Hopes and Challenges of Democratic Governance: Lessons from Portland, Oregon

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Government leaders and community members across the country are experimenting with ways to build and sustain greater partnerships between government and community in local decision making. "Democratic Governance" is a term that describes this new movement which seeks to mobilize citizens to "make decisions, overcome conflicts, and solve critical public problems." The National League of Cities, Democratic Governance Project defines democratic governance as "the art of governing a community in participatory, deliberative, and collaborative ways." It's easy to talk about changing local governance culture in the abstract, but what does it really take for a community to build and sustain a true governance partnership culture?

Portland, Oregon is one U.S. city that has been involving community members in decision making since the mid-1970s. Portland is known for its high level of community engagement. (Putnam 2003; Johnson 2002). In the mid-1980s, Portland's citywide neighborhood association system and community involvement mechanisms were identified as one of five shining examples of "participatory democracy" in a nationwide study by Tufts University researchers. (Berry, Portney and Thomson 1993). Portland's successes and struggles with public involvement over the years offer valuable insights to government officials and citizens in other cities who are seeking to build democratic governance cultures in their own communities.

This article discusses elements and tools of democratic governance, provides a brief overview of the evolution of Portland's community engagement system, highlights the Portland system's major strengths and weaknesses, describes recent efforts to revitalize and advance democratic governance in Portland, and summarizes some key lessons learned.

The Call for Civic Renewal, Participatory Democracy, and Democratic Governance

Since the 1960s, many researchers and activists have bemoaned the fall off in voting and apparent disengagement of many Americans from civic life. Some have called for a shift to a "strong democracy" model in which members of the public are much more actively involved in decision making. (Barber 1984; Mathews 1999; Boyte 2004). Public involvement proponents argue that greater public participation leads to better decisions that respond more effectively to a community's real needs, values, and priorities. They also argue that it legitimizes and increases support for government action, increases accountability of public officials and agencies, and

strengthens civic capacity in the community. Others argue that greater public involvement is the only way communities can leverage a wide range of community resources to solve complex problems that government cannot solve alone.

While theoretical descriptions of more collaborative governance can be inspiring, many public administrators and community activists want to know what it actually looks like in practice and what it takes to get there.

At its core, participatory democracy is fundamentally about increasing the "breadth" and "depth" of involvement. "Breadth" refers to increasing the number and range of different kinds of people and perspectives represented in the decision-making process; and "depth" refers to increasing the extent to which community members can affect the final outcome and implementation of public decisions. (Berry et al 1993).

Creating a foundation for a democratic governance partnership requires two partners who are willing and able to work together—the community and government. On the community side this requires creating the capacity for community members to engage effectively with each other and with government, also known as "community organizing." On the government side this often requires a culture change from a more traditional top-down, expert-driven approach to a greater willingness and capacity among elected and appointed public officials and government staff to partner effectively with community members.

Matt Leighninger, in his recent book *The Next Form of Democracy* (2006), relates that the governance partnerships he found around the country fell into two major categories:
- "temporary organizing efforts"—temporary citizen involvement projects that address a wide range of issues; and
- "permanent neighborhood structures"—"systems for decision-making at the neighborhood or ward level" with official committees, such as "neighborhood councils," "priority boards" or "neighborhood action committees."

Portland is a good example of a city with a "permanent neighborhood structure."

How well do these "permanent neighborhood structures" help a community move toward "participatory democracy?" Leighninger and other researchers have found that these types of structures "give citizens a say in decisions that affect their neighborhood or ward" and sometimes "citywide policies as well." City-wide systems ensure greater equity by providing a formally-recognized organizing vehicle for people in every part of the community. Berry et al note that these structures often provide vehicles for people who already are politically engaged rather than significantly increasing the number of people involved.

Kristina Smock, in her book *Democracy in Action* (2004) identifies and examines the strengths and weaknesses of a number of different neighborhood organizing approaches—including the traditional neighborhood association model. Smock identifies the broader challenge as one of "community organizing", the key goals of which are:
- Building individual capacity—developing local leaders.
- Building community capacity—networks and social capital.
- Building a community governance structure.

- Diagnosing and framing the community's problems.
- Taking collective action for community change.
- Widening the scope: Organizing for broader social change. (Smock, p. 6).

