STRENGTHENING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION THROUGH NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS:
Future Focus Goals

For the Portland Office of Neighborhood Associations

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PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this report is to provide information to further specific Future Focus goals of increasing citizen participation through neighborhood associations. The report emphasizes strategies to strengthen neighborhood associations, broaden citizen participation, and aid in leadership development.

In order to gather information to further these goals the following documents were reviewed: Tufts University report on citizen participation, the Future Focus report, Office of Neighborhood Association’s (ONA) Guidelines, and a summary of the District Coalition Board Chairs’ retreat of February 22, 1992.

Six focus group sessions were conducted using questions agreed to by ONA. The groups included representatives who are or were active in neighborhood associations, representatives of other community-based groups, neighborhood business groups, representatives of city bureaus, and present and former staff from neighborhood offices.

After the focus groups were held (see Attachment) and the information analyzed, four major themes emerged which were tested in interviews with selected civic leaders. These leaders nearly unanimously agreed with the identified themes; one additional theme emerged. In addition to these five themes, a number of concerns and issues were raised and many suggestions made to further the goals of Future Focus, and reinforce neighborhood associations and citizen participation.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The five themes emerging from this study are:

1. Neighborhood associations and the neighborhood association system are important assets to the city of Portland and its citizens though there are some concerns.

2. Other organizations and methods are needed to broaden citizen participation. Neighborhood associations are not and cannot be the only mechanism for participation.

3. Neighborhoods can provide good opportunities for citizens to gain experience and confidence as leaders.

4. Improved communications are vital for better citizen participation.

5. Neighborhood associations must maintain their grassroots orientation. The city cannot use them as another service delivery network without risking co-option of their independence, credibility, and ability to get things done by pulling neighbors together and speaking with an independent voice.
Theme One: Neighborhood Associations

In every focus group and interview a great deal of pride and support for neighborhood associations is exhibited even by those who have had disagreements over specific issues. This support is for individual associations as well as for the system itself.

Neighborhood associations are credited with empowering citizens and providing an avenue for communication with the city. Because the system is in place even in those neighborhoods where associations are not active presently, they can become invigorated and respond rapidly to opportunities and/or threats. Citizens who may not be active in their association generally have the perception that they have an advocate in the neighborhood association. The most dramatic example of the value of neighborhood associations to the city is cited by a representative of the police bureau who feels that it is the neighborhood association networks that provided a base for police and officials to keep peace and order in Portland during the Rodney King weekend.

Two concerns about neighborhoods are consistently raised. The first is whether neighborhood associations are representative of their residents. No solutions are provided to ensure that associations represent every resident; however, if the membership is open, communications within the neighborhood allow easy access to decisions; the process for elections and decisions, especially land use, is clear, and an appeal process is in place, it ameliorates the problem.

In reality, neighborhood associations are participatory rather than representative organizations. Fair and open rules and good communication go far to reduce this concern about representation. This may be a problem that cannot be eliminated entirely, but clarification of the responsibilities and expectations for neighborhood associations, residents and the city can keep this concern in perspective.

The second concern expressed in every conversation deals with the city’s commitment to citizen participation. Most participants feel the city gives lip service to participation and wants it on the city’s terms; or worse, the city listens but does not pay attention.

Long-time neighborhood activists feel the city has improved over the years in notification or making information available but does not give serious consideration to suggestions from the neighborhoods. For many, the question of involving more people is not as important as the quality of involvement. Whether this perception of a cavalier attitude toward citizen participation is accurate or not is moot. The perception among citizens is nearly universal and should be addressed to improve city-neighborhood relations and to enable the implementation of Future Focus goals.

Several specific complaints about the city’s attitude lead to suggestions for more training for bureau staff in how to work with citizens in general and neighborhood associations in particular. To make sure the training meets these needs, both city employees and
neighborhood people should be involved in its design. The training will be more efficacious if it is part of a dialogue between citizens and employees. Such training would improve not only the working relationships but the quality of participation and the outcomes. This training should make clear to both citizens and staff that disagreements are part and parcel of participation, emphasize how disagreements can be resolved, and build respect for citizen opinion that is vital to the city's credibility with citizen participants.

In addition to training for city employees, most activists feel the need for a strong advocate for neighborhoods within the city structure. While recognizing there is give and take and neighborhood associations cannot, indeed, should not, always get their own way, their viewpoints need a fair hearing and responsible responses. The majority of neighborhood association members feel there is no one in city hall that advocates for their inclusion and the value of their participation except in a cursory way.

