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Participatory Budgeting Opens Up Voting to the Disenfranchised and Denied

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Big City

By **GINIA BELLAFANTE**

On Wednesday afternoon, Anthony Marx, the president of the New York Public Library, addressed a roomful of women in pastel bouclé at an annual fund-raising lunch. He told them about a boy he had met on the stoop of a branch library in the Bronx who had a laptop that looked as though it was associated with a sales receipt time-stamped in the early 1990s. Mr. Marx asked him what he was doing, and the boy told him that he was there because his family couldn't afford Internet access at home.

“What we all take for granted, this,” Mr. Marx said, pulling his smartphone out of his pocket, “is still not within the reach of millions of Americans.”

Mr. Marx delivered his comments during a week in which New Yorkers in 24 City Council districts were engaged in participatory budgeting. The concept, imported to us from Brazil, where it began in the city of Porto Alegre in 1989, allows citizens to determine how a certain segment of municipal money might be divided up in their neighborhoods. This year a total of \$25 million, a tiny

but growing portion of the city's \$75 billion budget, will be spent through the process by voters across the city.

In the 38th Council District, in Brooklyn, which includes Red Hook and Sunset Park and where the highest voter turnout in the city was recorded during last year's budgeting cycle, more than half of the \$2 million allocated to the process this year has been tagged for potential projects that would improve technology. One of the 14 ballot items from which voters are choosing is a \$200,000 project to install 50 wireless devices on the rooftops of the Red Hook Houses to expand Internet access in public housing. Another proposal suggests an expenditure of \$965,000 to upgrade technology in nine local schools.

Participatory budgeting, which began in New York City in 2011 with four Council districts, is both an instrument of relatively small but meaningful revolution and a useful tool for anthropological inquiry. So much can be determined about a neighborhood's evolving identity and where it falls on the gentrification spectrum from what residents decide they want to do with the money allocated for their districts. On the ballot in Astoria, Queens, is a proposal for a dog run costing \$500,000; one of 13 proposals in Park Slope, Brooklyn, is for a \$250,000 storytelling garden with a possible statue of the Knuffle Bunny. (At a voting site on Eighth Street in Park Slope on Tuesday evening, hummus was served.)

The 38th Council District is made up largely of Mexican and Chinese immigrants, and during the past year, Councilman Carlos Menchaca told me, "requests for technology have exploded." Not long ago, during an event he attended, Mr. Menchaca was accosted by a group of elementary schoolgirls who demanded a robotics program. "Parents will visit other schools and they will see computer labs and iPads and want those things," he said.

The development of Industry City on the waterfront in Sunset Park, a hub of manufacturing and innovation and artisanal foods and, potentially, menacing throngs of 29-year-olds with Filson bags driving up rents, has been met with skepticism in the community, but it has also mutated into a new locus of aspiration. "Parents can look to it and see real possibilities for their

children,” Mr. Menchaca said, which has in turn been crucial in reshaping the immediate needs of his constituents.

Participatory budgeting, which has sprung up in cities around the world, is the ultimate inclusive party. In New York, children themselves can campaign for projects during the process in which ballot items are determined by the community, and in some districts those as young as 14 can cast actual votes.

On Tuesday afternoon, a 15-year-old named Quincy Phillips had commandeered a corner on Hicks Street in Red Hook and was flagging down potential voters and campaigning for the free wireless initiative in the Red Hook Houses where he lived, even though his own family has Internet access. His proposal for a skateboard park ultimately hadn’t made it onto the ballot, but it hardly seemed to turn him off to democracy.

The greatest value of participatory budgeting has been as a means of access to local stewardship and government more generally by those, including the formerly incarcerated and the undocumented, who have otherwise felt disenfranchised or denied. In Mr. Menchaca’s district last year, two-thirds of the ballots were cast in Spanish and Chinese. Of those who have voted in participatory budgeting citywide, 39 percent report household incomes of \$35,000 a year or less. This figure compares with 21 percent of those who voted in local elections in 2013.

Hispanics are voting in participatory budgeting at a rate nearly twice as high as they are voting in local elections. Seven percent of participatory budget voters are under 24, compared with 4 percent of 2013 local election voters. The proportions of foreign-born voters, young voters and minority voters have increased in the years since participatory budgeting began.

A similar dynamic has played out abroad. When a participatory budgeting project got underway in an area of London’s East End, where more than 100 different languages are spoken, residents felt empowered in new ways, even if they never got to think about the Knuffle Bunny.

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