

DISTRICT COUNCIL FOCUS GROUP AND COMMUNITY SURVEY REPORT

District Council Visioning/Audit Response

*Prepared by Julia Salinas, DON Graduate Intern & UW Evans School of Public Affairs
and Chas Redmond, Chair, City Neighborhood Council
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the District Council Visioning/Audit Response process, the Department of Neighborhoods (DON), in conjunction with the City Neighborhood Council (CNC), conducted focus groups and an online survey to seek community input on how to support the evolution of the Neighborhood District Council (DC) system as a key avenue for civic participation in Seattle. This information will be used to inform priorities and next steps for the District Council Visioning/Audit Response process.

From August to November 2010, focus groups were conducted with each of the district councils and with underrepresented populations with the assistance of the public outreach liaisons. Liaisons support outreach work for Neighborhood Planning and were utilized in this effort. An online survey was also created to reach the broader community – those not necessarily involved in the district councils.

Focus group participants were asked for their thoughts on the role and purpose of the Neighborhood District Councils as they see it now, how effective they are, what they would like the role of the DCs to be (if different), what elements are needed to increase their effectiveness, the idea of guidelines for DCs, and their general thoughts on the audit process. Survey respondents and underrepresented focus group participants were asked similar questions, focusing on the barriers and solutions to getting involved in the district councils.

Following are the major themes from each of the groups interviewed. In addition, there is an overview of data from the district council focus groups and online survey. Full comments are provided as supplemental documents to this executive summary. Details on research methodology are also provided.

Major Themes from the District Council Focus Groups

1. The role of the DCs runs a spectrum ranging from info-sharing to advisory to advocacy. Across the board, info-sharing is a crucial role. Many DCs only take positions occasionally. A few take positions frequently. Some feel positions and action are best taken at individual member organization level, not DC level. Others feel the DCs should take more positions.
2. Frustration exists across the board with the DCs feeling they have little voice or influence with the City – our input does not seem to be used in public decision-making.

3. Some want to increase the importance of DCs by giving them more budget authority, i.e. allocating grants, while others feel that their focus should be on info-sharing and community building.
4. Many do not agree with the idea of guidelines because the DCs are so unique. Others thought basic, flexible guidelines would help to decrease inconsistency. Some think the degree to which guidelines are set should relate directly to the role of the DCs. If the DCs have more influence, i.e. taking positions or allocating funding, then guidelines are appropriate.
5. Frustration with limited capacity as volunteers to do outreach and increase representation; yet there is pressure from above to do so even though no resources are provided. Need more support.
6. The Neighborhood District Coordinators (NDCs) are our connection to the City. Without their support, the DCs would probably fall apart. For strong neighborhoods, need the DC system and the NDCs to support it. The NDCs need more support and resources to do their work.
7. All DCs should be provided the staff support/ resources for a website as a vehicle for communication.

Major Themes from the Underrepresented Population Focus Groups

Participants in the focus group of underrepresented populations discussed the following themes:

- Build trust and accountability with government – follow-up and action are key.
- Address the issues that are relevant to underrepresented populations.
- Make outreach and meeting environment culturally appropriate and welcoming.
- Provide accommodations and amenities to encourage attendance (i.e. food, childcare, transportation, location, time of day, etc.)

Major Themes from the Community Survey

The online survey asked over a dozen questions, more than half with multiple-choice responses. Nearly all of the questions also had significant open-ended questions where the respondents replied with lengthy text responses. These fell into broad categories along the following themes:

- What would "best case" District Council meetings include and be like;
- How can awareness of the District Council system be increased;
- What are the issues District Councils should tackle and what should they do;
- What would improve citizen involvement in the District Council system?

