

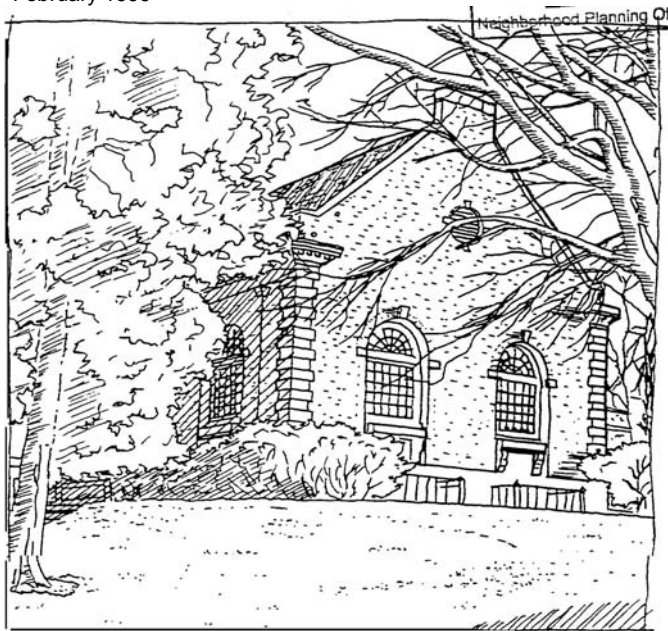


TIME TO REVISIT NEIGHBORHOOD PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

Background and Audit Objectives

The City of Seattle initiated an ambitious neighborhood planning effort in 1995 with City Council Resolution 29015, which called for a partnership between the City and its neighborhoods to improve the quality of life while accepting increased density. In 1999 the City Council adopted broad policies from each neighborhood plan into the Comprehensive Plan chapter on Neighborhood Plans. At the request of City Councilmember Sally Clark, the Office of City Auditor reviewed the City's implementation of neighborhood plans.

Columbia City • Hillman City • Genesee Neighborhood Plan cover February 1999



Summary of Significant Findings

The Neighborhood Planning and Implementation processes have been successful: The planning process has been praised by scholars as a model for citizen involvement in democratic processes and resulted in many tangible projects. Moreover, the City implemented many of the plans' recommendations. Ninety-three percent of the respondents to a citizen survey we conducted indicated that the neighborhood planning process produced positive impacts in their neighborhoods, particularly noted were large City capital investments (for example parks and libraries). In the early planning period, 1999-2002, there was heightened coordination across entities, for example: among City departments; between communities and the City; and among subsequent City planning efforts. Factors contributing to the success of the neighborhood planning process included:

- City employees dedicated to plan implementation;
- Leveraging City resources with external funding sources, non-profit initiatives, citizen volunteers and the business community;

- Aspects of neighborhood plans were adopted into City laws, regulations and/or procedures; and
- Neighborhood plan recommendations were incorporated into many subsequent City planning efforts.

After 2003, because of an economic downturn, the budget for the Department of Neighborhoods (DON) was reduced, as were the employee positions responsible for implementing neighborhood plans (see tables below). With the loss of focused staff positions, the energy in the neighborhoods galvanized by the planning process is dwindling or being redirected to other efforts.

The budget for implementing some recommendations continued to rise because of the voter-approved library bond and parks and community center levies.

City Staffing Dedicated to Neighborhood Planning				
City Staff	1999	2003	2004	2007
Sector Managers	6.0	3.0	0	0
Division Director	0.7	0.7	.01	.01
Database Assistant ¹	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
3 Geo-reps	3.0	0	0	0
Parks staff	0	Part	0	0
District Coordinator 1/5 time	0	2.6	2.6	2.6
Total NPI Staffing	10.7	7.3	3.61	3.61

Change in Selected City Budgets, 2000 and 2007 dollars in 000			
Department	2000 (In 2007 dollars)	2007	Percent change 2000 & 2007
Arts Commission	\$ 2,939	\$ 2,382	-19%
DON²	\$ 8,585	\$ 8,022	-7%
Mayor's Office	\$ 2,639	\$ 2,814	7%
Law	\$ 14,966	\$ 16,888	13%
Municipal Court	\$ 21,902	\$ 25,056	14%
Police	\$ 168,203	\$ 208,345	24%
Legislative	\$ 7,160	\$ 11,313	58%
Parks and Recreation ³	\$ 36,890	\$ 72,329	96%
Human Services	\$ 23,788	\$ 47,329	99%
Housing	\$ 574	\$ 2,928	410%

During this review, we identified the following issues regarding the planning process (1994-1999):

The City did not explain how the plans would be used. Some participants reported that they were deeply invested in the process before they understood how the City would be using the plans.

