

Eastmoreland Neighborhood Association

March 29, 2016

Sara Wright
Community Information and Outreach Representative
City of Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability
1900 SW 4th Ave, Suite 7100
Portland OR 97201

Dear Ms. Wright:

These comments are written on behalf of the Eastmoreland Neighborhood Association in reference to the February 2016 Discussion Draft of the Community Involvement Plan.

Eastmoreland welcomes the Community Involvement Plan. In fact, we believe that the city would have been well served if this plan had been adopted for the 1980 Comprehensive Plan. We specially support an independent body to offset the public involvement lapses that have been widely commented on. Notwithstanding, community involvement needs to respect Oregon's standards on open meetings and open documents. We have provided operational language to address these deficits.

However, it is difficult to evaluate the discussion draft without resorting to the word "hypocrisy." Other than the forgoing sentence, our comments avoid this. However, it is important to keep in mind that the word is commonly defined as the practice of claiming to have moral standards or beliefs to which one's own behavior does not conform.

The Draft Community Involvement Plan is not operational in character. Although it contains the correct sentiments, it specifies few steps to achieve them. These steps should be included in the Proposed Community Involvement Plan.

Transparency:

The word "transparency" is mentioned in the draft eleven times. The actual meaning of the term in the draft is generally left to the surmise of the reader. The closest to a definition is found on page 6:

Transparency of Process.

Effective implementation of the Comprehensive Plan requires that public processes and decision making is more transparent about how public input and involvement affects plans and investment decisions. Lack of transparency in this regard has been frequently expressed by a wide variety of stakeholders in the Comprehensive Plan update process.

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Transparency here means making sure the public knows it was heard and making clearer connections between communities' needs and the outcomes of the project. (emphasis supplied)¹

This is a highly unusual definition of transparency. To paraphrase, the draft indicates that transparency is recognizing input and explaining your decisions. A definition more commonly understood is that all relevant information should be freely available upon request.

In the context of Eastmoreland's yearlong attempt to find the basis of an important staff policy reversal, your colleague, Deborah Stein remarked "That said, I recall that all of our deliberations about Eastmoreland, as one of several R5/R7 areas we analyzed, occurred in group discussions and not via email."² After a prolonged effort to find the basis of a decision, it appears that "group discussions" are not documented.³

Access to Bureau of Planning and Sustainability documents now must go through the city attorney's office. A lawyer is required to gain access. Undocumented fees are often charged for meager results.

Recommendation:

Change the definition of transparency back to the commonly understood definition where all documents and processes are open to the public.

1. Make all documents available.
2. Eliminate the need for lawyers and litigation.
3. Eliminate unnecessary fees.

Meaningful Community Participation

In 2015, Ms. Stein's commented that "Our methodology is different than theirs – in large part because our desired objectives are different." This raises the question whether community input has significant value.⁴

In fact, neither the basis of the decision nor the "objective" was then or is now available to the public or decision makers.

¹ February 2016 Discussion Draft of the Community Involvement Plan, February 25, 2016, Sara Wright, page 6.

² RE: Response to Eastmoreland public records request, Deborah Stein, January 20, 2016, page 1.

³ Eastmoreland's requests were for all materials, not simply emails. So far, only some emails have been provided to these requests.

⁴ FW: ENA Testimony Ignored, Deborah Stein, March 5, 2015..

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The language quoted from January 20, 2016, above does reference widespread concern over the lack of transparency. A detailed review of these concerns was distributed by the directors and chairs of the seven coalitions representing Portland's neighborhoods.⁵ I have attached it to these comments.

And, of course, the most telling example of the staff's indifference to professionally prepared input needs to be addressed:

The king of the Netherlands asks "why, oh why, would one down zone Eastmoreland?"
Jon Fink says "Dunno, ask the peckerhead", pointing to me.
I lean forward and say "cuz".
He says.... FILL IN THE BLANK _____.
Amsterdam 2016, gotta go!
Sent from my iPad⁶

The significance of the email is not the insult, but the implication that after the community submitted detailed presentations and professionally prepared testimony, the senior members of the bureau showed both a lack of understanding for the issues and disrespect of their own process.

Currently, the Comprehensive Planning staff posts some materials and not others on their web site. Characterization of materials submitted by the community is highly idiosyncratic where greatly differing levels of public support are misrepresented.^{7,8}

Given the Bureau's ability to dominate the discussions before decision makers, it is appropriate for Bureau staff to represent both sides of a debate, not only their own to get a fair decision by decision makers.⁹

⁵ COMMENTS REGARDING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, Portland Neighborhood Coalition Directors and Chairs Group, December 10, 2015.

