Budgeting and Community Engagement

Best Practices Report



Zencity

Introduction

In building a stronger community, trust in local leaders is paramount. Our community engagement on budgeting report focuses on enhancing this trust by offering best practice recommendations to local government leaders. Through an examination of social media insights, we aim to provide data-informed decision-making tools that will increase support for local leaders.
This report aims to make the budgeting process more accessible and transparent. Our goal is to offer practical insights that foster community participation and support City leaders and administrators in shaping the future of the city.

This report includes data collected between January 1, 2023, and February 20, 2024.

Methodology

- The report offers an analysis of data collected from social media and local news outlets. As such, it reflects the interest and sentiment expressed by residents using these platforms.
- The analysis does not include sentiment and opinions expressed on private social media discussion boards and groups— only those expressed in fully public forums.
- The Zencity interaction count consists of all social media engagements (posts, tweets, likes, comments, shares, retweets, etc.). Therefore, the number of interactions reflects the volume of discourse and the level of interest among residents expressing their views online.
- Our machine-learning algorithm classifies large amounts of interactions according to topic and sentiment — positive, negative, or neutral — which indicate satisfaction or dissatisfaction levels about local issues, including those not initiated by the City. This model enables us to measure the interest that specific issues attract and understand how community members perceived these issues.

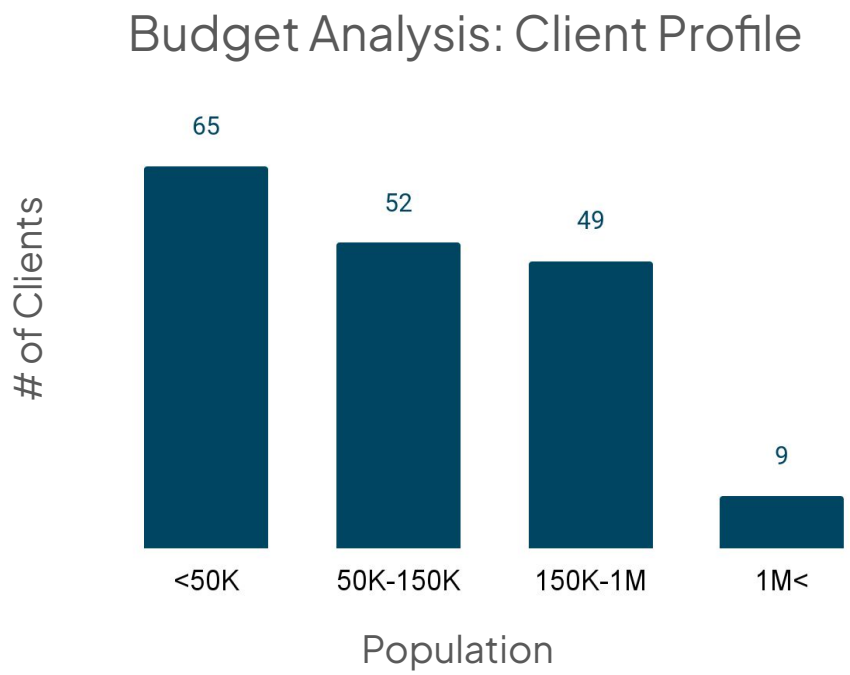
Executive Summary

Based on the analysis, Zencity recommends the following for enhancing budget communication:

