

Introduction

The City of Seattle and its more than 12,000 employees build and maintain infrastructure, provide utility service, support the needs of the city’s residents, and create recreational, cultural, and other enriching opportunities. In providing excellent service, these employees use and maintain dozens of city-owned properties, a fleet of vehicles ranging from fire trucks to golf carts, and equipment and facilities necessary to complete the City’s mission.

Budgeting for a large organization with many functions is a crucial and complex process. A proposed budget requires solid forecasts on commodities (such as the price of fuel), economic strength (as it impacts tax revenues, among other budgetary components), and demand for services (from parking meters to libraries to police officers to disc golf courses).

This book is designed to provide clear and accurate information on the budgetary process, estimated revenue streams, and a basic description of departmental needs and spending. The State of Washington allows cities to adopt biennial budgets. The City Council and Mayor adopted a budget for 2019-2020 in late 2018.

City of Seattle Budget Process

In its simplest terms, the City budget is proposed by the Mayor (Executive), checked for compliance with the law (City Attorney), and amended and passed by the City Council (Legislative) before returning to the Mayor for his or her approval and signature. The budget itself is composed of two main documents: an operating budget and a capital improvement program (CIP) budget. The CIP budget consists of large expenditures on infrastructure and other capital projects. The operating budget is primarily composed of expenditures required by the City to deliver the day-to-day array of City services.

Charts summarizing the City’s budget process and organization can be found at the end of this section.

Budget Preparation

The budgeting process begins early each year as departments assess needs and budget forecasters work to estimate revenues and costs. Operating budget preparation is based on the establishment of a current services or “baseline” budget. Current services is what it sounds like – continuing programs and services the City provided in the previous year, in addition to previous commitments that will affect costs in the next year, such as a voter-approved levy for new park facilities, as well as labor agreements and changes in health care, insurance, and cost-of-living- adjustments for City employees.

During the budget preparation period, the City Budget Office (CBO) makes two General Fund revenue forecasts, one in April and one in August. Both are used to determine whether the City’s projected revenues are sufficient to meet the projected costs of the current services budget. If revenues are not sufficient to cover the cost of current services, the City must identify changes to close the gap – either through reductions or increased revenues or a combination of both. If the revenue forecast shows that additional resources are available, then the budget process identifies new or expanded programs to meet the evolving demands for City services. Regardless, the City is required by state law to prepare a balanced budget.

Introduction & Budget Process

In May, departments prepare and submit Budget Memos to CBO for analysis and mayoral consideration. The Mayor's Office reviews and provides direction to departments on the Budget Memos, giving direction on items they should include in their formal budget submittal. In early June, CBO receives departmental operating budget and CIP submittals, including all position (employee) changes. Mayoral review and evaluation of department submittals takes place through the end of August. CBO, in conjunction with individual departments, then finalizes the operating and CIP budgets.

In late September, the Mayor submits the proposed budget and CIP to the City Council. In addition to the budget documents, CBO prepares supporting legislation and other related documents.

After the Mayor submits the proposed budget and CIP, the City Council conducts public hearings. The City Council also holds committee meetings in open session to discuss budget requests with department representatives and CBO staff. Councilmembers then recommend specific budget actions for consideration by their colleagues.

During the budget review process, the City Council may choose to explain its budget actions further by developing statements of legislative intent and budget guidance statements for future budget action. Intent statements describe the Council's expectations in making budget decisions and generally require affected departments to report back to the City Council on results.

After completing the public hearing and deliberative processes the City Council votes to adopt the budget, incorporating its desired budget changes, in late November. The Mayor can choose to approve the Council's budget, veto it, or let it become law without mayoral signature. The Mayor must veto the entire budget or none of it, as there is no line-item veto in Seattle. Copies of budget documents are available for public inspection at the CBO offices, at the Seattle Public Library, and on the Internet at <http://www.seattle.gov/budgetoffice>.

During the year, the City may have a need to change the adopted budget to respond to evolving needs. The City makes such changes through supplemental budget appropriation ordinances. A majority of the City Council may, by ordinance, eliminate, decrease, or re-appropriate any unspent appropriations during the year. The City Council, generally with a three-fourths vote, may also increase appropriations from available money to meet necessary expenditures that were not foreseeable earlier. Additional unforeseeable appropriations related to settlement of claims, emergency conditions, or laws enacted since passage of the annual operating budget ordinance require approval by a two-thirds vote of the City Council. Absent such changes, departments are legally required to stay within their annual budget appropriation.