⁶ FWD: King pics, Joe Zehnder to BPS leadership Team, June 1, 2015, page 1.

⁷ "Individuals and organizations testified in opposition to the Eastmoreland proposal on the grounds that it reduces maximum allowed density in an area close to services (including relative proximity to a new light rail station at SE Bybee) and the Central City," Residential Densities, Debora Stein, February 25, 2015. Page 19.

⁸ BPS summaries tend to create an appearance of a groundswell of support for their own opinions. For example, in the cited case, a small number of comments were received by BPA and only one two-page document in opposition.

⁹ "I'm going to assert that the PSC has the benefit of reviewing Eastmoreland's testimony directly; it's not necessary to incorporate it into our report (and, of course, we received their most recent testimony after our report was published)." FW: ENA Testimony Ignored, Deborah Stein, March 5, 2015. In this case, Bureau staff wrote a rebuttal to community input before the input was due. And, as is clear above, did not inform decision makers of the alternative information.



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Recommendation:

1. Publically state the policy question including community recommendations.
2. Publish meeting agendas so the public can find out where and when decisions are being made.
3. Invite timely comments.
4. Explain the outcome.

Conclusion:

While the draft policy has the appearance of meaningful public involvement, it is hardly operational. Past history indicates a lack of transparency and a lack of attention to community inputs. The draft should be changed to make specific changes to improve the situation.

Yours,



Robert McCullough

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Portland Neighborhood Coalition Directors and Chairs Group

Portland Comp Plan Update

COMMENTS REGARDING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

12/10/15

TO: Portland City Council
FROM: Neighborhood Coalition Leaders and Staff
RE: **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN THE COMP PLAN**

Neighborhood coalition leaders and staff, from all seven of Portland's neighborhood coalitions, want to share with you some important concerns about the community engagement in the update of Portland's Comprehensive Plan (Comp Plan).

Our group held a special three-hour meeting on November 12, 2015 to discuss community concerns about how BPS engaged the community in the update of the Comp Plan.

We recognize that lots of process took place, but we also are hearing strong concerns in the community about the quality of these processes, who was heard, and what impact community member input has had on the development of the recommended draft.

A key message is that both planning staff and community members need more time, and that the process needs to have enough resources and realistic timelines to ensure that the community effectively is involved in shaping the final products.

As leaders and staff for Portland's seven neighborhood coalitions, we want to share with you below what we are hearing and what we believe to be accurate.

SUMMARY OF KEY THEMES

Process did not follow Proposed "Chapter 2—Community Engagement" goals and policies

- We recognize that the recommended "Chapter 2: Community Engagement" language includes goals and policies that set strong expectations for good community engagement. We find it ironic and disturbing that the process used to engage the community in the Comp Plan Update did not follow these recommended goals and policies.

Community input appears to have had little effect

- We found many instances in which community members and neighborhood and community organizations provided extensive and detailed input but did not see that their input had any effect on the final product.

- Neighborhood and community groups and community members often did not receive a formal acknowledgement that their input was received, and often received no feedback on what was done with their input.
- In some cases, more savvy neighborhood and community activists who really understood the system and had good inside relationships were able to move some of their priorities forward. However, community members, in general, appear to have had little effect on the outcomes.

Decision making processes were not transparent

- Rather than a transparent, “additive,” process by which community members could see how different products and documents evolved, community input seemed to go into a BPS “black box” in which decisions were made without any explanation of how community input was or was not used and why. Community members complain that they are not able to “reverse engineer” BPS decisions to understand how these decisions were made.
- Community members want to know: What was the decision making logic? Were decisions just made by senior planners? What criteria did they use and what level of understanding of the prior community input and existing plans did they bring to their decisions?
- Recommendations in this process often appear to have gone forward without support of the groups that had been involved in helping develop the recommendations.

Lack of Community Access to Planning Commission

- Many community members feel that the Planning and Sustainability Commission (PSC) was not accessible to the community during the process. Community input to the PSC was filtered through the staff. Community members do not feel confident that PSC members adequately were aware of and understood community concerns and recommendations.