Smock warns that disparities in financial resources, social status, education, and other resources make it difficult to achieve political equality between different segments of a community. She also "challenges the notion that participatory democracy and collective action are naturally emerging phenomena." She argues that "If we are truly interested in creating a more democratic society, we must build residents' skills as public actors, develop their capacity to engage in collective action, create democratic decision-making structure for identifying community needs and priorities and develop strategic action campaigns to solve community problems." (Smock, p. 261).

Smock found that the neighborhood association model offers distinct advantages—it's the easiest to establish and maintain because it relies on volunteers and often functions with little or no operational funding. Participation is by those who choose to show up. These groups often are effective at working with government representatives to improve the quality of their geographic neighborhood. A common disadvantage of this model is that neighborhood associations often do not aggressively reach out to involve or build leadership capacity in a broad spectrum of the community. They may focus primarily on projects and interests of a small group of community members, often white, middle-class homeowners. Smock found that "while some models of community organizing have greater potential than others, no single model fulfills all of organizing's ideal objectives." (Smock, p. 247). She argues for an approach that incorporates a variety of organizing models to take advantage of each model's strengths.

The diversity of interests and ways people are drawn into community in many of our cities today poses a special challenge to the development of an effective public engagement system. Many "communities already have a 'dense context' of existing organizations and mechanisms that in different ways seek (or are seen) to speak for and act on behalf of particular neighborhoods." (Chaskin 2003). Fisher and Taafe (1997) "assert that in a 'postmodern' society with multiple identity and interest groups, the coexistence of many different organizations in a single neighborhood promotes broader civic participation." (Quoted in Smock, p. 257).

The neighborhood association model is a valuable vehicle for creating a sense of identity in a geographic community and allowing people to take action on important issues. A system of neighborhood associations, by itself, may not be enough to engage the full spectrum of community members and interests. Portland's 34-year-old experiment with community engagement and its neighborhood association system highlights many of these same challenges and offers some valuable insights and lessons.

Evolution of Portland's Neighborhood Association System

Portland is the largest city in Oregon and has a population of about 570,000. It is home to 95 formally-recognized, independent neighborhood associations that cover the entire city. These neighborhoods are divided into seven coalition areas. District coalition offices in each coalition area provide technical and community organizing assistance to their member neighborhood

associations. The district coalitions receive funding from the City of Portland. (Five of the district coalition offices are independent non profits; two are staffed by city employees. All the district coalitions are directed by boards of neighborhood representatives.) The city's Office of Neighborhood Involvement (ONI) provides support services to the district coalitions, neighborhood associations, and other types of community organizations. ONI oversees the grants that provide the bulk of the coalition funding—traditionally about $1.2 million each year total for the seven district coalition offices. Portland's system also includes 40 neighborhood business district associations. Portland's city agencies frequently use citizen task forces and committees to involve community members in decision-making. Community members also serve on over 40 ongoing boards and commissions that provide input into many different aspects of city government.[1]

Portland's community engagement system was born out of the political turmoil and community activism of the 1960s and 1970s. Portland community activists formed neighborhood associations in the 1960s to save older, inner neighborhoods from being razed to make way for proposed urban renewal projects. Others activists joined efforts to revitalize low income neighborhoods through federal government programs such as Model Cities. Activists across Portland called for a greater community voice in decision making. Progressive Portland politicians saw they could harness this growing activism to revitalize older, inner neighborhoods and help revitalize Portland's ailing downtown. (Abbott 1993).

In 1974, the Portland City Council created the Office of Neighborhood Associations (ONA) and authorized the formal recognition of neighborhood associations across the city. Neighborhood associations were to work on improving the livability of their neighborhoods, and city officials were to consult with neighborhood associations on "policies, projects, and plans which affect neighborhood livability." ONA staff formally recognized existing neighborhood associations and helped community members in other areas form their own neighborhood associations. ONA contracted with newly formed district coalitions—independent community non-profit organizations—to provide technical support to neighborhood associations.

