

City of Seattle Budget Process

Washington state law requires cities with populations greater than 300,000, such as Seattle, to adopt balanced budgets by December 2 of each year for the fiscal year beginning January 1. The adopted budget appropriates funds and establishes legal expenditure limits for the upcoming fiscal year. Washington state law also allows cities to adopt biennial budgets. In 1993, the City ran a pilot test on the concept of biennial budgeting for six selected departments. In 1995, the City moved from an annual to a modified biennial budget. Under this approach, the City Council formally adopts the budget for the first year of the biennium and endorses, but does not appropriate, the budget for the second year. The second year budget is based on the City Council endorsement and is formally adopted by the City Council after a midbiennial review.

Budgetary Basis

The City budgets on a modified accrual basis. Property taxes, sales taxes, business and occupation taxes, and other taxpayer-assessed revenues due for the current year are considered measurable and available and, therefore, as revenues, even though a portion of the taxes may be collected in the subsequent year. Licenses, fines, penalties, and miscellaneous revenues are recorded as revenues when they are received in cash since this is when they can be accurately measured. Investment earnings are accrued as earned.

Expenditures are considered a liability when they are incurred. Interest on long-term debt, judgments and claims, workers' compensation, and compensated absences are considered a liability when they are paid.

Budget Preparation

Executive preparation of the budget generally begins in February and concludes no later than October 2 with the Mayor's submittal to the City Council of proposed operating and capital improvement program (CIP) budgets. Operating budget preparation is based on the establishment of a current services or "baseline" budget. Current services is defined as continuing programs and services the City provided in the previous year, in addition to previous commitments that will affect costs in the next year or two (when developing the two-year biennial budgets), such as the 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. At the outset of a new biennium, current services budgets are established for both the first and second years. For the midbiennium budget process, the Executive may define the current services budget as the second year budget endorsed by the City Council the previous November, or re-determine current service levels. For example, the 2012 Adopted Budget was used as the basis for the 2013-14 Proposed Budget.

Budget Process

During the budget preparation period, the Department of Finance and Administrative Services (FAS), working in conjunction with 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. The revenue estimates must be based on the prior 12 months of experience. Proposed expenditures cannot exceed the reasonably anticipated and legally authorized revenues for the year unless the Mayor proposes new revenues. In that case, proposed legislation to authorize the new revenues must be submitted to the City Council with the proposed budget.

Budget Process

In May, departments prepared and submitted Budget Issue Papers (BIPs) to CBO for mayoral consideration. The Mayor's Office reviewed and provided direction to departments on the BIPs to be included in the department's budget submittal in early June. In early July, CBO received departmental operating budget and CIP submittals, including all position changes. Mayoral review and evaluation of department submittals took place during the month of August. CBO, in conjunction with individual departments, then finalized the operation and CIP budgets.

The process culminates in the proposed operating budget and CIP. Seattle's budget and CIP also allocate Community Development Block Grant funding. Although this federally funded program has unique timetables and requirements, Seattle coordinates it with the annual budget and CIP processes to improve preparation and budget allocation decisions, and streamline budget execution.

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.

Budget Adoption

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. After completing the public hearing and deliberative processes, and after making changes to the Mayor's proposed budget, the City Council adopts the budget in late November through an ordinance is passed by majority vote. 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. 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 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 state the Council's expectations in making budget decisions and generally require affected departments to report back to the City Council on results. A chart summarizing the City's budget process schedule is provided at the end of this section.

Legal Budget Control

The adopted budget generally makes appropriations for operating expenses at the budget control level within departments, unless the expenditure is from one of the General Fund reserve accounts, or is for a specific project or activity budgeted in the General Subfund category called Finance General. These projects and activities are budgeted individually. Capital projects programmed in the CIP are appropriated in the budget at the program or project level. Grant-funded activities are controlled as prescribed by law and federal or state regulations.

Budget Execution

Within the legally adopted budget authorizations, more detailed allocations, as approved by CBO, are recorded in the City's accounting system, called SUMMIT, at the lowest levels of each department's organizational structure and in detailed expenditure accounts. Throughout the budget year, CBO monitors revenue and spending performance against the budget to protect the financial stability of the City.

Budget Process

Budget Amendment

A majority of the City Council may, by ordinance, eliminate, decrease, or re-appropriate any unexpended 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.

The Budget Director may approve, without ordinance, appropriation transfers within a department or agency of up to 10%, and with no more than \$500,000 of the appropriation authority for the particular budget control level or, where appropriate, line item, being increased. In addition, no transfers can reduce the appropriation authority of a budget control level by more than 25%.

In accordance with Washington state law, any unexpended appropriations for operating or ordinary maintenance expenditures automatically lapse at the close of the fiscal year, except for any appropriation continued by ordinance. Unexpended appropriations for capital outlays remaining at the close of the fiscal year are carried forward to the following year, except for any appropriation abandoned by ordinance.

Budget Process Diagram

