What would you do with $32 million?

By Mark Chiusano March 30, 2016

After months of lead-up, perhaps you are preparing to cast your vote in the New York primaries on April 19.

But there’s another vote you may be able to cast, sometime this week, if your city council representative is taking part in the city’s five-year-old participatory budgeting program.

The concept is simple: All city council members have a discretionary fund which they can allocate throughout their districts — which has in the past led to accusations of a “slush fund.” Government as usual.

Participatory budgeting, or PB, is different: Council members turn over a portion of that discretionary fund to their constituents, who come up with potential uses for it, develop projects and vote on which projects should receive funding, three of which are guaranteed per district.

Democracy, up close and personal

Participatory budgeting is an attempt at deeper civic engagement and more direct democracy. PB began in Brazil in 1989 as a way to help restore trust in and engagement with the political system after years of military dictatorship.

The system came to the United States in 2009 when a Chicago alderman turned over a portion of his discretionary spending to his constituents. In 2011, four New York City Council members did the same.

Current council speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito was one of those members. She has worked to expand the program since then — it now covers 28 out of 51 council districts — and devoted resources to assist council
members who decide to partake.

The process is time-consuming for legislators and their staffers. It starts with public meetings to brainstorm project ideas in the fall, followed by the formation of committees to workshop and develop those ideas. The process culminates with a community vote in late March.

Projects reflect the quirks and demands of particular neighborhoods — dog run or water fountain upgrades. Over the past years PB has paid for new computers in libraries, street beautification, and basketball court renovations.

This year, voters will decide whether to fund projects ranging from exterior lighting at the Mott Haven Houses in the 8th Council District to AV equipment for P.S. 11 in the 3rd Council District.

Corinne Dickens, who joined the budgeting process in the 8th Council District in Manhattan, hoped that a renovated playground accessible for special needs children in the Washington Houses, where she lives, might have a chance to succeed.

“When you vote for somebody you never quite know what you’re going to get,” Dickens says, but it was empowering to formally say “this is what this neighborhood needs and get it.”

The accessible playground would be the first such playground in East Harlem, she says.

The process took work, Dickens says. In her district, residents hoped to get weather resistant benches for their housing development, but by the time NYCHA provided cost estimates, it was past the deadline.

**A different kind of voting**

Naturally, participatory budgeting can’t solve everything. Critics say that the program rewards those who have the leisure time to organize and push for projects, and don’t result in the big projects that affect people’s lives.

But participatory budgeting offers the promise of distributing power widely: Fifty-seven percent of voters who took part in PB in 2015 were people of color, compared to 47 percent of local election voters, according to a report from the Urban Justice Center. Voters can be as young as 14 and do not need to be documented citizens.

Participatory budgeting is meant “not to replace voting, but supplement it,” says Hollie Russon Gilman, author of “Democracy Reinvented: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation in America.” Gilman notes that some PB projects in America have targeted youth voters in Boston and Seattle.

It has the potential to bring more people into the political system, and decide on government projects in a more democratic way than the whims of elected officials.

As you prepare your portentous single vote for president, consider casting a vote closer to home.