ONA staff also helped develop innovative, formal mechanisms to give community members a stronger voice in city decision-making. These programs included:
- "budget advisory committees"(BACs) for individual city agencies that provided feedback to a city wide budget group with citizen members who had a strong influence on the development of the city budget;
- a "neighborhood needs" process that allowed neighborhood associations to identify lists of desired capital projects for consideration by city bureaus;
- a formal role for neighborhood associations in reviewing and commenting on many land use decisions; and

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[1] It is important to note that Portland is the only major city in the U.S. that still retains the "commission" form of government. The five members of Portland's City Council, in addition to their legislative role, also exercise executive authority over individual city agencies (called "bureaus" in Portland). One of the mayor's few extra powers is the ability to assign to and withdraw bureaus from each commissioner's portfolio. Individual city commissioners, have significant ability to set and alter the direction and priorities of the bureaus they manage. The interests and priorities of individual commissioners in charge of ONA (later "ONI")I have significantly shaped the agency's focus since its creation.

- a neighborhood planning program in which city planners worked with community members to develop plans for a neighborhoods character and development..

The early years of Portland's neighborhood system were characterized by strong support from the mayor and some city commissioners and agency managers and enthusiasm and energy in the community.

In the 1980s, the number of neighborhood associations continued to grow—ONA had recognized 77 by 1983. The city council still included some champions for the neighborhood association system. ONA began to try to establish minimum guidelines and expectations for neighborhood associations. Neighborhood activists generally resisted these attempts, suspicious that city government was trying to set the agenda for the very independent-minded neighborhood associations and district coalitions. The number of city agencies with budget advisory committees continued to grow (reaching 23 in 1987). (Johnson 2002). The research team from Tufts University studied Portland during the mid-1980s and declared the system and its innovative involvement mechanisms to be a strong example of participatory democracy.

During the 1980s, the Portland City Council began to add other community-focused programs to ONA, diverting some of the agency's attention away from its earlier exclusive focus on community empowerment. Intense power struggles within two district coalition boards in the late 1980s and 1990s led ONA to disband the two coalition board and offices and replace them with offices run by city staff that still took policy direction from boards of neighborhood representatives. (Witt 2000).

In the 1990s, turnover on the city council left the neighborhood system without a strong champion for public involvement. Oregon voters passed a number of property tax reduction measures, and city budgets became tight. City council members, city staff, and some community members began to complain that neighborhood associations were not always representative of their broader communities. People from traditionally underrepresented groups (renters, ethnic and cultural groups, low income people, youth, the elderly, etc.) felt particularly excluded. Funding for the neighborhood system stagnated while at the same time costs increased and Portland's population grew and became more diverse. During the 1990s, nearly all of the innovative involvement mechanisms lauded in the Tufts Study were dismantled. Additional city programs were added to ONA's tasks.

In 1996 a task force reviewed ONA and the neighborhood system. The task force recommended changing the agency's name to Office of Neighborhood Involvement (ONI) in an effort to begin to include groups of people not traditionally involved in the neighborhood associations. The city council approved the name change and also approved a mechanism to formally recognize neighborhood business district associations if they would comply with the same requirements that applied to neighborhood associations (for instance, open membership and not charging dues)—to date no business association has applied for formal recognition. Subsequent commissioners in charge of ONI further shifted the agency's focus away from community empowerment toward supporting public involvement efforts by city agencies and providing direct city services. A number of high profile conflicts between neighborhood associations and city government erupted during the 1990s.

During the 1990s, Portland experienced strong population growth and the beginning of a major influx of immigrants from other cultures, e.g. Asian, Latino, African, Eastern European/Russian. While Portland remains a very "white" city, the community is becoming increasingly diverse posing additional challenges to effective public involvement that did not exist in the 1960s and 1970s. The number of community organizations in Portland also has grown tremendously since the neighborhood system was founded. Portland's formal neighborhood associations no longer are the "only game in town" for community involvement.[2]

In the early 2000s, ONI's focus continued to shift away from community empowerment. ONI staff report that they spent much of their time supporting different city agency public involvement projects. Neighborhood activists became increasingly vocal in their opposition and criticism of city government programs and projects. City bureaus and the city council continued to complain that neighborhoods did not represent adequately the views of their constituents. Neighborhood activists argued that the city was not providing them with the resources they needed and grew increasingly frustrated at what they perceived as their loss of influence. In 2003, the mayor assigned ONI to a city commissioner who took control of ONI and set a new course for the agency—without any consultation with community members. He shifted a number of city services related to "neighborhood livability," such as the housing and noise inspection programs, into ONI. He also championed transforming the district coalitions into mini-city halls—their status as independent non-profits and community opposition prevented this. The community backlash was significant. Long-time activists and champions of Portland's tradition of public involvement called for ONI to return to its original focus on community empowerment and for citizens to once again have a strong voice in city decision making.