What follows are the recurring themes within each category:

Best Case District Council meetings would include and be:

- Accessible - times, locations, child care, food & beverage, translation
- Relevant - agendas, topics, approaches, citizen involvement
- Information sharing and community building
- Provide policy input and serve as grant/funds review/approval

Awareness can be raised by:

- More focused, smaller meetings, agendas, action items
- More relevant agendas, responses, lines of questioning
- More accessible information through translation, posting, mail
- Interactive web sites and blogs

District Councils should tackle these issues:

- Jobs and affordable housing
- Planning and development - neighborhood and city-wide
- Environmental issues - micro-local to regional
- Parks and recreation, including green space and community space
- Traffic and mobility, including public transportation
- Health, human and family services, including race and social justice
- Youth, education and schools, including youth involvement
- City involvement, support, advice and funding in neighborhood issues

Involvement in the District Council system would be improved by:

- Having more groups be open to new members and new ground rules
- Having more flexible locations and times with more City support
- Having more relevant agendas and action items
- Having more involvement in City matters such as planning and grants

GUIDE TO SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

This summary report contains a number of sections and attachments, as described below:

Sections:

- Executive Summary / Major Themes
- Methodology
- Themes/Sub-Themes from District Council Focus Groups
- Survey Results Overview

Attachments:

- District Council focus group full comments, sorted by Question and Theme (Excel and PDF)
- Survey Questions and Full Survey Results (PDF)
- Survey Question text response analysis and summary
- Underrepresented Population Focus Group Questions and Results (PDF)

Acronyms:

The following acronyms are used throughout the comments:

DC – Neighborhood District Council

CNC – City Neighborhood Council

NDC – Neighborhood District Coordinator

CC/NC – Community Council or Neighborhood Council

DON – Seattle Department of Neighborhoods

NMF – Neighborhood Matching Fund

METHODOLOGY

Julia Salinas, DON Graduate Intern and Evans School of Public Affairs MPA Candidate planned and conducted the interview and survey process with the guidance and support of Chas Redmond, CNC Chair, and Veronica Sherman-King, Director of Planning and Community Building, DON. Julia Salinas analyzed focus group results; Chas Redmond analyzed survey results.

Following are the audiences interviewed, the interviewing methods used, the main questions asked, and data analysis methodology.

Audience	Info-Gathering Method
District Council members	Focus groups with Chairs, past Chairs, others members recommended by the NDC or Chair. Groups ranged from 1-6 people. Representatives from all 13 Districts interviewed.
People active in their communities that may or may not be involved in the DCs	On-line Survey. Outreach done via NDCs and DON’s ethnic organizations list, website and blog, and press release. Secondary outreach encouraged through word-of-mouth. 256 respondents.
Underrepresented Populations	Focus Groups using the City’s Public Outreach Liaisons (POLs) for outreach (30 participants). <i>Ethnic/Cultural Groups included:</i> Native Americans, Somali, Khmer, Ethiopian (Oromo), Ethiopian (Amharic Speakers), Vietnamese, Latino, Chinese, Tigrinya Speakers, Filipino, and People living with Disabilities

Main Questions for District Council Members:

1. What do you see as the current role and purpose of the District Councils and CNC?
How effective do you think your DC is at fulfilling its role and purpose? What are some of its strengths and weaknesses?
2. What would you *like* to see as the role of the DCs and CNC?
3. What do you see as necessary to be in place to achieve an effective District Council system?
In terms of political will and organizational capacity? To what extent and how are these already in place? What do we need to do to get there?
4. What do you see as appropriate baselines across district councils, if any, regarding outreach, inclusion, and representation? What degree of flexibility do you believe DCs should have to determine their own goals and definitions of effectiveness, versus guidelines adhered to across DCs?

The questions for the online survey, as well as the focus groups for underrepresented populations, asked participants to describe challenges and solutions for greater community participation, and accessibility to the DC system.

Data Analysis:

The following methods describe the approach to data analysis for the focus groups and online survey.

Focus Group with Underrepresented Populations

The focus groups with underrepresented populations were done in one large meeting with smaller ethnic-based groups, facilitated and recorded by the Public Outreach Liaisons. Notes were typed and summarized by question.

