

RESIDENT FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

June and September 2017

Neighborhood Streets Program

Resident focus groups were held in summer 2017 to test opinions and hear insights on funding options for the Neighborhood Streets Program, as well as to gain a greater understanding of the specific needs of those who live on unimproved streets. Specifically, the discussion focused on who should be responsible for repairing these unimproved streets, if and how property owners should help to pay for the improvements, and what a fair and equitable prioritization system should include. Residents also shared details about stormwater problems, mobility concerns, and other challenges they face on a daily basis.

The format allowed the project team to have structured discussions with a large number of people (131), the results of which were used to complete the NSP proposal. What follows is a high level summary of these opinions expressed in the focus group discussions and in the exit questionnaire (discussion notes and questionnaire results attached).

What We Heard

The perspectives and input that residents of unimproved streets shared at the focus groups were generally aligned with the main themes gathered through the surveys and other outreach methods that primarily captured input from those who live on fully improved streets. There was a range of opinions about how and if the City of Portland should pursue improvements to unimproved residential side streets. At the most basic level, most all residents noted that lack of City maintenance on unimproved streets is a significant concern and they generally welcomed the conversation at the focus groups.

This summary memo has been written to highlight where common perspectives on an issue were heard across the diverse mix of perspectives and also where there was a wide range of, and

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESIDENT FOCUS GROUPS:

- *Give an opportunity for people who live on unimproved streets to directly influence the proposed program*
- *Provide a consistent and structured format to adequately test the funding, financing, and policy options for which PBOT needed community perspectives to develop the NSP*
- *Gather additional information about Portlanders' experiences with unimproved streets*
- *Expand the knowledge and understanding of the NSP throughout the community*

sometimes opposing, opinions on an element of the Neighborhood Streets Program. The focus groups provided many rich and nuanced conversations about the role of local streets in residents' lives. See the appended discussion notes and exit questionnaire summary for a more complete understanding of residents' comments and opinions.

- » **A need for maintenance.** While many residents said they would like some improvements on their streets, they also said that the City's top priority should be to grade and gravel streets where the degradation of the roadway makes it nearly impassable and, at times, unsafe for all modes of travel. Residents shared stories of their attempts to maintain their streets with neighbors, most concluding that they are not sufficiently equipped to do this work and many have modest or fixed incomes that make it financially out of reach. There was acknowledgement that improving all of the unimproved streets in Portland could take decades and many residents provided creative ideas for how the City can shore up the residential streets and stormwater systems in the interim.
- » **Stormwater is a common concern.** Many residents reported concerns about stormwater runoff and pooling. Residents stated that this lack of management results in degraded roadways, sediment in nearby streams, and streets that are extremely difficult to navigate.
- » **Citywide issue with City responsibilities.** Generally, residents at the focus groups believe that residential streets should be recognized as part of the citywide transportation system, especially for getting around by walking or bicycling. They also expressed the opinion that without improvements the whole community's ability to access parks, schools, and shopping districts is negatively impacted. Given the citywide impacts, participants did not view this issue as belonging solely to people living on these unimproved streets.
- » **Considerations for property owner contributions.** There were a few residents in the discussions that think homeowners should contribute more to improving streets, and others who believe that infill developers aren't paying enough to solve the problem. However, the majority of participants voiced concerns about their ability and/or their neighbors' abilities to afford any additional long-term expenses for living in their current homes.
- » **Need options and alternative street standards to control costs.** Another common theme was a desire for street improvement standards that are flexible enough to address local conditions such as: hillside slopes and needed connections to important community destinations; homeowner capacity to pay; and options for the preservation of things they care about most, for example established trees and traffic calming. Some residents shared their frustrations with the City's current process to improve these streets (through Local Improvement Districts), which included a perceived lack of cost controls and reliance on neighbors to have the time and resources to organize street improvements with other homeowners.
- » **Many ideas for funding prioritization, including equity for underserved neighborhoods.** Residents had diverse opinions about how the City should prioritize public funding for streets improvements - some favored a focus on investing first in communities with lower income residents or neighborhoods with people of color, while others favored prioritizing based on the condition of the street, prior commitments the City made to annexation areas, or relative importance of making safe connections to and through the neighborhood. Some

said it would be best for the City to prioritize financial assistance directly to low-income homeowners without regard to where they live (as opposed to prioritizing by whole neighborhoods with concentrations of lower income households).

