

# HOW TO NAVIGATE POLITICS IN BUDGETING

FGFOA School of Governmental Finance  
October 23, 2024

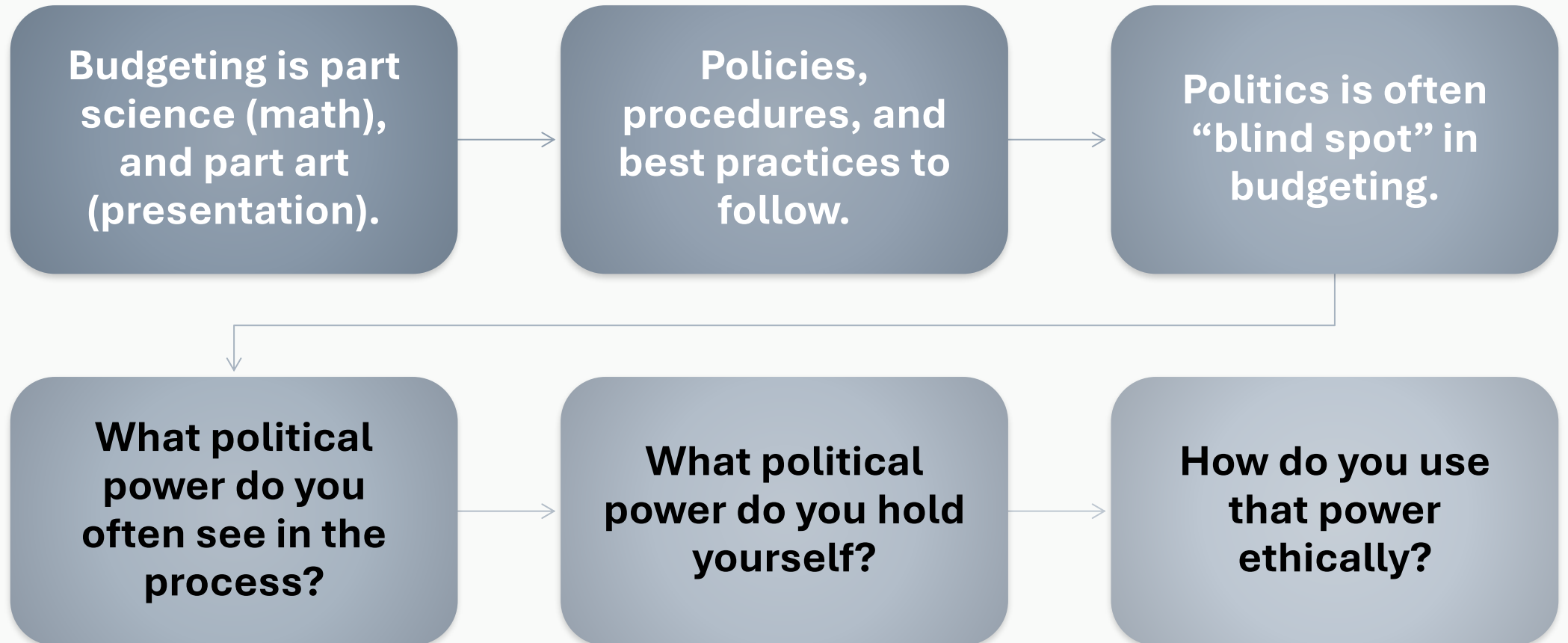
Greg James, Clerk of Courts & Comptroller  
Brandy King, Finance Director



# Introduction

- Who believes politics are involved in the budgeting process?
- Who believes politics are a beneficial part of the process?
- Politics are not the same in each governmental entity.
- Are we trying to “navigate” it or thrive in it?
- Does it need to be addressed and, if so, by whom?
- A finance director’s perspective
- An elected official’s perspective

# Budgeting is a political process



# What tools do we have?



Data



Information



Visual Aids



Relationships

<b>Data</b>	<b>Information</b>
Raw text and numbers, random	Text and numbers, processed
Based on records and reports	Based on analysis
Unorganized	Organized
May or may not be useful or specific	Always useful and specific
Does not depend on information	Without data, can't be processed

**“The goal is to turn data into information, and information into insight.” ~ Carly Fiorina**

# LOOK AT THE DATA!

Ask yourself:

- Are there missing values?
- Anything else unexpected?



