

Parliamentary control of governmental and administrative action and citizen participation in public financial planning

An interview with Pete Heuer, City Councillor of the City of Potsdam



Which relationships exist between the work of a City Councillor and good governmental and administrative action? How does citizen participation in the public finances in Potsdam work? How can transparency and participation in parliamentary work be achieved as a City Councillor? The City Councillor of the City of Potsdam, Pete Heuer, answers these and other questions in the following interview.

In your work as a City Councillor of the City of Potsdam, where are there relationships with good governmental and administrative action?

Governmental and administrative action is as good as the elected representatives demand. On the one hand, this includes strict control and on the other hand, the precise formulation of objectives. The structuring of both functions should - even if it may initially sound contradictory - take place in an atmosphere that is characterised by mutual acceptance and professional appreciation. In my experience, the constructive work in the technical committees is crucial for this. This is where the high technical expertise of the administration and the social and political ambitions of the City Councillors clash with one another and are shaped. Only an administration that is motivated will subsequently achieve committed implementation.

Participation is a key principle of a modern, democratic community. Healthy finances and sustainable budget planning are crucial to the functioning of a city/local authority. In Potsdam, both of these are conceived together. How does that work, in what way can the citizens of Potsdam become involved in the budget planning?

It is certainly correct that in the meantime, we can look back on a long tradition of the so-called “participatory budget” in Potsdam. Each year, thousands of letters with suggestions, a high level of participation in the voting procedure about the 20 best ideas and good media response allow a positive conclusion to be drawn. Nevertheless, I wanted an evaluation. According to my taste, the “participatory budget” became too distanced from the budget and developed into a collection of all possible good and less-good ideas, about which, the City Councillors, in turn, have the last word. I wanted real participation, which also envisages a certain budget for community-based expenditures - such as in the residential areas.

What added-value is created when citizens deal with public finances and can even partly help to control them?

I see two aspects. On the one hand, nearness is created to responsibility in handling public funds. Making demands is easier than racking your brain about where the money should come from - or, what may no longer be possible to finance, if you intend to assert your own ideas. The understanding about the budget system is linked with this. As a rule, hundreds of pages of the budget remain a closed book for most of us. Only an appeal to apply yourself can help with this. As the Chairman of the Budget Committee, I am intolerant of applications that incur costs, but do not contain a source of coverage. Ultimately, this is how I achieve the avoidance of promises that cannot be kept, or formulated positively - only promising something, when it is known whether and how it can be financed.

Another key principle of good governmental and administrative action is transparency. Which role does the parliamentary work play in the creation of transparency?

I believe that the principle of transparency is largely implemented with us. Thanks to the right to request inspection of files and ask questions and the largely public nature of the consultations, everyone and anyone can trace the decision-making paths. This does not rule out that we, as City Councillors, are not safe from unpleasant surprises. But that is the big exception. It appears to be much more important to me that in a next step, anything that is transparent must also be presented in a comprehensible manner. The citizens will only believe in what they understand and thereby develop trust. Ostracising language and incomprehensible presentations that are not explained sufficiently lead to mistrust. The administration and the parliaments are still not active enough in the social networks, where quick and clever response patterns are required, in order to convincingly deal with false information that has been put into circulation.

What are the political and social consequences of a lack of participation and transparency?

The consequences can be seen in the election results. It remains an open question, as to whether a lack of transparency and participation alone are at fault, but in the interaction with social fears and the feeling of insufficient nearness to citizens, either the political fringes of left-wing and right-wing democracy are strengthened or the sea of non-voters grows. Both are detrimental to the development of society.

Pete Heuer

Peter Heuer has been a member of the City Council of the City of Potsdam and the Chairman of the Finance Committee of the City Council since 2008.

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This paper reflects the opinion of the author.

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