Adding to this feeling of alienation, neighborhood people feel that, over time, the Office of Neighborhood Associations has become too inflexible and bureaucratic, paying more attention to form and structure and forgetting or overlooking the diversity of the associations and the need for flexibility in working with such a wide range of individuals and associations. More time needs to be spent reaching mutual goals and less time on form, structure and contracts. A suggestion that gained support proposes more personal intervention and fewer legalistic approaches to problem-solving within neighborhoods and between the city and neighborhoods. Basically, no matter how well guidelines and contracts are written, some volunteers may ignore the rules, control their district offices, excluding other neighborhoods, and/or disrupt the flow of neighborhood activities or promote dissension among members. In these cases, personal and informal intervention from ONA staff may be appropriate rather than stringent enforcement of the guidelines and contract or additional rules. This, however, is a very sensitive area. But it is essential that Associations do not become captive to a small group of volunteers to the exclusion of a broad neighborhood membership. More discussions may be necessary to develop appropriate techniques for such intervention.

Theme Two: Citizen Participation

Though a great deal of pride and support is exhibited for neighborhood associations, when the discussion turned to Future Focus most participants feel too much is being expected of neighborhood associations. Broadening citizen participation, if the participation empowers the participants and enriches the city, is a valuable goal, but there should be a range of organizations and avenues of participation -- from neighborhood associations to budget advisory committees to environmental groups and community development corporations. One long-time activist spoke for many when she said there is plenty of work for all of us and lots of ways to do it. This sentiment is expressed in a variety of ways in all the focus groups and interviews.

Most are concerned that too many expectations dilute the purpose and goals of neighborhoods and increase the number of people who leave because of burn-out. At the
same time, ways to broaden participation and strengthen neighborhood associations is an important issue. Neighborhoods may organize around a few specific issues, neighborhood planning or park development, for example. These may be the most important issues in the neighborhood but because the group is an organized association, the city may expect them to review and respond to a number of other issues from crime prevention to bureau budgets to providing volunteers for committees. Because most residents are interested only in other subject areas, the additional work falls to board members who feel they are being misused by the city. These associations can provide a forum for dialogue between the city and neighborhood residents but they cannot force participation. On the other side, city employees end up feeling that citizen participation is a waste of time. Again, training for city staff may reduce this problem. The realization that these citizens both pay taxes and volunteer significant amounts of time and resources to improve their neighborhoods and hence the city is basic to a good relationship between neighbors and staff.

Conversely, neighborhood associations need to recruit a more diverse membership. This diversity should reflect a wider range of ages in both the full membership as well as the boards of the associations. It is especially important to involve youths as they are the future leaders of the associations. Besides greater diversity in the age of participants, there is a need to reach out to people of all income groups and all races. Because there are many differences in the make-up of communities, from one area of the city to another, each association could look at the demographics of their area and work to see that the membership reflects the residents. Not only is it important to involve neighbors of all races, ages and income levels, but a mix of interests also strengthens and invigorates the associations. This diversity broadens the appeal of neighborhood associations and generates enthusiasm.

Besides a diverse group of members reflecting the residents, associations also need a range of issues and events. Again and again participants worry they might be seen only as a land use organization. Events and celebrations need to take place that reach out to everyone and keep neighborhood associations lively and fun at least some of the time. Working with other groups in a neighborhood is seen as a way to reduce stress and prevent burn-out while achieving more. An informal group representing all the active community-based nonprofits in an area allows for coordination and improved understanding and cooperation. Having an informal network reduces duplication, improves scheduling, and allows for information-sharing in neighborhoods with a high level of activity.

Small businesses are recognized as an important group in most neighborhoods. Business representatives need to be involved with the neighborhood association either as individuals or through an organization of their own. Service delivery to business groups is an issue that surfaced in these group discussions and interviews; however, time constraints prevented a more thorough discussion. It is evident that neighborhood associations and small businesses have many similar goals. Ways to meet the needs of both while maintaining their integrity deserves further exploration.

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Theme Three: Leadership

The participants in the focus groups and interviews agree neighborhood associations provide a good opportunity to gain experience and confidence. Most believe that people who become active in neighborhood groups already have the potential to be leaders, and activities requiring decision making, public speaking, mediation, volunteer recruitment and management, as well as a knowledge of how local government works, hone leadership skills.

Some express concern that neighborhood boards might become a stepping stone or short-cut to political office while others feel active service that contributes to a neighborhood gives potential leaders a better understanding of neighborhood projects and problems and probably works to the benefit of neighborhood associations.

In spite of some disagreement about the quality and nature of leadership development within neighborhood associations, all participants feel the availability of additional training is a high priority. This training should be available to everyone at minimal or no charge and be easily accessible. Several long-time activists refer to the training that The Center for Urban Education has provided in the past as a good model; others cite Southeast Uplift training sessions as another good example.

Training needs to address a wide range of topics, such as how to run a meeting, land use concepts and hearings processes, fund raising, and organizing techniques. It is felt that many experienced citizens in the community would be willing to donate their time and expertise to these training activities. Design of these training sessions, like the ones for city employees, should be done by neighborhood people in conjunction with city employees and professionals in various fields. The training programs could be sponsored by individual neighborhood associations or coordinated in a city-wide conference setting. It is specifically noted that as urban life has gotten more complex, the need for mediation training becomes even more important for both volunteers and staff.