# Converting Data to Information

**Organize**



**Purge**



**Perspective**



**Companions**

*"Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it." ~ Samuel Johnson*

## Resourcefulness is a Crucial Skill

- It's ok not to have all the answers
- But can you find them?





# VISUAL AIDS

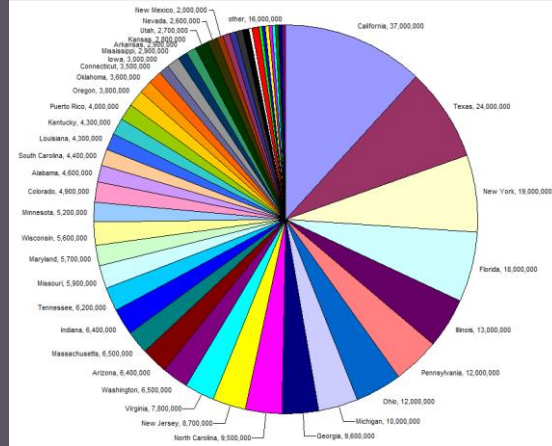
Should be:

- *Easy to understand*
- *Summarize in a meaningful way*
- *High quality*



This is HORRIBLE

WHAT NOT TO DO



PLEASE STOP!

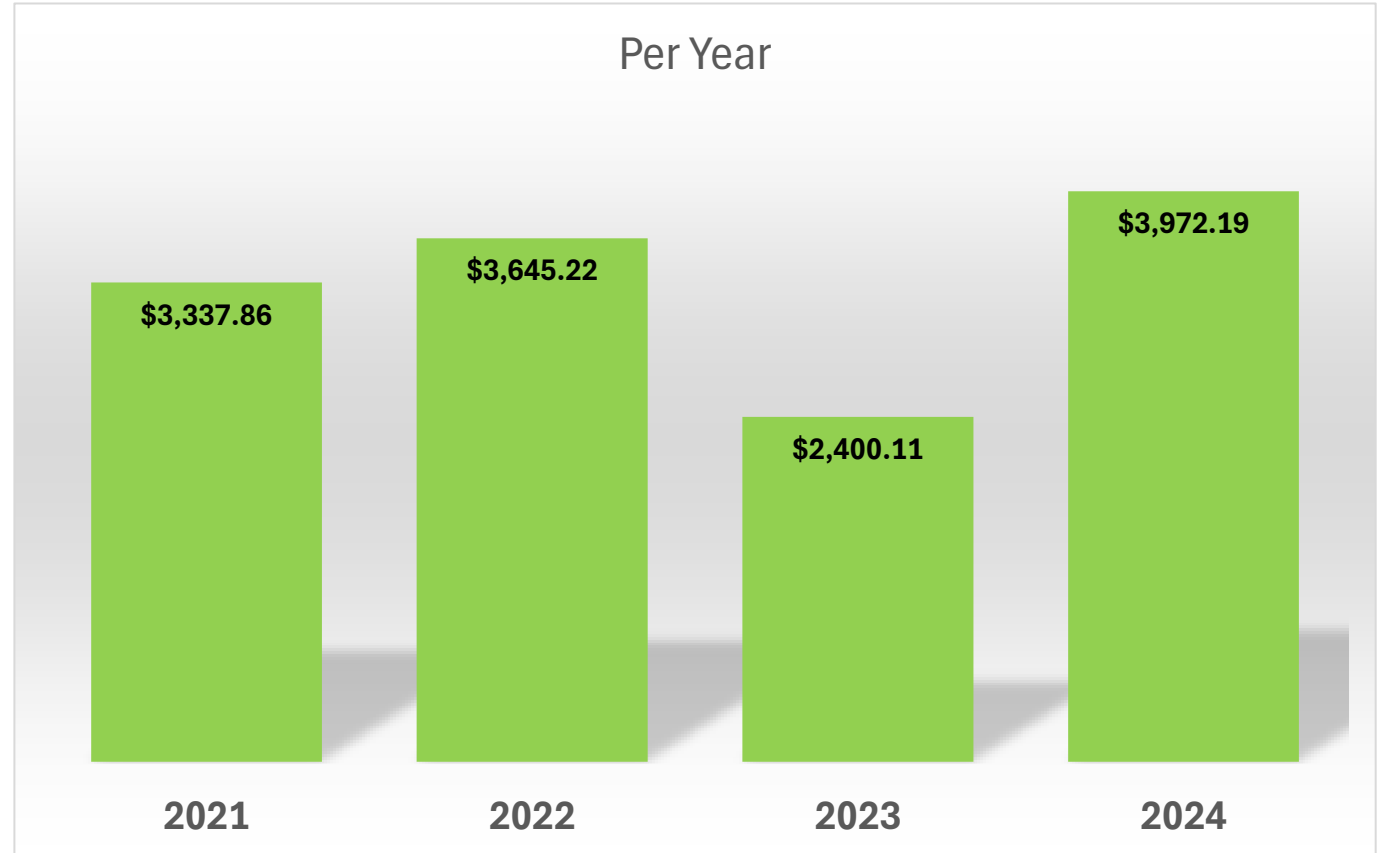


## How Rivers Are Formed

- Rivers start as very small streams and gradually get bigger as more and more water is added. Heavy rains and spring meltwater add so much water to some rivers that they overflow their banks and flood the surrounding landscape.
- The water in rivers comes from many different sources. Rivers can begin in lakes or as springs that bubble up from underground. Other rivers start as rain or melting snow and ice high up in the mountains.
- Most rivers flow quickly in the steeply sloping sections near their source. Fast moving water washes away gravel, sand and mud leaving a rocky bottom.
- Rivers flowing over gently sloping ground begin to curve back and forth across the landscape. These are called meandering rivers.
- Some rivers have lots of small channels that continually split and join. These are called braided rivers. Braided rivers are usually wide but shallow. They form on fairly steep slopes and where the river bank is easily eroded.
- Many rivers have an estuary where they enter the ocean. An estuary is a section of river where fresh water and sea-water mix together. Tides cause water levels in estuaries to rise and fall.

- ✓ **Not complicated**
- ✓ **Easy to read**
- ✓ **Simple language**
- ✓ **Not too busy**

