

Testimony to Ways & Means Committee Hearing on the City Budget  
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Good Morning Distinguished Members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to come before you today.

For the last several years, the Organization for Black Struggle –in collaboration with our partners in the Coalition Against Police Crimes and Repression—have been facilitating a community engagement campaign on “Re-envisioning Public Safety.” The goals of the campaign were to take our public consciousness past crime-fighting (reactive) to addressing the root causes of crime (proactive and preventive). The knee-jerk response to crime in our city is to shout more police. That is not the only answer to our crime problems and our current situation is a testament to this fact.

In the town halls across the city, citizens were asked to think about what they would do with the portion of the city revenue we spend on an ineffective and racist arrest-and-incarceration model the City operates now. Depending on how you cut it, the City spends 53-60 percent of its general revenue on police, courts, jails and other related agencies and programs.

Citizens did NOT come up with pie-in-the-sky ideas. They came up with suggestions like more recreation for youth, mental health services, community mediation and better access to basic human needs like jobs with livable wages, adequate housing and affordable health care.

At a time when we keep hearing that money is tight, we have made few changes in the way that we approach the budget. The Board of Alders and the Board of E&A must go into the budget process with new and innovative thinking to re-envision a city that takes into consideration all its citizens’ well-being, not just a few. If there’s any doubt about the racial and class disparities that are perpetuated in St. Louis, I refer you to reports like the St. Louis Children’s Report and For the Sake of All.

These are places where revenues like hidden or untapped like the police forfeiture funds, like TIFs and other giveaways to corporations and developers, uncollected business taxes, etc. We need to have a collective, comprehensive budget process that is more humane, inclusive and more futuristic. Instead of just whacking line items in the budget, let’s have a thoughtful, creative process that brings out the best in our city.

Next week, a national gathering is convening in St. Louis. The Organization for Black Struggle has been asked to facilitate one of the bus tours. As the tour guide, I will not be taking folks to tourist places like the Gateway Arch, or to the trendy Central West End. They will see segments of Black communities where many of us live and work. They will see the long-term intentional dis-investment in these neighborhoods producing blocks of abandoned buildings, food deserts and lack of services. We should not be pretending all is well in St. Louis for many of our citizens. It is not.

The City Budget is a starting place to make changes in the lives and futures of our citizens. I encourage you to adopt a framework that gets you different outcomes and that takes into consideration all the factors—challenges and opportunities—that face the City. There are people today who are interested and willing to help you do just that.

Thank you.