Recognition is given to a variety of existing opportunities for training, e.g. cable access; however, programs designed especially for neighborhood association members with a wide range of topics seem most attractive. It is also noted that city-wide conference settings allow for better sharing of skills, ideas and information.

Theme Four: Communications

Just as pride in neighborhood associations is expressed universally by both focus group and interview participants, communications are recognized by everyone as the single most important factor in organizing and maintaining strong, representative associations. Not only are communications within a neighborhood organization recognized as important, but communications among associations, between the city and neighborhoods, and with the general public are considered vital to successful organizations.
Three facets of communications emerge in these discussions: the content, the medium and the method of distribution. In terms of content, the participants agree that simple, straightforward information is best; however, a cautionary note is sounded. It is crucial that information be complete. These discussions again brought forward the need for training in the art of newsletters, both in terms of content and layout. Though many groups have access to computers and desk-top publishing programs, additional training would be helpful.

In terms of distribution, neighborhoods with access to neighborhood newspapers that can be utilized by the association are seen as an ideal. Many other neighborhoods are looking for better ways to distribute newsletters. Mailing gets a newsletter to the recipients but is not always timely and is too expensive if mass mailings to every household are planned. Door-to-door delivery by volunteers can occasionally be used but as a regular system it is too volunteer-intensive. Handing out newsletters at neighborhood banks and/or grocery stores seems to have potential but there has not been enough follow-up to ascertain this distribution system’s effectiveness.

Cable TV is another medium that needs further exploration. Cable access provides training in how to use the equipment, but producing shows concerning neighborhood activities requires additional training. Lents produced a look at their neighborhood that was judged to be quite interesting. Cable access has a great deal of potential for neighborhood communications, including live neighborhood meetings and training tapes for neighborhood activities. Many participants agree neighborhood associations could make better use of cable, but initial research into uses and available training is needed.

In terms of city-neighborhood communications, the discussion centered on the need for earlier, more complete information from the city, with specific contact people identified for additional information or questions.

All participants, whether neighborhood activists or others, want more positive press coverage. Many positive activities and events take place but the media tends to emphasize "bad" news or controversy. To combat this it is suggested that more media contacts be made through press releases and press conferences. Even though the stories are not always used, more "good" news helps create a more favorable climate for neighborhood associations. Discussion reveals a need for a media contact sheet listing both news agencies and the appropriate contacts. This could be produced and updated by ONA and distributed with the neighborhood directory.

Participants also suggest that ONA review new technologies that might be appropriate to neighborhood associations and keep them informed about the use, availability and cost. Though participants specifically discussed communications and new technologies they quickly expand that to include new technologies that could be adopted by neighborhood associations for improved services to their membership.
All neighborhood activists remember and miss the ONA newsletter and wish it could be re-instituted. Recognizing budgetary constraints, they still feel it provided an informational flow between the city and the associations and also increased communications among neighborhood associations. Generally, communications are accepted as the best buy for tight budget dollars.

**Theme Five: Grass Roots Organization**

Interviewees unanimously express great concern that neighborhood associations remain grass roots organizations. Most feel the city is coming dangerously close to co-opting the associations. As budgets get tighter the temptation to use neighborhood associations as another service delivery system becomes ever greater. Several people interviewed state no more expectations should be placed on associations.

Originally the associations were funded to give feedback to the city on its projects and programs. As one interviewee expressed it, neighborhood associations were a brave experiment in democracy -- a city government funding citizen groups to critique its activities. By and large this experiment has been successful, often in unanticipated ways. However, that success is threatened by overly restrictive rules and additional responsibilities.

To remain effective, neighborhood associations must maintain their independence from the city. They must not be viewed by Portlanders as another arm of city government. Neighborhood crime prevention is a logical extension of neighborhood associations and community policing and neighborhood associations work well together, but additional city programs relying on neighborhoods must be curtailed to allow neighborhood associations the freedom to choose the best way in which to serve their constituents.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to implement the ideas and suggestions in this report the district coalition chairs could review this report and consider the formation of working groups around the issues of training, communications and diversity. Group participation could be augmented by other citizens and city employees selected by the district coalition chairs. These groups would expand and further refine the suggestions provided by focus group participants and interviewees.

Implementation of the suggestions and ideas would broaden citizen participation, improve the quality of participation for individuals, the city and neighborhood associations, thereby strengthening the associations and aiding in leadership development. Nevertheless, other avenues of participation are valuable for both citizens and the city.
ATTACHMENT
FOCUS GROUP #1

The first of six focus groups was held at 6:00 PM, May 21 at Cogan Sharpe Cogan. Eight neighborhood people were invited. Of those invited seven attended and the eighth was replaced with an alternate. These people had all been active in neighborhood groups for a long time -- from 5 to 14 years. They represented all areas of the city.