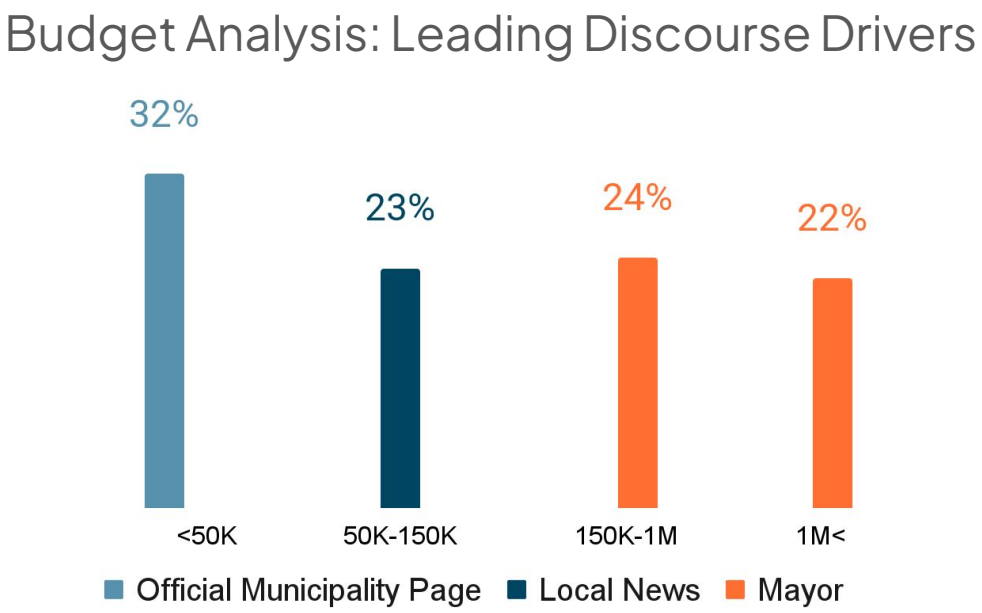
- **Offer diverse and accessible input opportunities:** Provide a multitude of feedback opportunities including comprehensive online surveys and community meetings.
    - Leverage Zencity Engage for proactive feedback and budget simulation.
    - Extend your outreach and publish on Nextdoor via the Zencity platform.
- **Build trust by showcasing past successes:** Highlight successful budget-funded projects to show tangible benefits and build community trust.
- **Emphasize commitment to addressing the community's needs:** Showcase how the budget drives progress and meets community needs with new initiatives, aligning with community priorities.
- **Address objections and communicate difficult decisions:** Acknowledge concerns, offer clear explanations for decisions, engage early and often and communicate with empathy to alleviate pushback.

Budget Conversation Overview

The recommendations included in this report were formulated through the analysis of over 90K online interactions, across 175 distinct municipalities. The clients included in the analysis were diverse in population size:



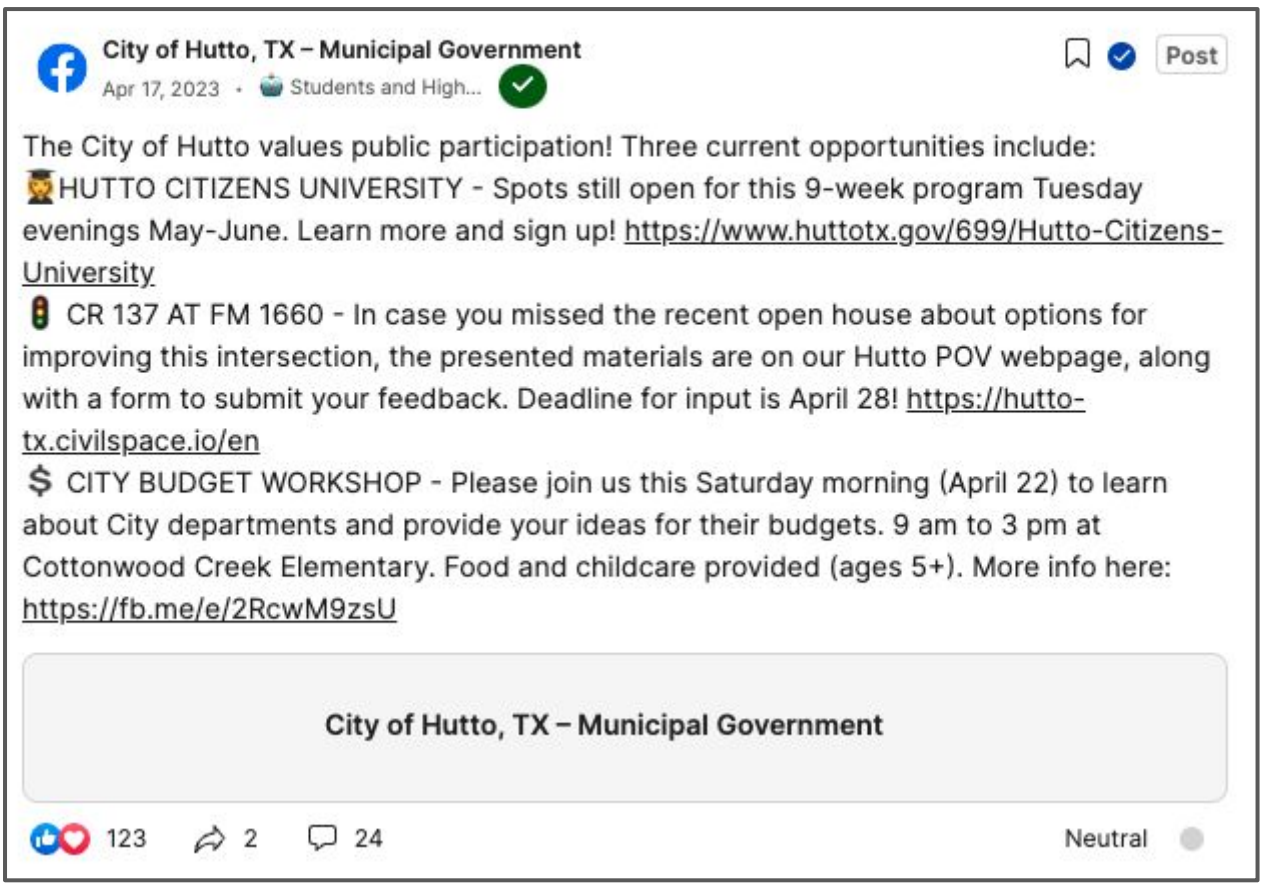
Primary City pages emerged as the leading discourse driver among smaller communities, while mayor pages drove the conversation in larger cities. Local news channels led the budget discourse among medium-sized Zencity partners:



