

NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZATION IN PORTLAND, OREGÓN

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## NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZATION IN PORTLAND, OREGON

During its lifetime of 120 years, Portland has been developed as a city of neighborhoods. Several of the neighborhoods were originally incorporated as separate towns, such as Linnton, St. Johns, Albina, Lents, and Sellwood. Even though they all annexed to the city by 1915, they still retain their identity. Some neighborhoods were platted and built in distinctive patterns -- for example, Ladd's Addition was laid out in a classical spoked wheel pattern within a square, and Laurelhurst follows the contours of its low hills. A map prepared in 1912 (the halfway point) shows no fewer than 50 neighborhoods within the city, each connected to downtown by a streetcar line.

The growth of the suburban towns since World War II, the increases in traffic in and through neighborhoods, and the deterioration of some of the older homes have put increasing pressure on these neighborhoods. About the same time that South Portland was succumbing to urban renewal, other neighborhoods began to organize to preserve and enhance neighborhood livability. Eight Northeast neighborhoods were organized through the Model Cities program, and five Southeast neighborhoods trace their current organization to a non-profit corporation established with OEO funds. Several others organized to resist freeway proposals, and a few to seek planning assistance. Whatever their origin, at latest count 46 neighborhoods have some form of organization.

Two-thirds to three-fourths of them are active on a regular basis. Five or six areas remain unorganized.

#### THE DPO PROPOSAL

As planning efforts got underway in Northwest Portland (1971), the planners discovered that their efforts were slowed by the lack of staff who could stimulate and coordinate the citizen participation, as in the Model Cities area. The planners proposed the formation of District Planning Organizations inspired by the San Diego and Fort Worth efforts. In response, Mayor Shrank established a Citizen Task Force and charged them to study the concept. What could be the authority of DPOs, and how could they be funded?

After meeting throughout 1972, the DPO Task Force submitted a report based on three principles:

- 1- A two tier structure should be established, composed of neighborhood planning organizations (NPOs) and district planning organizations (DPOs). Any matter which affected only one neighborhood should be considered by that NPO, and any matter affecting more than one neighborhood in a district should be considered by that DPO.
- 2- NPOs and DPOs should be involved in both physical and social planning.
- 3- NPOs and DPOs should have some genuine authority; in the words of the report, "While all plans and proposals subsequently approved by the planning organizations may not obtain City Council or agency approval, neither will City Council, agency plans or proposals be funded and/or approved that do not have the approval of the neighborhood or district involved."

In its consideration of this report, the City Planning Commission amended the third principle by adding the words, "...unless overall City policy articulated by the City Council and approved by the majority of the neighborhoods is involved." The Planning Commission also noted that they did not have sufficient resources to aid planning in all the neighborhoods.

The new mayor, Neil Goldschmidt, strongly supported neighborhood participation and during the budget hearings of April 1973, he proposed a Bureau of Neighborhood Organizations with a budget of \$104,000. The chairman of the Task Force appeared at the hearing to advise the Council that they would need an implementor to transform the report into action. The Council accepted the budget item on the understanding that specific legislation would be prepared

#### DETERMINING THE PATTERN

Portland has a modified commission form of government where the mayor and four commissioners conduct legislative matters and where each of the five elected officials administers a number of bureaus. Mayor Goldschmidt assigned the task of implementing the DPO proposal to the new Commissioner of Public Affairs, Mildred Schwab. She hired a person who had been working as staff-person to a Northwest Portland neighborhood association. The first problem they faced was that the City Charter did not permit the delegation of legislative authority. Some form of decentralization was feasible, however, because the charter permitted the delegation of administrative or supervisory authority. The question was: How to structure the relationship so that citizens has some genuine authority without encroaching on the authority of elected officials?

