

## ABSTRACT

Communities across the United States are experiencing a “civic revival” that is reconnecting community members with local decision-making and civic life in their communities. Since the 1980s, academic researchers and local governance reformers have advocated for a shift away from the traditional top-down, expert-driven approach to governance and toward a governance model in which government leaders and staff and community members work as partners to shape the community and make local decisions.

Portland, Oregon, since the 1970s, has been known nationally and internationally as a city with a tradition of strong community involvement. Portland’s successes and failures offer a valuable case study into what it takes to develop, implement, and sustain policies, structures, and programs that encourage greater participatory democracy.

This dissertation reviews the evolution of Portland’s community and neighborhood system from its creation in the 1970s through 2013 through an examination of the many reviews of the system over the years supplemented by reviews of newspaper accounts and informal, unstructured interviews with individuals who were involved in different processes and programs. This dissertation investigates which elements are important to the success of a city-wide community and neighborhood involvement system, the factors that help or hinder the adoption and implementation of system reforms, and strategies that help embed system advances to prevent them from being eroded or undone.

This dissertation argues that a community that wants to move toward much greater participatory democracy and community governance must develop and implement

a comprehensive strategy that accomplishes three goals: involving many more people in the civic life in their community, building community capacity to organize and be involved in local decision making, and significantly improving the willingness and ability of city leaders and staff to work in partnership with community members and organizations. This dissertation also argues that community and neighborhood involvement systems need to include not only traditional geographic-based neighborhood associations but also communities of people who find their community through shared identity.