In 2004, Tom Potter, a progressive former Portland police chief and "father" of Portland's community policing program, ran a successful, grassroots, low-money campaign for mayor. Potter ran on a platform of re-engaging citizens in governing the city. He drew strong support from neighborhood activists. Potter argued that Portland needed to develop a "community governance" culture in which community and government are partners in decision making.

During the four years of his administration, Mayor Potter presided over a renaissance of community involvement in Portland. He moved ONI back into the mayor's portfolio and his administration initiated a number of new programs and initiatives to repair Portland's community engagement system and to broaden and deepen public engagement, especially among traditionally underrepresented groups.

We'll first take a look at the general strengths and weaknesses of Portland's community engagement system and then look at Mayor Potter's efforts to revitalize community engagement and advance participatory democracy in Portland.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses of Portland's Neighborhood Association System

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[2] Local Portland civic capacity scholar Steve Johnson has identified over 340 environmental organizations in the Portland metropolitan area alone!

Despite ups and downs in the quality and effectiveness of public involvement over the years, Portland has maintained a strong and vibrant system of independent neighborhood associations and district coalition offices. A number of task forces and community organizations have studied Portland's community engagement system over the past 15 years. Here are some of the key strengths and weaknesses they found.

Strengths: Portland's city wide neighborhood association system ensures that people in every part of the city have access to a formally recognized community organizing vehicle. Neighborhood associations give people a sense of community identity and provide a place to get involved, learn about their community, develop skills, and make a difference. The independence of neighborhood associations from city government has generated among community members a strong sense of ownership and pride in Portland's neighborhood system. Unlike in other cities with city-government-administered neighborhood programs, in Portland, it's up to volunteer community members whether the neighborhoods or coalitions sink or swim—not the city. When the system is threatened, hundreds of people turn out to fight for it. The independence of neighborhood associations from city government control allows them to be effective advocates for the interests of their residents.

Neighborhood associations do a tremendous amount of good work in their communities. They organize neighborhood cleanups, block parties, and community celebrations; they produce and distribute neighborhood newsletters, host websites, hold forums on controversial issues, pursue community improvement projects, build relationships with other community groups, tap the wisdom and experience in the community, leverage community resources, and engage with city government to help shape city projects, policies, and programs. Neighborhood associations also act as a buffer for city government by helping community members and other stakeholders solve problems in the community and by helping them interact more effectively with city government.

Neighborhood associations are training grounds for civic leaders. Some have used the skills and knowledge they gained in their neighborhood work to move on to run for office or serve in leadership roles inside city government, on city boards and commissions, and in a variety of community organizations.

Portland's district coalitions provide a wide range of technical support for neighborhood associations and a vehicle for neighborhood activists to share experiences and work together on issues that transcend a single neighborhood. Portland's Office of Neighborhood Involvement has consistently funded the district coalitions (at about $1.2 million annually) and has provided a variety of administrative and technical support to neighborhood coalitions, neighborhood associations, individual community members, other community organizations, and city agencies.

The maturity of Portland's neighborhood system has allowed many early boundary disputes between neighborhood associations and power struggles on coalition boards to work themselves out. General formal guidelines for neighborhood associations are in place, and neighborhoods generally accept and follow them.

Portland's neighborhood system continues to be a model for other communities. ONI staff receive a number of requests each month for information, and delegations come to Portland from

across the country and around the world to learn more about Portland's community involvement system.

Unlike many cities where public involvement is not the norm, Portland has developed a culture in which community members and government leaders and staff generally expect that the public should be involved, at some level, in most important public decisions. City leaders and staff often use ONI and the coalition and neighborhood system to distribute information, get feedback, and engage community members in their work. Some city agency public involvement processes have been very successful, and some city staff have partnered with community groups in innovative ways to reach and involve traditionally underrepresented groups, including a variety of cultural and ethnic populations.

