Recognizing the Best in County Government Programs!

Virginia Association of Counties

2014 Achievement Awards

Call for Entries

2014 VACo Achievement Awards

Deadline: June 2, 2014

Virginia Association of Counties

Application Form

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 2, 2014.**

Program Information

Locality _____

Program Title _____

Program Category _____

Contact Information

Name _____

Title _____

Department _____

Complete Mailing Address _____

_____

Telephone #_____ Fax #_____

E-mail _____

Signature of county administrator or chief administrative officer

Name _____

Title _____

Signature _____

Overview

Prince William County's "*E^3 – Educate, Enhance & Engage in the Budget Process"* program was developed in response to requests for increased governmental transparency and the desire to take full advantage of technological advances that enhance community connectivity. *E^3* enhances the community's role in the budget process by providing broader access to the information used to develop budget recommendations for the Board of County Supervisors' consideration and ultimate action. A more educated community is better able to fully participate in the process, and *E^3* provides the tools for anyone to expand their knowledge base.

A comparison of informational resources posted on websites indicates that Prince William County's *E^3* program provides web access to information not available in neighboring jurisdictions. Since implementing *E^3* we have seen increases in web activity and budget questions, along with the more traditional public hearing participation.   Additionally, community survey results have shown increased satisfaction with service efficiency and effectiveness, value for tax dollar, and trust in government decision making.

Our goal is to empower citizens to participate at whatever level they choose by providing access to information. While *E^3* is an informational program, it has had an impact on our governmental and financial management practices. We have used citizen comments to simplify and clarify our language in reports and presentations, and we are showing data in graphs and charts more often to illustrate major points. It also improves our government's accountability to its constituents by promoting a well-informed citizenry. Very much a work in progress, the elements of *E^3* are continually assessed to ensure their usefulness in terms of content and technology.

The Challenge

The recent recession created a new normal for government entities that subjects them to heightened scrutiny and accountability, especially with regard to finances. As the downturn negatively impacted household finances, citizens became more focused and vocal regarding the tax dollars they pay and the services they receive, putting pressure on localities to increase the transparency of their budget processes. In addition, community expectations and technological advances make increased connectivity with the community vital to the success of the budget process.

Prior to the recession, Prince William County had recently undertaken a major overhaul of its internal budget process, implementing a cross-functional approach that organized all agencies into four functional area teams to make recommendations on service reductions and expansions. The "budget congress" process continues to receive praise throughout the organization as agencies report increased knowledge and appreciation of the work of others and a greater sense of cooperation and coordination. The budget process is no longer viewed as having agency winners and losers; it is a collaborative effort to appropriately allocate limited resources toward common goals and objectives. Building on this initial success, it was time to turn our attention outward and begin to build the same cooperative spirit with the community so that they have the opportunity to become a part of the budget process that leads the Board of County Supervisors (BOCS) to the appropriate allocation of resources.

Program Implementation

Prior to July 2010, community participation in the Prince William County budget process took place primarily through four venues:

- Participation on one of the BOCS appointed budget review committees

- Attendance at the budget public hearings

- Submission of a budget question

- Direct conversations or correspondence with BOCS members

Since the initiation of the FY 12 budget process in July 2010 (the beginning of our FY 11) the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has focused considerable effort to improve the transparency and accessibility of the process and the resulting adopted budget.   OMB strives to provide broader access to the information used to develop recommendations for the BOCS' consideration and ultimate action, allowing for more educated civic involvement.   The "E^3 – *Educate, Enhance & Engage in the Budget Process (E^3)*" program is a combination of experimentation and evolution – trying new things, retaining what seems to work and jettisoning what does not – to build a more robust website to address our community's desire for 24/7 access to budget information.

- **2010: Improvements for the FY 12 Budget –** The focus of the FY 12 budget process was to demonstrate the County's commitment to providing efficient and effective service:

    o <u>Publish Base Budget Reviews (BBR)</u> – In addition to the annual process of "scrubbing" each agency's base budget to remove one-time costs, the County began selecting a few individual agency budgets for more scrutiny in 2009, beginning with the Department of Information Technology (DoIT). The purpose of a BBR is to ensure County departments are correctly funded and these funds are in the proper program, to ensure accountability for taxpayer money and transparency on the use of funds. This more in-depth historic review of budget and spending patterns highlights areas of potential savings as well as areas where additional resources may be needed to achieve the adopted mission. The results of the DoIT base

budget review were incorporated into the FY 2011 Budget, but the specifics of the report were never presented nor published.   For the FY 2012 Budget, the Department of Fire and Rescue and the Park Authority were selected for review.   As part of E^3, OMB formalized the base budget review process and began publishing the reports on the website. To date, six agencies have been reviewed and five reports published.

o Efficiency Report – Prior to the presentation of the proposed budget, OMB presents a summary of efficiencies implemented throughout the previous year. These efficiencies fall into three general categories – reductions in overall service delivery costs, supplanting County funds with other resources (grants, agency revenues and/or volunteers), or improved service delivery with existing funding. The efficiency report has been well received by the BOCS and the community in that it highlights efforts to reduce dependence on tax dollars for services.

o Your Tax Dollars at Work – A key component of the County's budget presentation is the dollar bill graphic, identifying how much of each dollar in real estate tax revenue goes to various County services. With the adoption of the FY 2012 Budget OMB created Your Tax Dollars at Work, an interactive program that allows the user to enter the assessed value of their property to determine the total tax bill, and the percentage devoted to service categories.

