funders together to keep adapt
 - More volunteers at every level
 - Mediation fees increase
- Communication
 - Electronic communications up-to-date
 - Keep public informed
 - Small participation is better than none
 - Bring new fresh faces to decision making ideas and be more open to hearing
 - volunteer voices count
 - listen to the community as we develop strategic plans
 - Evaluate how our diverse population has come together - bring minorities into decisions
 - Try to connect socioeconomic spectrum to work together
 - Recognize our friends and start playing together differently
 - Enlist boards and membership across different interests

- Creative Ideas
 - Write grants to be less categorical
 - Don't give up on things that haven't been priorities in the past

Attendee Evaluations

Attendees who provided email addresses were emailed an online survey following the forum to assess the usefulness of the forum and to identify areas of improvement. We received 10 responses to the survey and below is a summary of the responses:

Question 1: Please rate the over all quality of the Community Budget Forum

Excellent	1	10%
Good	5	50%
Fair	2	20%
Poor	2	20%

Question 2: What did you like best about the Community Budget Forum?

- It was an open forum where the public could offer its advice. The County employees/officials in attendance seemed earnest in their desire to hear from the public about the oncoming budget crisis.
- Public input which has been lacking due to specifics of cuts.
- Information given by the County on the cuts and reasons why.
- Hearing from the community in response to the administrators.
- An opportunity for dialogue.
- All attendees were able to voice their opinions.

Question 3: Is there anything about the forum that could be improved for future forums?

- County employees should not lead the groups. This may sound like a picky thing, but they arguably have an interest to sway what ideas are eventually brought to the County decision makers about the budget.
- Make sure speakers speak in practical, pragmatic terms, as some were too abstract
- Would have been nice for more of the Supervisors to be in attendance - it would lend credibility to their openness to hearing what the public has to say.
- Yes, let the public know exactly what is planned for reduction or cuts so they can inform the Board of their priorities or desires in the types and level of services for discretionary programs.

- More community forums where the community can speak their concerns, more time within each forum to speak of the concerns of the public, and more ample time in advance notice so the community can be informed and be able to come.
- Larger space with more ventilation and more time for questions from people.
- I'm not so sure about the small group format having a real function. I feel it's a way to appease the public without really being open to input.
- You may need a larger room if you keep having these!
- When specific problems are known to be of interest-- here it was MMS's situation-- they need to be addressed early and comprehensively in the overview.

Question 4: How did you hear about the forum?

County website	2
County Supervisor's email distribution list	1
Community Calendar	0
Email list	1
Marin Independent Journal	3
Public Access TV \ Marin G Channel	0
Other (please specify)	3

Other replies:

- Friend told me about it
- Other individuals who were attending
- Marin Bar Association

Question 5: Do you have any additional comments or questions?

- What will the county do when the public's wish does not agree with the Boards?
- When is the next one?
- Many questions did not have a direct answer or no answer "yet"
- I only read the Sunday IJ and was surprised to see mention of meeting. There should be more notices, even in the SF Chronicle to get better attendance and more people involved in the process.

Next Steps After the Forum

At the conclusion of the forum, County staff presented the following “next steps”:

- Record the comments and notes from the forum and draft report
- Distribute the report to forum attendees, the Board of Supervisors and others
- Use comments from the forum to inform the develop of the FY 2010-11 budget process
- Evaluate the forum to consider holding additional forums or other ways to engage the community in the budget process

The County staff encouraged attendees to visit the County’s website at www.co.marin.ca.us to get more information about Marin County government, including County services and volunteer opportunities with County government. This summary and related information is located on the County’s Budget Information Website at www.co.marin.ca.us/budgetinfo