- » **Ensure fairness in funding and process.** Many participants voiced concern for those who may not be able to pay the full cost of improvements on their street and also noted the need for an open and transparent community process. Some residents noted that many of those on fixed incomes would have difficulty absorbing a new monthly expense to improve their streets. The deferred payment option was generally viewed as a good idea, but participants had many questions about how it would work, including concerns about financing costs.
- » **Continue communication and involvement.** Throughout the focus group events many residents noted appreciation for the opportunity to weigh in, and they also expressed a need for the City and PBOT to continue to openly communicate progress and priorities. Some said ongoing communication is especially warranted, because of the length of time it may take to see progress on their street.

Process and Agenda

The focus groups were established at a time in the project when the team most needed answers and opinions from people who live on unimproved streets. The events were also designed to hear from many more people than a traditional focus group, which typically include 8-12 people who are recruited to meet specific community representations.

Who Participated

In early June 2017, a postcard invitation to register for a focus group was mailed to each of the 27,924 Portland households on unimproved streets. Participants self-selected and registered ahead of time through an online or voicemail registration system and were placed in a focus group on a first come, first served basis. 330 residents registered interest in participation and over 100 residents who could not attend the focus groups, called and emailed PBOT staff to share their opinions and experiences.

In all, 132 people participated in a resident focus group: 72 people participated at the Multnomah Arts Center in southwest Portland on June 28, 2017, 50 people at the Midland Library in East Portland on June 29, 2017, and residents on a waiting list for the June focus groups were invited to attend a third and final focus group of residents at the Portland Building on September 26, 2017 (10 residents participated).

- 128 of the 132 focus group participants were homeowners who live in single-family detached houses. Participants reported having lived on an unimproved street for as few as 9 months to more than 60 years; about half have lived on an unimproved street for more than 15 years.
- Participants came from 36 different neighborhoods from around the City.

- About half of the residents who participated reported living on a street with dirt or gravel, the other half reported having some pavement, and fewer than five residents said they have sidewalks and/or stormwater facilities on their street.

Program in Detail

The focus groups were 90 minutes long and followed the same format, schedule, and list of discussion questions. Generally, the discussion focused on funding - options for funding, their perspectives on the property owners' role in implementation, and advice for how the City could go about prioritization and decision-making. Each discussion group had a trained facilitator, who also kept notes of the discussion.

RESIDENT FOCUS GROUP AGENDA

5:30-5:40p	Welcome and Orientation: review process and purpose
5:40-5:50p	NSP Presentation: Overview of information needed to participate, focus group questions
5:50-6:50p	Facilitated Discussion: up to 10 people per discussion group, each with a facilitator / note-taker
6:50-7:00p	Exit Questionnaire: Survey of participants to register individual and more detailed responses.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following series of questions were asked during the 1-hour facilitated discussion groups:

- 1 The Neighborhood Street Program will provide limited public funds for residential street improvements. The City is considering two different approaches for using these funds: (1) funding projects 100% with City funding, or (2) requiring adjacent property owners to also contribute a portion of the funding for projects. By requiring property-owner contributions the City would be able to improve more streets each year. Current City code and policy typically requires property owners to pay for 100% of the cost of improvements to residential streets.

What is more important to you: reducing the cost for property owners, or making more progress sooner on improving neighborhood streets?

- 2 The City is committed to addressing equity issues. For the Neighborhood Streets Program, that could mean offering subsidies to cover 100% of the cost of improvements for low-income households, as well as prioritizing City investment to areas with high-concentrations of under-served populations (low income, people of color, renters).

What do you think about these approaches? Follow-Up Question: Are there some circumstances where the cost of improvements should be the full responsibility of the property owner – no City money?

- 3 When property owners help pay for these types of improvements, they have the option to spread out the cost over a longer period of time (5, 10, or 20 years) to make annual payments more manageable. The City is also considering a new policy that would allow property owners to completely defer their payments until they sell their property.

What do you think about this option for property owners to defer payments?