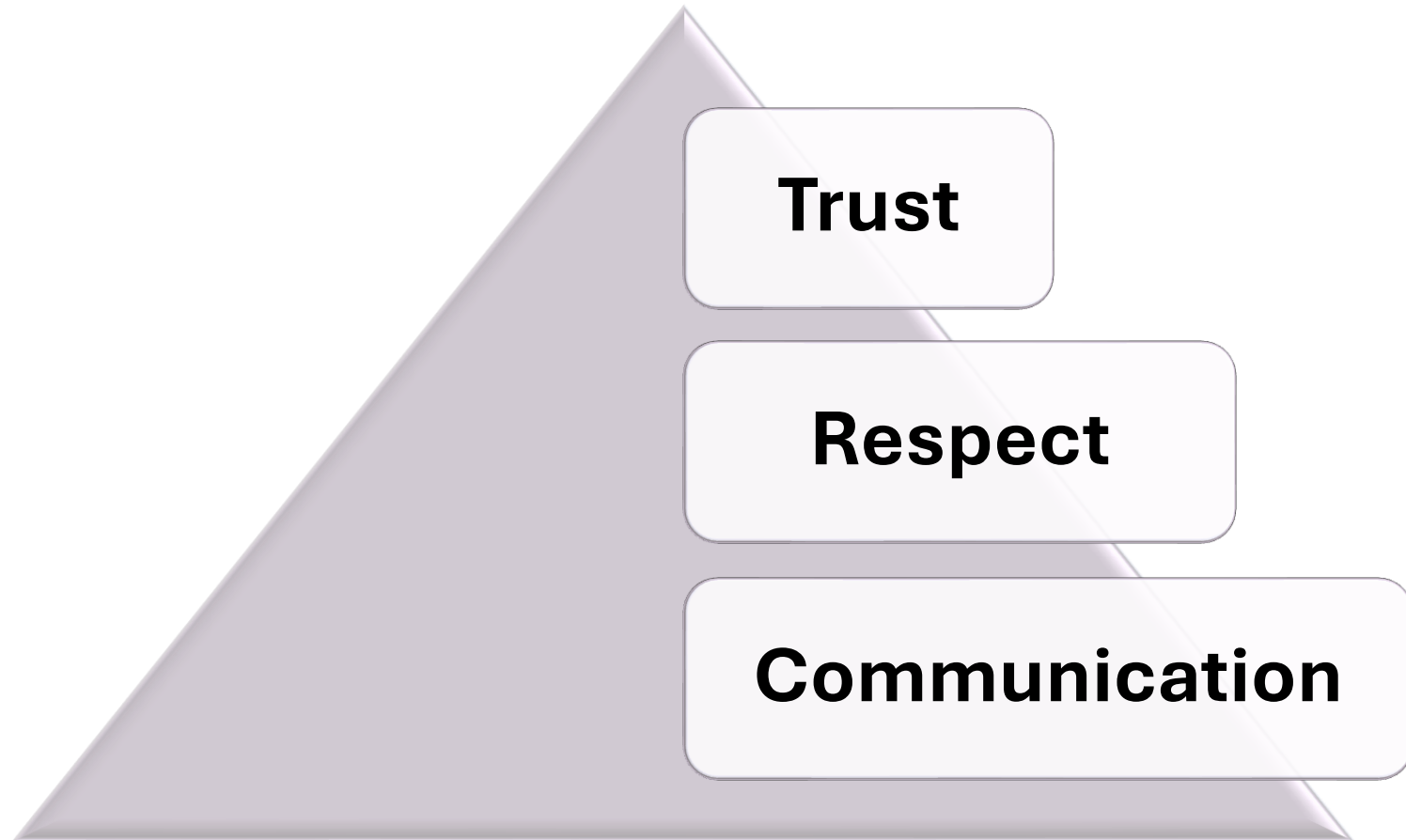
## Widget Comparison



Big AI's Widgets



# Relationships





**Be open**



**Be approachable**



**They need to feel they can trust you**



**Deal with stakeholders on their terms**



**Read each situation and react accordingly**

# Behavioral Intelligence

# EARN Respect

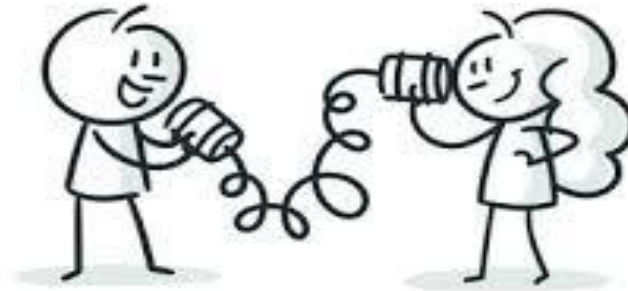
- ✓ **Accountability**
- ✓ **Sincerity**
- ✓ **Humility**
- ✓ **Truthfulness**
- ✓ **Helpfulness**



# *Communication*

## What are they really asking??

- Terminology variations
- Use plain speak
- Teach and explain
- Real world examples



