



REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

OFFICE OF CITY AUDITOR

SEATTLE, WA

June 22, 2009

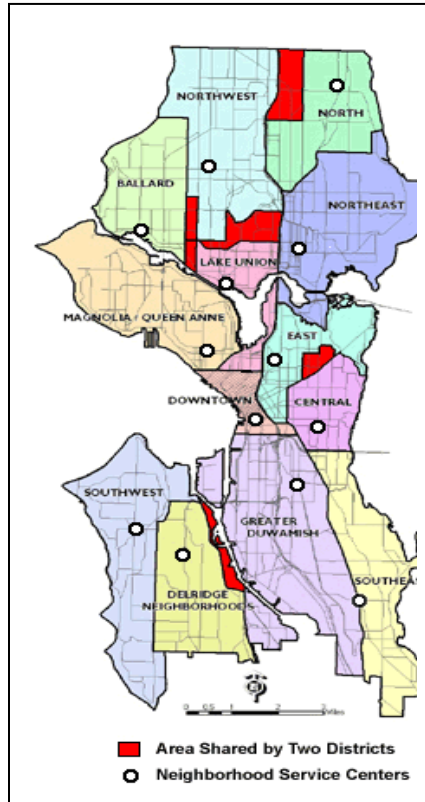
Seattle District Council System Needs Renewal

Audit Background:

The City's 13 district councils provide a forum where neighborhood organizations can send representatives to exchange ideas, address common problems, and disseminate information back to their organizations. Although Seattle's neighborhood involvement process has been regarded as a model of civic engagement, City officials, residents, and community representatives have expressed concerns regarding how representative district councils are and about their levels of diversity. These issues led to the requests for this audit.

Audit Objectives:

At the request of Councilmember Sally Clark and citizens, the Office of City Auditor reviewed the City's district council system and examined how other jurisdictions' community participation systems function (see next page). Specifically this audit addressed 1) whether the district council system, which includes the City Neighborhood Council, is fulfilling the purposes set forth in Seattle City Council Resolutions 27709 and 28115, and 2) whether the district council system could be improved.



Significant Findings:

The district council system partially fulfills the requirements of City Council Resolutions 27709 and 28115.

While the citizen-participants' activities in the district councils and City Neighborhood Council generally fulfill the responsibilities assigned to them in the resolutions, we found three significant issues that Seattle City government (the City) needs to address:

1) The resolutions describing the district council/City Neighborhood Council system are unclear about the district councils' role in providing policy advice to the City. When district councils take policy positions on City issues it has, in some cases, undermined the councils' primary purpose of networking and problem solving, and led to divisiveness

and erosion of broad participation.

Seattle's District Boundaries

- 2) The City's involvement in district council governance, especially with membership issues such as trying to make district councils more diverse, was not prescribed in the resolutions and has contributed to conflict in some cases.
- 3) The City is not performing several responsibilities assigned to it in the resolutions, including maintaining a mailing list of community organizations, assisting in the production of neighborhood newsletters, and maintaining an interdepartmental committee to optimize responsiveness to the concerns of neighborhood organizations. Furthermore, the services the City provides are not standardized, leaving participants unclear about what to expect.

We also found that the Department of Neighborhoods has been inconsistent in preserving district council system records.

Recommendations: We make ten recommendations for updating the resolutions that guide the district council/City Neighborhood Council system and improving the City's record-keeping for the system's records. Summary versions of the recommendations are on the following page.

A copy of the Office of City Auditor's full report can be obtained at the Auditor's website at <http://seattle.gov/audit> or by calling (206) 233-3801. Please direct any questions or comments regarding this report, or suggestions for future audits to the Seattle City Auditor, at (206) 233-3801 or davidg.jones@seattle.gov

Recommendations for Improving Seattle's District Council and City Neighborhood Council System

1. Clarify the City's objectives for the district council/City Neighborhood Council system: is the emphasis on information or policy?
2. Consider a change in the names "district council" and "City Neighborhood Council."
3. Provide additional guidelines for the district council/City Neighborhood Council system consistent with any clarified objectives.
4. Require that standards are met if district council and City Neighborhood Council responsibilities include rating and ranking City grants.
5. Avoid characterizing the district councils and City Neighborhood Council as representative bodies.
6. Clarify the City's role in district council governance.
7. Establish appropriate conditions for the City's continued support of the district councils and City Neighborhood Council.
8. The City should explore ways to help district councils and the City Neighborhood Council reduce and/or manage conflict at meetings.
9. The City should clarify the level of staff support it will provide to district councils, the City Neighborhood Council, and other groups.
10. The Department of Neighborhoods should improve its compliance with the State's document retention laws by retaining district council documents that come into its possession.

Useful approaches from other jurisdictions. We interviewed 36 jurisdictions about their neighborhood participation programs and identified the following successful approaches:

- Many of the objectives for neighborhood participation programs are achieved with a limited or moderate level of support.
- Government-supported tools that assist local neighborhoods to organize, publicize their existence to each other, and communicate.
- Useful, relatively inexpensive tools include guidelines and templates, web linking or even web pages, and occasional all-group gatherings.
- A cost-effective method used by Sacramento to disseminate government-related information to citizens is to invite all citizens to regular (e.g., bimonthly) meetings held throughout the city where the city presents information and solicits feedback about pending projects or active issues in the area.
- An alternative method for government to communicate with citizens is to organize advisory groups to address specific issues such as crime, neighborhood planning, transportation, and capital projects. Seattle uses this approach frequently.

Office of City Auditor

Seattle District Council System Needs Renewal

June 22, 2009

Audit Team:

**Mary Denzel, Auditor in Charge
Virginia Garcia, Assistant City Auditor**



City of Seattle Office of City Auditor

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To help the City of Seattle achieve honest, efficient management and full accountability throughout City government. We serve the public interest by providing the Mayor, the City Council, and City department heads with accurate information, unbiased analysis, and objective recommendations on how best to use public resources in support of the well-being of the citizens of Seattle.

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City of Seattle
Office of City Auditor



Susan Cohen, City Auditor

June 22, 2009

The Honorable Greg Nickels
Seattle City Councilmembers
City of Seattle
Seattle, Washington 98104-1876

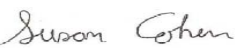
Dear Mayor Nickels and City Councilmembers:

Attached is our report, **Seattle District Council System Needs Renewal**. Our objectives for this work were to determine whether Seattle's district council system is fulfilling the purposes specified for it in Seattle City Council Resolutions 27709 and 28115, and to identify recommendations for improving the system.

We incorporated responses into this report from the Department of Neighborhoods, current and former City Councilmembers, and citizens who have participated in the district council system. Formal written responses are attached in Appendix II.

We appreciate the cooperation received from the Department of Neighborhoods and the citizens who provided information and insights during our review process. If you have any questions regarding this report or would like additional information, please call Mary Denzel at 206-684-8158.

Sincerely,


Susan Cohen
City Auditor

by David G. Jones
Acting City Auditor

Enclosure

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I. Summary of Findings and Conclusions

Seattle's district council system only partially fulfills the purposes established for it in City Council Resolution 27709 and in subsequent Resolution 28115, which modified the system. The citizen-participants' activities in the district councils and City Neighborhood Council generally fulfill the responsibilities assigned to them in the resolutions. These duties include networking, addressing common concerns, participating in City planning initiatives, and helping to rank applicants for Neighborhood Matching Fund grants. However, we found three significant issues that Seattle City government (City) needs to address:

First, the resolutions describing the district council/City Neighborhood Council system are not clear about the district councils' role in providing policy advice to the City. When district councils emphasize taking policy positions on City issues it has, in some cases, undermined the primary purpose of networking and problem solving, and led to divisiveness and erosion of broad participation in the district councils.

Second, the City has become involved in district council governance, especially with membership issues, by trying to make district councils more diverse. This role was not prescribed in the founding and subsequent resolutions and has contributed to conflict in some cases.

Third, the City is not performing several responsibilities assigned to it in the resolutions, including maintaining a mailing list of community organizations, assisting in the production of neighborhood newsletters, and maintaining an interdepartmental committee to optimize responsiveness to the concerns of neighborhood organizations. Furthermore, the City does not provide standardized services to district councils, leaving participants unclear about what to expect from the City.

We also found that the Department of Neighborhoods has been inconsistent in preserving district council system records.

We make ten recommendations for updating the resolutions that guide the district council/City Neighborhood Council system and improving the City's record-keeping for the system's records.

Tables 1, 2 and 3 below display the responsibilities assigned in the resolutions to the City and citizen participants in the district council system. We have given each responsibility a score of green, yellow, or red indicating respectively whether the responsibility is fulfilled regularly and/or well (green), sometimes or partially (yellow), or poorly or not at all (red).