Disconnect with prior, existing plans and earlier products

- The Comp Plan Recommended Draft proposals and recommendations do not appear to reflect earlier aspirational goal and policy language—e.g. visionPDX, Portland Plan, earlier Comp Plan aspirations, goals for specific zoning, Zoning Code density standards, existing plan districts, etc. For instance, the Comp Plan map and zoning updates and changes being proposed do not seem to correlate with the aspirational language in the Comp Plan goals and policies.
- The Comp Plan Recommended Draft does not appear to incorporate and reflect other existing plans that often were developed with significant community input: e.g. District Plans, Parks Vision 2020, Climate Action Plan, Age-Friendly City Plan, etc.

Community engagement processes were not designed to be appropriate to different audiences

- Community engagement should focus on helping community members understand how a project or proposed policies will affect them and their community and how they can have an effect on the issues that are most relevant to them.
- Many community members and organizations did not have the capacity to get themselves up to the level at which planning staff were working.
- Much of the community outreach and engagement was done in language and formats that many community people could not understand. Outreach and engagement also was not designed to be accessible to many different groups of people in our community and often was not tailored adequately to the needs and context and communication styles of different cultural communities.
- Outreach also was not tailored adequately to different areas of the city. Too many presentations had a general city-wide focus and were not relevant or useful to community members—community members could not see how the issues and processes would affect them and what they could do to affect outcomes that mattered to them.
- Outreach also needed to be staged and tailored to audiences with different levels of interest and expertise. Too much of the information came all at once. Processes needed to make sure that the right people were in the room for the content being presented—e.g. “101” sessions for people who are very new to planning, and more advanced sessions for more experienced people.

Multiple Projects were underway in parallel without being clearly integrated

- Too many different planning projects were underway at the same time. It was not clear to most community members how they all fit together. Even the most savvy and experienced neighborhood and community activists had trouble following and understanding what was happening.
- BPS staff also often were overwhelmed and said they did not understand how all the pieces fit together. This made it difficult for them to help the community engage effectively.
- The Comp Plan is about much more than just land use, including transportation, bikes, parks, etc. This process affects so many different areas important to the community that it was easy for community members to lose track. Many felt that the whole picture was not being looked at.

Projects were not pursued in a logical sequence with adequate time

- Projects at different levels of the planning process were happening all at the same time, rather than a logical progression from the most broad to the most specific. Implementation projects were started before goals and policies were finished, and often shared the same deadlines.

- The process also was marked by a feeling that BPS staff were rushing to get everything done to meet what appeared to be artificial deadlines. This appeared to sacrifice the goals of producing a quality product and ensuring that the community understood and was able to provide meaningful input and have an effect on the outcomes.
- In some cases, staff reports were released to the community with only a week for the community to review and respond. This was completely inadequate given the complexity and importance of many of these products.
- Many community members feel overwhelmed and exhausted trying to follow, understand, and participate in all the different processes that were happening at the same time.
- Both planning staff and community members need more time.

Inadequate Resources

- BPS staff were overwhelmed by the scope and complexity of the processes and products they needed to deliver. While some planning staff tried hard to engage the community, BPS did not have enough people and resources to adequately involve the community in all the different projects.
- BPS staff did not have the resources to acknowledge, consider, and respond adequately and effectively to all the community input. This resulted in many community members and organizations feeling that their input was not heard or considered.

“One-size fits all policies” do not work for many parts of Portland

- The Mixed Use Zoning project proposes a one-size fits all approach at the general level that amplifies the drive toward greater density and other effects that often contradict the goals of existing plan districts and disregard existing plans and public input. The more fine grain levels and impacts of these proposed policies are not clear.
- The “five Portlands” approach does not describe the Portland community members see. We need zoning and planning that reflects the neighborhoods in question.
- No mechanisms exist for neighborhood associations to have a say in design and development in their neighborhoods.
- Neighborhood livability is being sacrificed for regulatory simplicity.

Lack of adequate analysis and modeling—identification of unintended consequences

- BPS generally has not analyzed adequately the different proposed policies to identify their likely, real-world outcomes in the community.
- Analysis has been limited primarily to static studies. Finer grained studies of the likely impacts on local areas have not been done. Analysis tools have not been responsive to the questions that the community is asking.
- BPS also does not track the actual impact of adopted policies on different neighborhoods in Portland.

- Community members already are seeing unintended consequences of this process. It's important to daylight these consequences earlier rather than later. Some additional mechanism is needed to identify and respond to these unintended consequences as the many elements of the Comp Plan are implemented.