



Public Works

Building Public Will for the Common Good

Communicating Effectively about Public Budgets

September 2013

Talking about Public Budgets



Our goal is to.....

help more Americans to understand that public budgets are not simply balance sheets full of dollar figures. They are essential tools for building and maintaining the vast array of public systems, programs and services that make our quality of life possible.

Default Thinking on Public Budgets



Thinking about “budgets” and what they are is a challenge for many Americans. When trying to talk about public budgets we need to recognize that the default thinking about budgets often leads in unproductive directions.

Attitudes about government shape thinking about public budgets...



When Americans think of government as “just politics,” they are likely to think that politicians use budgets to benefit their own interests and the interests of contributors.



When Americans think of government as a red-tape-filled bureaucracy, they are likely to think that much of our public resources will be wasted by the invisible, inefficient bureaucracy.



When Americans think of themselves as merely consumers of government services, they are likely to consider how they personally benefit. They may ask “What’s in it for me? I shouldn’t have to pay for things government does that I didn’t request and don’t need.”



Common sense about “household budgets” influences perceptions of public budgets.

This organizing metaphor keeps the focus on the need to “tighten our belts” and make the “tough & painful” cuts we need to bring the budget in line.

Through this lens it is very hard to see how increasing revenues could be part of the solution.

Avoid triggering this frame.

Recommendations for Changing the Conversation

Use Values to Connect



Articulate the public good and shared value that public budgets make possible, i.e. they pay for the public structures that “protect” us, that help ensure “community well-being”, and allow for families to have economic “security”. They also enable communities, or a state, or the nation to “plan for the future.”

Explain how we ALL benefit

We need to help people see themselves not as consumers “purchasing” only the services they want and need but as members of a community that all benefit from living in a society with well-supported public systems.

When talking about the importance of a public service or program focus on the broader community impact, not just on the individual recipients of the program or service.



Focus on Shared Responsibility Over Time



It is important to show how budget decisions today are connected to past decisions and future goals.

Reset the context by focusing on how budget and tax choices help us meet future goals and objectives and reminding us that the decisions of previous generations made possible the systems we enjoy today.

Use Statistics Wisely

Avoid using too many statistics and give them context and meaning. Find a few of your most compelling numbers and make sure they help tell the budget story in a compelling and understandable way.



Don't Incite Crisis Thinking



Crisis rhetoric does not have the intended response of engaging your audience in a thoughtful consideration of budget decisions. In fact, the opposite is often true.

Rather than using inflammatory crisis language, present problems as serious but solvable, and offer choices and solutions.

Telling the Budget Story Differently

We Need to Move Beyond

- Laundry Lists
- Crisis
- The Vulnerable
- Short-Term Thinking
- How much will it cost?