The first draft of the ordinance was based on the Task Force Report, but was more explicit and added provisions for the proposed bureau. The ordinance specifically required citizen participation in all city projects and programs affecting neighborhood livability. A section on district planning organizations spelled out their formation by neighborhoods and stipulated that any matter affecting the livability of more than one neighborhood would be considered by the DPO, while matters affecting the livability of just one neighborhood would be considered by the NPO. A process for recognizing neighborhood associations was adapted from a Eugene, Oregon ordinance, and the functions of the Bureau of Neighborhood Organizations were defined. A draft map of districts was attached, and the whole proposal was circulated for citizen comment.

This first draft raised a storm of questions. At a community forum attended by over 100 citizens, neighborhood association officers made it clear that they believed that DPOs could turn out to be "another layer of bureaucracy" between neighborhood associations and City Council. In particular, the division of functions drew fire, for neighborhood officers feared that DPOs would usurp their review of issues and have more influence at City hearings. The functions of the Bureau were criticized as too strong. Even the draft map of districts was disliked because the base map of census tracts was taken to mean that neighborhood boundaries would have to follow census tract lines. Suggestions for revising the ordinance were made at that forum and at more than 30 other meetings with neighborhood groups and community associations. Together the suggestions added up to a shift in emphasis from DPOs to neighborhood associations.

Two months later, a second draft was released. This draft began by setting out the process for recognizing neighborhood associations, and spelling out their functions. In section 3 the ordinance provided that recognized neighborhood

associations could form a District Planning Board and delegate certain functions of their choice to the board. The role of the bureau was changed from one of conducting citizen participation to coordinating the effort, and a new name was requested for the office. The name of the bureau (the Bureau of NO) had carried an unfortunate connotation to both the neighborhoods and city officials. A whole new section on accountability was added, whereby neighborhood associations were requested to include clauses in their bylaws to guarantee the rights of both non-participants and participants who expressed points of view dissenting from the majority. The ordinance clearly stated that no one would be denied the right to participate directly in the decision-making process of the Council.

One very brief section stipulated that administrative decisions, such as the hiring and firing of staff and the disbursement of budget funds would be carried out with the mutual agreement of the neighborhood association affected and the commissioner responsible. The new bureau was renamed the Office of Neighborhood Associations (ONNA). This second draft included so many ideas garnered from the citizen review that it met most objections of most citizens. Consequently, a hearing was scheduled before City Council in January 1974.

In two hearings, City Council reviewed the ordinance section by section, addressing all the proposed changes. Specifically, the commissioners made it clear that they wished no more than one neighborhood association in any given area, hence there could be no overlapping boundaries. The section protecting individual rights was strengthened by asking neighborhood associations to guarantee in their bylaws that applicants for zone changes would be notified of neighborhood meetings to review their proposals.

Then in a surprise move, Commissioner Frank Ivancie proposed the deletion of the entire section on DPOs. As the mayor later stated, the commissioner "struck a chord in the hearts of the other commissioners." By a vote of 4-1, DPOs were dropped "for now." Because of the change in emphasis to NPOs brought about by citizen input, the deletion of DPOs could be absorbed with only minor changes to finish off the language of the ordinance. The Council adopted the revised ordinance by a vote of 4-1.

#### IMPLEMENTING THE ORDINANCE

The first task undertaken by the Office of Neighborhood Associations was the establishment of a monthly newsletter, Neighborhood Intercomm. This carries the calendar of major public hearings with brief paragraphs on current programs at the City. Next, procedures for notification to neighborhood associations on zoning matters were revised by the Planning Commission to arrange for a longer notice time. Meantime, the coordinator of OONA has been consulting with formative neighborhood groups. This consultation role consists largely of informing new groups of the alternative methods used in other neighborhoods and advising them of their rights. Each group then establishes its own structure and procedures for notification of meetings and other events. The Office of Neighborhood Associations plays a supportive role, offering assistance in printing and mailing for neighborhood groups which do not have access to other resources. Information and referral services are offered to agencies, neighborhood associations and other nonpartisan groups, and to accomplish this function, the Office keeps the list of contact persons. Advocacy is left to the citizens for this is a role which they fill well in Portland. Neighborhood people do not want to have to convince staff of their point of view, nor do they wish to leave representation to them.