The discussion began with expressions of pessimism about the city's commitment to citizen participation. Probing elicited strong feeling that the city gave lip service to participation. Opportunities to be heard are provided but the city doesn't really listen. If broadening citizen participation means more people involved in neighborhood associations, then, the range of issues that involve neighborhood associations must be made broader and not just land use. The differences between neighborhoods need to be recognized and that diversity must be respected.

In conjunction with broadening the range of issues, the group felt earlier notification with clearer and more information would help. It should be written in language the average person can understand, not government jargon. Neighborhoods need to have more up-front involvement (pro-active rather than reactive).

The group also felt that commissioners tend to appoint "the elite" to interesting policy groups and task forces and leave the boring appointments for neighborhoods to fill. The Future Focus committee was used as an example of elitism in both its make-up and process as well as a group that did "to" the neighborhoods rather than "with".

All the participants agreed that there was a core of workers who kept things going in each association. Events that brought out more people included (1) controversy, (2) celebrations and (3) special projects. Ongoing activities that increased attendance included (1) regular meetings with useful programs of general interest (remodeling your kitchen, gardening techniques, composting know-how for example) (2) refreshments, potlucks, picnics in the park (3) calling trees for both emergencies and reminders (4) bring a neighbor programs.

In every part of this session the importance of newsletters was emphasized. With a regular newsletter or neighborhood newspaper section people follow what's going on and get involved when they have a problem or a project interests them.

Suggestions for developing leadership as well as broadening citizen participation included training programs similar to Southeast Uplift's program. Educational classes about local government should be reinstated. These could include planning and processes used in the city government. (The discussion reminded me of the
classes that the Center for Urban Education held).

A long discussion about cable TV took place. Suggestions included a lending library of training tapes, taping neighborhood meetings or airing them live. The cable program on Lents was an example of highlighting a neighborhood. In order to develop and coordinate better use of cable by all the city bureaus, associations, task forces, etc. staff time or a new position in the cable office or ONA or a combination needs to be put in place.

Training should also take place in bureaus about neighborhoods and how to work with them.

The participants all expressed pride in Portland and the neighborhood system. They agreed it wasn't perfect but was much better than nearly all other cities and as good as any. The group believed that neighborhood associations gave people a sense of place and pride. They reduced alienation between citizens and government and showed that if people worked hard they could make a difference.

Neighborhoods cannot be all things to all people. Other groups can and do provide other avenues for participation and projects. Examples included Portland Organizing Project, Reach, the Chamber of Commerce and small business associations as well as parent-teacher organizations. Good examples of broader involvement were neighborhood clean-ups, community policing, crime prevention and block watch. The fire bureau received good marks for involvement of neighborhoods. Transportation received mixed to bad marks.

Final comments included re-emphasis on being listened to and not just heard, early involvement of citizens; clear, timely communication between city and citizens and between neighborhood associations and their residents (members). More good news and successes need to be showcased so folks in and out of government know that citizen's hard work and tenacity pay off and are important.

Neighborhoods need an advocate for them in the city. The participants felt that neither staff nor any elected official advocated for them. Much of the time they felt they were treated as a bother rather than an asset. The citizenship awards, while valuable, were an exception rather than the prevailing attitude. The group agreed that neighborhood associations in Portland have a great deal of power but it must be used judiciously and it takes a long term commitment to tap into that power to make changes.

I felt this was an exciting group session. The participants had complaints but overall they expressed pride, energy and lots of good ideas. Many of these put a new spin on old techniques.
FOCUS GROUP #2

The second of six focus groups was held at 6:00 PM on May 26 at Cogan Sharpe Cogan. Six business association representatives were invited. Of these two attended, a man and a woman. They represented Columbia Corridor and the north-northeast business groups. The low response can be attributed primarily to a Blazer play-off game.

The discussion began with negative comments about both city and neighborhood associations. Business representatives felt that neighborhood representatives were not always representative but reflected only one or two peoples' view. The city should be responsible in making sure neighborhood associations meet certain tests (like annual meetings with a constituency present) if neighborhoods are to have official stature. (The business people seemed not to know about the guidelines or contracts.) The perception was strong that neighborhood input was solicited but small business association input wasn't when planning studies were done. Additionally, one representative for neighborhoods on a committee or task force could not adequately represent all neighborhood area views. City process too often leaves out small business while including residential and big business interest. In spite of these criticisms, these participants feel neighborhood associations are a good vehicle for citizen participation in many cases and much of the work that they do is good for the neighborhood as well as the city. Suggestions to improve and broaden citizen participation echoed many of the same suggestions put forth by the neighborhood people:

(1) Accept diversity in neighborhood associations. Different areas have different issues and styles.

