

Department of Neighborhoods Response to Audit and Recommendations City Auditor' Report – June 23, 2009

The Department of Neighborhoods values and recognizes the extraordinary impact that the District Councils and their members have made for their communities. For more than twenty years, members have volunteered countless hours to share information, address neighborhood concerns and exchange information with each other, city departments and elected officials. They have also had an important role in neighborhood stewardship, reviewing and prioritizing applications for City funding programs for neighborhood projects and in serving as a resource for City departments.

The Department of Neighborhoods has recognized that the District Councils are self-governing community groups that respond to the localized needs of their neighborhoods with different approaches. We also understand the challenges of the current system. The City of Seattle needs consistency in the way we provide information to and solicit input from community members, and takes seriously our responsibility to ensure that all populations are represented in civic engagement and are equitably served.

We welcome the Auditor's report and plan to review the recommendations in collaboration with the District Councils, the City Neighborhood Council, the Executive's Office, and the City Council to explore any clarifications and changes the City will have the authority to make. We have supported and fully appreciate the work of the auditor's office and have provided them access to all our records for their research, and references to other information sources. Some recommendations are procedural, and some require formal changes to existing legislation.

It is important that we conduct efforts to review, discuss, engage and collaborate with the District Councils, City Neighborhood Council, Seattle City Council, other departments and the Executive's Office, and the community at large. The end goal is to implement changes that will improve effectiveness and provide clarity in the role and purpose for all District Councils and for the City staff who support them.

Auditor’s Recommendations for Improving Seattle’s District Council and City Neighborhood Council System	DON Responses to Recommendations
<p>1. Clarify the City’s objectives for the District Council and City Neighborhood Council system: is the emphasis on information or policy?</p>	<p>Agree: DON is very interested in doing this - some District Councils have responded by saying they would like to wait for the Audit results. DON is willing to collaborate with Neighborhood District Councils, City Neighborhood Councils, and the City Council to clarify roles, especially having to do with policy.</p>
<p>2. Consider a change in the names “district council” and “City Neighborhood Council.”</p>	<p>Clarifying the role and responsibilities of both Councils will better define than a name change. If community desires a name change, we will support it.</p>
<p>3. Provide additional guidelines for the District Council/City Neighborhood Council system consistent with any clarified objectives.</p>	<p>Agree: decision-making on the role and responsibilities as well as sponsorship versus support will clarify objectives, which can then be standardized across Councils. DON is very interested in doing this - some District Councils have responded by saying they would like to wait for the Audit results.</p>
<p>4. Require that standards are met if District Council and City Neighborhood Council responsibilities include rating and ranking City grants.</p>	<p>Good point: as stated in footnote #6 on page 13 of the report, DON currently ensures diversity by appointing members to the CAC, and NMF CRT. In addition, DON has been working through staff (NMF Project Managers and Neighborhood District Coordinators) to encourage more applications from diverse community groups to increase equity of resources to community-building projects.</p>
<p>5. Avoid characterizing the District Councils and City Neighborhood Council as representative bodies.</p>	<p>Good Point: DON has been working to include voices from other diverse community groups through activities such as the Neighborhood Leadership Training funds, Neighborhood Plan Outreach program, and participation in diverse community events. District Councils work well for some people and others choose to engage with the City in different ways. All ways are valuable. Several community groups and coalitions meet separately from the District Councils.</p>
<p>6. Clarify the City’s role in District Council governance.</p>	<p>Good Point: if the clarification is that the CNC and District Councils are independent bodies, separate from the City, then the City should provide minimal support to governance and operation of these groups. DON has been working with Neighborhood District Coordinators to determine their roles and responsibilities which helps to provide consistency across district. In addition, DON has provided additional resources (enhancement funds) to the District Councils and funding to the activities and events of the CNC (budget conference, candidates forum), which should be reviewed as the sponsor versus supporter role is clarified.</p>

7. Establish appropriate conditions for the City's continued support of the District Councils and City Neighborhood Council.	If it is determined that the CNC and District Councils are independent bodies, DON has no governance or consequence-setting role. Our role going forward would need to be defined in collaboration with the City Council, CNC and District Councils.
8. The City should explore ways to help district councils and the City Neighborhood Council reduce and/or manage conflict at meetings.	Good Point: DON has offered and provided facilitation services for Councils in conflict. In addition, Neighborhood District Coordinators have been trained by the Dispute Resolution Center in mediation techniques and in some instances may be able to facilitate conflicts.
9. The City should clarify the level of staff support it will provide to District Councils, the City Neighborhood Council, and other groups.	<p>Good Point: prior to this report, DON had already been working with the District Coordinators to define their roles and responsibilities so that they are consistent across Districts. We also recognize that skills vary from one individual to another. In addition to working towards consistency in basic support across Districts, DON has been working to provide opportunities for District Coordinators to share their skill sets and assist each other across Districts.</p> <p>Presently, DON hosts web pages dedicated to the CNC and links to District Councils and neighborhood group emails. The DON mailing list is updated quarterly by the Neighborhood District Coordinators.</p>
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.	Good Point: DON has been working to update its retention schedule as of Q4 2008. The clarification of sponsor versus supporter role will allow DON to move forward in fully updating this document, especially as it relates to Councils.

Background

The Neighborhood District Councils were instituted in 1988 as a part of City of Seattle Resolution establishing, *A Neighborhood Planning and Assistance Program for the City of Seattle*. This Resolution established the tenets for the Neighborhood District Councils.

At the request of Councilmember Sally Clark, the Office of City Auditor reviewed the City's District Council system to determine whether the District Council system is fulfilling purposes specified in Seattle City Council Resolutions 27709 and 28115, and to identify recommendations for improving the system. On Monday, June 22nd 2009, the final report was given to Seattle City Council, the Executive Office and participants in the interview process.

Several staff from the Department of Neighborhoods were interviewed for the audit, along with District Council officers and community participants, elected City officials, and other City officials and employees that have a role in the district council system.

The Department of Neighborhoods' purpose is **'Connecting People, Communities and Government.'** With deep connections throughout Seattle's diverse communities, we play an important role in implementing the Mayor's Race and Social Justice Initiative and work to bring a voice to all communities, with focused sensitivity to those that are underserved and unrepresented. As defined by Resolution 28115, district councils are charged with seeking membership that *"reflects the geographic, racial, culture and economic characteristics of the district"*.