

May 18, 2008

To the City Neighborhood Council:

We are writing to you today in response to your request for information concerning the membership policy of the Southeast District Council.

From Fall 2006 extending until October 2007, the Southeast District Council engaged in an exhaustive conversation related broadly to SEDC bylaws, but more specifically to representation in the district council. The discussion centered on the City Council's 1989 resolution regarding district councils, which states "Other representatives may be added at the discretion of the District Council. The District Council[s] will seek to reflect the geographic, racial, cultural and economic characteristics of the district." At issue was whether that mandate could be met by limiting the membership to "community councils and neighborhood business organizations" which were identified in the original 1987 resolution creating district councils, or whether membership should be extended to groups that don't fit neatly into those two categories.

As a district council, we recognize that groups gather and engage in different ways—some according to geography; some according to religion, culture, or ethnicity; some according to common interests, such as groups focused on sustainability or youth; while others engage with specific populations, such as renters, or families with children in Seattle Public Schools. Recognizing that 40 percent of Southeast Seattle is made up of immigrants, nearly 80 percent are people of color, and our district has both more children and less income per capita than the rest of Seattle, the district council ultimately decided that diversity and inclusion were principles not only supported by the district council, but indeed, critical to any meaningful representation of "community" in our area. The revised bylaws, passed in October 2007, reflect that awareness.

When discussed in the abstract, it is possible to lose sight of exactly which groups whose participation in the district council is at stake in this discussion. It may be helpful, therefore to list a few: the Eritrean Association, which assists the large number of Eritrean immigrants and refugees in Southeast; the Racial Disparity Project, which works to address racial disparity in the criminal justice system; the Tenant's Union of Washington State, which advocates for the large number of renters in the Rainier Valley; Powerful Schools, which promotes student success in Southeast; Horn of Africa, a group devoted to social and outreach services for East African immigrants; and the list goes on. When the dialog shifts from the abstract to the specific, it is clear that our district council is stronger and better representative of our community because of the participation of these groups.

The discussion that took place last year concerning the bylaws was trying for the district council and its member groups. We have emerged stronger, however, and participation continues to increase. We recently admitted five new member organizations, including Powerful Schools and Horn of Africa. While we recognize that the discussion can be difficult, we strongly urge the other district councils in the city to take it up. We look forward to learning how each of the other district councils responds to the challenge presented by the law requiring us to broaden our representation.

Thank you,

The Executive Committee of the Southeast District Council