



# REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

OFFICE OF CITY AUDITOR

SEATTLE, WA

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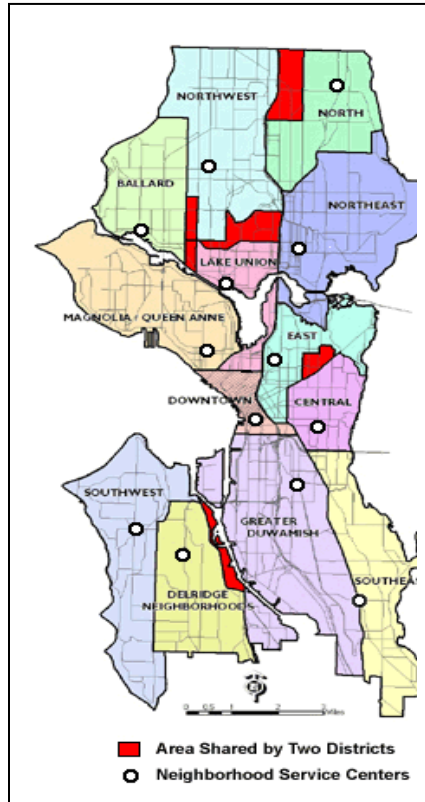
## Seattle District Council System Needs Renewal

### 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.

## **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.