- **2011: Improvements for the FY 13 Budget –** The focus for the FY 13 budget process was to expand citizen access to the work performed by fellow citizens who volunteer to serve on budget committees:

o Budget Q&A Online – OMB received and published budget questions and answers for years, but the format had been less than user friendly. Weekly PDFs of questions and responses were published, but the PDFs were organized based on the week that question was answered,

not when it was submitted. Anyone looking for a specific question and its response would

have to wade through all the PDFs until they found what they were looking for. The

improvement made in FY 13 was the creation of a searchable SharePoint web part on OMB's

webpage. Questions were loaded as they were received, with responses loaded as they were

completed. Anyone searching the spreadsheet could search by who asked the question, or by

key words in the question, or by key words in the answer.

- **2012: Improvements for the FY 14 Budget** – The focus for the FY 14 budget process was to

  inform the public about mandated services that the County is obligated to perform as well as the

  programs which enhance our quality of life:

  o Comprehensive Assessment of County Activities – In 2011 the BOCS adopted a new strategic

    vision, to be a "community of choice." Immediately following the adoption of the FY 2013

    Budget, OMB received a Board directive to develop seven tax rate scenarios for FY 14, ranging

    from a flat tax bill to a 5% increase in the tax bill, and to identify critical unmet capital and

    operating needs, to initiate a community discussion around a "community of choice." As part

    of the response, OMB convened all agency directors to determine, on an activity basis, cost of

    services and the impact of discontinuing any services. All activities were categorized –

    state/federal mandates, County code requirements, strategic priorities, AAA bond rating

    priorities, interjurisdictional agreements, multi-year contractual commitments, and other –

    and ranked according to the risk to the community if the activity were to be discontinued.

    The response took six months to compile, resulting in the most comprehensive assessment of

    County activities to date. This detailed response was provided to the BOCS and published on

OMB's website to facilitate community discourse. This report generated additional questions, specifically about vacant positions and year-end savings, subsequently addressed by OMB.

o Value of Vacant Positions – In response to a budget question, OMB coordinated the calculation of the annual value of each vacant position in the County, as well as the individual service level impacts of eliminating any of the positions. This report was repeated as part of the FY 15 budget process. This focus on vacancies resulted in the development of a monthly vacancy report, provided to all agencies and the BOCS.

o Turnback (Year-End Savings) Analysis – In response to a budget question, OMB prepared a report comparing revised budgets to actuals for the past five years, providing a three year and five year historic average. This report was expanded into the Budget Variance Report for the FY 15 Budget.

o Combined Budget and Capital Improvement Program (CIP) – In the past, the proposed and adopted budgets and CIPs were printed in separate documents, making it more difficult for any individual searching for information on a specific project or program – is this capital or operating, where is debt service, etc.? The FY 2014 Budget was the first to combine these into one document, consolidating all the information on both operating and capital funds in one place.

o Community Partner Information – Community discussion and debate regarding contributions to nonprofits in the County has increased, and in response OMB expanded the Community Partners section of the budget to include the performance measures from the individual memorandums of understanding between the County and the nonprofit and the cost-per for

the services provided by the nonprofit. This information helps the community determine the value of the contribution and services provided.

- o Additional Community Meetings – In an effort to be more accessible to the community earlier in the budget process and to provide context to the information, OMB organized additional community meetings, each being held immediately after a major deliverable was provided to the BOCS. These meetings, held in the evenings or on Saturdays, were not well attended, with the exception of the meeting held immediately after the proposed budget was delivered (the only meeting formerly held). Comments received during and after the process centered around 24/7 access to information as opposed to specific meetings, and so the additional meetings were discontinued for the FY 15 process.

- **2013: Improvements for the FY 15 budget –** The focus for the current budget process is to open up the "behind the scenes" work performed by staff prior to the budget being proposed:

  - o Budget Variance Report – Based on questions that arose after the turnback analysis was presented as part of the FY 14 process, OMB recreated the analysis with explanations of line item variances and year-over-year variances. These notes provide context for the reader to better understand year-end savings.