Weaknesses and Challenges: While Portland's system has many strengths, community members and city leaders and staff sometimes are frustrated by aspects of the system and sometimes by each other's performance in the system.

The capacity and effectiveness of Portland's different neighborhood associations and district coalitions vary widely, depending on the abilities of their volunteer members. Many different skills are needed to run an effective neighborhood association: good meeting facilitation, volunteer management, strategic thinking, effective communication, and conflict resolution. Leaders and participants cycle in and out of the system requiring constant, outreach, training and leadership development, and organizational development and support. Often a few people end up doing a lot of the work, and volunteer burnout is a common problem.

Many neighborhood associations do not reach out broadly and involve a wide spectrum of their community members. This has been a long-standing complaint, especially by city staff and people from traditionally underrepresented groups in Portland. Some people say that neighborhood association meetings are not welcoming and find intimidating the typically full agendas and use of jargon and Roberts Rules of Order. Many people just do not like meetings—they are looking for activities that are social and fun or for on hands-on projects. Lack of time and energy, lack of child care or transportation, and a need for translation services also are barriers to involvement for some.

Many neighborhood associations focus on particular projects or problems, but do not have the energy or capacity to engage in broader community building or to build relationships with other community organizations. Some community members complain that neighborhood associations focus too much on land use matters and do not take up the issues that they care about.

Portlanders are active in many different types of community organizations in addition to neighborhood associations—including business associations, schools, churches, and ethnic, cultural groups, and a wide variety of advocacy, issue, and interest-based organizations. These different groups often have little contact and little experience working together. Lack of cooperation or, in some cases, active conflict between community groups sometimes has undermined their collective political effectiveness.

The role of the Office of Neighborhood Involvement has shifted over time in response to the changing personalities and interests of City Council members. ONI's early focus on community empowerment has been diluted with the addition of other government programs and the redirection of ONI staff resources to assisting city agencies to design and implement agency community engagement projects. Critics have complained that, over time, ONI stopped being a source of civic innovation or grassroots empowerment. Funding for the neighborhood system stagnated in the 1990s and early 2000s even as Portland's population grew and became more diverse and public involvement system costs increased. For many years, no overall strategic plan guided the development of public involvement in Portland and no clear set of performance standards and measures existed to evaluate system performance.

Despite Portland's reputation for public involvement, many city government leaders and staff exhibit the same lack of support for public involvement found in other cities. Many city staff lack knowledge of the community and of effective public involvement process design and engagement techniques—especially reaching out to underrepresented ethnic and cultural groups in culturally appropriate ways.

Portland is known for creating a lot of public process, but that does not mean it is always "good" process. The quality of public involvement varies dramatically between city agencies and even within agencies depending on the project manager. No consistent citywide standards exist to define and guide public involvement by city government agencies. No formal mechanisms are in place to evaluate city public involvement processes, capture lessons learned, and identify and share best practices within and across city agencies.

Some city staff worry that public involvement takes a lot of resources and can bog down decision-making. They complain that community members can be adversarial and that neighborhood associations sometimes are dominated by a few people who do not really represent the broader views of their communities. Community members complain that many processes appear to be "for show," but do not give the public a meaningful voice in setting priorities and offering alternatives. Many times community members complain that elected officials and city staff do not involve them until many important decisions have already been made. In some cases, distrust between community members and government staff has built up over many years making it difficult for them to work together.

Many Portland city agencies do not include early and effective public involvement as a core part of their decision making processes. In some agencies, public involvement staff people are not part of senior management planning and decision-making related to policies, projects, programs. City government personnel performance evaluation and incentive systems, especially for agency directors and senior staff, generally do not evaluate city employees on the quality of their public involvement knowledge and practices providing little incentive for improvement in these areas.

Portland's mayor and city council members have a lot of influence on how aggressively and effectively city agencies seek to involve the public. Council members vary tremendously in their understanding of and commitment to effective public involvement. Some community members complain that the lack of clearly institutionalized public involvement principles and standards leaves the system very vulnerable to the "whims" of elected officials.