Scale for Tables 1, 2 and 3	
Score/Color	Meaning
Green	Responsibility performed regularly and/or well
Yellow	Responsibility performed sometimes or partially
Red	Responsibility performed poorly or not at all
Blank	Would require further work to assess

Table 1. District Council Responsibilities From Resolutions 27709 and 28115		
District Council Responsibility	Score	Comment
Provide a forum for consideration of common concerns (e.g., planning, budget, delivery of City services).	Green	All district councils provide such a forum.
Provide a forum for sharing of ideas for solutions to common problems.	Yellow	Many district councils do this well, but a few have been sidetracked by controversy.
The district councils and neighborhood organizations shall play advisory roles in the updating of the comprehensive plans in the areas for which they are responsible including participation in the scoping of priorities and review of staff recommendations.	Green	The Department of Planning and Development worked with the City Neighborhood Council (CNC) to conduct outreach and education on the last (2004) major Comprehensive Plan revisions.
The district councils shall rate and rank the eligible applications for the matching fund.	Green	The district councils do this.
Seek to reflect the geographic, racial, cultural and economic characteristics of the district.	Yellow	District councils struggle to achieve this goal. Some district council bylaws may hinder their ability to be more diverse.

Table 2. City Neighborhood Council Responsibilities From Resolutions 27709 and 28115		
City Neighborhood Council Responsibility	Score	Comment
Review and make recommendations regarding City budget issues (e.g., general fund, capital budget, block grant budget, Neighborhood Matching Fund [NMF]).	Green	The CNC does this annually.
Provide advice on policies necessary to the effective and equitable implementation of the Neighborhood Planning and Assistance Program.	Green	The CNC does this.
The Neighborhood Matching Fund shall be administered through the Office of Neighborhoods (now Department of Neighborhoods [DON]) in consultation with the City Neighborhood Council.	Green	DON consults the district councils and CNC about NMF administration.
The City Neighborhood Council shall rate and rank the eligible applications for the matching fund.	Green	The CNC does this.
Additional positions may be added to make the membership reflective of the City's diverse population.	Yellow	The CNC struggles to achieve this goal.

Table 3 lists the tasks assigned to the City in Resolutions 27709 and 28115. In the twenty-two years since the program was initiated by Resolution 27709, the City has ceased doing some of these activities, and reduced its efforts for others. City Council resolutions are advisory, and in Seattle’s system of government the mayor directs the activities of the City staff who would implement these activities. In 1989, Seattle Mayor Charles Royer concurred with City Council Resolution 28115. There have been three mayors since that time, and they have not consistently emphasized the goals outlined in the resolutions.

Table 3. City Responsibilities From Resolutions 27709 and 28115		
City Responsibility	Score	Comment
To the extent practical community service centers shall provide ample meeting space at consistent locations for public meetings of neighborhood groups and citizens.	Yellow	Many Neighborhood Service Centers do not have ample meeting space.
The district councils shall be staffed by the community service centers.	Yellow	The kind and quality of staffing varies among district councils.
DON responsibilities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mediation services for land use disputes referred by developers, neighborhood organizations, or the Department of Construction and Land Use (DCLU) 	Red	The City does not provide this service. The Department of Construction and Land Use is now the Department of Planning and Development (DPD)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff support for the CNC 	Green	DON consistently provides.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oversight & management of the Neighborhood Matching Fund 	Green	DON consistently does this.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close cooperation with Office for Long Range Planning (OLP) and Department of Community Development (DCD) to update Comprehensive Land Use Plan 	Green	DPD works with DON and the CNC on major updates. OLP and DCD no longer exist.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close cooperation with Community Service Centers in development and facilitation of neighborhood organizations and leadership 	Green	DON Neighborhood District Coordinators do this work to develop community organizations in their districts.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperation with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in development of budget information organized by neighborhood district 	Yellow	This was judged impracticable. OMB’s functions were transferred to the Department of Finance.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership and staff support for the Interdepartmental Neighborhood Coordinating Committee 	Red	This committee no longer exists and its function has not been replaced.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintenance of the community organization mailing list 	Red	The list is not consistently updated.

Table 3. City Responsibilities From Resolutions 27709 and 28115		
City Responsibility	Score	Comment
Procedures for budget review and comment by neighborhood organizations and district councils shall be developed for City Council approval.	Green	The CNC and the City collaborate on providing budget information for neighborhood organization response.
Neighborhood organizations and district councils shall be provided the opportunity to initiate budget proposals for neighborhood projects.	Green	Neighborhoods can propose projects through the NMF and certain levies.
The Mayor's budget recommendations to the City Council shall include a report containing departmental responses to neighborhood budget initiatives and the City Neighborhood Council's budget recommendations.	Green	The Mayor responds annually by letter to the budget recommendations of the CNC, and the CNC sends recommendations to the City Council as well.
The Office of Long Range Planning shall cooperate with the Office of Neighborhoods, the district councils and the City Neighborhood Council to ensure that coordination with City departments and neighborhood organizations occurs.	Yellow	This coordination is inconsistent.
A community organization mailing list shall be maintained by the Department of Human Resources and made available to all City departments and neighborhood groups.	Red	The City does not consistently update this list. The Department of Human Resources no longer exists.
DCLU's General Mailed Release (GMR) shall be publicized on Channel 28, the Public Access Channel.	Green	Now called the Land Use Bulletin, this is readily available online on the City's web site.
The City will assist community organizations in producing and distributing neighborhood newsletters and will prepare City supplements for periodic insert in daily and weekly newspapers.	Red	This is not done. The City could accomplish this by assisting neighborhood organizations' web sites.
An interdepartmental neighborhood coordinating committee (INCC) shall be created under the leadership of the Director of the Office of Neighborhoods and shall be made up of the planning agencies and operating departments that deliver services to neighborhoods.	Red	This no longer exists.
The INCC's functions shall include: i) Coordination of departmental responses to neighborhoods	Red	This function is not being done.
ii) Monitoring of commitments made by the City to neighborhoods;	Red	This function is not being done.

Table 3. City Responsibilities From Resolutions 27709 and 28115		
City Responsibility	Score	Comment
iii) Identification and evaluation of ways that the City can be more responsive to neighborhoods	Yellow	DON does this. Some citizens told us other departments do not consistently do this.
The Office of Neighborhoods and DCLU shall explore during 1988 whether neighborhood organizations and/or district councils should be involved in earlier reviews of public and private development proposals and whether expedited permit processing could be achieved in connection with such early review.	Blank	This effort was undertaken. It would require further work to determine when it ended and why. The City's Design Review program accomplishes some of this purpose.

II. Objectives, Scope and Methodology

At the request of City Councilmember Sally Clark and a number of citizens, the Office of City Auditor reviewed the City's district council system, and examined how other jurisdictions' community participation systems function.

Our two primary audit objectives were to determine 1) whether the district council system, which includes the City Neighborhood Council, is fulfilling the purposes specified in Seattle City Council Resolutions 27709 and 28115, and 2) whether the district council system could be improved.

To evaluate the district council system, we used the guidelines found in Attachment A to Resolution 27709, (later amended by Resolution 28115) as criteria. We also:

- Reviewed legislation and previous studies that address the district council system, including an audit of public participation approaches in Seattle¹;
- Interviewed more than 50 individuals including district council officers and participants, elected City officials, and other past and present City officials and employees with roles in the district council system;
- Attended district council meetings in every district, including one of a breakaway group in the Southeast District, and a meeting of the City Neighborhood Council;
- Reviewed the neighborhood participation practices of thirty-six jurisdictions; and,
- Interviewed neighborhood-participation staff from nine jurisdictions.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain

¹ City of Seattle Citizen Participation Processes, September 27, 1999.
http://www.seattle.gov/audit/report_files/9908-Citizen_Participation.pdf

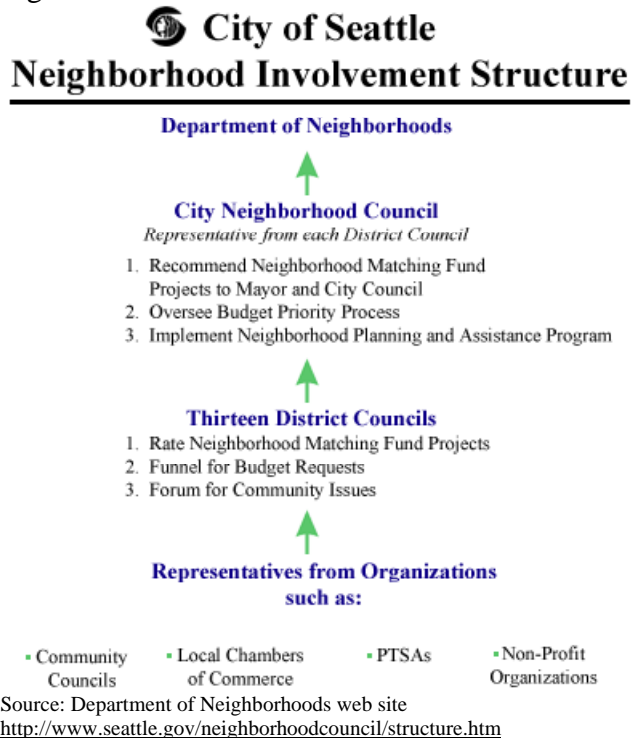
sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

III. Background

Seattle has 13 geographic districts with numerous organizations that take an interest in the affairs of their community including community clubs or neighborhood associations, business groups, social service agencies, parent-teacher associations, ethnic associations, crime prevention councils, block watches, and gardening communities. Figure 1 below shows Seattle’s Neighborhood Involvement Structure.

