

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SUCCESS STORY: THE PEOPLE'S BUDGET REVIEW



BY CHUCK ELSESSER

Community organizing and civic engagement are fairly commonplace in the Northeast; places like Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey, and where I practice law, in Miami. But civic engagement on behalf of low income issues in most of the southern states as a whole, including Florida, not so much. So I was delighted to learn in the session Community Organizing and Civic Engagement at the Florida Housing Coalition's 2013 conference that we have more community organizing going on in Florida than I realized.

Last year in St. Petersburg, a coalition of advocacy groups united to become the People's Budget Review (PBR). The People's Budget Review consists of members from SEIU Florida Public Services Union, the League of Women Voters, Council of Neighborhood Associations (CONA), Agenda 2010 and Beyond, NAACP, Awake Pinellas, Suncoast Sierra Club, St. Pete Polls, as well as local business leaders and activists.

They came together to make changes to the city's budget. They understood that the city's budget is the city's priorities. And they wanted those priorities to include what mattered most to the hard working, lower income families in the community. After surveying the neighborhoods, they narrowed the "ask" to three priorities: money for reducing youth unemployment; money to work on

the plan for reducing poverty in South St. Petersburg by 30% in 7 years; and money for the new Sustainable Projects Program designed to empower residents to directly enhance the economy, environment, and equality of their neighborhoods. The total cost was \$450,000.



Rick Smith, SEIU, presenting at the Community Organizing and Civic Engagement Workshop at FHC Conference.

Rick Smith, with other members of the PBR, testified in front of City Hall that "These budgets are political statements. You cannot have policy without them... the biggest voting day of the year won't be on Nov. 5 — when registered voters choose their mayoral and city council candidates — but on Sept. 26, the night that the City Council will vote on a final budget for 2014". And so it was. The PBR, through community organizing and civic engagement, was successful in getting their priorities into the City budget.

It was September 9, 2013, when Smith explained the PBR work at the Florida Housing Coalition conference; at that time we were impressed by the effort; now we can marvel at the result. I hope this report provides inspiration to all those individuals and organizations who are trying to effect positive change in their communities. [HNN](#)

Chuck Elsesser is an attorney with the Community Justice Project of Florida Legal Services, specializing in representing community organization involved in affordable housing litigation and policy advocacy.



LEFT: THE PEOPLE'S BUDGET REVIEW MEETS WEEKLY TO DISCUSS STRATEGY AND EXPLORE ORGANIZING OPPORTUNITIES AS THEY ARISE AROUND ISSUES OF QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE ST. PETERSBURG COMMUNITY.



RIGHT: MORE THAN 300 RESIDENTS PACK A LOCAL RECREATION CENTER DEMANDING INVESTMENT FOR YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS IN A COMMUNITY WHERE 1 IN 4 CHILDREN ARE LIVING IN POVERTY.