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Best Practice: Appropriate Level of Unrestricted Fund Balance in the General Fund

Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA)

Background:

In the context of financial reporting, the term *fund balance* is used to describe the net position of governmental funds calculated in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP). Budget professionals commonly use this same term to describe the net position of governmental funds calculated on a government's budgetary basis. While in both cases *fund balance* is intended to serve as a measure of the financial resources available in a governmental fund, it is essential that differences between GAAP *fund balance* and budgetary *fund balance* be fully appreciated.

1. GAAP financial statements report up to five separate categories of fund balance based on the type and source of constraints placed on how resources can be spent (presented in descending order from most constraining to least constraining): nonspendable fund balance, restricted fund balance, committed fund balance, assigned fund balance, and unassigned fund balance. The total of the amounts in these last three categories (where the only constraint on spending, if any, is imposed by the government itself) is termed unrestricted fund balance. In contrast, budgetary fund balance, while is subject to the same constraints on spending as GAAP fund balance, typically represents simply the total amount accumulated from prior years at a point in time.

March/April, 2017

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2.The calculation of GAAP fund balance and budgetary fund balance sometimes is complicated by the use of sub-funds within the general fund. In such cases, GAAP fund balance includes amounts from all of the subfunds, whereas budgetary fund balance typically does not.

3.Often the timing of the recognition of revenues and expenditures is different for purposes of GAAP financial reporting and budgeting. For example, encumbrances arising from purchase orders often are recognized as expenditures for budgetary purposes, but never for the preparation of GAAP financial statements.

The effect of these and other differences on the amounts reported as *GAAP fund balance* and *budgetary fund balance* in the general fund should be clarified, understood, and documented. It is essential that governments maintain adequate levels of fund balance to mitigate current and future risks (e.g., revenue shortfalls and unanticipated expenditures) and to ensure stable tax rates. In most cases, discussions of fund balance will properly focus on a government's general fund. Nonetheless, financial resources available in other funds should also be considered in assessing the adequacy of unrestricted fund balance in the general fund.

Recommendation:

GFOA recommends that governments establish a formal policy on the level of unrestricted fund balance that should be maintained in the general fund for GAAP and budgetary purposes. Such a guideline should be set by the appropriate policy body and articulate a framework and process for how the government would increase or decrease the level of unrestricted fund balance over a specific time period. In particular, governments should provide broad guidance in the policy for how resources will be directed to replenish fund balance should the balance fall below the level prescribed.

Appropriate Level. The adequacy of unrestricted fund balance in the general fund should take into account each government's own unique circumstances. For example, governments that may be vulnerable to natural disasters, more dependent on a volatile revenue source, or potentially subject to cuts in state aid and/or federal grants may need to maintain a higher level in the unrestricted fund balance. Articulating these risks in a fund balance policy makes it easier to explain to stakeholders the rationale for a seemingly higher than normal level of fund balance that protects taxpayers and employees from unexpected changes in financial condition.

Nevertheless, GFOA recommends, at a minimum, that general-purpose governments, regardless of size, maintain unrestricted budgetary fund balance in their general fund of no less than two months of regular general fund operating revenues or regular general fund operating expenditures. The choice of revenues or expenditures as a basis of comparison may be dictated by what is more predictable in a government's particular circumstances. Furthermore, a government's particular situation often may require a level of unrestricted fund balance in the general fund significantly in excess of this recommended minimum level. In any case, such measures should be applied within the context of long-term forecasting, thereby avoiding the risk of placing too much emphasis upon the level of unrestricted fund balance in the general fund at any one time. In establishing a policy governing the level of unrestricted fund balance in the general fund, a government should consider a variety of factors, including:

- 1.The predictability of its revenues and the volatility of its expenditures (i.e., higher levels of unrestricted fund balance may be needed if significant revenue sources are subject to unpredictable fluctuations or if operating expenditures are highly volatile);
- 2.Its perceived exposure to significant one-time outlays (e.g., disasters, immediate capital needs, state budget cuts);
- 3.The potential drain upon general fund resources from other funds, as well as, the availability of resources in other funds;
- 4.The potential impact on the entity's bond ratings and the corresponding increased cost of borrowed funds;
- 5.Commitments and assignments (i.e., governments may wish to maintain higher levels of unrestricted fund balance to compensate for any portion of unrestricted fund balance already committed or assigned by the government for a specific purpose). Governments may deem it appropriate to exclude from consideration resources that have been committed or assigned to some other purpose and focus on unassigned fund balance, rather than on unrestricted fund balance.

Use and Replenishment. The fund balance policy should define conditions warranting its use, and if a fund balance falls below the government's policy level, a solid plan to replenish it. In that context, the fund balance policy should:

- Define the time period within which and contingencies for which fund balances will be used;
- Describe how the government's expenditure and/or revenue levels will be adjusted to match any new economic realities that are behind the use of fund balance as a financing bridge;

- Describe the time period over which the components of fund balance will be replenished and the means by which they will be replenished.

Generally, governments should seek to replenish their fund balances within one to three years of use. Specifically, factors influencing the replenishment time horizon include:

- The budgetary reasons behind the fund balance targets;
- Recovering from an extreme event;
- Political continuity;
- Financial planning time horizons;
- Long-term forecasts and economic conditions;
- External financing expectations.

Revenue sources that would typically be looked to for replenishment of a fund balance include nonrecurring revenues, budget surpluses, and excess resources in other funds (if legally permissible and there is a defensible rationale). Year-end surpluses are an appropriate source for replenishing fund balance.

Unrestricted Fund Balance Above Formal Policy Requirement. In some cases, governments can find themselves in a position with an amount of unrestricted fund balance in the general fund over their formal policy reserve requirement even after taking into account potential financial risks in the foreseeable future. Amounts over the formal policy may reflect a structural trend, in which case governments should consider a policy as to how this would be addressed. Additionally, an education or communication strategy, or at a minimum, explanation of large changes in fund balance is encouraged. In all cases, use of those funds should be prohibited as a funding source for ongoing recurring expenditures.

Approved by GFOA's Executive Board: September 2015

*The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA), was founded in 1906, and represents public finance officials throughout the United States and Canada. **GFOA's mission is to promote excellence in state and local government financial management.** GFOA has accepted the leadership challenge of public finance. To meet the many needs of its members, the organization provides best practice guidance, consulting, networking opportunities, publications including books, e-books, and periodicals, recognition programs, research, and training opportunities for those in the profession. For more information visit the GFOA website at www.gfoa.org.*



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