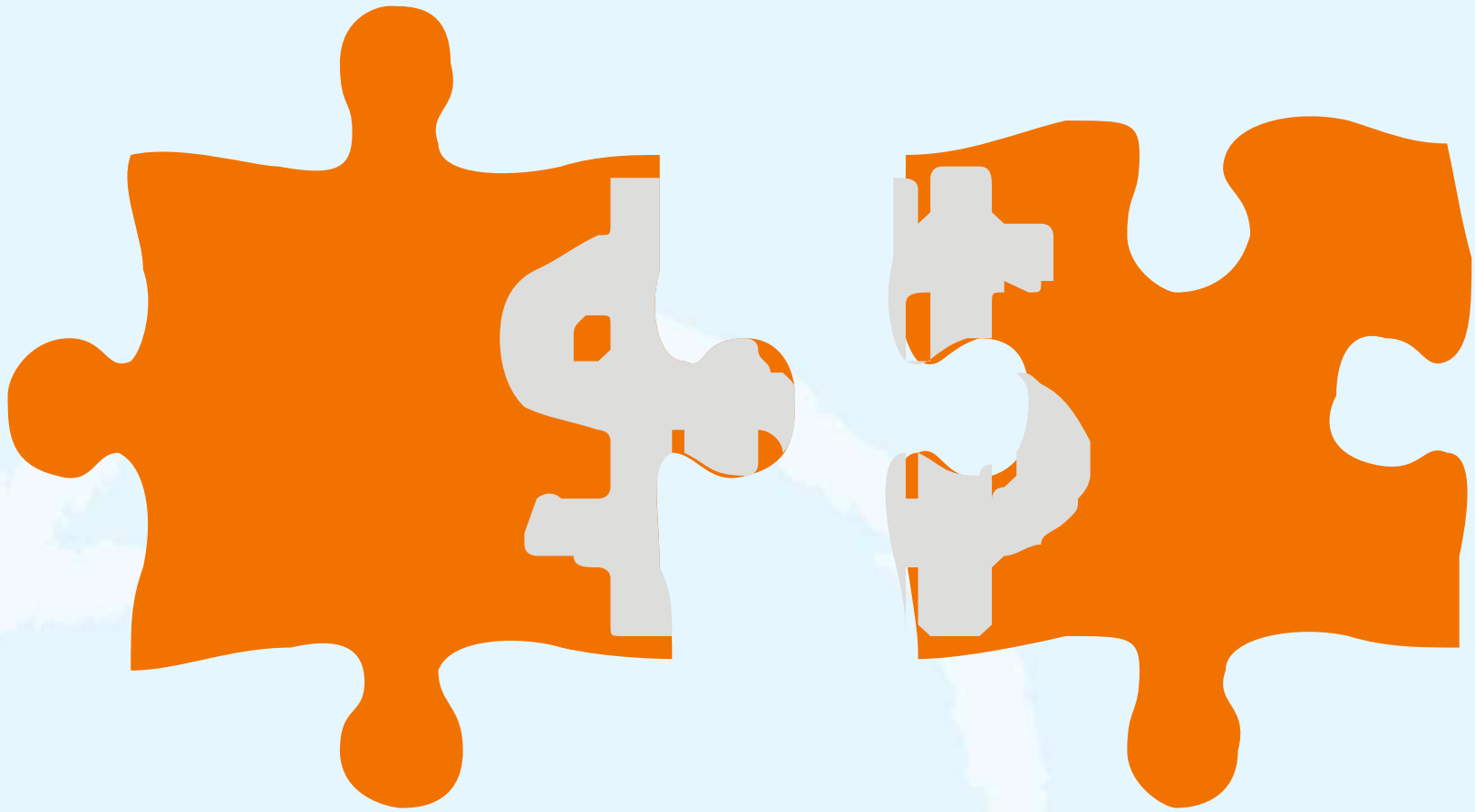
.....to a Productive Explanation

- Values & Objectives
- Choices & Solutions
- Our Communities
- Long-Term Thinking
- What kind of state do we want?

Talking about Revenue

When we talk about public budgets, we obviously also need to talk about public revenues. This comes with its own set of challenges and strategies.

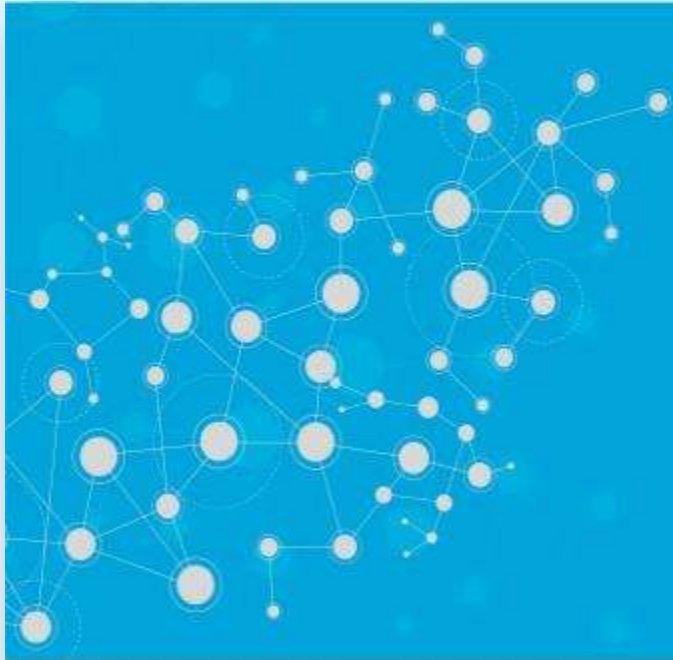




Taxes have become
disconnected from their purposes.



When those of us who work on these issues think of government, we see government all around us. But, that is not necessarily the picture the public has in mind.



Conversations about the need for Revenue...

- Cannot be just about the money and/or who needs to pay . . .
- They must **connect the dots** between the **shared goals and desires** people have for their communities and **the public tools and resources** necessary to achieve them.

Pragmatic Management

We need to promote a pragmatic manager stance. Budget and tax decisions are **the way we build and maintain the things** that keep our communities functioning well, now and into the future.



Shared Stewardship



- From taxpaying consumers to **“civic-minded” stewards of communities.**
- **We all benefit when we support the public goods** that create community wellbeing and a healthy economy.

We need to tell a More Productive Story about Public Budgets

The **quality of life** we all want in our community is directly connected to **the public structures we build and maintain**. Our parks, schools, social services and infrastructure **are what make our community a good place to live and work**. Continuing cuts to public programs and services will undermine **the public systems we rely on every day**. It is time to focus on finding new revenue to keep our community functioning well, now and into the future.



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For more information about talking about government's role in the economy, we encourage you to visit www.publicworks.org.