1. Offer Diverse Feedback Channels for Community Input

Provide various methods for residents to give feedback and input on the budget. This could include town hall meetings, surveys, online platforms, or community forums.

Make it easy for residents to provide feedback and assure them that their input will be considered. This helps residents feel more involved and valued in the decision-making process, showing that their voices are heard.

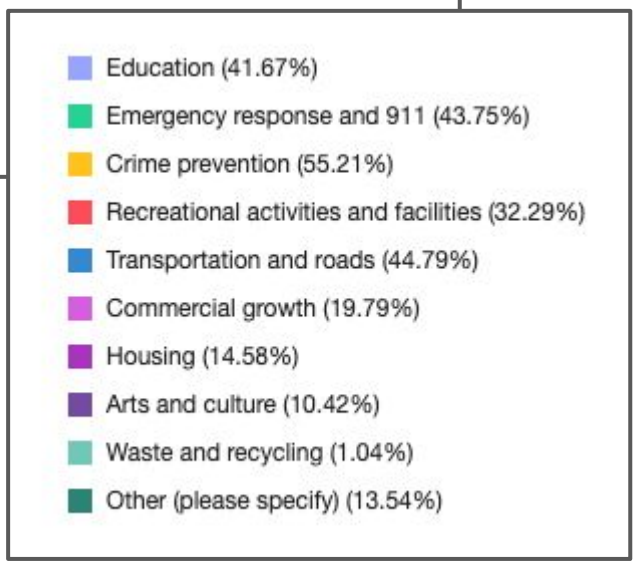


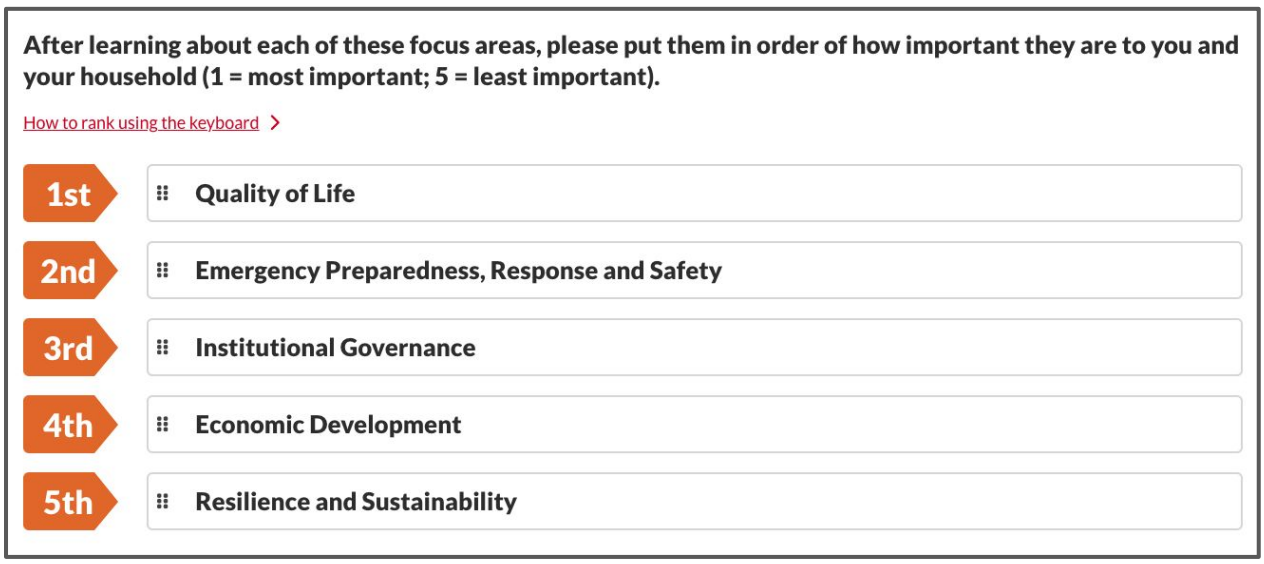