(2) Encourage more avenues of participation for example school associations, Portland Organizing Project, Black United Front etc.

(3) Make sure communications are timely and interesting; they should make people understand the relevance of the issue to them. Don't use jargon. Don't use general telephone numbers on notifications. Use specific telephone numbers with the name of the appropriate staff person. This applies to the city and neighborhood communications.

(4) Neighborhoods need to increase outreach to business and business groups. (Southeast Uplift is an example of this.)

(5) Participants need to be validated; need to be listened to.

(6) Some additional money should be spent on business associations especially for newsletters but ONA may not be the appropriate agency. Portland Development Commission is looking at small
business involvement. They may be a more appropriate agency but neighborhoods and business groups need to have an ongoing dialogue.

This group, like the first, felt that leadership qualities were already present in individuals. Neighborhood associations taught skills especially through experience and increased self-confidence. They also provided opportunities to assume more responsible tasks as an individual became more able. Other community opportunities for leadership that this group mentioned included other volunteer organizations as well as school groups, emergency relief and community policing.

While being interested in strengthening neighborhood associations they discussed this strengthening in terms of business and business groups. They were especially interested in increased dialogue between business and neighborhood associations. This would lead to problem solutions and less debate, suspicion and bickering. This in turn strengthens both groups and the city and frees up energy for more positive activities. Someone needs to get these dialogues going and since the city is already an information broker and translator the city could take the lead.

Many business districts don't have the money to get started and they don't have the expertise or knowledge of the issues without some help. These folks suggested that some money from business licenses be used to help neighborhood business associations. This group also believed that businesses may be able to generate some dollars themselves and that should be explored but they still had some misgivings about ONA being the agency.

One of the major strengths this group commented on was having a system in place. With that in place many things are possible. And like the first group they felt that associations gave people a sense of place and pride. City resources, especially for printing and mailing of newsletters, was given great importance. However, some neighborhood representatives are not representative and have an inflated sense of power believing they have the power to stop things and don't understand that in city issues their power is one of advice and consent. Since neighborhoods have city recognition and resources they have a responsibility to "follow the rules". For example land use appeals need to have grounds in fact and not be on flimsy issues. Neighborhood board members need to be trained with an eye to broadening their prospective. That prospective would open more opportunities for dialogue with businesses as well as other groups.

Finally, this group felt that their is so much going on that people are stretched too far and have difficulty staying on top of everything hence it is even more important that timely, effective communication takes place. Both the city and neighborhood groups lose credibility with inadequate communication.
I enjoyed this session and was struck by the number of similarities to the first group's concerns. While this group had some criticisms of both the city and neighborhood associations overall they supported the neighborhood association structure, in fact they wanted a similar system for small business groups. Discussions of communication and dialogue took a very high profile. The groups lack of understanding about neighborhood requirements for recognition and guidelines suggests a need for more public acknowledgement of the relationship between neighborhood associations and the city.
FOCUS GROUP #3

The third of six focus groups was held May 27 at Cogan Sharpe Cogan. Six people representing community based organizations not neighborhood associations were invited. Of these three attended, one had a last minute crisis and two canceled too late to get substitutes. The people present all had a long history of activism and had been involved with neighborhoods either directly or indirectly.

This group began the session by questioning whether the city wished to broaden citizen participation or achieve meaningful citizen participation. They felt there were opportunities but they were not always meaningful because the solution is prejudged or the city doesn't like what it hears. If the solution is already determined why encourage more participation? It would be better for the city to state the decision than create disappointment.

If the city wants broader participation they are sending the wrong message by shortening the land use process and leaving policies out of the process. Citizen participation is a waste of time if the only reason is to meet government requirements (Goal one, LCDC). One of the reasons it is hard to get more people involved at the neighborhood level is that many feel no one really listens and they can't make a difference.

The commission form of government can also be a drawback to citizen participation because some commissioners don't pay attention to citizens' work and it gets lost or compromised in the process. Some bureaucrats and commissioners act condescendingly and loud neighborhoods get the attention but rational discourse gets ignored. This sets a bad example.

On the other hand, there are a lot of opportunities to be involved in a meaningful way all the way from the block and neighborhood level, to coalition, to city and region. Citizens need to know what their opportunities are and when to be involved and when to say "no". Many citizens are lazy or don't care enough to work for change. Responsibility is a two-way street--both citizens and government need to do their share. Some neighborhoods get active only to get something from the city rather than finding ways to do for themselves.

More people can be motivated if they see they can accomplish things, e.g. Reach Development Corp., and Northwest Service Center. Neighborhoods and the city must show people what they can do. This is especially important in poor and minority communities.

ONA should take a leadership role in training people to understand how issues are fought (land use) and how decisions are made. Coalitions can use some of their dollars for training and education for all their residents. Southeast Uplift has a good training
program that can be used as an example. Also coalitions could use their dollars to go after additional training dollars through grants etc.