# How do we measure success?



"Information is a source of learning. But unless it is organized, processed, and available to the right people in a format for decision making, it is a burden, not a benefit." ~ William Pollard



1. Take the high road, lead with integrity.
2. Be authentic, people will trust you.
3. Listen actively, don't make wrong assumptions.
4. Ask tough but fair questions, stay neutral whenever possible.
5. Assume positive intent, talk to clarify.
6. Adopt a service mindset, don't act with selfishness
7. Recommend speaking with another expert in the field for "validation".
8. Stay on good terms with everyone, don't play politics yourself.
9. Remain neutral in negative situations to de-escalate or avoid additional conflict.
10. Try collaboration and inclusion, include key people.
11. Make connections without an agenda, show genuine interest in others.

**Forbes Human Resources Council**

- Don't make mountains out of molehills.
  - Ask "Is this battle worth fighting?"
- Everything looks like a nail when you are a hammer.
  - Don't throw your weight around all the time.
- Know who you are dealing with.
  - If it's ends up in a you versus them who has the most political clout?
- Know when to communicate.
  - Timing is important.
- Know how to communicate.
  - Will a phone call be better than an email?
  - Do you want to create a public record?
- Know your place and purpose.
  - You might disagree with the policy-maker but they are the policy-maker.
- Be true to yourself and "stick to your guns"
  - Statutory language, rules, policy...

**A few final thoughts to consider...**

- ❖ **GFOA Webinar – “*Successfully Navigating Power, Politics, and Budgeting*”**
- ❖ **GFOA Publication – “Power, Politics, and Budgeting”**
- ❖ **GFOA Infographic – “Power, Politics, and Budgeting”**

# POWER, POLITICS & BUDGETING

DON'T HATE THE PLAYER,  
DON'T HATE THE GAME,  
**CHANGE THE GAME!**



## PERSUASION

**"YES, IF..."**

**Dr. No**



Finance officers can gain the reputation as "Doctor No" by rebuffing ideas for programs or services that spend public money. The solution is not to say "yes" to everything. Rather, say "yes, if ...", as in "yes, we can add that new position if we identify a new source of ongoing revenue to pay for it or reduce expenses elsewhere."



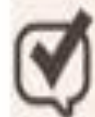
**"Power politics"** is the use of power for selfish gain at the expense of the broader community. This is incompatible with the purpose of local government budgeting. However, the finance officer can "change the game" and redirect the energy of power politics to more constructive ends.



**How to Play.** Power in modern society hinges on persuasion. **Persuasion power** does not require a high profile or grabbing the proverbial spotlight. Persuasion comes by effectively deploying ideas. Persuasion power is supported by the **power of agenda setting**. The finance officer is well positioned to persuade by offering compelling ideas and to set the agenda through design of decision-making processes for financial issues like budgeting.



## PERSUASION



### **The power of knowledge comes from sharing it, not hoarding it**

If others can better appreciate the finance officer's worldview, they will be more receptive to the finance officer's ideas.



### **Cultivate professional credibility**

Trust is a finance officer's most valuable asset. The GFOA ethics program shows how to enhance trust: [gfoa.org/trust](http://gfoa.org/trust)

## PERSUASION



### **Provide facts and expertise**

As one mayor said, the finance officer "knows things others don't".



### **Communicate ideas effectively**

Keep ideas simple, use metaphors and stories, and tune your language to suit the political environment.



### **Relationships and Network**

Cultivate relationships inside and outside of local government that can enhance your persuasive ability.

## AGENDA SETTING



The finance officer often may not be the final decision-maker, but the public finance officer often designs the decision-making process.



Design the process to provide a better context for decision-making. For example, when faced with unhelpful either/or framing of a problem, design the process to expand the number of options that are considered.



Asking the right questions, establishing clear priorities, and considering wise options is the essence of agenda setting and thereby "changing the game" of power politics.