Utilize comprehensive surveys, online forums, and community meetings to gather resident feedback. Offer residents various options in order to **lower the barrier to participation.**

a. Leverage Engage for Proactive Feedback and Community Priorities on the Budget

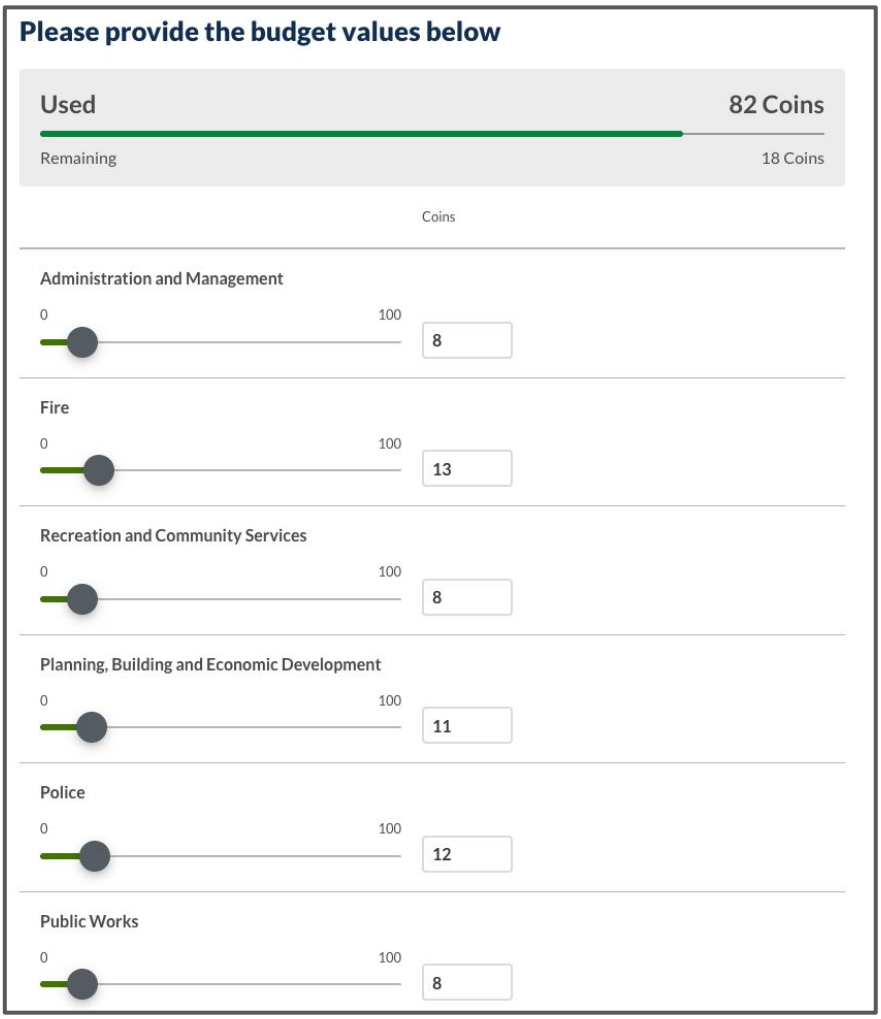
Build a strategic budgeting survey for the City's upcoming fiscal year, and encourage participants to **propose allocation amounts and rank preferences.** This method ensures that the budget aligns with community priorities and expectations.