Former innovative mechanisms that gave community members a voice in setting budget priorities, identifying community needs, and setting a course for development in neighborhoods have been dismantled and have not been replaced. The transparency of city agency operations and public access to information varies from agency to agency.

Portland has developed and sustained a strong citywide neighborhood association system that involves thousands of community members and significantly enhances the livability of individual neighborhoods and the city as a whole. Both community members and city leaders and staff have grown to expect a certain level of public participation in important community decisions. However, Portland has not yet achieved "participatory democracy" or a true "democratic governance" culture. Portland struggles with many of the same challenges faced by other cities. The challenge for Portland is how to build on its strengths and overcome these challenges. The next section describes a number of innovative actions taken to do just this during the recent administration of Portland Mayor Tom Potter.

A Renaissance in Public Involvement under Mayor Tom Potter

When Portland Mayor Tom Potter took office in January 2005 he said he was committed to reengaging the community and creating a "community governance" culture in Portland. His vision was a city in which community members and city government leaders and staff would be true partners in decision-making. The processes and programs initiated during Mayor Potter's administration offer interesting examples of strategies intended to engage more people and a greater diversity of people and give community members greater impact on local decision-making.

Mayor Potter initiated a broad public visioning process and many different projects and policies intended to strengthen community capacity and change the culture of city government. He gave special attention to increasing the involvement of people from traditionally underrepresented groups. Mayor Potter significantly increased funding to support these public involvement efforts. His efforts over the past four years have led to something of a renaissance of public involvement in Portland. Some of the most significant processes and projects are described below.

"Community Connect": Mayor Potter established a diverse committee of community members and city staff—known as "Community Connect"—and charged them with reviewing Portland's neighborhood association system and focusing on how to more effectively engage people from underrepresented groups. After two years of hard work, the committee reported its findings and proposed a "Five-year Plan to Increase Community Involvement".

A key finding of Community Connect was that, while many people define their primary community in geographic terms, many others find community, not in their physical neighborhood but in joining with other people who share a common identity or common interests—this was particularly true for community members in Portland's African-American, Latino, Asian, Native American, and immigrant and refugee communities. The committee found that Portland's neighborhood association system provides a good foundation, but needs to be

supplemented and linked with other organizations and structures to serve people who define their community in other ways.

The Community Connect committee identified three primary goals:

- **Goal 1: Increase the number and diversity of people involved in their communities.** The committee found that the first step needed is to "engage the broad diversity of the community in civic life." The committee developed nine strategies to: "Increase the power and voice of under-represented groups; overcome common barriers to participation; and provide effective communication to keep the community informed about issues and opportunities for involvement."

- **Goal 2: Strengthen community capacity**. Once engaged, community members "need the connections, skills, and tools to be able to work together effectively to solve problems and achieve their common aspirations." The committee developed 11 strategies to: "Foster social ties and a sense of community identity; support the community's capacity to take action to move forward its priorities; and foster networking and collaboration between neighborhood and business district associations and other local organizations and interest groups."

- **Goal 3: Increase community impact on public decisions**. Community involvement is only effective to the extent that City leaders respond and community members have an impact on local government policies and decisions. The committee developed 10 strategies to: "Make public decision-making more response and accountable to community input; institutionalize the City's commitment to public involvement in decision-making; and create the infrastructure to support the goals and recommendations in the *Five Year Plan* by updating the internal structure of the Office of Neighborhood Involvement."

The Portland City Council formally "accepted" the Community Connect report in February 2008 and, in spring 2008 voted to fund the first year implementation of the Community Connect Five-year Plan. [3]

Mayor Potter also appointed a new director for the Office of Neighborhood Involvement with who has a strong background in and commitment to public involvement, especially the involvement of traditionally underrepresented groups. Under her leadership, ONI began implementing many of the innovative programs and policies the Community Connect was identifying before the final report was completed. ONI also began to model democratic governance principles in its own operation. The ONI Bureau Advisory Committee (BAC) (one of the few remaining in Portland city government) became much more active in guiding the work of the agency. While the ONI BAC had included representatives of immigrant and other under-represented groups in the past, representatives of different cultural groups involved Community Connect and neighborhood association representatives began, for the first time, to work together as genuine partners.

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[3] The full Community Connect report, recommendations, and five-year implementation strategy are available at: http://www.portlandonline.com/mayor/index.cfm?c=46442.

