

# Espacios Abiertos hosts rogue budget hearings

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The Espacios Abiertos hearings gave a voice to individuals and organizations not allowed to testify during legislative budget hearings.

Espacios Abiertos, an organization that seeks to strengthen the capacity of individuals, groups and communities to act effectively in the political, social and institutional framework, hosted public hearings Wednesday to give citizens a chance to testify on the government's proposed budget for Fiscal 2018.

The rogue hearings were held in response to the alleged rejection by the House and Senate Finance Committees to give citizens and community-based organizations participation in the hearings at the capitol, which will conclude today.

Lawmakers are supposed to approve the budget and submit it to the Financial Oversight and Management Board next.

“In all the democracies of the world, including the United States, people participate in the discussion about the use of their collective fiscal resources,” said Cecille Blondet-Passalacqua, executive director of Espacios Abiertos. “This budget is important because it is the first under the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA.)

“Opening the public hearings process to participation from community groups is a very basic principle of good governance and democracy. Given the hermetic attitude of the Legislature, we have called to speak certain the organizations and individuals that represent voices of people who can not buy access to the circles of power,” Blondet-Passalacqua said.

“If citizens are good to contribute money that feeds the budget, they must also be good to express themselves in the hearings and influence the decisions of what is done with their money,” she said.

Some of the leaders and organizations that testified Wednesday were: Luis Jorge Rivera, environmental leader representing the Coalition Pro Northeast Ecological Corridor; Tania Rosario, from Taller Salud; the “Una Sola Voz Movement;” María de Lourdes Lara, of Citizen Agenda; Myrna Rivera, of ALAPAS; and Glorynel Ojeda, from INESI, among others.

Participants addressed various perspectives on the use of public money included in the island’s budget in the face of the fiscal crisis. From the importance of protecting environmental resources and services that are essential for the life and viability of the island, to the prevailing need for allocations to be awarded with rational criteria, based on sustainable data on the island’s reality and not for political patronage or random ideas about collective wellbeing.

Espacios Abiertos proposed to develop a public record of the fiscal expenditures resulting from tax privileges granted to wealthy individuals and companies; to review the efficiency of each one and eliminate those that do not bear fruit to the government’s coffers. This is a vital step before subjecting people to extreme austerity measures such as those proposed in the budget in question, group representatives concluded.

The hearings also addressed issues of governance, citizenship and democratic participation in a modern or developing society. Participants offered ideas with environmental, health, educational, social and economic perspectives, among others.

Espacios Abiertos and other organizations had been asking to participate in the public hearings since June 5. Their petitions were denied given a supposed lack of time that only allowed government agencies to provide testimony.

“That is unacceptable, nor is it acceptable for us to be brushed off by telling us to submit our testimony in writing or offering us a meeting,” Blondet-Passalacqua said. “Budget hearings can not be a dialogue between government and government. If we want things to change, citizens cannot be kept in the dark, with little or no information. We already know where that has taken us.”

“We have the right to know, to participate and to influence the use of our resources. PROMESA has set a new budget story in Puerto Rico and its management must be different from what it has been given in the past if there really is a willingness to transform historical mistakes and get out of this economic crisis by putting the island first,” she concluded.