

Central NE and East Neighborhoods **Constituency Meeting Notes**

Public Involvement Task Force

June 2, 2003, East Precinct Community Room

Present: Kerry Brown (Wilkes Community Group), Phill Colombo (Roseway NA, Central Northeast Neighbors), Cristina Germain (Commissioner Francesconi's Office), Patrick Haggerty (Glenfair NA), Barbara Hart (Planning Bureau), Mavis Holt (Mill Park NA), Arlene Kimura (Hazelwood NA), Bonny McKnight (Russell NA), Ross Monn (Wilkes Community Group), Christine Czarnecka (Family Works), Steven Yett (Cully Association of Neighbors)

Not Represented: Beaumont-Wilshire NA, Hollywood NA, Madison South NA, Rose City Park NA, Sumner NA, Sunderland NA, Argay Neighborhood Association, Lents Neighborhood Association, Parkrose Heights Association of Neighbors, Parkrose Heights Association of Neighbors, Parkrose Neighborhood Association, Centennial Community Association, Pleasant Valley Neighborhood Association, Woodland Park Neighborhood Association

Hosts: Central Northeast Neighbors
East Portland Neighborhood Office

Arlene Kimura opened the meeting shortly after 7:00 P.M. with a welcome and an explanation of task force objectives and time frames and how the task force is looking for guidance from neighborhood associations and people in the community. She noted that we are looking for neighborhood-specific issues that would involve neighbors more in citywide decision making. Those attending were given a brief moment to review the materials passed out.

Provide incentives

Bonny McKnight initiated the comments with a concern of whether there is enough incentive for bureaus to include the public. Phill Colombo noted that one of the suggestions before the task force is to include public involvement in bureau directors' performance evaluation with objective measures. Bonny explained that she was looking more for an incentive before the fact to make involvement happen, rather than a sanction after the public is not involved in decisions. Specifically, she mentioned the possibility of using public involvement as additional reasons for city staff to be promoted or to scale merit raises by the amount of public participation in decision making.

Barbara Hart suggested NAs taking the lead by recognizing efforts of bureaus or personnel to involve the public in their decision making. Kerry Brown suggested more effective communication between city bureaus to effect a multifaceted engagement of the public. Bonny noted that the impact assessment process does that and that a chart actually exists to show the different stages of public involvement. The chart is available from the Planning Bureau. Phill noted that the City Council has charged the task force to come up with minimum standards for public involvement that will be applied across all bureaus. Bonny suggested using the piece

already on the table to reinforce that effort, and she promised to send a copy of the chart to Brian Hoop.

What's wrong with how it works now?

Steve Yett posed the question: what's wrong with the way the public is involved now? Arlene responded that some bureaus are better at getting the public involved than others, and that what the NAs are looking for is early, substantive notification without excuses that a process is too technical for the public to understand, etc. Looking over a list of the bureaus and how they're doing at engaging the public, many people are not satisfied with every bureau's public involvement process. Steve noted that the land use process seems to work very well, so he was at a loss to understand what the problem is or where it was generated.

Bonny responded that neighborhoods are not required to have the same say in transportation, for example, that they have in land use issues. Often city staff look at us neighbors as unqualified individuals when it comes to making decisions that affect us, so what we wind up with many people who do not live in our neighborhoods telling us what to do. Christine Czarnecka noted that, on the other hand, lots of times public notice does go out and few people or sometimes none show up. We need more substantive public involvement. Arlene noted that there were other people who feel as Steve does.

Sometimes city ignores us

Steve used the airport issue as an example of City rubber-stamping decisions made by the Port in its 20-year plan. Cristina Germain asked whether the public group monitoring Port issues was not working. Steve used the analogy of being overruled in court. He said citizens wrestle with this all the time. Kerry said that the City and Port are not working hand in hand, and that elected officials have completely ignored neighborhoods in this regard. Arlene commended Ross Monn for being very vocal in this arena and not letting the issue go away.