The City’s 13 district councils were created to provide a regular forum so that neighborhood organizations could send representatives to exchange ideas, address common problems, and disseminate information back to their respective organizations.² District councils are one of many methods the City uses to engage with its citizens and businesses. The City provides some district councils with meeting space and occasional support for communication and outreach. The City also provides each district council with limited administrative staffing and an annual “enhancement fund” of approximately \$500.³

Figure 1:



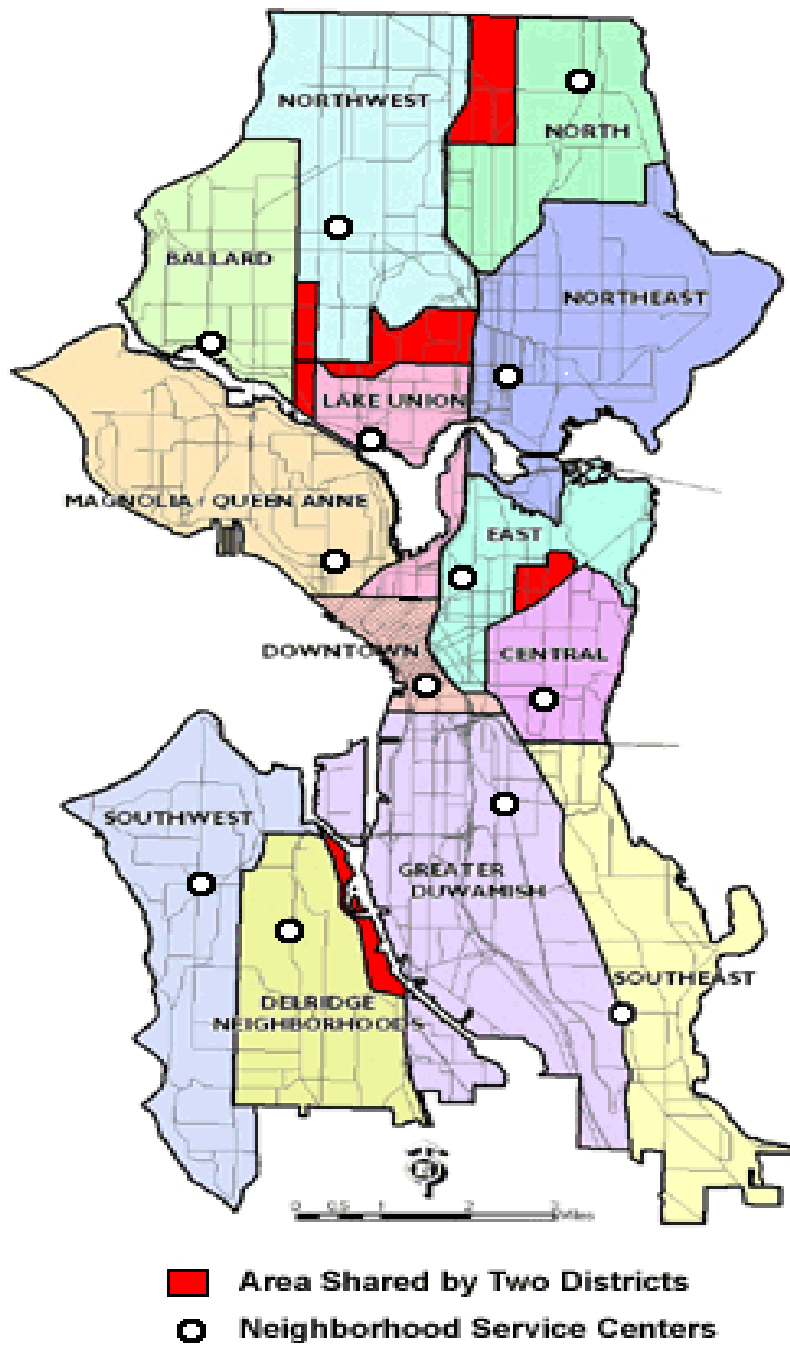
² Most of the guidance for the district councils is found in one paragraph of Attachment A to Resolution 27709:

District Councils shall provide a forum for consideration of common concerns including physical planning, budget allocations and service delivery and for the sharing of ideas for solutions to common problems. [Resolution 27709, Attachment A, section 2 d, 1987]

See Appendix 1 for more information about the history of the district councils and City Neighborhood Council.

³ Until mid-2009 this figure had been \$1,000 per district for several years. Not every district council used the funds. Several districts pooled funds in 2007 to conduct a citywide neighborhood meeting.

Figure 2. Boundaries of Seattle's 13 Districts



Seattle's neighborhood involvement process has been regarded as a model of civic engagement.⁴ Citizens who participate in their neighborhood organizations and district councils volunteer their time to share information, address neighborhood concerns and exchange information with each other, City departments and elected officials. District council participants are often active in several civic engagement groups and contribute many hours of effort to civic affairs. They form a core group of well-informed citizens.

The City uses the district councils to formally review and prioritize applications for City funding programs for neighborhood-level projects. In addition, a number of City officials use the district council system as a way to disseminate information to community members who are linked to large groups of people in other community organizations; a sort of "one stop shopping" for getting the word out on City initiatives. These functions of the district council system clearly provide value both to the City and the participants.

At the same time, City officials, residents and community representatives have expressed the following concerns about the district council system:

- The system is dominated by the presence of long-time members whose point of view is overly dominant at both the district council and City Neighborhood Council levels and potentially not representative of their community;
- The district councils in general are not sufficiently representative of the communities they nominally represent, which calls into question whether input to the City from the district councils and City Neighborhood Council reflects anything beyond the opinions of the individuals involved;
- The councils make insufficient efforts to expand participation and encourage turnover in leadership and membership; and,
- The City has used the concerns expressed about membership turnover and diversity to become overly involved in district council membership issues.

These issues led to the requests for this audit work.

IV. Findings and Conclusions

We identified three key elements of the current district council system's operations that vary from the guidance provided in Resolutions 27709 and 28115 or for which the guidance is unclear.

⁴ See *Democracy's Edge: choosing to save our country by bringing democracy to life* / by Frances Moore Lappé with the assistance of Rachel Burton, Anna Lappé, and Hope Richardson. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, c2006; *Neighbor Power: Building Community the Seattle Way*, by Jim Diers, Seattle: University of Washington Press, c2004; *Investing in Democracy: Engaging Citizens in Collaborative Governance* by Carmen Sirianni, Brookings Institution Press 2009 c.

- First, the City needs to clarify its expectations of the district councils, particularly regarding taking policy positions. When district councils emphasize taking policy positions on City issues this has, in some districts, undermined the councils’ primary purpose of networking and problem solving, and led to divisiveness and erosion of broad citizen participation in those districts.
- Second, the City should clarify its own role in relationship to the district councils. The City has become involved in district council governance, especially with membership issues, in an effort to make the councils more diverse. This role was not prescribed in the enabling resolutions (i.e., 27709 and 28115), and works against preserving the district councils’ independence, which was a clear objective of the resolutions.
- Third, the City should clarify what services the district councils and the City Neighborhood Council can expect from the City. The City does not at this time perform several of the responsibilities assigned to it in the applicable resolutions, including maintaining a mailing list of community organizations, assisting in the production of neighborhood newsletters, and maintaining an interdepartmental committee to optimize responsiveness to the concerns of neighborhood organizations. Furthermore, the City provides varying levels of support to different councils, with some receiving substantial administrative support and assured meeting space while others receive little support.

While conducting our audit work, we also noted that the Department of Neighborhoods has been inconsistent in preserving district council system records.

We address each of the elements listed above in the sections that follow, and make recommendations for updating and improving the district council/City Neighborhood Council system.

Finding 1. District Council Roles Need Clarification

We found through our interviews with City officials and district council participants that there are conflicting understandings of the purposes and influence of the district councils. Resolutions 27709 and 28115, through Attachment A for each, identify the characteristics and roles for the district councils:

They were to be made up of representatives of the following types of organizations:

1. Business organizations that wish to participate
2. Neighborhood organizations that wish to participate
3. Other representatives, “at the discretion of the district council. The District Council will seek to reflect the geographic, racial, cultural and economic characteristics of the district.” [Quoted from Attachment A to Resolution 28115].

Their purposes included:

1. Consideration of common concerns including physical planning, budget allocations and service delivery,
2. Sharing of ideas for solutions to common problems,
3. Review of and comment on the City budget,
4. Playing an advisory role on updates of the City's Comprehensive Plan, and
5. Reviewing and prioritizing applicants for certain City grant programs (Neighborhood Matching Fund, Neighborhood Project Funds).