District Council Focus Groups

District Council focus groups notes were typed as the sessions were being conducted. Individual summaries for each district were created, arranged by question and theme and approval was requested from the individuals interviewed (and received in a few cases). All comments were copied and pasted into an Excel file and coded by question, theme, and sub-theme (where appropriate). The Excel file is presented by theme; however, it can be sorted by district council so as to read as chronological summaries.

Online Survey for Broader Community

Text response methodology:

For each of the ten questions which had text answers, the survey results were downloaded for that question from the Survey Monkey site. Each response was read for each question. After reading all of the responses for each question, a generalized break-down of response topics was developed. Answers were color coded for the initial round of responses. Any remaining responses were read again to see if that response fit into an existing category for that question. If it did, the response was color coded for that category, if it did not, a new category was created which covered more than one un-categorized question. In this manner, each question's responses were read and categorized in an interactive process. Once all responses from a question were categorized, the absolute numbers of each category were summarized for that question. The process was repeated for all ten questions with text responses.

For the multiple-choice questions, the Survey Monkey question response sheet shows a bar graph of the distribution of the answers.

THEMES FROM DISTRICT COUNCIL FOCUS GROUPS

The following themes (*in alphabetical order*) were identified in the district council comments, falling under each of the major question categories: 1) Current Role, 2) Potential Role, 3) Effectiveness, 4) Capacity, 5) Guidelines, 6) Audit Process

Access to Data	Equipment/Space	Mtg Process –
Advisory Role	General	Efficiency/Inclusion/Issues/Structure
Ambiguity	Geographic Asset	NDCs
Audit Process – Biased	Guidelines: OK / Basic-Flexible	Neighborhood Planning
Autonomy	Inconsistency – Elections / Roles	Outreach –
Awarding \$	Info-sharing	Communication/Diversity/Marketing
CNC	Info-sharing & Advisory	Position-taking – occasional/no/yes
Collective Action	Issues Addressed	Recommendation
Community Building	Lack of Volunteer Capacity	Resources/Support
Connection to Government	Leadership Development	Uniqueness
DC Budget	Legislation	Voice/Influence
Definition of Diversity	Membership –	
DoN – Capacity	Diversity/Inclusion/Issues/ Limited Capacity/Outreach	

RECURRING THEMES

The following charts demonstrate the sub-themes identified. Sub-themes are a summary of more specific sentiments within each theme that were repeatedly reported. They are not verbatim comments, rather a combination of the sentiments demonstrated in the sub-theme. Sub-themes are displayed in descending order according to the number of districts reporting it. Full verbatim comments are available in the Excel or PDF document, also sorted by category and theme.

Current Role

Theme	# and Name of District	Sub-Theme
Info-sharing	8 B, E, GD, LU, M/QA, NE, SE, SW	A place for groups to network, share ideas, have dialogue, find common ground.
Info-sharing & Advisory	7 B, LU, M/QA, N, NE, C, SW	Are a conduit for information sharing both up and down: DCs give advice and recommendations to the City (and other govt entities) and City sends information down to disperse to neighborhood groups.
Collective action	5 C, DR, N, NE, NW	Goal is to get all groups in a district to work together to enhance their common interests and the quality of life in their district. As a unified voice, we have more access to the City.

Position-taking	5	DR, E, LU, M/QA, SE	Our DC does not take positions because we have diverse viewpoints. Encourage individual member groups to take positions directly instead.
Geographic asset	4	DT, LU, NW, SW	The CNC and District Councils are the only advisory bodies in the City that are not appointed by the city and are not issue-specific, rather are geographic-based. Members are selected entirely at the grassroots and address multiple issues.
Uniqueness	3	DR, NE, NW	Each district has a unique way of operating.
Connection to Govt.	2	DT, E	The DCs are a means for community groups to work with the City and for our interests to be heard by the City.
Position-taking	2	B, SE	Occasionally take positions/write letters.
	2	M/QA, SW	Only vote if there is full agreement or a strong majority in favor.
	2	DT, LU	Our DC votes/takes positions.