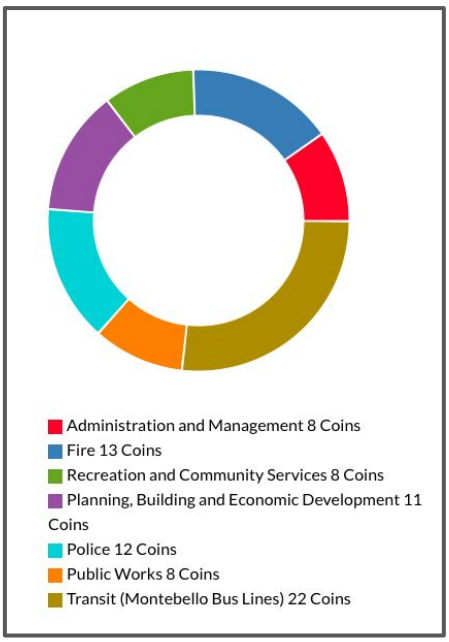






b. Include a Budget Simulation Exercise in Your Survey to Get the Residents Involved



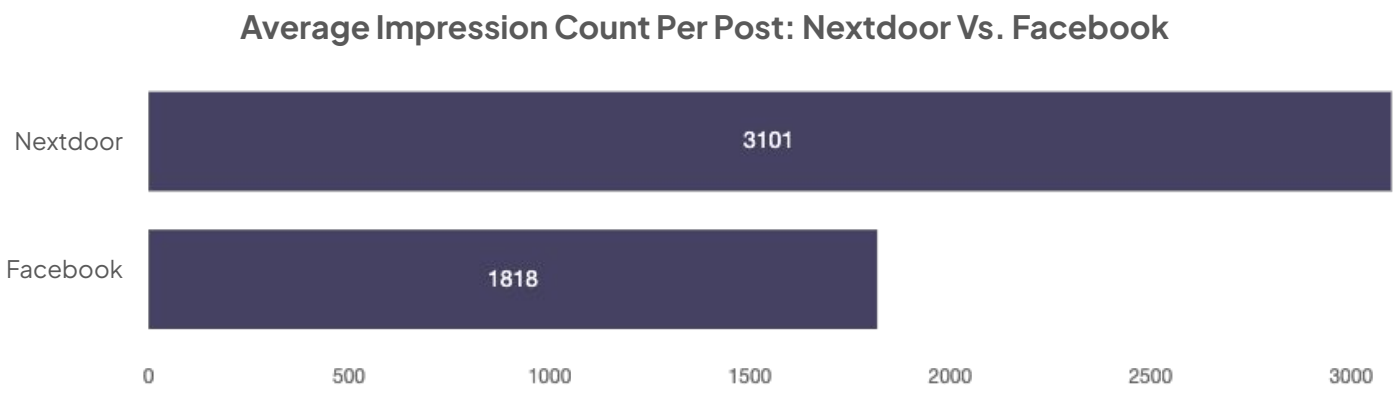


Share this simulation tool as an **educational exercise for residents to experience budget allocation firsthand.** This interactive approach allows participants to simulate budget decisions, gaining valuable insights into the process. By engaging in this exercise, residents can actively contribute to aligning the City's budget with community priorities and expectations.

The Budgeting Exercise is an Engage Pro feature. Ask your CSM for more information about Engage Pro.

c. Extending outreach with Nextdoor

We recommend connecting your Nextdoor accounts to the Zencity platform to enhance community engagement. **On average, posts published on Nextdoor generate 71% more social-media impressions than on Facebook*.** This integration can significantly expand your reach and improve the effectiveness of your communication efforts.