  - o Improved Q&A Online System – The Q&A system was converted from a SharePoint web part to a SQL server, allowing improved access and usability. Viewers can now filter the database by fiscal year, agency, the source of the question, and the status of the response, and they can query the database for all questions and/or responses related to a specific topic by entering key words.

o <u>Interactive Budget Development Process Cycle</u> – The budget development cycle is one full year for any given budget. In order to better communicate the cycle a virtual, interactive 'walk-through' is posted on our web site, and accessible via mobile devices. In our technology driven, mobile world this serves as another option for citizen understanding of the process and where they have opportunities to participate.

o <u>Converting the Budget-in-Brief and the CIP-in Brief to the Citizen Guide</u> – Previous budgets and CIPs were accompanied by tri-fold "briefs" that summarized the larger documents. Because of space limitations, the briefs were limited to charts and graphs that portrayed the BOCS' final decisions, but no discussion of how those came about. This year we developed a more robust document that walks the reader through the budget process in layman's terms. The 16 page Citizen Guide includes community demographics, a summary of the strategic plan, the dollar bill graphic and a link to Your Tax Dollars at Work, a description of the County budget with revenue and expenditure summaries, a summary of major FY 15 initiatives, a discussion of the Schools transfer (a hot button item this year), a budget process calendar and summary of our process, a CIP summary and a listing of citizen involvement opportunities.

o <u>Description of the Budget Development Process in Proposed Budget</u> – Prior budget documents used a Project Manager graphic to illustrate the budget process by outlining each step. Unfortunately, while this was a useful graphic, it did not explain what was behind each step. We made the effort this year to walk the reader through the budget process, including state requirements, the numerous County policies and practices behind the budget, the interagency collaborations to recommend reductions and additions, and the opportunities for public input. We also attempted to address issues that arose from questions in previous

budgets – how does the County address state and federal revenue reductions, what are the debt limitations, how are the County and Schools budgets related?

Program Costs

With the exception of the Q&A database, all work on E^3 was accomplished with existing OMB staff as part of their normal workload. The creation of the Q&A database required the use of an outside contractor and assistance from the Information Technology and Communications departments. The outside contract involved 252 work hours at a cost of $22,000; Information Technology staff devoted 132 work hours, valued at $9,200, and Communications staff devoted 40 work hours, valued at $2,400.

Results/Successes

A goal of E^3 is to improve the knowledge base of our citizens so that they can better participate in the exercises that influence the BOCS' decision making. The success of E^3 can be quantified in three different areas:

- The number of budget-related documents available via our website – Compared to other Northern Virginia localities, Prince William County has significantly more budget-related documents available to the community electronically, providing more information to our community. We researched four other localities (City of Alexandria and Arlington, Fairfax and Loudoun Counties) and found that, along with Prince William County, there are a total of 23 different types of documents available online. All 5 communities post their budgets and capital improvement programs and accept comments electronically. Of the remaining possible documents, Arlington has one, Alexandria and Loudoun have two, Fairfax has eight, and Prince William has 13. (The comparison is summarized in the attachments.)

- Increased community activity – We have seen steady growth in online activity since we

  implemented E^3, with activity more than doubling between FY 12 and FY 13, and another 18%

  growth year-to-date FY 14. Activity on the Q&A site in FY 13 was more than double that of FY 10.

  It is clear that the community is taking advantage of increased access and informational

  opportunities, as well as the more traditional public hearing venues.

DATA POINTS FROM OMB	FY 10 (baseline)	FY 11	FY 12	FY 13	FY 14 (YTD)
Number of external hits on the OMB web pages	Not available	Not available	12,874	27,497	32,456
Number of budget questions received	154	202	242	379	200+
Number of budget related web postings	14	42	36	70	35
Number of speakers at the budget public hearings	86	151	36	25	43

- Improvements in the biannual community survey results – As community members become well

  versed in ways to influence decision making, satisfaction with the decisions should increase. Our

  community survey highlights improvements in satisfaction with overall County efficiency and

  effectiveness of service delivery, value for the tax dollar, and trust that the County will do the

  right thing. We have also used the survey to ascertain the connection between County services

  and taxes. The FY 12 survey results, when compared to FY 10, show that slightly more people

  think the services and taxes are appropriate, 5% more think we should decrease services and

  taxes, and slightly less think we should increase services and taxes. The important factor here is

  not where the individual stands on the scale, but the fact that we have provided more

  information regarding services and their costs so that the individual can take that specific stance.

DATA POINTS FROM BIANNUAL COMMUNITY SURVEY	FY 10 (baseline)	FY 11	FY 12	FY 13	FY 14 (YTD)
Respondents agreeing that County services are efficient & effective	88%	-	90%	-	Not yet available
Respondents agreeing that they can trust the County to do the right thing	63%	-	85%	-	Not yet available
Respondents agreeing that County services and facilities are a fair value for the tax dollar	83%	-	85%	-	Not yet available
Respondents choosing one of the following: The County should… • Decrease both services and taxes • Keep both services and taxes the same • Increase both services and taxes • Other	 15% 65% 11% 10%	 - - - -	 20% 66% 10% 3%	 - - - -	Not yet available

A more educated community is better able to fully participate in the process, and E^3 provides the tools for anyone to expand their knowledge base and more successfully influence decision making in the County.

Attachments

- Web documents referenced in this application can be found by clicking on the following links:

    o Base Budget Review Reports
    o Your Tax Dollars at Work
    o Budget Variance Report
    o Q&A site
    o Interactive Budget Development Process Cycle
    o Citizen Guide (print)
        • Citizen Guide (online)
    o Proposed FY 15 Budget

- Comparison of online information available by jurisdiction provided in a separate PDF