At budget hearings in April, 1974, City Council approved a plan to try out field offices in three areas of the city, where staff resources from federal or other funds are not available. Planning with neighborhood delegates for these decentralized offices is now going on; at least two of the three offices will be established by a contract for services, where the City will pay an agreed sum to the neighborhood associations in an area in return for services in citizen participation. Neighborhood representatives will then hire a staff-person and part-time secretary to perform the functions stipulated in the contract with the mutual agreement of the commissioner responsible. One limitation on the funds is that they may not be used for either candidates or ballot measures, that is, they shall be used for non-electoral purposes.

This process will be tested as the city moves toward capital improvements planning. Furthermore, new state legislation requires that local areas must undertake comprehensive land use planning with citizens participating in accordance with goals and guidelines to be established by the state's Land Conservation and Development Commission at the end of this year. The problem may soon become how to seek citizen input without overburdening citizen groups.



## IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

### Contract for Services

The contract for services is not a new method in Portland. The City contracts with other agencies, particularly the County, to accomplish some functions, and contracts with private firms for professional services. In the private sphere, the Tri-County Community Council contracts with participating social agencies. The City also contracts with the Model Cities Citizens Planning Board, and more recently, with two neighborhood-based corporations to establish youth service centers using LEAA Impact Funds.

The concept of citizen participation is not new, either, as both the federal and state governments have required citizen participation. The Oregon State Highway Division has contracted with private firms to do this work for them as a professional service, a part of a planning effort in transportation. All that is new in Portland is the combination of these ingredients, as the City will experiment by contracting with incorporated neighborhood groups to provide services in citizen participation. In return for a sum fixed in the contract, the neighborhood associations themselves will establish an area office for the use of the neighborhood groups, and will hire staff with the mutual agreement of the commissioner responsible.

### Mutual Agreement

The term "mutual agreement" expresses the understanding that the neighborhood associations and the City are coequal partners in this effort. If either party refused or failed to cooperate, the experiment would fail. Since the two parties need each other's assistance, they must share the

responsibility and the authority. They need to agree on how to hire staff and the conditions of employment (including possible termination), and they need a mutual agreement on the budget and the ways of spending it. The mutual agreement model could be viewed as a mutual veto system in administrative matters, but the orientation in Portland has kept the emphasis on the positive side. Mutual agreement can result in action, whereas a mutual veto does not.

The contract model based on mutual agreement has other advantages over simple delegation of responsibilities. First, a more or less explicit statement of responsibilities is necessary prior to the beginning of activity, and if a process for resolving difficulties is built into the agreement, some problems may be avoided later. Second, under the contract model, the staffpersons need not be civil service employees, and since the neighbors have an equal say in hiring, and if need be, in firing, the responsiveness of the employees may be increased. Third, when responsibilities are not met, either party can terminate the contract with thirty days written notice. Fourth, the contract procedure provides for annual renewal, which is a natural time for renegotiation, if desired.

#### Neighborhood Associations

Neighborhood associations are defined in the ordinance as "a group of people organized within the boundaries of one neighborhood area for the purpose of considering and acting upon a broad range of issues affecting neighborhood livability." They are distinguished from other community groups by their commitment to a particular territory and the population

within the area. At this time, organized neighborhoods range in population from a few thousand to eighteen thousand. The small neighborhoods are too small for social agencies to deliver services economically in the separate areas. An area large enough for the economical delivery of social services may be too large for the neighborhood associations to deliver their services in citizen participation, because neighborhoods are naturally bound by face-to-face communications. One need not worry about fragmentation into too many neighborhoods so long as the associations are willing to work together and share an area office, and so long as the perimeter of the service districts is congruent with the boundaries of the associated neighborhood groups.