Be careful

Bonny warned that thinking public involvement and decision making were the same thing is heading down a dangerous road. She urged that the issues be properly framed and presented to the City Council for a vote so as to avoid the current process that is so undefined to allow the public no role in the process that it can count on. Arlene agreed that we are looking for a better template for the bureaus to use in making its decisions that affect the public. Christine agreed with Bonny and said that to what degree the public is involved depends on the staff engaging them—their attitude. For example, she said, transportation has been great—so much so that they were stunned when we commended them for their efforts. And neighborhoods do go to lengths to commend, but we need to integrate that into the staff's performance review and stop the clock and go back and readdress an issue, if that is necessary.

Make someone responsible

Christine said that what is needed is a city public involvement czar, someone to find the best practices for public involvement and be able to enforce bureaus implementing them. Christina used the recent Mt. Tabor Reservoir issue as an example, saying that lots of people are still not sure how to evaluate that process. Ross noted that Bonny was always sending letters to the commissioners. Bonny added that we should be cautious about loading the responsibility on

the lower level staff and said she believes the Reservoir issue was approached wrong to begin with—regulation of water supply was a long range issue, and people were being more practical. Patrick Haggerty agreed with what Bonny said and added that the City presented its case first at the meeting and then asked for testimony. The city blew it and tried to use security as an excuse. The rationalization of the Mt. Tabor issue was long range, and people respond to more immediate issues. Arlene noted that any evaluation will have to stand the impact of time. Cristina asked whether a three-year time would be adequate time to deal with water quality issues.

What's the use?

Mavis Holt raised the spectre of a frustrated public. She asked how getting out the word any earlier would have mattered. Who cares, anyway? Phil agreed that what people believe is very important. He said perception is nine-tenths of the law. Unless public involvement and comments come before draft plans, neighbors will always believe that any draft plan they are seeing at first blush is a done deal, a public attitude very difficult for any civil servant to work with.

Suggestion

Phill added that reversing the process so that city staff hold back on how they'd like to see it done until they hear suggestions from the public will take a culture change that needs to be implemented at the highest authority levels—elected officials and the directors they hire. Phill said that will only come about with training on all level on how to engage the public and how to integrate what they public would like to see with the ideas of professional. Training takes funding, one of the things the task force is considering. Christine noted that changing the culture was a slow educational process, usually a five-year process, not something that's done overnight. Meanwhile, decisions need to be made now. Additionally, people are not consistent about showing up at meetings. The question is how does the public sector compete with things the public think may be more important?

Suggestions need funding

Kerry noted that financing any solutions is an issue. Bonny said in the past, when there were special district boards to deal with specific issues everything was more focused on problems. Now there seems to be a lack of expertise, and she agreed with Patrick's assessment of the Mt. Tabor hearings. Ross suggested having a master check list that all bureaus could use to determine whether they were doing what they needed to do to engage the public. Phill suggested that bureaus develop plans for dealing with public involvement and the suggestions that come from it, e.g., how do we respond and move on, if the public suggests this or that?

Staff needs

Barbara said that it would be helpful to city staffs if we could clarify our expectations of them. For the most part, those employed by the city are doing the best they know how, but we need clear expectations when it comes down to the relationship we're expected to have with the public. It's important that we then invest the right kind of city staff in this effort—staff we know can do the job. Patrick had kudos for how the Parks Bureau provided an overview of what's in the neighborhood and then determined what citizens want. The city seems to want more people involved, but we need to know how far the decision making goes. Without that limit, they'll

hear us coming back at them asking, “Did you listen? You’re not doing what we said!” Arlene noted that decisions are made at the Council level, but that many neighbors are frustrated because it seems that the Council is not listening.

Setting standards

Bonny noted that we cannot set abstract standards, but there are some that we can suggest. One way is for the commissioners to use—or at least show they’ve used—the existing NA and Coalition network a certain percent of the time. The group brainstormed some suggestions. Mavis said city officials should contact all affected by the decision with the initial concept linked to a timeframe for notification. One idea is to have provisions for emergency actions (e.g., Columbia Sportswear, PGE Park, etc.) spelled out beforehand. Funding for whatever is decided is a must. Local notification by multiple media—public access TV, Internet, e-mail, etc.—was also suggested. Patrick suggested that everyone’s busy and the city needs to engage more than just older people to participate.

