

A CITY FOR



ALL OF US



MORE VOICES,



BETTER SOLUTIONS

Strengthening Community Involvement In Portland



COMMUNITY CONNECT FINAL REPORT

SUMMARY VERSION

JANUARY 2008

Executive Summary

Portland has earned a national reputation for its strong tradition of neighborhood involvement and participatory democracy. Often described as a big city with a small town feel, Portland prides itself on its openness and sense of community. But over 30 years have passed since Portland's community involvement system was first developed, and it is struggling to meet the challenges of our 21st century city.

Mayor Potter convened Community Connect to strengthen involvement in Portland's communities, create a welcoming environment for public participation, and reinvigorate the partnership between community and government. Led by a diverse, 18-member volunteer workgroup, Community Connect talked to hundreds of Portlanders about how they would like to be involved in their city. Out of these conversations emerged a vision of a city where:

- People feel connected to one another, and to their communities;
- All Portlanders, regardless of their backgrounds, have the opportunity to be actively engaged in civic affairs;
- Government leaders are responsive and accountable to community input and priorities; and
- The inclusion of more voices in civic affairs results in a healthier and more vibrant city.

Five Year Plan to Increase Community Involvement in Portland

To achieve this vision, Community Connect developed a *Five Year Plan to Increase Community Involvement*. The *Plan* provides a comprehensive roadmap for strengthening Portland's civic life. It is organized around three interdependent goal areas representing a "three-legged stool" of effective community involvement. Each goal area has recommendations that include concrete action steps:

GOAL 1: Increase the number and diversity of people involved in their communities

The first step to an effective community involvement system is to engage the broad diversity of the community in civic life. To achieve this goal, Community Connect proposes nine strategies that will:

- Increase the power and voice of under-represented groups;
- Overcome common barriers to participation; and
- Provide effective communication to keep the community informed about issues and opportunities for involvement.

GOAL 2: Strengthen community capacity

Once community members are actively engaged, they need the connections, skills, and tools to be able to work together effectively to solve problems and achieve their common aspirations. Towards this end, Community Connect recommends 11 strategies to:

- Foster social ties and a sense of community identity;
- Support the community's capacity to take action to move forward its priorities; and
- Foster networking and collaboration between neighborhood and business district associations and other local organizations and interest groups.

GOAL 3: Increase community impact on public decisions

A world-class system of community involvement will only be effective to the extent that City leaders are responsive to the community's input. The third goal increases the community's ability to have an impact on local government policies and decisions. Community Connect proposes 10 strategies to:

- Make public decision-making more responsive and accountable to community input;
- Institutionalize the City's commitment to public involvement in decision-making; and
- Create the infrastructure to support the goals and recommendations in the *Five Year Plan* by updating the internal structure of the Office of Neighborhood Involvement.

Community Connect’s recommendations were shaped by the recognition that an effective and inclusive system of community involvement is essential for a healthy city, and a functioning democracy. “We want to increase participation by all members of our community, including those groups who are currently under-represented in Portland’s civic life,” says Cece Hughley Noel, Community Connect’s Chair. “Our recommendations build on the strengths of the existing neighborhood system while broadening the system to more fully involve the full diversity of our community.”

The Five Year Plan aims to be comprehensive. It recognizes that significant improvements to our system of community involvement will require a serious commitment from the City. The recommendations have been developed with the assumption that they will be funded with new resources when needed, and that they will be implemented with fairness and accountability. Our intent is not to divert resources from existing programs to fund these recommendations.

Phase One Implementation

The *Five Year Plan* is accompanied by an Implementation Plan that details 12 strategies to be tackled first to build a foundation for successful implementation of the remaining recommendations. These include strategies to:

Engage the broad diversity of our community in civic life. *For example:*

- *Overcome barriers to participation* by providing resources for translation and interpretation, child care, transportation, and meeting accessibility.
- *Expand and make permanent the Diversity and Civic Leadership pilot projects* to support leadership development and capacity building for under-represented groups.

Strengthen Portland’s communities by providing the tools and support to effectively address their needs. *For example:*

- *Expand the Neighborhood Small Grants Program* to support local community-led projects throughout the city.
- *Promote networking and collaboration* through citywide community dialogues, an annual Community Assembly, and an expansion of the Community Engagement Initiative.

Enhance the community’s role in public decision making. *For example:*

- *Make information about government decisions easily accessible and transparent* by requiring City boards and commissions to post online meeting notices and summary minutes.
- *Support the creation of a Public Involvement Standards Commission* and charge it with developing policy proposals to institutionalize the City’s commitment to public involvement.

Development of implementation plans for subsequent phases will be facilitated by the Office of Neighborhood Involvement (ONI), working with strategic action teams of key stakeholders and experts around each recommendation.

If the *Five Year Plan* is fully implemented, Portland will continue to set an example nationally as a city where the government and the community work in genuine partnership, and where everybody has a chance to be heard. Community Connect’s plan gives Portland an opportunity to renew its commitment to community involvement by investing in strategies that will reinvigorate civic life in our 21st century city.