

How Should Government Spend Our Tax Dollars?



Consensus Exercise—Facilitator Guide (For use with either a state or county government focus)

Purpose

- To help participants learn about the consensus approach to decision-making.
- To help participants learn about the trade-offs made by policy-makers.
- To illustrate the difficulty of making decisions about complex policy issues.

Time

About 30 minutes total. (It is not necessary for participants to feel that they have completed the decision-making but they need to have struggled a little.)

Learning/Life Skills

- Responsible citizenship
- Communication
- Decision-making

Process

1. Each person should mark his/her own choices of three programs which could take a partial cut in funding.
2. Now, groups of 3 or 4 persons need to reach agreement on the choices.
3. Combine at least two groups and go through the same process.
4. When the group comes back together, quickly tally the decisions made by each of the final groups. (Avoid getting into a debate on the issues).
5. Spend some time discussing what happened in the groups.

Talking it Over

1. What were the dynamics within the groups? How were decisions made?
2. How easy was it to reach a decision in the smaller group? In the larger group?
3. If the group had had a different composition, would the priorities be different? Would the decision-making have been harder or easier?
4. Did the group find it easier to make decisions when they knew time was running short (just like legislative recesses!)?
5. Were there any interesting “alliances” made in order to reach agreement within the group?

How Should State Government Spend Our Tax Dollars?

Michigan's general fund budget* for the current year is about \$8.7 billion. Revenue has not been coming in at the expected rate, so the state is facing another \$1 billion deficit for the next fiscal year, beginning October 1. The governor and the state legislature will need to make some difficult decisions. Select THREE programs where you think the funding can be partially reduced.

- Merit scholarship programs
- Mental health services
- Special tax incentives to attract very large businesses to Michigan
- Medicaid funding
- Michigan prison system
- State police
- State parks
- Job training
- Substance abuse treatment programs
- Family assistance programs (Family Independence Agency)
- Money for the state's 15 universities
- Revenue sharing to local governments
- Funding for the arts

Directions:

- Each person mark their own choices.
- Groups of 3 or 4 persons need to reach agreement on the choices.
- Combine at least two groups and go through the same process.
- Allow time for group discussion.

**The general fund is the portion of the total state budget (about \$39 billion) where the legislature is able to make decisions on the spending of dollars. The other portions of the budget are school aid and restricted funds and the distribution of funds is already laid out in the constitution or in law.*

How Should County Government Spend Our Tax Dollars?

This exercise is designed to help 4-H Capitol Experience participants better understand the consensus approach to decision-making.

The county board of commissioners will need to make reductions in the budget for the next year. Select THREE programs where you think the funding can be partially reduced.

- County park system
- County fair
- Animal control
- Substance abuse programs
- Economic development programs
- County library system
- Sewer and water systems
- County jail
- County road patrol
- Public health
- MSU Extension
- Emergency medical services
- Public transportation
- Mental Health

Directions:

- Each person mark their own choices.
- Groups of 3 or 4 persons need to reach agreement on the choices.
- Combine at least two groups and go through the same process.
- Allow time for group discussion.