Do as I do

Bonny noted that public involvement is not solely a generational phenomenon but one of example. A non engaged public, she warned, is dangerous for a country like ours where we’re told not to gripe, if we’re not engaged. Christine suggested a calendar of issues for radio, TV and newspapers along with cable access. Arlene again brought up funding as a major issue, and Bonny stressed that the city would have to hire professionals to do it right. Cristina suggested using school publications, and Bonny suggested seeking sponsorships for distribution of certain issue notification. Steve said depending on how much money bureaus have, some do well at getting the word out, others not. And he added that whether the public attends meetings and makes comments depends on whose ox is getting gored.

Changing culture

Christine hoped that a culture change at the city would get more neighbors involved. Steve recalled the situation ten years back and said things are different now. Back then, the Cully Plan was attached to the city plan, no infill is the top issue. We had a better head of steam up ten years ago and it’s like starting all over again. Arlene agreed. Bonny suggested that ONI take responsibility for gathering communities together. Mavis said people got tired not getting responsive answers from the city and that she’s been fighting all her life against people in government who rubberstamp wrong.

Bonny noted that all of these issues are ones that have been subsumed by NAs. Barbara noted that we have a structure that supports engaging work unlike other constituencies. Bonny said NAs should be catch-alls for many issues, but Arlene noted that other constituencies do not perceive NAs as catch-alls. Ross said NAs are the city’s customers. Kerry added that NAs are bombarded by many issues forcing NA chairs to work together and delegate work. Arlene noted size of NAs vary and no one has the right answer. There are lots of people, however, who feel NAs are not responding, that they do not have the voice they should.

NAs as central

Bonny said when organizations are separated from NAs, public involvement is fragmented. She maintains that NAs should be a public involvement umbrella organizations for all other groups. Christine suggested that the NAs be more networked, and Patrick agreed with

Bonny and thinks that the problem might be one of NAs having, for example, a crime problem and other groups such as environmental groups, not being concerned.

Arlene said that NAs should be repositories and conveners of issue oriented groups to gain a larger voice for the east side of town and be more effective. Christine suggested it be worked that way through the ONI structure. Arlene used the analogy of the NAs being the spine and other organizations being other parts of the body. Bonny added that the NAs need to be open and make the forum more accessible to other groups and individuals, especially in issues germane to a specific geographic area. Patrick used Powell Butte as an example.

Outer East malaise

Bonny used history to explain how the eastern portion of the city never really wanted inclusion, and by force in the late '80s, became the city's step-children. Geographically, east Portland with its large lots and strip malls bears little resemblance to the rest of the city. Steve pointed out that Cully was similarly annexed in the late '80s, and it too is dissimilar to the rest of the city in its land use and zoning with lots of mom & pop business ventures and R5 zoning. Ross added that these parts of the city are not given credibility. Arlene indicated they are areas that are all spread out.

Phill said Roseway's main issue is infill housing taking the shape of what's being called "skinny" homes, 15-foot-wide, three-story-tall houses on single 25-foot-wide lots where larger single-family homes used to stand on two to four lots. Patrick said that was leading to a loss of privacy in areas of the city where privacy was once the norm. Patrick sees a main concern of east side neighborhoods as one of equity.

Christine noted lots of residential bad feeling where demographics were mostly older people who are not wanting side streets paved and sidewalks improved; immigrants not vested in the community; extreme infrastructures needs never adequately addressed by the city since annexation; and people generally not voting, so politicians generally do not pay attention to them. Bonny we never asked to join the city, our geographic lack of infrastructure should have been funded with added services soon after annexation. Previous low service levels have been allowed leaving us with a differential in service level. In some areas we have the streets to carry transit, but we do not have the transit service we need. The city has not brought us up to full participatory level.

Mavis noted that the city wanted our money, and that's why it got us in—we need sidewalks on main streets like NE 117th Avenue.

Rest of the story

Christine says that the rest of the city, at the same time, is clueless about why the city should spend lots of infrastructure money out here in the East. Cristina noted that the bias was towards living close in to downtown, and, frankly, she said that Powell Butte is not part of City Hall everyday talk.

There was a call for some *pro bono* work to push for Powell Butte preservation, and Arlene noted that there was a need for more PR and better handling of the East neighborhoods' situation.

The meeting was adjourned shortly after 9:00 P.M.

***Respectfully submitted
Phill Colombo--6/14/03***