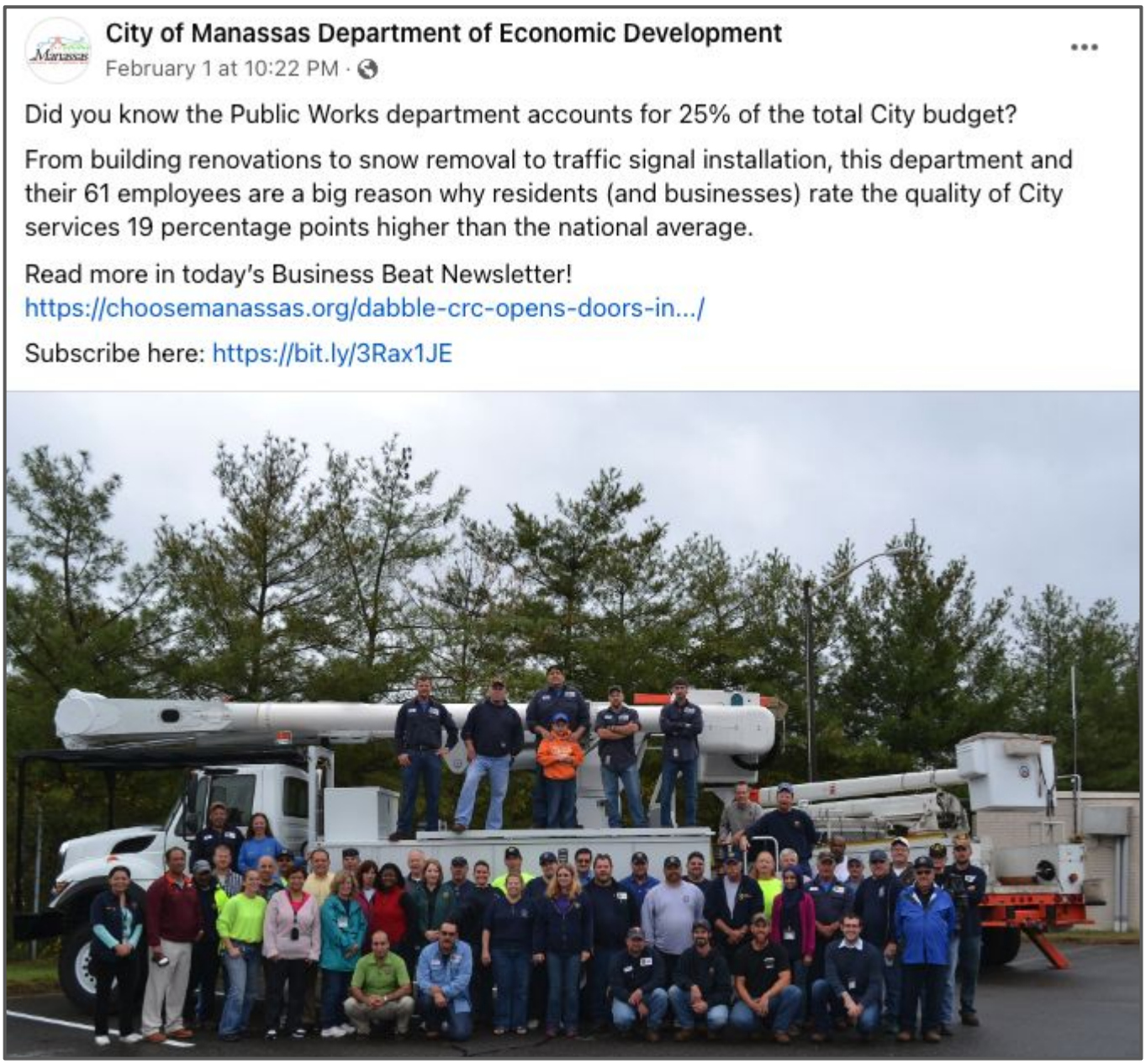
Extending your reach through platforms like Nextdoor not only increases the number of residents informed about budget processes but also fosters a sense of inclusivity and transparency. This leads to greater community trust, participation, and ultimately, more informed decision-making.