But the city should not mandate that all coalitions do the same kind of training. For instance, Southeast Uplift opens its training program to all neighborhoods for a minimal charge. Other neighborhoods could do different training and open it to everyone. This would allow volunteers a wide menu to choose from, meet the needs of diversity while containing costs.

Neighborhoods need to recruit new people for boards and committees, especially younger folks. ONA needs to empower neighborhoods, encourage improvement, and be more people oriented and less bureaucratic.

Neighborhood associations greatest strength is that it is a system which is in place. It keeps things going so when action is needed, a structure is in place. Citizens can use it in a very wide range of ways from issues with the city to neighborhood based projects.

Neighborhoods would be stronger with better information and training. City bureaus need to be able to better use neighborhoods as an information conduit without compromising the associations integrity. Hence city people need training about neighborhoods, and the information conduit provided by coalitions, neighborhoods and/or individuals should be clarified to both neighbors and bureaucrats. Additionally, informal networks between coalitions need to be reinforced without creating another layer to the system.

Final comments in this group included strong criticism of Future Focus for the implication that neighborhoods were single issue oriented without really learning who and what neighborhoods are. Again there were complaints that city government sees neighborhoods and citizen participation as a snag to efficient government and they involve citizens only to meet required goals. The city needs to understand that participation is messy. There must be a balance between that messiness and efficiency.

This group also sees neighborhood associations primarily as white middle-class home owners. There must be strong outreach to achieve greater diversity in their make-up.

This group was more critical of both the city and neighborhoods. While they believe in neighborhood associations they feel the city is not as responsive as it once was. They felt that both the city and the neighborhoods need to work for more solutions to achieve a more diverse group of people and not just give lip service to citizen involvement.
FOCUS GROUP #4

The fourth of six focus groups was held at 6:00 PM on May 28 at Cogan Sharpe Cogan. Eight neighborhood people were invited. Of these six attended. All areas of the city were represented with the exception of North. The group consisted of five men and one woman.

This group session began with a discussion of the neighborhood system structure. The participants felt that the coalitions, with the exception of Southeast Uplift, do not work well. Much of what the coalitions work with is issues that come from the neighborhoods and the neighborhoods could deal with them better themselves. The coalitions are too bureaucratic and a waste of time, hence they discourage people and use their energy in non-productive ways. The coalitions, albeit unintentionally, undercut the strength of neighborhood associations. The city also undercuts neighborhood power by setting up alternate mechanisms like Blue Ribbon Committees and Task Forces that do not involve or only minimally involve neighborhood people. The results often have a significant impact on neighborhoods but they have not had much in-put. Citizens, especially those who have worked hard to be informed, feel used and undervalued by bureaucrats, especially the Transportation Department. Both elected officials and bureaucrats seem cynical about citizen participation. This leads to a breach of trust between citizens and government.

The group had a number of suggestions for broadening citizen participation. These included: 1) disbanding the coalitions or at least reducing their functions; 2) rebuild the levels of trust between associations and the city starting with straight talk; 3) train bureaucrats to better understand how neighborhoods work and how to work with them not use them; 4) layout issues by both the city and neighborhood associations in such a way as to show their relevance to the average resident; 5) work to get more diversity in membership; 6) provide training not only for members but for all citizens especially kids (possibly through the schools); 7) have fun—hold celebrations, picnics, etc.; 8) have storefront offices so neighborhood associations will have a high visibility and be a part of daily life; 9) use grocery stores, banks, churches as part of a delivery system for newsletters and information (savings from mailing would offset additional printing cost); 10) provide a range of activities from clean-ups to fairs to planning issues; 11) find common ground among all players; 12) find new ways to empower neighborhoods; and 13) associations must find ways to get new people involved to prevent burn-out and increase the diversity of those who are active. However, neighborhood associations should not be expected to be the only avenue of participation.

The leadership of neighborhood associations at this time tends to be white middle-class. No one has done a good job of getting
diverse groups involved on a regular basis. New issues/projects like community policing may be a way of getting more diversity. Training and orientation should focus on involvement. Leaders will arise out of that involvement. Participation training should include basic skills e.g. how to run a meeting, understanding and accessing government. This training should be aimed at everyone including kids. If associations created positions on their boards for teen-agers it would help involve and teach younger people and make neighborhood activities relevant to more people. Activities or training that engender any or all of the following are valuable to both participants and leaders: endurance, intensity, accessibility, enthusiasm, dedication, commitment, patience, pride of place and basic utilitarian know-how including media relations.

Neighborhood associations aren't perfect but they have many strengths. Perhaps the best thing about them is the structure they provide for participation and the opportunity they offer communities. Citizens have not fully utilized their power so, in many ways, their potential is the most important attribute. Additionally associations provide a forum for discussions and help channel energy into constructive action. They also help maintain a balance between citizens and the city.