The elected officials who helped create the district council system through Resolutions 27709 and 28115 are no longer in office, and City practices concerning the district councils have changed considerably over the twenty years since the system was established. Furthermore, the guidance provided in the resolutions is broad and somewhat vague. For example, the resolutions state that “the City Council shall consider the recommendations of the City Neighborhood Council and the comments of neighborhood organizations and District Councils in its review and actions on the City budget” [emphasis added]. This suggests the City seeks a different kind of input from the two groups, but the distinction between “comments” and “recommendations” is not clear. Because of this lack of clarity, and the turnover in decision makers over twenty years, we found that current and former participants in the system, both City officials and citizens, had widely varying ideas about the purpose of the district council system. For example, some district council participants now believe it is appropriate for the district council to provide policy direction to the City Council on issues unrelated to the budget and the City's Comprehensive Plan.

Historic Perspective: Although Resolution 27709 states that district councils shall provide a forum for consideration of common concerns and sharing of ideas, several current and past City officials involved in the establishment of the district councils indicated in interviews that the district councils were not expected to provide policy direction to the City on issues. Rather, according to early participants, district council meetings were intended as a tool for information dissemination where representatives of neighborhood organizations could hear about policy issues and then take information about these issues back to their respective organizations. In turn, the local community organizations, at their discretion, could take policy stances and attempt to directly influence city policies or decisions of elected officials or City department management. This intent is reflected in Resolution 27709 Attachment A, 2 e, which states:

Neighborhood business and residential groups will continue to determine their own boundaries and will remain free to deal directly with City departments and elected officials as they have in the past.

In contrast to the district councils, Attachment A to Resolution 27709 explicitly assigned to the City Neighborhood Council the role of providing recommendations and advice to the City:

The responsibilities of the City Neighborhood Council shall include i) review (and) recommendations regarding City budget issues including the general fund, capital and block grant budgets and the Neighborhood Matching Fund; ii) advice on policies necessary to the effective and equitable implementation of the Neighborhood Planning and Assistance Program. [Emphasis added].

Attachment A to Resolutions 27709 and 28115 further states that the Department of Neighborhoods will consult with the City Neighborhood Council regarding administration of the Neighborhood Matching Fund, and both the district councils and the City Neighborhood Council “shall rate and rank the eligible applications for the matching fund.”

The Current City Perspective: Most City officials regard the district councils as one voice among many they hear from, and do not accord the district councils’ stance on issues more weight than others. Many City officials are unaware of the content of Resolutions 27709 and 28115, which govern the district council system. However, there is general awareness among these officials that the district councils receive City support. City department staff and elected officials find the district councils a convenient place to interact with groups of dedicated citizens who are knowledgeable about City processes and particular neighborhood issues. Yet many City officials are concerned that there is little turnover among district council participants, and that the councils reflect the views of only a narrow segment of citizens made up primarily of Caucasian business owners and middle class residential property owners. Some officials believe these are segments of Seattle’s population that already have access to City decision makers.⁵ Furthermore, several officials viewed district councils as unnecessarily bureaucratic and duplicative of community council, business association, and City Neighborhood Council activities. While acknowledging the experience and knowledge-base of long time participants in the district council system, City officials place district council and City Neighborhood Council input in the broader context of all citizens and groups they hear from.

Current District Council Participant Perspectives: District council participants we interviewed were mixed in their assessment of their roles and of the value of the district council system. The district council chairs and other participants we interviewed were often much more familiar with the content of Resolutions 27709 and 28115 than City officials. Many valued the opportunity to network and address common concerns with residential, business and other interest groups located in the same area, and to hear from invited speakers. However, we also heard complaints from some participants that the City does not seem to accord much respect to the district councils. Several participants stated “the district councils have no power.” Several district council chairpersons noted that their agendas were sometimes overloaded with City personnel making reports, and that they had to decline some requests from City staff to make presentations to leave time for networking and their own agenda items.

⁵ We attempted to obtain information about the membership of the district councils over the last ten years, but were unable to locate sufficient information to document change or lack of change in membership.

Lack of Clarity Has Created Problems: The lack of clear, shared understanding about the role and purpose of the district councils has created some problems:

1. From 2005 through 2007 the City engaged with the Southeast District Council to implement City programs and policies including the Southeast Action Agenda and the outreach process for discussions about the Community Renewal Act. These City actions gave the impression that the district councils are agents of the City and representative of their districts. Because there was not universal support for these processes in the community, the City's use of the district council in this way contributed to ongoing conflict in the Southeast District. The City placed itself in the middle of these conflicts, rather than maintaining a hands-off approach in which district council members settle their issues among themselves.
2. When district councils convey policy opinions, and City officials or district councils characterize these opinions as a show of "broad community support" justifying official decisions, it accords power to district council votes. An example of this type of City use of the district councils occurred in 2006 when some City Councilmembers cited the Southeast District Council's letter supporting detached accessory dwelling units as indicative of "broad community support" for the controversial measure. This infuriated some community members who opposed the measure.

When a small number of members of an organization claim to represent an entire neighborhood, there is a risk that their decisions will be challenged. Such an incident was recently publicized in local news media when a member of one community council filed a suit against her community council for falsely claiming to represent the position of all of the community council's members in a City land use decision process.

In these instances district council and community council participants perceived that they lose or gain influence with the City depending on the predominance of members with their point of view on the district councils. This has created conflicts over who is in control of some district councils, and ongoing conflict among those with differing opinions. In some cases this has caused some participants to become disgruntled and stop their participation in the district councils or to form separate, rival groups. Some district council representatives sit on multiple neighborhood groups within their district comprised of the same members. This can allow the point of view of a small group of people to become over-represented in discussions and voting in the district councils.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. Clarify the City's objectives for the district council/City Neighborhood Council system: is the emphasis on information or policy? The City should consider the objectives of the district council/City Neighborhood Council system in the context of other City-sponsored advisory boards and citizen participation efforts, and determine whether the system's primary objective is to network and disseminate

information or to offer policy opinions to the City. Once this determination is made, the City should clarify the guidance it provides to system participants to emphasize the objectives in a resolution or through other means.

Recommendation 2. Consider a change in the names “district council” and “City Neighborhood Council.” The use of the term “council” suggests a representative body with some degree of authority granted to it on behalf of the City. This may be contributing to the confusion about the role and purpose of the district council system.

Recommendation 3. Provide additional guidelines for the district council/City Neighborhood Council system consistent with any clarified objectives. The City should formalize its decisions regarding the objective(s) of the district council/City Neighborhood Council system and also address the following issues:

- Determine whether the City will “sponsor” the system (like a City-appointed board or commission) or merely support it as an independent group or groups,
- Determine whether any renewed system will be subject to City regulations regarding ethics, open public meetings, and maintenance of public records.
- If one of the objectives is providing policy opinions, consider developing guidelines to ensure that all community participants’ voices are included. Such guidelines might include directing district councils that convey policy opinions to the City to identify the groups participating in the district council vote on the issue; documenting all viewpoints, not just the majority viewpoint; and noting the tally of opinions on all sides of an issue. Some district councils have already adopted this policy. An alternative to a policy role for the district councils would be one in which district councils are a place to gather information to bring back to the underlying membership groups, and to have those underlying groups communicate issue positions to the City.

Recommendation 4. Require that standards are met if district council and City Neighborhood Council responsibilities include rating and ranking City grants: If the City determines that the district councils and City Neighborhood Council should continue ranking applications for City grants, the City should assure itself that these groups meet City standards for representation and diversity.⁶

Recommendation 5. Avoid characterizing the district councils and City Neighborhood Council as representative bodies: City officials should avoid characterizing district council and City Neighborhood Council opinions as representative of the broad community, because members are not elected at large but are volunteers.

⁶ The City currently uses the district councils and City Neighborhood Council for a preliminary part of the ranking of grant applications. The City ensures diversity on the final decision-making group by appointing some members to that group.

Finding 2. City Involvement in District Council Governance Contributes to Conflict

Resolutions 27709 and 28115, which provide the guidance for the district council/City Neighborhood Council system, assign the City no role in system governance issues such as membership policies, conduct of meetings, voting rights, and the responsibilities of member-representatives. In recent years City officials have become more aggressive in their efforts to make the district councils more inclusive, and have engaged at least one district council (Southeast) in partnership to further City policy objectives; however, the City has kept a “hands-off” attitude when conflict has erupted at meetings. This mixed behavior has left some district council participants with unfulfilled expectations for City intervention, and others resenting the City’s intervention.

Resolution 27709, which established the district councils, provided only broad statements about their membership and purpose. In subsequent years, in response to a lack of citizen participation on district councils and the City Neighborhood Council, the City Council passed two resolutions:

1. Resolution 28115 (1989) stated the City’s support for increasing the diversity of those who participated on the district councils.
2. Resolution 28948 (1994) changed the representative structure of the City Neighborhood Council. Instead of having two representatives from each district council (one business and one residential representative), it became just one representative (the chair of each district council).

Governance practices vary among the district councils. All district councils’ bylaws specify having elected officers. The district councils have different methods for conducting their meetings; some use formal rules (e.g., Roberts Rules) while others have informal approaches for conducting meetings.

