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Nashville residents want budget that prioritizes community-led safety, arts, affordability



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Money for the arts, cost-of-living wage increases, infrastructure for bicyclists and pedestrians and community-driven safety funding topped the list of Nashville budget priorities shared by dozens of speakers in early February.

Members of Nashville's council heard two hours of remarks from community members and advocates during their Feb. 6 meeting. The comment period — a relatively new addition to the way Metro handles its annual budget process — allows residents to share their priorities with council members before a budget proposal is released in May or early June.

Another public hearing will be held after the draft budget is released, in keeping with Nashville's charter.

Here are some highlights from speakers' top requests.

1% of the budget toward Metro Arts

Multiple speakers echoed an unfulfilled request from Nashville's last budget season: To keep pace with other major cities, they said, Nashville should dedicate 1% of its budget (around \$32 million, based on last year's budget) to the arts. Some speakers further requested that funding be split 50-50 between larger arts organizations and smaller organizations and independent artists, a response to ongoing equity concerns over the disbursement of Metro Arts' last funding round.

Joseph Gutierrez, executive director of API Middle Tennessee, said the arts provide a "vehicle for my community to share paths forward and celebrate our identities" as Asian Pacific Islanders "in a state that tells us we don't belong."

Is Nashville committed to equity? Arts funding controversy draws scrutiny

Princella Smith, a filmmaker, is working on a Tennessee-made animated film called "Walk in the Light," telling the story of Raymond Washburn, a blind man who saved five people in the Oklahoma City bombing. Smith's film is partially funded by an arts grant, but recent turmoil and delays in arts grant disbursement meant she wasn't able to finish the film on schedule.

"While I appreciate the funds that I received last year, I was immensely disappointed when I did not receive the full funding that I was promised," she said.

Funding for community-led safety initiatives

Several speakers advocated for funneling more dollars toward community-led safety initiatives instead of police coffers.

Tom Maxwell suggested reallocating funding toward housing, robust rent assistance, community organizers and vigilance committees, the expansion of resources for mental health, addiction and disability and a citywide participatory budget model.

Erica Perry, executive director of the Southern Movement Committee and a member of the Black Nashville Assembly, asked council members to invest public dollars in "community-driven public services" to "redefine public safety and define our vision for safe and healthy communities." That includes funding for affordable housing and rent relief and supportive services for youth.

"I'm asking for an increase in spending for community-based safety initiatives that do not involve cops, courts and cages," Perry said.

More: Year-old Nashville police surveillance contract to get its first public hearing

Multiple speakers asked for a \$1.2 million commitment to The Village, an organization dedicated to empowering grassroots community organizations led by people from marginalized communities, for each of the next three years.

Program manager Erika Burnett said the organization — which was supported by the now disbanded Mayor's Office of Community Safety — is committed to resourcing leaders and organizations "in the closest proximity to the epicenter of many of our community ills."

Bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure

Several speakers arrived to the council chambers wearing bike helmets and other gear.

Chris Ashton asked for increased funding for sidewalks, bike lanes, greenways and non-car-related infrastructure.

"At some point we have to come to realize that building one more lane is not going to fix our problems, and continuing to build things for more cars, and more cars, and more SUVs and more trucks is not going to fix our issues," he said. "We need to start thinking about investing in ... ways that we can get people around without having to put them in a vehicle."

Ashton and a handful of others specifically requested that a bridge be built to connect Madison's Peeler Park to the Stones River Greenway.

Affordable housing and aging in place

Mike Hodge, a member of local nonprofit NOAH's Affordable Housing Task Force, spoke of people being priced out of their Nashville communities. He supports dedicating at least \$30 million to the Barnes Housing Trust Fund.

"Affordable housing is not just about a roof over your head, as important as that is," he said. "It's also about the kind of community we want to create, who we welcome into our community, and who we exclude and push into other counties."

Nashville zoning overhaul: What to know about push for more middle-income housing

Grace Smith, executive director of nonprofit AgeWell Middle Tennessee, said the organization receives calls daily from older Nashville residents, most of which are about "really basic needs" like affording food and housing and having transportation to medical appointments.

"The majority of older Nashvillians are homeowners," she said. "We need to increase our capacity to help those older homeowners stay in their homes with home repair and safety modifications that allow them to age in place safely."

5% cost-of-living wage adjustments for Metro employees

Donna Clay, a Metro Nashville Public Schools employee and Service Employees International Union Local 205 member, said Metro employees who love what they do are having to work

two or three jobs to continue living in the city they serve. A 5% cost of living raise is necessary, and the school board should be held accountable to delivering it, she added.

"People are struggling," Clay said. "It's hard out here. You cannot afford to live in Davidson County."

Said Angela Perry, another MNPS employee: "I do thank you for the last raise that we got. It was helpful. However, it is not enough. The battle is not over."