Potential Role

Voice/Influence	3	B, DT, NW	Empower DCs by using them to allocate community funding, to determine city budget.
Awarding \$	2	DR, SE	DCs could be in charge of allocating NMF Small/Simple, Small Sparks grants.
CNC	2	M/QA, SW	The link between the DCs and CNC is very weak. We are interested in local issues, not citywide. Okay with the CNC not existing.

Effectiveness

Voice/Influence	7	B, DT, GD, M/QA, NE, NW, SW	The City usually comes to give presentations rather than ask for our input and use it in decision-making. We need to be looped in early, before decisions are made. Need to create a formalized feedback mechanism; City needs to make it clear how we fit into their deliberations.
Awarding \$	3	E, N, SE	Are a resource for NMF and street fund project applicants - provide ideas on how to strengthen their proposals to the City.
Lack of Volunteer Capacity	3	B, N, SW	One of the biggest challenges is limited time for volunteers to go to additional meetings, work on multiple issues.
CNC	2	NW, SW	The CNC's strength is diluted. It struggles to not step on toes and operate by consensus.
Mtg Process	2	B, M/QA	A lot of our work is done in sub-committee so monthly meeting time isn't taken up. Use monthly meetings to identify issues that work on outside of that venue.
Voice/Influence	2	N, NW	Don't feel letter writing has had much influence.

Capacity

Outreach/ Communication	7	DR, DT, E, LU, N, NE, SW	All DCs should be provided the staff support/resources for a website as a vehicle for communication.
NDCs	6	B, DT, E, LU, M/QA, N	The NDC is our connection to the City. Without their support, the DCs would probably fall apart. For strong neighborhoods, need the DC system and the NDCs to support it.
NDCs	4	DT, LU, NE, SW	The NDCs need more support and resources to do their work.
DC budget	3	LU, NE, SE	Increase DC's budget and resources.
Access to Data	2	DR, LU	Need access to demographic data for our districts to help with outreach.
Equipment	2	N, NW	Need electronic resources for our meetings, like laptop, projector, and projection screen.
Space	2	NW, SE	Meeting space for each DC is inconsistent. Some are high quality and business-like; others are not. We all need decent and sufficient meeting space.

Guidelines

Uniqueness	6	B, DR, E, GD, M/QA, SW	Each district should determine guidelines because they are all unique.
Guidelines: Basic/Flexible	5	B, DT, M/QA, N, NE	Basic guidelines on membership and "rules of engagement" are okay. Flexibility is important.
(Various)	4	B, DR, GD, NE	If the role of the DCs is for advocacy/taking positions or allocating money, then think guidelines/protocols are appropriate.
Definition of Diversity	3	B, GD, LU	There are many types of diversity besides racial, i.e. renters, business representation.
Inconsistency	2	DT, GD	Inconsistency between DCs in membership, process, and structure. Guidelines/clarity would help address this.
Membership	2	B, DT	Need guidelines on membership to help address inconsistent attendance.
Membership	2	GD, N	Have very open membership.
Membership/ Term Limits	2	GD, NE	Term limits should be considered. Help bring in new ideas and prevent stagnation, however institutional memory and long-time commitment very important.
Membership/ Diversity	2	E, NE	Attention to outreach via community councils is more effective.
Membership/ Limited	2	DT, NW	Limited capacity as volunteers to do outreach. Should be supported by the City/NDCs.

Capacity			
Resources/ Support	2	C, SW	Have guidelines that create consistency with resources available across the DCs.

Audit Process

Biased	3	B, DR, LU	The audit is biased towards the SE District; it did not reflect a true representation of the work we are doing across the districts. Should focus only on the areas that need attention, not the entire system.
Ambiguity	2	M/ Q, N	City Council should think about what it expects of the DCs and communicate that to us.
Lack of Volunteer Capacity	2	B, DT	Impact on volunteers resulting from the audit response effort. Too cumbersome and out of scale for what volunteers have the ability to do.