Governance conflict areas: We observed two governance-related areas where conflict has been particularly heated in some district councils: 1) voting on policy opinions, and 2) membership.

- *Voting practices.* Some district councils have guidelines about voting on policy positions while others have none. Some have a policy that their district council can issue a policy opinion if a simple majority of a quorum supports the position. Others specify that all points of view will be conveyed in any policy opinion along with a record of who voted for each position. A few district councils explicitly avoid taking positions (e.g., the Northwest and Southwest district councils) and find the most value in addressing only those issues on which they can work collaboratively with unanimous support.
- *Membership rules.* Such rules vary widely among the district councils, but have become a point of controversy, particularly in the Southeast District Council.

Because of the controversy in Southeast, the City Neighborhood Council suggested in its April 2008 meeting that each district council discuss the issue of legitimate membership. Some district councils have specific membership rules such as requiring membership organizations to have a minimum number of participants, not allowing a member to be counted towards the membership-count of more than one member group, and disallowing participation by political or service groups. Most specify that no single business or organization can be a member, which led to controversy over the membership of single non-profit agencies. Most, but not all, specify that the organizations sending representatives to district councils must hold at least one open public meeting a year, have bylaws, and elect officers.

City influences district council membership. In accordance with current Mayor Nickels' Race and Social Justice Initiative⁷ and his Public Outreach Policy, the Department of Neighborhoods Neighborhood District Coordinators' performance standards charge them with helping the district councils become more diverse and representative. Some Neighborhood District Coordinators have sought out or even helped create groups to bolster diverse participation in district councils, and in some cases have encouraged community leaders who shared this diversity goal to join a district council. Members of the breakaway Southeast Neighborhood District Council stated that some organizations recruited to join the Southeast District Council by the Neighborhood District Coordinator did not meet the membership guidelines set forth in the district council's bylaws. Current members of the Southeast District Council disagree with that assertion.

An example of a membership controversy has been the granting of voting membership on district councils to single non-profit agencies to act as "representatives" of the people they serve. While this issue has been particularly controversial in the Southeast District, some district councils have welcomed nonprofits as voting members. Because of City actions that appear to accord power to district council votes (noted above), some former and current district council participants perceive that council membership is "stacked" by the City to ensure that votes on policy issues support the Mayor's programs. Some participants complained of conflicts of interest when nonprofit organizations voted at the district council and also received regular funding from the City. While Resolutions 27709 and 28115 assign to the (now) Department of Neighborhoods a responsibility to "[develop] and [facilitate] neighborhood organizations and leadership," they do not assign the City the responsibility for recruiting district council members. This City intervention in district council governance has contributed to ongoing conflict, particularly in the Southeast district.

City refrains from handling conflict at meetings. The Neighborhood District Coordinators and City Councilmembers we interviewed uniformly reported that they

⁷ The mission of the Race and Social Justice Initiative is to end institutionalized racism in City government and to promote multiculturalism and full participation by all residents. The Initiative's long-term goal is to change the underlying system that creates race-based disparities in our community and to achieve racial equity. [From the web site of the Mayor of Seattle: <http://www.seattle.gov/mayor/issues/rsji/>]

believe it would be inappropriate for them to intervene if and when conflict arises at district council meetings. In this respect, they regard the district councils as self-governing. At the same time, many citizen district council participants reported an expectation that City officials who witness uncivil or threatening behavior at district council meetings should intervene to address the behavior. A study of Los Angeles' extensive neighborhood association system found that a friendly, non-conflictive atmosphere at meetings is one of the most important factors potential participants consider in choosing whether or not to participate. Seattle's district council system does not have effective mechanisms to address this important element of citizen participation, though in 2008 the City Council provided \$100,000 for the Department of Neighborhoods to provide neighborhood leadership training to district council participants and the broader community.

The City and many district councils do not address the lack of communication between district council representatives and their neighborhood organizations. The resolutions establishing the district councils state that members will be representatives of neighborhood organizations. Some district council bylaws address the responsibilities of member-representatives to exchange information with and to duly represent the wishes of their member groups, but most district councils do not address these responsibilities. We observed at least one meeting of each district council and the City Neighborhood Council, and heard very little indication of communication between member-representatives and their member groups. Furthermore, the City's efforts to increase the diversity of membership have not addressed what it means to become a member-representative. Interviews with district council representatives confirmed that communication with their "represented" groups is inconsistent, irregular and in some cases nonexistent.

City involvement is central to some district councils' existence. We found no City policy documents that suggest a City role in district council governance. Former City officials and citizen activists who participated in the founding of the district councils reported that the district councils were intended to remain independent, grass-roots organizations receiving limited City support in the form of administrative assistance from the City's Office (now Department) of Neighborhoods. However, there is variation in the types of support that district councils request and receive from the City. Some district councils rely heavily on the City's Neighborhood District Coordinator. In one case, a district coordinator reported that the district council did not meet during the time of a vacancy in the district coordinator's position. In other cases, Neighborhood District Coordinators identify speakers and issues for the district council.

Recommendations

Recommendation 6. Clarify the City's role in district council governance. The City should address the following questions, which concern the extent of the City's involvement in district council governance:

- Should the City influence the membership of the district councils?
- Should the City enforce district council bylaws?

- Should the City have a role in the conduct of the meetings?

Recommendation 7. Establish appropriate conditions for the City’s continued support of the district councils and City Neighborhood Council. For example, if district councils or the City Neighborhood Council fail to demonstrate efforts to attract membership that reflects the diversity of the district, the Department of Neighborhoods should attach consequences such as limiting or removing City support services. The City should also provide district councils with current demographic information about their district and contact information for organizations that include or represent under-represented groups.⁸

Recommendation 8. The City should explore ways to help district councils and the City Neighborhood Council reduce and/or manage conflict at meetings. Because diverse, broad citizen participation is one of the City’s goals for the district council system, the City should consider ways to help district councils and the City Neighborhood Council more effectively manage conflict at meetings. If the City continues to fund leadership training for community leaders, it should specify that part of the training address managing conflict at meetings.

Finding 3. Different Levels of City Support to District Councils and the City Neighborhood Council Leave Participants Confused about the City’s Commitment

The City Council resolutions that govern the district councils and City Neighborhood Council provide broad guidance regarding City support for the district council system. Attachment A to Resolutions 27709 and 28815 states that the City’s Office (now Department) of Neighborhoods shall perform four functions related to the district councils:

1. Staff the district councils and the City Neighborhood Council,
2. Provide meeting space when practical,
3. Provide budget information by neighborhood, and
4. Keep a mailing list of participating organizations.

The City’s Neighborhood District Coordinators have not offered and/or provided a consistent level of services to the councils, and there is no clear City statement of what City staff support should be provided to the district councils and City Neighborhood Council. Some District Coordinators provide agendas, meeting notes/minutes, publicity for the council meetings, and also identify and arrange speakers while others provide only some of these services. Some district councils get help with websites from the City, but this service has not been provided to all district councils. The lack of clear City guidelines about the kind of administrative support

⁸ The City’s Department of Planning and Development posts 2000 census information on its website. See, for example, http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/cms/groups/pan/@pan/documents/web_informational/dpds_007743.pdf

the City will provide has led to some resentment from district council and City Neighborhood Council officers and members about the level of support they should expect.

Over the years the City has not provided meeting space for all district council and City Neighborhood Council meetings, has not maintained the mailing list of participating organizations, and has abandoned providing budget information by neighborhood as impracticable. City officials explained that all of these efforts require considerable resources in the form of facilities and staff time, and there is not sufficient City funding to do them.

Recommendation

Recommendation 9. The City should clarify the level of staff support it will provide to district councils, the City Neighborhood Council, and other groups. The kind of support the City provides should optimize the City's objectives for citizen participation, for example:

- If education and information-sharing across district boundaries are primary City policy goals for district councils, City assistance for the district councils in the form of web site creation and updating would be appropriate. This might allow district councils to reach a far broader citizen audience, and facilitate two-way communication between the councils and citizens, without requiring attendance at evening meetings, which is a barrier to participation for many citizens.
- If the City believes face-to-face networking is an important district council goal, consider multiple ways of achieving this. Several jurisdictions reported that annual or semiannual neighborhood-oriented events were more successful at drawing large, diverse groups than monthly meetings.
- If one City objective is to disseminate information to citizens, consider methods that are not specific to district councils, for example:
 - a. Sacramento employs well-publicized, regularly scheduled meetings that anyone can come to, where city information is provided.
 - b. A useful approach already used by some Neighborhood District Coordinators is to disseminate City information via email to any interested person who signs up for the mailing list.