Neighborhood associations would benefit from better visibility through neighborhood signs, storefront offices, more publicity on projects, media focus on good news as well as bad, more use of cable access.

Finally this group suggested better notification from the city (excepting the bureau of planning), county and, in some cases the state. Neighborhood associations as corporations could take on some projects that would generate dollars and jobs for their community as well as reduce their dependence on city money.

This group wanted to see regular sessions to discuss and share ideas with other neighborhoods/coalitions. In order to do this they suggested a presiding officers association for neighborhood chairs and an annual city-wide meeting or Congress.

This session was more academic in their approach than the other groups, however many of the same issues emerged.
FOCUS GROUP #5

The fifth of six focus groups was held at 6:00 PM on June 25 at Cogan Sharpe Cogan. Eight present or past neighborhood employees were invited. Of these two were unable to attend because of conflicting neighborhood meetings. All of the participants have a long history with neighborhoods generally as both employees and volunteers. There were four women and two men.

This session began more pessimistically than the first five. The group believed that the city wants to look good and sound good but is not really interested in citizens' viewpoint but wants to control citizens. ONA pushes more uniformity on associations and coalitions and requires too many reports on administrative activities. This burns up energy and reduces the available time and energy of both staff and volunteers. Since not all neighborhoods operate in the same way, it establishes artificial barriers to broader participation.

The city also needs to recognize that there will be a wide variety of participation both from within neighborhood associations and from other formats. The original idea for Portland neighborhood associations was a contractual arrangement allowing maximum independence and minimal control. The city is encouraging diversity in our society and then makes honoring that diversity more difficult for neighborhood associations by placing more rules on them that push towards uniformity. The group opined that the present elected politicians are uncomfortable with the messiness of citizen participation, and they want more uniformity in the associations and are less willing to recognize other groups. There is work enough for everybody and the city needs to welcome citizen participation from them. Neighborhood associations cannot be all things to all people.

Some participants were more optimistic but they acknowledged that they had not been as involved with the process recently.

The group agreed that it is easy to be dependent on city dollars. Given that federal requirements for citizen involvement have shrunk and the money to fund those efforts have dried up, that, under Ballot Measure 5, city resources are incredibly tight. Neighborhoods need to look for other dollar sources, do more with less and/or provide additional services to the city. These services should not be mandated but negotiated. A great deal of skepticism was expressed about the city's ability to negotiate rather than mandate.

One suggestion pictured the coordinators as having contracts with the city and another suggested that the neighborhood offices be city satellite offices that provide information and referral and support services to a range of volunteers not exclusively for neighborhood associations. The management and paper work would
then be done by city rather than volunteers or coordinators. A discussion ensued about the change in times, dollars and sophistication levels of neighborhood associations. This group exhibited a willingness to re-define the present system/process though they felt it was vital to involve neighborhood associations and other volunteers at the beginning of such a discussion and be ready to hear what they are saying and not have a process were the outcome is predetermined.

As in the other focus groups this group felt that communications, especially written, were vital. The use of neighborhood newspapers is an excellent method of keeping the majority of neighbors informed of activities and issues. Unfortunately most neighborhoods do not have such a vehicle. In those areas it becomes even more important to have a broad distribution system for a regular newsletter. ONA's newsletter was a vital source of information on upcoming processes at the city that would require neighborhood participation and a way to stay abreast of activities in other neighborhood/coalition areas. With fewer dollars available communication with groups and citizens becomes even more important. It should be the last thing cut from the budget.

A problem identified at the neighborhood level is volunteers who are in it for their own personal power or who are "crackpots" who drive good volunteers away. It is frequently difficult to change this behavior or dissuade these volunteers. Personal intervention seems to work best either by board chairs, coordinators or the ONA director, however, more rules and regulations will only hamper good volunteers and the troublesome members seem able to find a way around them. Neighborhoods are to get things done and empower EVERYONE not just a few.

The biggest strengths of neighborhoods are 1) that the system is in place and open to everybody and, 2) the volunteers. Anything that supports these two points helps strengthen neighborhood associations.

This group felt strongly that more diverse events, especially celebrations are needed. The spirit of Portland Awards are great but more recognition for groups and individuals. More media coverage for good news and not just controversy or bad news would reenforce neighborhoods and volunteers. Cable could be used but must be involved in such a way as to support activities and not wear volunteers out. Neighborhood associations cannot do all the citizen involvement. ONA needs to get more directly involved with a wide range of citizens and not just a few. The coalition system runs the risk of leaving the little guy out. Neighborhood associations are not, indeed cannot be, representative; they are participatory much like elections--everyone has an opportunity to vote. Some choose not to. Finally, ONA needs to make both bureaucrats and elected officials aware of the services that are provided by neighborhoods and coalitions so that they are respected
instead of being ignored.

