



Cheers for something new at City Hall

Editorial

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If insanity is defined as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, then Mayor Chris Beutler has a plan to stay out of the looney bin.

His move to outcome-based budgeting could be the catalyst for a big shakeup in Lincoln city government.

Lincoln residents ought to be willing to give it a try. No one seems particularly enamored with the current process, and there are some tough decisions ahead if current trends continue.

The aim of budgeting for outcomes is to focus spending decisions on what should be kept in the budget, rather than on what should be cut.

Authors David Osborne and Peter Hutchinson, who wrote a book, "The Price of Government," about outcome budgeting, say it "asks public leaders to set the price of government, find out the outcomes citizens most value, prioritize their tax dollars to purchase those results, and rethink the way their departments and agencies go about producing them."

Those are some difficult questions to answer. Ask 10 residents how much they are willing to spend for city government and you're likely to get 10 different answers.

Beutler has enlisted the help of the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center to do a random survey of residents, hoping to bypass the usual special interests and ferret out the opinions of average folks.

In addition, the Beutler administration is planning to arrange focus groups and hold town hall meetings.

The methodology of the initial phase will be crucial to raising public confidence in the process. The survey questions must be scrupulously designed to avoid leading questions.

The Beutler administration also should be cautious about the results of focus groups. Those experienced with the groups know that one powerful personality in a focus group may skew the consensus.

Town hall meetings are a more traditional form of providing average people an opportunity to vent and offer opinions. Although they can be dominated by special interests, they do have one prime advantage in that anyone can step up to deliver a message to City Hall.

One of the first places that outcome-based budgeting was put into practice was in the state of Washington, which, like the city of Lincoln, was facing a budget crunch. Among other changes, the process led to the elimination of 2,500 state jobs.

Now the new budgeting approach is spreading rapidly, including to Fort Collins, Colo.; Auburn, Ala.; Dallas; Los Angeles and others.

The approach also can be used by school districts and county governments, which gives rise to another question: What would the answer be if Lincoln residents were asked to prioritize not just City Hall, but all local government functions from schools to jails?

If outcome-based budgeting works for City Hall, maybe the practice will spread locally. Eventually the question might be answered.

Beutler deserves credit for innovation. We encourage residents to participate. City Hall can use the help.