Finding 4. The City Needs to Retain More District Council Records

During our audit, we requested documentation from the Department of Neighborhoods on the history of the district councils such as rosters of past board members, agendas and minutes. The records they supplied were very incomplete. We found that Department of Neighborhoods' personnel have not been consistent about what district council records

they retain and store. Furthermore, the City Council resolutions do not address this responsibility. In contrast, the City Clerk has good records for the City Neighborhood Council.⁹

Washington State records retention laws state that documents concerning City operations that are submitted to the City or that come into the City's possession, regardless of their source, become public records and should be stored and retained in accordance with Revised Code of Washington Title 40. The Washington Administrative Code (WAC), section 434-610-020 defines a public record as follows:

WAC 434-610-020: "Public record" defined.

"Public records" means any paper, correspondence, completed form, record book, photograph, map, or drawing, regardless of physical form or characteristics, and including records stored on magnetic, electronic, or optical media, and including all copies thereof, that have been made by any agency or received by it in connection with the transaction of public business. And includes any writing containing information relating to the conduct of government or the performance of government or proprietary function prepared, owned, used, or retained by the state or local agency regardless of physical form or characteristics. [emphasis added]

The state requires all government agencies to abide by a records retention schedule. The City of Seattle has a General Records Retention Schedule that identifies official meeting files of City advisory boards as records to be retained for six years, and also as records of potentially archival value. The lack of clarity about whether district councils are advisory bodies makes it unclear whether the City must retain district council minutes, agendas and other records that are not provided to City staff. Recommendations 1 and 3 above address the need to clarify the role and status of the district councils and the City Neighborhood Council.

Recommendation

Recommendation 10. The Department of Neighborhoods should improve its compliance with the State's document retention laws by retaining district council documents that come into its possession. The Department of Neighborhoods needs to ensure all staff members understand their responsibilities to comply with RCW Title 40 and WAC 434-610-020 especially with respect to copies of documents they receive in association with their work supporting the district councils and City Neighborhood Council. The Department of Neighborhoods is aware of this problem and has an item on their current work plan to develop an improved records retention schedule and improve its monitoring of the records retention process.

⁹ The City Clerk generally archives records that are offered by departments. We did not determine who provided City Neighborhood Council records to the City Clerk for archiving.

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V. Models Used by Other Jurisdictions

We reviewed thirty-six jurisdictions' websites, and interviewed staff from nine of these jurisdictions, including Seattle, to obtain information about successful approaches and challenges to promoting neighborhood participation in civic affairs. The neighborhood programs we examined varied considerably in specific elements; however, we grouped them into three general categories based on the level of support the jurisdictions provided: limited support, moderate support, and substantial support. Tables 4 and 5 below summarize the jurisdictions' programs we reviewed. We defined the three groups as follows:

1. **Limited support jurisdictions** help individual neighborhoods organize and communicate; including providing such tools as a registry of neighborhood associations, web site links, limited publicity, model bylaws, and in some jurisdictions limited training. These jurisdictions do not further organize groups into larger districts like Seattle, and generally leave the groups to function independently.
2. **Moderate support jurisdictions** help organize localized neighborhood groups into "umbrella groups"¹⁰ or neighborhood councils and provide ongoing support to them. These jurisdictions may provide meeting space, web site hosting, publicity, training, guidebooks, templates, administrative staffing, periodic conferences and/or social gatherings, and funding for community improvement programs such as matching grants. These jurisdictions may also establish boundaries and criteria for membership, and screen groups for adherence to the criteria. However, these jurisdictions provide limited or no financial support to the councils.
3. **Substantial support jurisdictions** help organize localized groups into councils and formally appoint members to the neighborhood councils or fund elections, provide annual financial support to the councils and/or provide paid staff to the councils. In most cases, these councils use their funding and staff to supply the services noted above (meeting space, publicity, training, etc.).

¹⁰ An umbrella group is "something, as an organization or policy, that covers or encompasses a number of groups or elements" *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, 1996.

Table 4. Jurisdictions’ Neighborhood Association Support Levels

Limited Support	Moderate Support	Substantial Support
Albuquerque, NM	Arlington, TX	Clark County, WA
Atlanta, GA	Bellevue, WA	Honolulu, HI
Baltimore, MD	Charlotte, NC	Kansas City, KS
Columbus, OH	El Paso, TX	Los Angeles, CA
Denver, CO	Ft. Worth, TX	Minneapolis, MN
Detroit, MI	Jacksonville, FL	New York, NY
Houston, TX	Long Beach, CA	Portland, OR
Indianapolis, IN	Memphis, TN	St. Paul, MN
Miami, FL	Oklahoma City, OK	Washington, D.C.
Milwaukee, WI	Sacramento, CA	Wichita, KS
Omaha, NE	Seattle, WA	
Virginia Beach, VA	Spokane, WA	
	Tucson, AZ	
	Vancouver, WA	

Table 5 displays additional information we obtained from interviews with nine jurisdictions on full time equivalent (FTE) staff devoted to neighborhood association support and in some cases annual budget information. Of the jurisdictions we interviewed, Honolulu, Minneapolis, and Ft. Worth noted that changes were being considered to reduce the historic level and mode of funding because of the current economic downturn, and Sacramento was holding positions vacant because of budget cuts.

All the jurisdictions we reviewed support active neighborhood organizing. At all levels of support, the groups face the same challenges of attracting and retaining a representative and diverse group of participants. They also reported having difficulty finding ways to productively discuss controversial issues, such as the pace of a neighborhood’s development. Groups are often sustained by a core of citizen activists whose composition changes little over many years. This experienced and knowledgeable core group is a resource to citizens and government officials. However, their presence can be a barrier to new participants who may feel intimidated in the face of such long-standing relationships and expertise.

Table 5. Jurisdictions’ Budget and FTEs for Neighborhood Association Support

Jurisdiction	Support	Annual Budget	FTE¹¹
Clark County, WA	Substantial	\$100,000 print/mail	0.5
Ft. Worth, TX	Moderate	No information	7
Honolulu, HI	Substantial	\$900,000 + elections \$	16
Minneapolis, MN	Substantial	About \$14 million for all	9
Portland, OR	Substantial	About \$300,000 each	12.5
Sacramento, CA	Moderate	No information	8
Seattle, WA	Moderate	\$500 each district	2.5 ¹²
Spokane, WA	Moderate	No information	3
St. Paul, MN	Substantial	\$37,000 each	No information

Conclusions from Review of Other Jurisdictions’ Neighborhood Programs

A primary function of neighborhood participation programs is to allow communication among citizens (both residential and business) and between citizens and government, and to encourage citizens to come together for mutual problem solving. We did not discern notable differences in participation or influence based on the levels of support provided to neighborhood groups. However, a moderate level of support is required if a city’s objectives for neighborhood participation programs include creating a partnership between the city and its neighborhoods and coordinating city departments’ responses to neighborhood problems and requests for help.

We developed the following additional conclusions from our review of the approaches of other jurisdictions:

Approaches that have proven successful in achieving the goals of a neighborhood participation programs:

- Provide tools that assist local neighborhoods to organize, publicize their existence to each other, and communicate. Useful, relatively inexpensive tools include guidelines and templates, web linking or even web pages, and occasional all-group gatherings.

¹¹ For Honolulu and Minneapolis, staff costs are included in the annual budget figure. For the other jurisdictions staff costs are in addition to the annual budget.

¹² The 13 Neighborhood District Coordinators from Seattle’s Department of Neighborhoods devote approximately 20 percent of their time to supporting the district councils and the City Neighborhood Council (i.e., a total of 2.5 FTEs). However, they spend substantial additional time supporting smaller, more local neighborhood organizations including local community councils, chambers of commerce, ethnic associations and issue-focused groups.

- A cost-effective method used by Sacramento to disseminate government-related information to citizens is to invite all citizens to regular (e.g., bimonthly) meetings held throughout the city where the city presents information and solicits feedback about pending projects or active issues in the area.
- An alternative method for government to communicate with citizens is to organize advisory groups to address specific issues such as crime, neighborhood planning, transportation, and capital projects. Seattle uses this approach frequently.

Challenges

- Establishing “umbrella” groups whose members are ostensibly representing other groups has been associated with problems in several jurisdictions we interviewed. These problems include challenges to the legitimacy of the representative framework, lack of diversity and turnover among the members, and burnout caused by participating in multiple layers of groups (e.g., the local group, the umbrella group, and potentially additional meetings for officers or committee work).
- When government is the convener of the group, participants may presume the group is government-sponsored and that government has an ongoing duty to provide support for the group.

The best approaches leverage the natural interest of participants, make pertinent information easy to access, facilitate dialogue, and provide for synthesizing the diversity of opinion in communications to decision makers.

Appendix 1. Overview of Seattle's District Council System

The City supports multiple structures for two-way communication with its citizens including:

- The district councils and City Neighborhood Council;
- City-appointed citizens advisory committees in the police, utilities and other departments;
- Ad hoc advisory committees established to oversee levy expenditures or particular construction projects;
- Block watches;
- Numerous specialized boards and commissions; and
- Public hearings, workshops and/or other events focused on particular issues.

City resources, such as staff time, are used to support these structures including, but not limited to: 1) organizing, publicizing and sometimes documenting meetings; 2) providing meeting space; 3) developing and presenting information; 4) providing informational materials; 5) conducting investigations and writing reports; and 6) occasionally providing food, parking costs, and honoraria.

