

PORTLAND'S NEIGHBORHOOD SYSTEM: GOVERNMENT BY AND FOR THE PEOPLE

Why discuss the state of the neighborhood system in Portland now? The question was posed at the regular monthly meeting of the Chairs and Directors of the seven coalition neighborhood offices following the 2004 elections. The consensus was that this was a “teachable moment” highlighting a unique opportunity to incorporate new challenges and develop new assets related to public participation through Portland’s “neighborhood system”. The election, in fact, provides an important reminder that we are a government by and for the people.

This report is a sketch. It is not intended to be comprehensive. It is not intended to be the last word; it hopefully will be part of a healthy process of public participation.

For the purpose of this report, “the neighborhood system” will refer to the programs and projects that promote resident participation including neighborhood associations, affiliated grass-roots programs, coalition offices, and City Bureaus including the Office of Neighborhood Involvement (ONI) administration as it impacts resident participation.

This report will outline the current state of “the neighborhood system” and propose thoughts for a future neighborhood/city participation program for consideration by City Council. Representatives from the 7 neighborhood coalition offices used their current experience and draw on their cumulative knowledge developed citywide over the past thirty years.

The compressed timeline was meant to reach the City Council as early as possible after the elections and the seating of the new Council in January. The offices of the Mayor and City Commissioners were individually informed of this effort in early December.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

It is hoped that this report will lead to a complete review of “the neighborhood system” and the creation of a strategic plan led by and developed by the community. It is further anticipated that reforms dealing with the mechanics of the system can be implemented immediately, while those reforms that impact the intent and framework of the City of Portland’s commitment to public participation will require a more detailed strategic planning process with the widest possible outreach.

CURRENT STATE OF “THE NEIGHBORHOOD SYSTEM”

ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION FOR THE WELL CONNECTED

Prior to the establishment of “the neighborhood system” in 1974, public participation was a rare animal in Portland. This was the environment in which women were excluded from membership in the City Club. Barriers were more common as there were few programs aimed at providing access to the municipal government for anyone other than local elites. Structured communications between the people and their government was often reserved solely for elections.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: ESTABLISHING THE NEIGHBORHOOD SYSTEM

For the first twenty years of its existence, City of Portland’s unique and innovative neighborhood system focused public participation through Neighborhood Associations. This was manifested in the Office of Neighborhood Associations, a central office with a small staff--a director, fiscal officer, receptionist, outreach specialists, and crime prevention liaison. In addition to the seven non-profit neighborhood coalitions ONI administered other community-based programs like Elders in Action and the Neighborhood Mediation Center. ONA’s function was essentially contract administration, coordination, and liaison between the bureaus/Council and the neighborhood system.

During this period of time “the neighborhood system” was praised by Portland residents and outsiders for its uniqueness and effectiveness in community policing, civic engagement (e.g., publicly financed and supported public participation through neighborhood associations), resident interaction with the bureaucracy (e.g., Bureau Advisory Committees), public participation in the budget process (e.g. neighborhood needs process), etc.

Neighborhood activism was focused on social services (model cities), housing (CDCs), land-use (neighborhood planning program), public policy engagement and self-directed community development activity. In retrospect, the system seemed most effective when citizens received the support to participate and when elected officials and staff were genuinely interested in authentic collaboration.

QUESTIONING THE FUNCTIONALITY OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD SYSTEM

Over the past 10 years, concerns with the effectiveness of the program and budget constraints, effected a change in “the neighborhood system”. Policy and operational discussion became more focused on who wasn’t at the table rather than who was. As the barrier to broad resident participation by local elites was breached over the past thirty years, “the neighborhood system” began to receive criticism from elected officials, staff, and the broader community that it was not representative. Concern began to grow not over access to the table, but who was sitting at the table. Interest

grew in representation rather than participation. At the same time, policies and operations negatively impacted “the neighborhood system”.

POLICY/OPERATIONAL CHANGES WEAKEN THE NEIGHBORHOOD SYSTEM

The social service function identified by neighborhood offices was weakened earlier (1983) by the adoption of Resolution A between the County and the City sending social services to the County. Neighborhood planning resources were scaled back in the midst of budget cuts and clashes between the Bureau of Planning and the community over the Southwest Plan,. As many crime statistics improved, ironically, community policing became less of a partnership between police and community and more Police Bureau driven. The model budget process based on assessing neighborhood needs faded away. Residents, once engaged at the beginning of the budget process, now found themselves reacting to a budget developed by the City administration. Bureau Advisory Committees faded away as well or became increasingly ineffective in providing advice to bureaus. Public Participation Resources from the Bureau of Housing and Community Development became less coordinated with the Office of Neighborhood Involvement occasionally creating dual public processes.