¹ This position has been vacant part of the time between 2004 and 2007.
² The DON budget for 2007 shown here does not include \$274,000 for the Office for Education, which was incorporated into DON in 2004.
³ The Parks Department figures include only General Subfund funding.

The variation in plan detail made implementing some plans difficult. A plan template would have facilitated responses to the plans by the City and others, while still allowing for variations that acknowledge the uniqueness of each neighborhood.

The decision-making process for including items in a plan was not clear. How conflict would be resolved and decisions made were not established up front.

Participants did not prioritize recommendations from the start. Because the City encouraged the planning groups to be as inclusive and broad as possible in their visioning for their communities it surprised some citizens later when they were asked to prioritize.

The City didn't establish how neighborhood planning fits with the City's numerous planning efforts, and what takes priority when recommendations conflict.

Items over which participants have actual control and those that require the action of other agencies were not distinguished. A number of recommendations were beyond the control of citizen groups or the City.

A process and resources for obtaining broad community input at regular intervals over the life of the plans was not developed.

Clear planning area boundaries were not established. Some adjacent neighborhoods included the same area in their planning boundaries, leading to conflict.

During the review, we identified the following 13 issues regarding the implementation phase. The first ten issues refer in particular to the later implementation phase (2003-2007) and the last three apply to the entire implementation phase:

Participants did not feel that their enormous time investment was fully appreciated and respected by the City.

The City did not provide regular reporting on plan accomplishments.

Plan implementation was slowed by the reduction in staffing dedicated to neighborhood plan implementation and decreases in the DON budget.

While initially the plans directed the departments, now the departments direct the plans, and the approach changed from a bottom-up to a top-down approach.

No one in the City "owns the plans." Some citizens feel that it is up to them to bring the plans to the City's attention.

With staff turnover and loss of committed staff, attention to and knowledge of plans is uneven within departments.

Citizens don't get routine updates on the status of neighborhood plan recommendations.

The quality and amount of information from the City regarding opportunities to implement plan recommendations varies by district.

Maintaining citizen involvement by all parts of the community is difficult. The effort to engage all citizens takes commitment of City time and resources that has not been consistently available since 2004.

The City's Capital Improvement Program Document creates cynicism. The City attributes capital projects to neighborhood plans if they "align with" plan goals. While this assessment may have merit, it creates cynicism among some citizens that the City might be stretching the facts to claim accomplishment of plan goals.

Where action by other government agencies is needed, City and citizen successes have been limited.

Transportation infrastructure has not kept pace with increased density.

Plans are starting to be dated. Some neighborhoods have seen a lot of development and change since plans were adopted; new planning would be useful.

In addition to addressing the above, as the City moves forward it will need to:

Be clear at the outset whether the update process will be City-directed or neighborhood-directed. City staff favor more City staff direction to improve the quality and consistency of plans while citizens desire meaningful input into the process.

Revisit the neighborhood recommendations from the plans adopted in 1999 to account for changes that have occurred over eight years and to identify additional recommendations that might be accomplished. Since 2000, the City has tracked fewer than half of the plan recommendations; the tracking system is outdated and inaccurate.

Plan for long-term management of plan recommendations needed. Assign City employees with sufficient stature and authority to marshal resources and maintain focus on plan recommendations.



I-5 Colonnade project was included in the 1998 Eastlake Neighborhood Plan. Photo courtesy of Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation

A copy of the Office of City Auditor's full report regarding Neighborhood Plan Implementation 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 Susan Cohen, Seattle City Auditor, at (206) 233-3801 or susan.cohen@seattle.gov.