Formation of Seattle's District Council System

Seattle's system of 13 district councils was established in 1987 through Resolution 27709, which created the Neighborhood Planning and Assistance Program. The district councils were originally intended to provide networking opportunities between resident and business groups from the same geographical area of the City. The same resolution also created a group to which each district council would send a representative: the City Neighborhood Council (CNC). In 1989, through Resolution 28115, the City attempted to modify the system to allow and encourage participation from more neighborhoods and from a broader diversity of racial and ethnic groups.

These resolutions also assigned the Department of Neighborhoods the responsibility of:

- Staffing the City Neighborhood Council and the district councils,
- Providing meeting space when practical,
- Cooperating with the Community Service Centers (now called Neighborhood Service Centers) in the development and facilitation of neighborhood organizations and leadership, and
- Maintaining the community organization mailing list.

Neighborhood Planning and Assistance Program

Resolution 27709 lays out the objectives of the Neighborhood Planning and Assistance Program, of which the district councils were a part, as follows:

- Create a partnership between the City and its neighborhoods
- Provide the neighborhoods with tools and resources for planning and development which reflect their needs and values
- Design City plans, regulations and programs to suit the diverse character and development patterns of the City's neighborhoods
- Strengthen and coordinate City departments' responses to neighborhood problems and requests for help
- Foster cooperation and consensus among diverse interests within neighborhoods
- Encourage constructive settlement of disputes involving neighborhood groups, prospective developers and the City
- Facilitate communication between neighborhoods regarding common concerns

The eleven parts of the Neighborhood Planning and Assistance Program were:

1. Community Service Centers (one for each district)
2. Neighborhood District Councils
3. City Neighborhood Council
4. Office of Neighborhoods (now Department of Neighborhoods)
5. Budget Review
6. Neighborhood Planning
7. Comprehensive Plan Updates
8. Neighborhood Matching Fund
9. Communications Assistance
10. Interdepartmental Neighborhood Coordinating Committee
11. Early Project Review

Many of the objectives of the Neighborhood Planning and Assistance Program were achieved through the City's Neighborhood Planning effort in the 1990's.

Original Role of the District Councils

According to Attachment A to Resolution 27709,

District Councils shall provide a forum for consideration of common concerns including physical planning, budget allocations and service delivery and for the sharing of ideas for solutions to common problems. [Resolution 27709, Attachment A, section 2 d, 1987]

Although Resolution 27709 states that district councils shall provide a forum for consideration of common concerns and sharing of ideas, several current and past City officials involved in the establishment of the district councils indicated that the district

councils were not expected to provide policy direction to the City on issues. Rather, district council meetings were intended as a place where representatives of neighborhood organization could hear about policy issues and then take these issues back to their respective organizations—providing a tool for information dissemination. In turn, the local community organizations, at their discretion, could take policy stances and attempt to directly influence city policies or decisions. This intent is reflected in Resolution 27709 Attachment A, 2 e, which states:

Neighborhood business and residential groups will continue to determine their own boundaries and will remain free to deal directly with City departments and elected officials as they have in the past.

The City Neighborhood Council was originally designed to have one business and one residential representative from each district council. This was later changed to one representative from each district council, either the chair or an alternate. In contrast to the district councils, the responsibilities assigned to the City Neighborhood Council explicitly included providing recommendations and advice to the City, and were spelled out as follows:

The responsibilities of the City Neighborhood Council shall include i) review (and) recommendations regarding City budget issues including the general fund, capital and block grant budgets and the Neighborhood Matching Fund; ii) advice on policies necessary to the effective and equitable implementation of the Neighborhood Planning and Assistance Program. [Emphasis added].

Attachment A to both resolutions 27709 and 28115 further states that the Department of Neighborhoods will consult the City Neighborhood Council regarding administration of the Neighborhood Matching Fund; and both the district councils and the City Neighborhood Council “shall rate and rank the eligible applications for the matching fund.

City Use of District Councils

City elected officials and department representatives frequently attend district council meetings to provide information and solicit feedback on City-sponsored programs or projects. District councils have been entrusted with the responsibility of ranking and recommending top priority projects in their district for two City grant programs: the Neighborhood Matching Fund and the Neighborhood Project Fund¹³.

¹³ The Neighborhood Project Fund is a shortened name for the neighborhood Street Fund/Cumulative Reserve Sub-fund (NSF/CRS) that funds street and parks projects proposed by citizens.

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Appendix 2. Public Comments on a Draft of the Report “District Council System Needs Renewal”

We solicited comments on a draft of this report from district council participants we interviewed for this audit, and incorporated many of these comments into the final report. We share the comments here to provide additional perspectives on the City’s district council system and possible improvements to the system. We have put them in order geographically from southwest to northeast; added a comment provided by former City Councilmember Jim Street, who was active in establishing the district council system in 1987; and, finally, listed several anonymous comments.

Charles (Chas) Redmond, Southwest District Council Co-Chair

Your recommendation: Clarify the City’s role in the governance of the district councils. The City should address the following questions, and specify the extent of the City’s involvement in each:

- Should district councils be considered City organizations or independent, self-governing organizations?
- Should the City influence the membership of the district councils?
- Should the City enforce district council bylaws?
- Should the City have a role in the conduct of the meetings?

So for those four questions - here's my take:

- independent, self-governing organizations
- city should not influence membership
- city should enforce bylaws (else why have them and/or who)
- perhaps - witness, document-bearer, city-rep, agent of the hood, all of the above but at the discretion of the self-governing organization.

Does that make me too anarchistic or not enough?

Sharonn Meeks, former Chair, Southwest District Council

I actually read this and found it interesting that only Northwest and Southwest do not take positions on issues but rather prefer to be sounding boards. Well written and yes, we could use more than \$500 a year! Still want to see a website for all District Councils to

communicate with each other and it seems that DON could send announcement out once instead of asking local reps to forward them on. Nice job.

Barbara Hadley, North Admiral (in the Southwest District) Resident

I read your report, very interesting but not surprising that things have been a bit muddled for some groups. Neighborhood issues can be feisty! We have a great city rep, Stan Lock. I do not attend meetings--mostly because I have had enough meetings to last forever. However, he is great at getting city information out to the list and they have a booth at the West Seattle Street Fair to recruit members.

I have one comment of caution regarding the report. It is suggested, that if the city wants to hold councils responsible for "diverse" membership and withhold money if it is not forthcoming, that might be a good hammer. I would recommend that money not be withdrawn as it deprives the whole community of help for something the city wants to encourage. Instead, city could investigate further what keeps residents from membership and help with problem areas. What is diversity anyway? It could be many things and should reflect what is in that district. It is always difficult to get folks to willingly give up their time to attend meetings no matter how interested they are; and sometimes one difficult member can drive others away who simply do not want to "put up with it".

Pete Spalding, Chair, Delridge District Council

Thanks for sharing this report with us. I have three general areas to comment on:

1. You state in the report "The City provides each district council with meeting space". This is not a true statement. They might "help" some councils find a spot to meet but they do not provide it. In Delridge we find our own meeting space and because of this we have had to move our meeting several times over the last three or four years.

2. It seems to me that you spend an inordinate amount of time focusing on the issues in the Southeast part of the city. This is not right. Just because one council had a squabble where the two sides differed and they kept waiting on someone else to solve their problem instead of handling it themselves you should not cloud the report to make it seem that this was more than it was. This issue did not impact the other 12 districts in going about their business. If you are going to give one district so much power in this report could you please show how it impacted (for example) what transpired in the Delridge Neighborhoods District Council? I just don't like the picture you are painting that one districts problem impacted the others to that great of a degree.

3. I worked for a number of years as an auditor in the private sector and know how audit reports are written. BUT I would really love it if you would throw some more positive aspects of what our District Council system has done. There is some absolutely

tremendous work being done by our councils. We are helping a lot of folks and just because a certain part of our community is not at the table it does not mean that their interests are not being considered. If you remember when your audit staff visited the Delridge meeting it was commented that this was the only council that had been visited that had youth participation. In reading this report it almost sounds like the district council system is broken. I would like to argue that this is not the case. It might not work like a well oiled machine in some areas but by golly we sure do get some stuff done in my neighborhood.

Once again thanks for sharing this report and please give thought to revising the report so it does not have such an overly negative feel to it and that it does not unduly focus on one district at the detriment of the other 12.

Dick Burkhardt, Southeast District Council Representative to the City Neighborhood Council

1. A general principle: The more power given to district councils, the more representative they must be.
2. Therefore to the extent that efforts to obtain broad representation are informal, it is better not to ask, or accept, District Council resolutions on general community issues. Instead, if such an issue is discussed, then the District Council secretary would record different sentiments expressed by those present (group representatives plus audience) and forward this to relevant city departments and to the member groups of the District Council. In this sense a District Council would act more like a combination of sounding board and avenue of communication. Except that there would be special city-specified procedures for the Neighborhood Matching Fund and any similar task authorized by the city.
3. As to prior conflict at the Southeast District Council, it was not noted in the section on City influences district council membership on pages 12-13¹⁴ that many community members also support a more representative membership, especially the inclusion of non-profits such as Southeast Effective Development (SEED) and the Tenants Union, who are able to represent the interests of lower income residents. This is because lower income residents generally do not have the training, time, or support to participate effectively in such forums, although it would be very desirable for the city to pay community organizers to do such training and support.