Neighborhood associations are often challenged by questioning how representative they are. But what is representative? An official elected by 60% of the registered voters (or a majority thereof) is regarded as a representative. In another definition, a good survey with a large sample is regarded as a representative measure of public opinion, and even in surveys, a margin of error is provided. Neighborhood associations can represent citizen opinion, but the degree of representativeness depends on the quality and depth of participation. The ordinance guides neighborhood associations toward presenting both majority and dissenting points of view. If this protection is observed, and if neighborhood associations receive the staff aid necessary to reach more citizens, then a wider range of viewpoints will reach City Council. The amount and quality of participation depends on the importance of the decision to be made, and the degree to which the participation is ultimately effective. The goal is more informed decisions based on a more participatory process.

## Neighborhood Livability

Service districts are usually unfunctional areas of responsibility. Even where service districts are multi-functional, they rarely include more than a few of the many services. In contrast, the neighborhood is the one place where an integrated pattern of living and working occurs. Whether a neighborhood is livable or not is a subjective judgment made by citizens based on a balance of objective factors including land uses, the quality of the housing stock, the quality of the school nearby, the crime rate, and the environmental conditions, such as air and noise pollution. If neighbors believe that animals running loose or a pollution source affects livability, then city officials must recognize the problem and seek solutions, if they wish the citizens to remain living in the city.

## NEIGHBORHOOD ACTIVITIES

Neighborhood associations are beginning to work out more constructive roles for themselves. Protest on controversial issues continues, but protest alone can not tackle all the problems facing a neighborhood. The planning efforts which are beginning can open a long-term role for neighborhood participation, but many problems can be addressed more swiftly on a smaller scale through citizen action. For example, several neighborhood groups have begun recycling centers, since the markets for newspaper, office paper, glass, and metal are expanding in Oregon. One of the recycling projects intends to devote the proceeds to a tool-lending cooperative. As a result of several independent programs and with recent coordination from OONA, the number of community gardens has increased to 24, and this year some of the produce will be given to the hot lunch program for elderly people.

The tree planting program, now three years old, has been greatly benefitted by concerted community canvasses. The neighbors themselves in four areas have done the organizing and door-to-door work that the City could not afford to pay for, and naturally they do it more to their satisfaction than city employees alone could accomplish.

Under the auspices of the Bureau of Human Resources, four Youth Service Centers have been established in the City, and three of these are under contract to neighborhood-based corporations. They provide counselling to youths and their families, and an alternative to the criminal justice system for many young people.

Five major parks and a number of mini-parks can be attributed to neighborhood's efforts on their own behalf. In addition, the Park Bureau has worked out a five-year plan with citizen input to assure that available funds are spent in ways that reflect citizen priorities.

The resolution of the great need for a citywide housing rehabilitation program lies only in the future due to the lack of sufficient resources. If community development revenue sharing is adopted, then housing programs will receive a high priority in Portland. Meantime, at least one neighborhood has worked for three summers on a Model Block program, where neighbors and youth employed under the summer employment program have provided much of the labor. Neighborhood groups have been involved in the planning of several housing projects, but these too are stalled until more funds are available. The City is currently working to find sufficient resources, probably from a combination of public and private funds.

## CONCLUSION

The interrelationships among neighborhoods, and of neighborhoods with downtown, are sufficiently synergistic that one can hardly speak of neighborhood self-determination. However, observers in Portland do expect an increase in neighborhood self-sufficiency. Planning for capital improvements, for housing rehabilitation, for cable television, an arterial street study, and various projects in transit planning need a coordinated citywide effort. Even in these projects, however, there is room for variation to reflect neighborhood preferences. Few of these efforts could be carried to fruition without the benefit of the time, the energy, and the creative ideas emanating from an aware citizenry. With citizen involvement public officials can hope that programs will receive the support of the public in their thinking and at the polls. Above and beyond the citywide efforts, neighborhood groups are now beginning to work collectively on smaller scale projects to satisfy other needs. Using the town meeting as a process for decision-making, neighborhood groups are assessing both the benefits and the needs of their own areas. Then, with an assortment of private and public efforts, neighborhood groups scrounge and improvise to begin programs which give hope for Portland's future.