This more diverse and active ONI Bureau Advisory Committee hammered out an consensus agreement on a budget proposal that established priorities for the first year implementation of the Community Connect strategy that included resources and programs for both traditional neighborhood associations and other community organizations. The City Council was very impressed by this unprecedented collaboration and agreed to fund the first year of the implementation plan.

ONI also has initiated an update of its mission and goals to bring them in line with the Community Connect goals and to clarify that the agency's primary purpose is to support community empowerment, increase the number and variety of people engaged in civic life, and increase the impact community members have on local decision making.

Public Involvement Task Force and Bureau Innovation Project #9: Mayor Potter also supported the completion of the work of an earlier task force of community activists, city staff, and public involvement practitioners (the Public Involvement Task Force (PITF)) that had developed a broad strategy for improving city government public involvement. The PITF recommendations focused on shifting the culture of city government to better support effective public involvement, building greater capacity in city government to engage the public, improving the design of public involvement processes, increasing government accountability and transparency, and evaluating city public involvement efforts.

In a follow up to the PITF effort, Mayor Potter created a committee ("Bureau Innovation Project #9") that developed a tool kit to help city staff evaluate appropriate levels of public involvement for different types of projects. Mayor Potter also led a successful effort to convince the City Council to establish a new Public Involvement Advisory Council (PIAC) to develop consistent city government public involvement standards and guidelines. A staff person was hired in ONI to help set up and staff the new council and to work with city agency staff to assess public involvement training needs and reinstitute regular meetings of public involvement staff from across city government.

Proponents of public involvement in Portland have always been challenged to show its value and to justify the city resources spent on it. In response, Mayor Potter earmarked funds to support the development and implementation of an ongoing performance measurement program for ONI and the neighborhood system.

New programs and resources: Creating the infrastructure to support democratic governance takes resources. Mayor Potter dedicated substantial new resources ($3.2 million over the past three years) to strengthen community capacity in the neighborhood system and in ethnic and cultural groups in the community. Other programs were targeted to strengthening public involvement capacity in city government. These projects were intended to remedy some of the system weaknesses described above. These new programs include:

o   Community Capacity Building:
  ▪   Traditionally Underrepresented Groups

- Diversity and Civic Leadership Academy: Funding to smaller ethnic and cultural organizations to provide leadership training to the populations they serve. ($210,000 over three years.)
- Diversity and Civic Leadership Organizing Project: Funding to expand community organizing capacity in larger ethnic and cultural groups. ($570,000 over two years.)
- Community Engagement Initiative: Funding to build capacity in neighborhood coalitions to engage and build relationships with under-represented communities and organizations. ($135,000 over three years.)

- Traditional Neighborhood System
  - Coalition Community Organizing: Funding for an additional organizer position at each of the seven neighborhood coalition offices. ($700,000 over two years.)
  - Neighborhood Small Grants Program: Funding for neighborhood associations in partnership with other organizations to take on a wide variety of community-initiated projects. ($600,000 over three years.)
  - Neighborhood Association Communications: Increased funding for neighborhood association newsletters, websites, etc. ($285,000 over three years.)
  - Reducing Barriers to Participation: Funding to reduce barriers to participation by diverse populations in neighborhood associations and other community based organization activities (e.g. transportation, child care and language translation). ($60,000 over two years.)
  - Small Business Association Support: Funding to build capacity among small business associations. ($150,000 over two years.)

- Government Capacity Building
  - City Government public involvement standards: Funding to support the new Public Involvement Advisory Council to create consistent standards for city government public involvement and to convene and support a new networking group of city public involvement staff. ($165,000 over two years.)
  - Performance Measurement: Funding for the development and implementation of a performance measurement program to track the efforts of ONI, the district coalitions, neighborhood associations, and community-based organizations as they strive to meet the Community Connect goals and attempt to improve civic capacity and public involvement in Portland. ($50,000 over two years.)
  - Additional ONI staff support: Funding for skilled dispute resolution staff to respond to high profile community controversies and develop deliberative dialogues around important topics and general support for all the new programs. ($250,000 over two years.)