This group had both a philosophical and pragmatic perspective. The discussion covered history, a comparison of system and "nitty gritty" suggestions. A discussion with a group similar to this might be enlightening for ONA, elected officials and bureaucrats.
FOCUS GROUP #6

The last of six focus groups met July 21 at 10:00 AM at Cogan Sharpe Cogan. Ten staff people from city bureaus were invited. Of these seven attended. There were four men and three women, representing seven city bureaus. Many of the participants not only represented a bureau but are or have been active in neighborhood associations.

The opening discussion centered around what did the city's Future Focus mean by broadening citizen participation. The group did not reach a consensus on a definition but quickly moved to their own ideas and experiences of broader participation. The city and neighborhoods need to find ways to expand from the usual hard core participants. To do this there must be timely communication to an expanded group of community residents either through mailing lists or other means. This effort could be aimed at neighbors who care but don't know how to plug into the process. If the city hopes to reach the average person it must support efforts to translate information so that it appeals to a particular event or interest. On going citizen participation is hard work especially if diverse participation is a goal. A barrier to participation is a lack of understanding of the process.

The city needs to clarify its processes and bring people into the whole process and not just their "interest" area. This can help build a constituency for city process, projects and issues as well as broadening citizen participation. Some neighbors feel that associations don't represent them (especially in traffic issues).

The goal for neighborhoods has been to be representative but in reality they are participatory. Therefore it is incumbent upon active members to survey the neighborhood for issues and concerns and include the findings in future actions. This leads to better representation of neighborhood. Even so, some neighborhoods have made major decisions without finding out what the neighborhood thinks. Early notification and better communications might help, allowing the association to do a better job of eliciting neighborhood opinion. Frequently citizens only respond at the last minute or the neighborhood doesn't have sufficient time between receiving the notification and the deadline for stating their position. In some cases it isn't enough for the city to use just the neighborhood list. They may need to do additional research and outreach. This depends on the importance of the issue and how wide-reaching its impact.

The transportation Department has 20-30 projects and only 3 or 4 neighborhood associations involved. PDOT believes that most neighborhood groups want to stand back. Some bureaus do their own recruiting for budget advisory committees because of little or no response from neighborhood associations. The links between BACs and neighborhoods need to be clarified and strengthened but the
kind of work that BACs do isn't exciting or it isn't perceived as relevant by most people.

People respond to "hot issues" and frequently go away when issue is resolved. Sometimes these new people can be brought into the association but generally only a few of those who were active in the "hot issue" take on the less exciting on-going work. Demographics may play a part in activity level. There is enough energy and time to address an issue that is perceived as important or having a big impact but single mothers and other low income people don't always have the luxury of time and resources to participate.

There is a great variety in the levels of activity from neighborhood to neighborhood and from issue to issue. Training might help bureau people better understand and give them some techniques to work with less successful neighborhoods with few participants and little representation.

In terms of developing leadership neighborhoods were seen as only one of many avenues to do this, especially if the goals of Future Focus are to be reached. Additionally, as the previous discussion shows, there are more than one kind of leadership already exhibited in neighborhoods. Two of these are crisis leadership and on-going leadership. Often people are good at one and not the other. Future Focus seems to be looking for leaders with more training and experience than they can get in the neighborhoods. Perhaps neighborhood associations provide a place for leaders to begin to emerge. But bottom line leadership is a personal quality or it isn't. More training and experience gives a leader additional skill. There are lots of opportunities in our community in addition to neighborhoods---all the way from parent-teacher associations to AIDS programs.

At this point in the discussion one of the participants asked why neighborhoods didn't get involved in any "important" activities and the group then discussed SEUL's project about racism. This lead to a discussion about better "press" to tell the story of neighborhoods in a positive light. A few neighborhoods are capable of generating media coverage but most need help.

In a discussion of strengths and weaknesses, much emphasis was placed on better communications between the city and neighborhood associations as well as communication directly with residents. Better communications needs to be a priority both from top down and bottom up.

The structure of ONA and the neighborhood coalition system was also questioned. More flexibility and support for diversity in the neighborhoods need to come from the city and ONA.

Within neighborhood associations themselves there must be better
out-reach to residents both for additional activists and more representative decisions. A way to limit the power of "crackpots" so others will stay or become involved is vital. This would also improve the image of neighborhood association.

The strengths included; 1) provides an opportunity to get things done, 2) influence government decisions; 3) a forum to discuss neighborhood issues and resolve differences; 4) a clearinghouse for both resources and problems; 5) a way to access the system, and 6) a sense of place and pride in one's neighborhood.

This group felt strongly that money spent on neighborhoods is money well spent---in fact the representative from the police department said that because of neighborhood associations and there knowledge and work Portland escaped problems during the week-end of the Rodney King trial riots and that the money saved by avoiding the trouble experienced in other West Coast cities would pay for neighborhood associations for 10 years.