Gradually, City government moved from an exclusive club for the well connected to a bureaucracy that had learned how to manage public relations. In the process, public participation became more possible, yet often more frustratingly dysfunctional.

THE FLAGSHIP OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD SYSTEM EVOLVES

At the same time, it became increasingly difficult for ONI, the flagship of “the neighborhood system”, to articulate its identity. It took on a broader mission and moved toward centralization of function.

The Office of Neighborhood Involvement evolved from a bureau that was nearly solely focused with supporting contracts to coalition offices to a multifaceted agency with a frequent shift of purpose and function. Structural changes at ONI were often positioned politically rather than strategically planned.

The Office of Neighborhood Associations underwent a name change to the Office of Neighborhood Involvement. Coalition neighborhood Offices lost ground as Crime Prevention positions once part of the neighborhood offices were now centralized downtown. Dramatic increases in insurance, mailing, printing, and other operational costs were not met with increased resources as revenues dedicated to public participation remained relatively flat. Disparity continued to grow between the salaries of non-profit contractors providing the bulk of citizen participation services and bureau employees citywide that performed outreach services.

Community based programs like the Elders in Action, the Mediation Center and the Human Rights Coalition Programs were spun off from the ONI portfolio, while service based programs with tangential public participation functions like Information and Referral and Neighborhood Inspectors were created or moved to ONI. The number of employees engaged in public service rather than public participation activity increased dramatically.

THE RECIPE: PHILOSOPHY AND FUNCTION

THE NEIGHBORHOOD SYSTEM

The "Neighborhood System" is a participatory system. It informs, invites, and encourages neighbor participation in directing community decisions. Further, it provides linkages to improve livability. It is a system that supports and invites participation in public driven decisions.

All of this participation and involvement means a lot more time and work. To elected officials, bureau staff, businesses, and even us volunteers, this may not always be such a welcome thing. However, the core advantage is that more cooperation and involvement can, in the end, lead to a better result; much happier "customers" and bureaus and their employees that are appreciated and respected .

The "neighborhood system" is ideal for community building/organizing, developing community leaders, problem solving, recommending and prioritizing policy, visioning future neighborhood livability plans, generating self support, partnering with government, and providing constructive criticism.

THE COUNCIL AND BUREAUS

The "neighborhood system" works best if the core mission of all bureaus is a commitment to authentic cooperative, transparent public participation. It is less effective if all public participation functions are segregated into the Office of Neighborhood Involvement.

The neighborhood system when authentically invited to participate and not considered an enemy force can provide the city a valuable resource that cannot be duplicated or bought. Without public participation, the City misses a valuable resource in budgeting, planning, and community development.

Elected officials make the neighborhood system to work through their commitment to authentic cooperative, transparent public participation.

NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS

Neighborhood associations are self-defined and self-directed. The volunteers involved are in it to improve their community. Because they are participant based

and open to all, neighborhood associations vary in their personality, consistency, skills, and knowledge.

While neighborhood associations are self-defined and self-directed, they derive a measure of their effectiveness due to the City of Portland's long-time commitment to recognize and support "the neighborhood system" through authentic collaboration and financial commitment.

Neighborhood Associations are valuable because they are place based with specific boundaries and an institutional memory of that place and the systems that serve them. While they are best served by considering the big picture, they are by nature most valuable in their understanding and are focused on their immediate neighborhood. They are likely to be the only one's who do. Other cities without neighborhood associations have a more difficult time replicating this sense of place and the accompanying special knowledge and pride.

A big challenge in providing staff support is providing organizational development advice (leadership, facilitation, creativity community development activity, maintenance of the social fabric, and issues education) that is effective to each highly individual neighborhood group. A big challenge for those working with neighborhoods is to recognize that they are volunteers in this capacity and have constraints on their time and capacity for involvement (and create accommodations accordingly).

Neighborhood associations maintain a structure maintained by active participants that is available to advocate, build on local assets, or respond to a crisis when needed. They are best when they have the organizational capacity to balance local interests, encourage a sense of fairness, and otherwise facilitate neighborhood advocacy.