Mayor Potter initiated a great reinvigoration of Portland's neighborhood system and presided over an unprecedented level of strategic investment in, assessment of, and planning for public involvement. Mayor Potter chose not to run for another term, however, and a new Portland mayor will take office in January 2009. City government revenues are projected to drop because of the national economic downturn. Community activists and democratic governance proponents in Portland are waiting to see the extent to which the new mayor and a new commission in

charge of ONI will continue to support the work begun under Potter and which innovations and investments of the past four years will survive the coming city budget cuts.

<u>Conclusion—Creating a Democratic Governance Culture is Hard Work!</u>

Creating a culture of democratic governance in a community is not a simple task. Portland, even with its city-wide neighborhood association system and long history of public involvement, is struggling to engage a wider spectrum of people and increase the impact community members have on decision making. It's taken Portland over thirty years to get to this point! Rather than setting unrealistic goals, communities around the country may be better served by assessing where they are on the journey toward democratic governance and focusing on how to take achievable and sustainable next steps.

A formally-recognized, city-wide neighborhood system is a very valuable tool but it needs ongoing support to thrive. Resources need to be devoted to strengthening community capacity to reach out and engage new people, build the skills and capacity of individual leaders, and strengthen and sustain the capacity of individual neighborhood associations. Neighborhood associations need help identifying the different types of people who live in their communities and in building relationships and collaborating with other community organizations.

A geographically-based involvement system always will find it difficult to serve people who find their community outside geographic boundaries with people who share a common ethnic or cultural identity or common interest. Additional mechanisms need to be created to ensure these people are engaged and that their needs are met.

Democratic governance requires two willing and able partners—the community and government. Communities need to direct attention and resources to increasing the capacity of city leaders, administrators, and staff to design and implement effective public involvement programs. Effective public involvement needs to become an integral part of the government's work—not an add-on after the important decisions are made. Portland's most effective efforts to engage the public were developed in collaboration with community members rather than imposed from the top down.

Elected officials can play a major role in helping or hindering efforts to engage the public in decision making. Special efforts need to be made in the community and in government to help elected officials develop the awareness and skills to support effective public involvement. Some elected officials will not be interested in a shared governance approach and may seek to roll back previous advances. Democratic governance efforts may benefit from seeking greater formalization and institutionalization of public involvement principles, guidelines and standards, and mechanisms and structures to protect them from being undermined or eroded.

Much more work needs to be done to gather lessons about what works and what does not to further the development of democratic governance from communities around the country that have experience with their own citywide neighborhood systems and other public involvement models. Better measures of the performance of these systems and their effect on civic capacity need to be developed and standardized.

Democratic governance is all about involving more people and perspectives and increasing community member impact on decision making. Important questions remain: What approaches, structures, and tools are communities across the country using to promote democratic governance? What are the key elements that increase the chance of success? How do we measure the effectiveness of these efforts? Can we develop some sort of "ladder of democratic governance" that can help communities assess where they are and identify logical and achievable next steps on their journey? Together we can begin to answer these questions and strengthen the growing movement to bring democratic governance to communities across our nation.

RESOURCES

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Web Links to Portland Documents:

- Office of Neighborhood Involvement, City of Portland: http://www.portlandonline.com/oni/
- Community Connect: Five-year Plan to Increase Public Involvement (major focus on building capacity in the community): http://www.portlandonline.com/mayor/index.cfm?c=46442
- Diversity and Civic Leadership program (Leadership and organizing support for under-represented groups): http://www.portlandonline.com/oni/index.cfm?c=45147&
- Public Involvement Task Force (overall strategy to increase openness to and ability of city government to involve the public): http://www.portlandonline.com/oni/index.cfm?c=29118&
- Public Involvement Standards Program/Public Involvement Advisory Council (new council established to develop public involvement guidelines for city government): http://www.portlandonline.com/oni/index.cfm?c=48289&
- Public Involvement Toolkit: http://www.portlandonline.com/mayor/index.cfm?c=39099
- Citywide Public Involvement Network (network of city public involvement staff): http://www.portlandonline.com/oni/index.cfm?c=48952
- Performance Measurement System: www.portlandonline.com/oni/measures

Web Link to National League of Cities Democratic Governance Project:

- http://www.nlc.org/topics/index.aspx?SectionID=governance_structure