

## *Imagine a City of Engaged, Articulate Citizens and Neighborhoods...*

November 11, 2003

### *The short version.*

- The City of Portland's neighborhood program, once broadly recognized as an catalyst for civic innovation, has become a shadow of its former self.
- Rather than promoting and sustaining neighborhood organizing as a means for ensuring a steady flow of new participants into neighborhood association activities, and articulate and empowered neighborhoods, the Office of Neighborhood Involvement has become a top-heavy bureaucracy intent on defining performance in institutional rather than grassroots terms.
- What is needed is a new commitment to neighborhood organizing, a willingness to define performance goals in terms of community needs and processes, and a refocusing of effort on neighbor-to-neighbor interaction.
- All of this is possible within the scope and scale of the City's current presumed commitment, monetary and otherwise, to neighborhood association activity.

### *There is a problem.*

In the 1970's the City of Portland created the Office of Neighborhood Associations (ONA). In doing so, the City committed itself to supporting and sustaining neighborhood organizing in the belief that organized, articulate neighborhoods would be a key to Portland's future success even if, from time to time, those organized communities emerged as the most committed opponents of the Council. ONA itself was envisioned as a means for efficiently passing funds through to coalitions charged with carrying out the organizing and technical assistance at the grassroots level, and for helping to assist City agencies with learning to listen more effectively to what citizens were talking about.

As a consequence of what some on the Council considered a revolutionary action, Portland found itself on the map in this nation as a leader among civic innovators. Unfortunately, that commitment to organizing and a limited role for ONA has since been abandoned almost completely. Instead of a small ONA committed to organizing, we are at the end of a 15-year about-face, with a bloated Office of Neighborhood Involvement acting as an adjunct of the city bureaucracy. What was once a commitment to grassroots empowerment through organizing has been transformed into an ineffective central bureaucracy attempting to herd citizens through top-down devised processes.

Today, the neighborhood system is no longer a source for civic innovation or grassroots empowerment. Social learning on the part of countless volunteers is no longer passed on to the next generation of leaders. New voices aren't being incorporated into leadership roles. Instead of viewing interaction with the city as one of many strategies for accomplishing locally defined priorities, neighborhood activists have become increasingly focused on organizational politics. We've gone from proactive barnraising to

reactive wordsmithing. In short, we're spending down the civic and social capital accumulated during ONA's first decade, and it's almost all gone.

*However, we can envision a different path.*

There are several principles that we believe are essential for a healthy neighborhood system in Portland:

- 1) Neighborhoods should be thought of as consisting of residents, business owners, tenants, land owners, and anyone else engaged in the territory found within neighborhood boundaries. It's time to end the parallel development of neighborhood and business associations, even if that means redrawing neighborhood boundaries to better reflect natural affinities. We inherited most neighborhood boundaries from the Model Cities era efforts. There is nothing particularly magic about them and it may be time to rethink territory along more functional lines.
- 2) Neighborhood associations must be viewed as vehicles for participation, not representation. The results of participation are important and should be viewed as more significant than simply another lone voice in the wilderness of public opinion. However, it is not fair, just, or reasonable to expect neighborhood associations to carry the burden of representation. That is, after all, the signature role that we charge our elected officials with, and for which they should be held accountable.
- 3) The Office of Neighborhood Involvement needs to return affirmatively to its ONA roots by recommitting itself to neighborhood organizing. We need a new commitment to grassroots empowerment through organizing. Organized neighborhoods provide a vital forum for residents, and the best avenue for the city to understand where local priorities lie. Properly done, a new generation of neighborhood organizing will incorporate new voices and new residents in an ongoing civic discussion, and lead to the sustained development of leadership able to help individual neighborhoods effectively advocate for an inclusive agenda of neighborhood concerns.
- 4) Neighborhoods need to be encouraged and supported to solve their own problems. This can involve interacting with city agencies. It can also mean developing their own resources to meet neighborhood needs. The neighborhood system needs to create mechanisms to ensure that all neighborhoods have access to the tools they need to move their priorities forward.
- 5) District coalitions need to be conceived of as nonprofit organizations that receive base funding from the city to sustain organizing efforts in each of their member organizations, create and support neighbor to neighbor communication, provide technical assistance and training, and convene neighborhood associations to identify and act on common concerns or interassociation conflicts.
- 6) The City's Office of Neighborhood Involvement should, as a matter of policy, be limited to fewer staff positions than are found within any single district office. Its role should clearly focus on helping city agencies understand the dialogue taking