WHAT'S WORKING AND WHAT'S BROKE: THE LIST

WORKS

- The neighborhood system is an important foundation of government by and for the people**
- The City of Portland has made a commitment to the neighborhood system, one that more often than not exceeds the commitment of other cities**
- Neighborhood Office support provides assistance to the neighborhood system**
- The neighborhood system maintains an effective structure for community development or crisis response**
- Valuable institutional memory is maintained by a consistent core of volunteers**

- **The neighborhood system prevents Council and staff from being overburdened with every issue and provides a resource to respond to community members who approach staff and council members directly**
- **The sometime lack of volunteers is not necessarily a problem, but a reflection of what the majority of other volunteer organizations experience on a regular basis**
- **Community Building Activities are better targeted as they are determined locally by neighborhoods with local buy-in**
- **The neighborhood system is growing in its effectiveness in networking among community groups**
- **By comparison to most other cities, Portland neighborhood system does a better job**
- **The neighborhood system provides a unique pool of educated facilitators for residents and City administration**
- **Some Neighborhood Associations with skilled volunteers do great newsletters and websites**
- **Mayor can change bureau attitude toward public participation and community policing**

BROKE

- **Neighborhood Associations often view Bureaus/Council as being less interested in listening and more interested in managing, directing or ignoring participation by neighborhood associations. Staff is often defensive around neighborhood associations. Council often chooses to view neighborhood associations as adversaries or allies depending on the political point.**
- **Bureaus engage in “punch list” public participation and seek engineered solutions rather than authentic collaboration. This is often Public Relations (management) rather the Public Involvement (collaboration). Public involvement intent varies from bureau to bureau.**
- **City administration and elected officials often directly or indirectly blame the neighborhood system for not being inclusive without providing their own personal commitment or resources to approaching an issue that is historical and widespread both societal and citywide. Applying blame to public participants is as unlikely to improve inclusivity as ignoring it is.**
- **Bureau “silo mentality” impedes effective public participation. Federal, State, and local requirements may get in the way of real systemic change regarding public participation.**
- **The City Budget is missing a resource by not engaging public participation through authentic education, collaboration, and action through the Neighborhood Needs process and Bureau Advisory Committees.**
- **In land-use matters, there seems to be a systemic effort to avoid considering comment from neighborhood groups.**
- **Elements of the neighborhood system are challenged in doing outreach, not because of a lack of desire or knowledge, but because of time constraints, funding, and skill levels.**

- **More resources are needed in the neighborhood system for high stakes issues. The distribution of resources is not predicated on the need (e.g., the resources are the same when there is or is not a community crisis).**
- **Neighborhood office funding has remained the same in dollars over the past decade, but has diminished significantly due to hard costs rising (postage, printing, insurance, supplies, etc.), the removal of staff from neighborhood offices to the downtown office (crime prevention), the loss of key partnerships (neighborhood planning, BES neighborhood outreach, community policing), and neighborhood staff salaries have stagnated while city staff salaries have risen implying that neighborhood staff are less significant.**

REFORM FOR THOUGHT NOW

INCLUSION OF UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS

Provide adequate support to promote meaningful involvement and leadership development for underrepresented groups in the neighborhood system. Create authentic cooperation in the community. Avoid exacerbating adversarial relationships.

Consider assigning downtown ONI administrative staff to work directly with neighborhood associations and other community groups to affect change. Make public participation and the accompanying a core value of inclusivity in public participation a priority for all City bureaus.

Consider directing resources toward groups traditionally not participating in the neighborhood system.

OPERATING COSTS: INSURANCE, PRINTING, ETC.

The City of Portland should directly insure for liability neighborhood associations through its self-insurance program as well as maintain a legal defense fund to counter any potential for spurious lawsuits. Liability insurance for street closures (block parties and events), the hanging of banners, and approved neighborhood based projects in the public rights-of-way should be shifted from coalition neighborhood offices to the Portland Department of Transportation. Based on history and other legal conditions, these would appear to be a low risk reforms. More importantly, it would address the issue of steeply rising insurance costs eating away at public participation resources while general fund resources remain scarce.

Non-profits offering public participation services for the City of Portland should be afforded a paid consultant to create a centralized pool for other non-liability

insurance (employee health insurance, workers compensation, etc.). Non-profits should also receive the assistance of a consultant in creating a centralized cooperative purchasing authority in an effort to reduce costs through efficiency.

THE DOWNTOWN OFFICE OF NEIGHBORHOOD INVOLVEMENT

Direct service functions now in the downtown ONI offices need to be shifted, so that ONI can use its resources to become a stronger advocate for public participation.