On average, posts published on Nextdoor generate **71% more social-media impressions** than on Facebook*.

**Based on data collected from six Zencity partners between December 2023 - January 2024.*

2. Build Trust With Past Success Stories and Fiscal Transparency

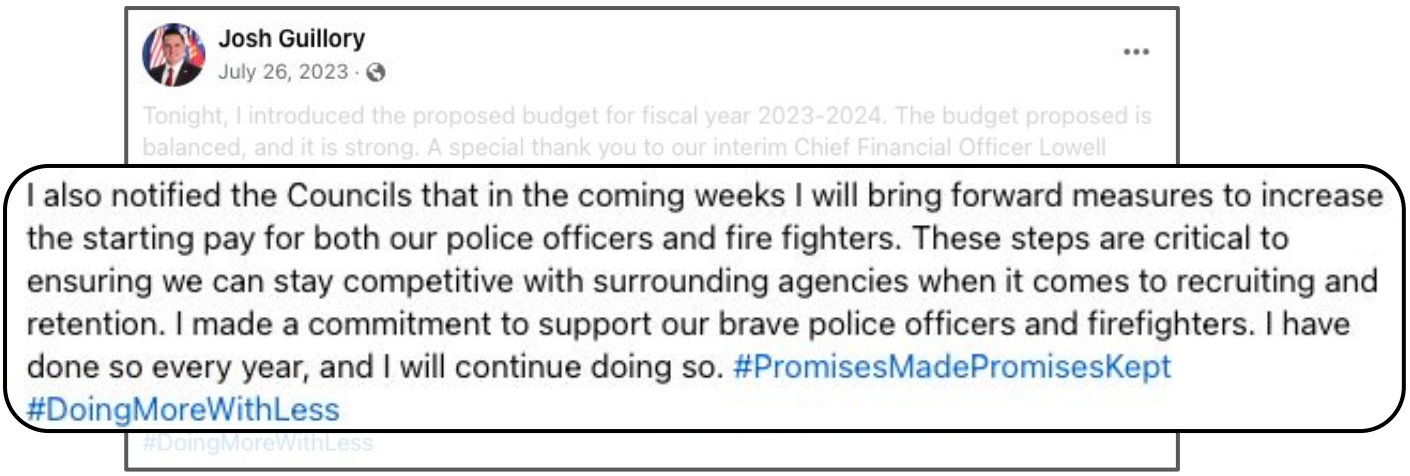
Highlighting successful projects funded by the budget in the past can build trust. Demonstrating where the money was previously spent and the positive outcomes achieved can help the community see the tangible benefits of budget decisions.



Show where funds were spent and the positive outcomes achieved, demonstrating the **tangible benefits** of budget decisions.

3. Emphasize commitment to community needs

- Highlight the transformative impact of the current budget on the community, showcasing how it propels progress and addresses pressing needs.



- Emphasize the introduction of new initiatives and impactful changes that align with community priorities and aspirations. By clearly illustrating these advancements, you can demonstrate the budget's commitment to driving positive change and enhancing the quality of life for all residents.



Emphasize new initiatives that **enhance residents' quality of life**, showcasing a commitment to community priorities.

4. Address Objections and Concerns with Tax Increase Discussions

Communicating difficult decisions, such as a tax increase, requires a strategic approach to minimize backlash and foster understanding.

- **Acknowledge community concerns** and frame the decision as part of a comprehensive strategy to improve community well-being.
- **Provide clear explanations** for the decision, illustrating its direct impact on addressing pressing issues.
- **Engage with the community early and often**, seeking input to show their voices are valued.
- **Communicate with empathy**, transparency, and a focus on community priorities to mitigate outrage and build support for necessary changes.



Resident's response:

"All we've learned is you want to raise our taxes significantly while our city has the highest inflation in the country."

"...transparency and educating with honesty for the people is so important. You are a great example."

When the messaging framed decisions as part of a comprehensive strategy to improve community well-being, acknowledged community concerns, and addressed the community as the audience, it was more likely to garner support and positive responses. In contrast, **communications that did not address community concerns or provide clear explanations for decisions were more prone to garner frustrations and objections.**