However it is hard for these supportive community members to see why for-profit business groups should be represented but not non-profit organizations. Instead it appears that opponents of representative membership are strongly motivated to keep more low income residents out of southeast Seattle, and that they have attempted to do this by adopting an agenda to restrict District Council membership so that they would be able to

¹⁴ This is now found on pages 15 and 16 of the report.

control the District Council and use it oppose any community or city initiatives that would appear to them to favor the interests of low income residents over those of certain business and home-owner groups.

Leslie Miller, former Chair, Southeast District Council

It's concerning that the methodology employed in the audit replicates some of the most problematic aspects of the district councils as they stand now in that the constituents, members, and participants involved and paraphrased in the audit are the same citizens accurately described by the City as predominantly white, middle to upper class, English-speaking, business and homeowners. It would be interesting to see if newer members or previously disenfranchised groups would have to say should they be interviewed. During our district council meetings those members expressed that they were excited to participate in the system and that working with groups that they usually didn't network with and having an opportunity to address the City was in fact an "honor." They also expressed dismay, fear, and frustration by their characterization and treatment by some when they did participate. The report would be more balanced by having heard from those members directly about their feelings and ideas about how the district council works for them, especially since the audit reflects the views of some who find their participation inappropriate and/or threatening.

For the education of all, it would be helpful to have a snapshot of current district councils by district, with lists of their members and average numbers of participation, in addition to the types of issues discussed. Appending this material to the report would be quite meaningful.

In general, though the report does examine various group roles and how they influenced and operated within a contentious period within the Southeast community, this should not overshadow nor obfuscate the fact that Southeast boasts a large, diverse, vibrant, functioning district council led by and strengthened by the community. In fact, the Southeast District Council (SEDC) was used as a model for district council operations for some time, and was the largest and most diverse body of its kind for some time before any problems arose. Though there have been issues regarding the SEDC and membership and power, to characterize it primarily as a dysfunctional body both casts the current SEDC in an unflattering light and also discounts some of the truly great work done by all the members involved over many years, most importantly community building. This includes one of the biggest accomplishments, one that the City has yet to achieve in the same way, that of making this city model available and welcoming, and prioritizing the true participation and leadership of citizens of different socio-economic positions, races, ethnicities, and ages, including business- and homeowners as well as renters and more transitory populations, all of whom should have an equal stake in adding to the collective voice of their neighborhood. Though it is quite fair to say some discord arose from this work, SEDC could also be characterized as a resource should the city choose to remake the district council system into one that truly strives to meet the goals set out in the amendment: to accurately and responsibly reflect the constituency of the district. In focusing so much on SE and by not referencing more systematic problems, this report

seems to perpetuate an old disagreement instead of focusing on possible district-wide solutions.

In closing, in addition to your suggestion to the City that it must resolve its role in district councils, it is also key that chairs and members across districts should have an opportunity to interact and problem-solve. This is supposed to happen naturally through the CNC, yet the CNC is not set up to facilitate this type of dialogue and suffers from many of the same issues of restricted, long-term participation and a lack of diversity and viewpoints that many district councils do. To augment the district council system without addressing similar issues within the City Neighborhood Council (CNC) would not make much sense.

Finally, if the City is truly to prioritize race and social justice, use of Roberts Rules, complicated bylaws, and tedious meeting requirements, coupled with a lack of funds for translation, childcare, or other incentives and aids for participation must be addressed for the entire district council system, including the CNC.

Nancy Bolin (Co-Chair Northeast District Council and President of the View Ridge Community Council)

I would like to suggest the following:

1. District Councils should retain their relative autonomy allowing members to establish their rules of operation, etc.
2. The City can provide general guidelines or suggestions for operation.
3. The District Councils should be responsible for providing information to the communities they serve on a regular basis--perhaps once per year. The information they should provide is about their organization, how the members are selected, what their mission is, what they have accomplished in the last 12 months, etc. This information can be shared at a regular meeting with sufficient notice to the communities of the meeting time and place; it can be shared electronically on a council website (if available); it could be shared in some printed form--perhaps a "public service" type message appearing in one of the local neighborhood publications.

Those are my informal suggestions. I am happy to provide more information if you have questions.

Jim Street, former member, Seattle City Council

I think you have done very good work here.

Among the various perspectives, has the perspective been articulated clearly that district councils were not intended to be substitutes for neighborhood councils and should not operate in such a way as to weaken neighborhood councils or other grass roots organizations? To the contrary. The primary objective is to facilitate communication and cooperation among organizations within the district to help them be effective. Because they exist, they can also be useful places where the city can communicate efficiently to such organizations. They were not intended to be power centers.

Of course, there are other perspectives. It would not be wrong for the next generation to reach different conclusions.

Anonymous

There is a central theme (and I don't know if this audit is the appropriate vehicle) that is missing from the audit report: the behavior and actions of city employees, toward residents, in pursuit of city goals.

Ask anyone in southeast Seattle that has interacted with the Southeast District Council (SEDC) and they'll tell you, the southeast district council has been turned into a tool of the city. The SEDC is rendered silent when the city wants silence (Downtown Emergency Services Center (DESC) shelter) and caused to issue supporting votes on other issues when the city demands support (Detached Accessory Dwelling Units (DADU) ordinance & Community Renewal Act (CRA)). In pursuit of city agendas the staff and employees of the city set their agenda over and above the wishes (votes) of actual residents. Your audit addresses the symptom of the problem but not the cause.

To accomplish their (city) agenda there has been a seismic shift in attitude and behavior by city employees. Several key individuals come to mind; Stella Chao, Alex Wiggins, Nora Liu, Adrienne Quinn, and Glen Harris, but there are others. The change of attitude is a recent phenomenon, relatively speaking. City employees routinely demonstrate less respect for citizens than at any time in my recollection. I've encountered a range of attitudes that range from mild indifference on the one hand to open hostility including verbal insults, rumors, and implied threats at the extreme. These attitudes are exhibited in one-on-one encounters, in group settings, and toward community issues which fall outside of the employee's (city's) agenda.

I speculate the poor attitudes may be a reflection of the attitudes of city leaders. It's my perception that city staff and agencies believe that they do not work for the residents of Seattle. Rather, they work for the Mayor; responsible to their department Directors and department goals and not receptive to or seeking input from residents who are made to feel as if they are obstacles in the city's grand plan. Their interest in community issues pales in comparison to their interest in advancing city agendas or department goals. *(You cannot have a conversation about city employee behavior without raising the episode involving a city employee who contacted the employer of a southeast community activist, complaining of the activists' use of his work email, a clearly hostile act intended*

to interfere with the activist's employment. This is a perfect example of the treatment to which community leaders have been subjected at the hands of city employees).

The district councils have been functioning predictably and without significant issues since 1987. The recent problems with the Southeast District Council didn't happen organically. There was a plan to use the Southeast District Council to further specific city goals. The city encountered more resistance than they anticipated, and a break-away group was formed. Is there room in the audit for analysis of the trickle-down attitude of city leaders? After all, city employees were acting under the direction of city leaders. It was a change of attitude at the top that brought down the Southeast District Council. Perhaps this is a topic for a separate audit?

Anonymous

Pages 7-8¹⁵ of the report reveal that there were problems with the Southeast District Council (SEDC) because of their stewardship of the Southeast Action Agenda (SEAA). SEDC voted to explore the Community Renewal Act (CRA) and to begin "outreach discussions for the Community Renewal Act" as noted in the report.

At this time, the City began collecting data for a Blight Study. A neighbor even recalls an inspector asking about rats in the neighborhood. I later learned that a Blight Study is a CRA requirement. Although the community fought against CRA, and the City withdrew CRA efforts in SE Seattle, the Blight Study was completed and a "final determination of blight" was made. This is a major problem for SE Seattle because the City Council can now apply CRA and the use of eminent domain because a "determination of blight" was made. If something is "determined" to be broken then the City must fix it.

Although I must stress that I had serious concerns at the time about the SEDC conducting any kind of community outreach for the CRA, the City without question understood the ramifications of beginning a blight study and doing so without even waiting for a community outreach effort to be completed. Also, I fault SEDC for not knowing the consequences. Ignorance is not an excuse. If one accepts to steward something, one is expected to act responsibly.

The City's involvement in SEDC and CRA in Southeast Seattle is a sad commentary on district councils and combined abuse of power. I believe that pages 7-8 of the report must stress even more the seriousness of the problem caused by SEDC and the City of Seattle to Southeast Seattle. A most important recommendation might be that steps be taken to insure that what happened in Southeast Seattle is never allowed to happen again, nor in any other part of the City of Seattle.

¹⁵ This is now page 13 of the report.