The infrastructure of BDS may better serve the Neighborhood Nuisance Inspectors and the Neighborhood Noise Control Office.

Consideration should be given to returning Crime prevention staff to coalition neighborhood offices to address the lack of resources in those offices.

The decentralization to neighborhood coalition offices of Information and Referral staff may also be able to address this gap in community office resources.

Downtown outreach and administrative staff resources might be exclusively (or as a high priority) assigned to work directly with neighborhood associations and underrepresented groups to increase inclusivity in public participation. This would help address the need in the community while addressing the current lack of resources in neighborhood coalition offices.

End to Chairs and Directors agendas that focus on administrative detail and put coalitions in reactive mode instead of encouraging a "big picture" look at issues. The Office of Neighborhood Involvement should not direct these meetings, but instead provide support. In the past neighborhoods and coalitions have been blindsided by actions and decisions coming out of the ONI office. Involvement of neighborhood associations and their neighborhood offices in these decisions that affect the neighborhood system should be encouraged and fostered.

COMMUNICATIONS - MONEY /RESOURCES

Improve support for the communications function of the neighborhood system (monetary, technical, and staff) to ensure that information is communicated despite the ebbs and flows that affect participation over time. More and broader outreach by the neighborhood will educate, inform, and activate more public participants.

At a minimum communication funding should allow each residence in a Portland neighborhood to receive two newsletters from their neighborhood association each year.

Neighborhood Associations should also receive city support in developing, hosting and support of a web site on the City of Portland's server. Adequate on-going support should be provided for the expansion of the evolvment program to be expanded citywide.

More cross neighborhood coalition activity directed toward education, information, and mutual assistance should be encouraged and implemented.

CITY BUDGET

Reestablish the annual neighborhood needs process for both the budget and capital improvements in the next budget cycle. In the next budget cycle, set aside a portion of capital and certain operational funds in each coalition area and allow the community to prioritize their districts expenditure (e.g., the St. Paul Minnesota model). Provide an Office of Management Finance employee as a consultant to neighborhood coalition offices for this effort. Consider a small grants program to stimulate self-directed grass roots involvement (e.g., Savannah, Georgia model)

Establish an effective bureau advisory committee system that is involved in meaningful organizational changes, rather than after the fact notice. To maintain authority, BAC chairs could report directly to the Mayor without the presence of staff.

Stop misrepresentations of how much the City spends on support for its neighborhoods in relationship to other City programs and projects. The Office of Neighborhood Involvement budget does not reflect public participation neighborhood involvement dollars. This confuses the public and city administration alike. Fund neighborhood offices as a higher priority to create broader based public participation in consideration of the ONI budget.

Equalize pay and benefits of coalition neighborhood office staff with outreach staff in all City bureaus. The current inequity leaves the appearance that public information and relations (City Bureau Outreach Staff) is more important to the City's mission than the support of public participation provided by coalition neighborhood office staff.

Convert as many City Bureau public relations positions as practical to public participation positions. Consider their affiliation and (the cooperative direction of their function) with neighborhood offices (e.g., past BES model) to support public participation in the neighborhood system.

Maintain and expand recent improvements to public participation in the planning Bureau (neighborhood liaison program).

Restore the BES/neighborhood office public participation partnership.

PLANNING REFORM

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Address the drift of the neighborhood system from self-directed public participation through a strategic planning process. An effort should be made to establish a specific philosophy and framework (e.g., Assets Based Community Development) to insulate the neighborhood system against changes in City administration. Maintain consistency in direction/vision/mission/function/structure and end the abrupt changes created by the continual shifting from one Commissioner's portfolio to the next. There should be regular opportunity to review, evaluate and redirect the above rather than abrupt calls for evaluation of the system that are not well thought out and meaningful. Use resources from Portland State University in this effort.

In the process, find ways to address the disconnect between neighborhoods and schools and the City/County split that makes it difficult to ensure that basic needs are met while staying focused on larger policy issues affecting a neighborhood. Seek innovative processes for gathering comments/concerns/opinions -- even votes on an issue. Public hearings are so limiting. They don't foster discussion (if there haven't already been good processes to ensure that). There must be better ways to foster understanding, help people on all sides understand the big picture implications of possible paths, etc. This is probably more expensive, but then one should weigh these costs against the impacts (e.g., Measure 37).



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A STRATEGIC PLAN

(Think of a circle with a line through it and in the middle imagine the words "task force")

Discussion January 13, 2005