- place at District meeting tables, and engage in training and technical assistance for facilitating more effective interaction between city staff and neighborhood associations generally.
- 7) Crime prevention efforts should be envisioned as part of a strategic program of community policing, and should be paid for with funds dedicated to making Portland a safe community. Co-location with district offices should be encouraged when it makes sense to both districts and those charged with guiding Portland's community policing effort.
  - 8) The City's investment in a "neighborhood system" should yield organized associations in every neighborhood having an agenda or set of priorities, a strategy for acting on those priorities, and a commitment to involving all citizens in helping to frame those goals. The City needs to gage its success in terms of how well citizens interact with each other in neighborhoods, not in terms of other measures applied to bureaus and the Council itself. Making neighborhood associations or district offices into "little city halls", rhetorically or otherwise, only serves to define them from the top-down as adjuncts of the City, rather than as avenues for building community and empowering citizens.

***We have a vision.***

We believe that the city should be divided into 8-10 districts, each responsible for providing services to about 12 neighborhood associations. Each district office should receive funding adequate to support a coordinator, one organizer charged with supporting communications efforts (publications, web sites, etc.), one organizer to support planning efforts, and an office manager/information and referral position. The coordinator and organizers will each be expected to provide direct services to up to 4 neighborhood associations. We believe that offices staffed in this way could be established for about \$260,000 per year, or a total of about \$2.5 million.

The Office of Neighborhood Involvement/ONA would be staffed by a coordinator, an assistant for communications and technical assistance, and an office manager/information and referral position. In addition, that office would receive approximately \$50,000 each year to provide mini-grants for "civic microenterprises" aimed at furthering neighborhood organization, capacity, and cohesion. We believe that this would cost approximately \$270,000 per year. The total bill for district offices and the central office would come to about \$2.8 million per year.

This is clearly in reach given current commitments to ONI. In 2003-04, the approved ONI budget is in excess of \$7 million, some \$2 million or more of which was added to support inspection services transferred out of the Bureau of Development Services. Of the \$5 million of so remaining, \$2.4 million is for "citizen participation", \$1.3 million for crime prevention, \$357,000 for Neighborhood Mediation, and \$227,000 for the Metropolitan Human Relations Center. Consequently, the vision we present would require no new resources from the City.

Instead, our vision simply requires the City to recommit to tapping the wisdom of its citizens to create the next generation of civic innovation in Portland. By implementing this vision, we believe that the city can re-establish its neighborhood system as the premier effort to promote civic engagement in America. Further, it can begin to build back the sense of community that so many citizens are seeking, but which has become confused in recent years with more bureaucratic efforts and imperatives.

Make no mistake: we have great confidence in and affinity for the efforts that the Council and the bureaus are making to sustain Portland's quality of life and effectiveness. We simply believe that those efforts need not and should not be confused or conflated with what neighborhood associations, as true vehicles for participation and relationship building, ought to be.

*What's next?*

This needs to be reviewed by neighborhood leaders, and embraced broadly from the grassroots on up. We are not interested in yet another top-down reformulation of Portland's approach to neighborhoods. Then, if after discussion, revision, and consent, there is a desire to move changes like this forward, we stand ready to assist a broad coalition with reformulating neighborhood associations to move Portland ahead as a model of civic innovation.

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