



City Neighborhood Council

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DISTRICT COUNCILS:

- Ballard
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- Downtown
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- Greater Duwamish
- Lake Union
- Magnolia/Queen Anne
- North
- Northeast
- Northwest
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July 10, 2008

City Councilperson
City Hall, 600 4th Avenue, 2nd floor
P.O. Box 94749
Seattle, WA 98124-4749

RE: NEIGHBORHOOD PLAN UPDATE PROCESS - ASSESSMENT PHASE

The City Neighborhood Council comments here on the Executive’s June 19 revision of its proposal for updating neighborhood plans presented to the City Council’s Planning, Land Use, and Neighborhoods Committee June 11, 2008 and further details provided to us by City Councilmember Sally Clark at the June 23rd meeting of the CNC. We recognize that the process has been a long one, but this latest proposal still lacks specificity, and continues with a top-down approach that we do not support.

State of the Neighborhoods Report (Neighborhood Assessment)

The proposal envisions research activities to be conducted by City staff and a “State of the Neighborhoods” report that will precede and possibly curtail subsequent citizen-based planning activities. The Scope of Neighborhood Assessment lists 10 items, all of which revolve around accommodating growth in housing or jobs. These are not the only possible reasons to update neighborhood plans or the only topics for an assessment. Missing are indicators of citizens’ sense of well-being, security, or their vision for the future of their neighborhood – not merely the metrics of zoned capacity. Neighborhood culture, character and preserving individual neighborhood features have become dominant themes in discussions about Seattle’s future. The proposal should address how neighborhood-generated topics such as diversity, crime, the arts, pedestrian safety, youth, schools, and noise would be included.¹

¹We urge you to review the 3/12/08 memo from the UW Urban Design Studio on “Data Use in Neighborhood Plans” prepared as part of their report on Seattle Neighborhood Plan Update for a more comprehensive view of topical issues for Neighborhood Assessments. See <http://courses.washington.edu/studio67>

The assessments should clearly address the status of plan implementation and steps that will be taken to provide public services to meet concurrency requirements under the state Growth Management Act. The assessments should provide an updated listing of implementation steps taken and those remaining to be accomplished for each neighborhood plan. Citywide policies that differ from specific neighborhood plan policies should be highlighted in the assessments. Concurrency should be measured in terms meaningful to citizens such as congestion at major intersections, changes in transit service, and achievement of parks and open space goals.

Station Area Planning and Transit Oriented Development Focus

The proposal is top-down in its declaration of station areas as the de-facto planning priority. The proposal is not clear about distribution of efforts, such as how Bus Rapid Transit fits into station area planning efforts. It could be interpreted that planning for transit-oriented development around the light rail stations in Southeast Seattle will absorb most of the resources being requested. Station area planning is important, but there is no acknowledgment that the five station area planning areas fall partly or wholly within existing neighborhood plans (Rainier Beach, MLK at Holly, Columbia City, Beacon Hill, and North Rainier). The stakeholders in those neighborhood plans should be given the opportunity to update their plans in conjunction with station area planning.

Neighborhood Plan Advisory Group

The proposal is vague on the Neighborhood Planning Advisory Group (NPAG) and what its authority will be. We do not recommend one large group. We recommend having an Advisory Group for each of the six areas for the Assessment Phase – important since their role is to advise on outreach activities and the adequacy of neighborhood assessments. A citywide body will be far too dilute to do those jobs effectively.

City resolutions give the City Neighborhood Council and District Councils an advisory role regarding neighborhood planning. We agree with the proposal that each District Council have a representative on the NPA Group(s) that cover(s) their territory, but we oppose allowing the Executive and the City Council to make those appointments, which should be made by the district councils themselves, with input from their neighborhood plan stewardship groups. If there is only one citywide NPAG, we recommend that a member designated by the CNC be included as well. The current proposal calls for 7 at-large members. We request that the CNC have a voice in nominating and selecting these members.

Differences of opinion may arise within the NPAGs but the proposal does not explain how they will be documented and resolved, in particular between citizens and City staff, or how the NPAG's "advice" will be weighed by the City. When there is disagreement over a threshold matter, having an established "appeal" process to the City Council will strengthen citizens' sense of equality with Executive branch staff.

Neighborhood Outreach

The proposal describes two open house events in each of the six "areas" of the city. More outreach will be needed. There must be adequate time (at least one month) for citizens to review the draft Neighborhood Assessment document(s) before the "report back" open house. This interval will give volunteers time to comment on the data and conclusions and increase the accuracy of the final documents. We are concerned that the proposal for different treatment of "under-represented" communities would separate these groups from their fellow community members. If increasing their sense of involvement and building community are the goals, why not integrate these groups with their fellow community members? Provide plenty of translation and interpretation services at neighborhood-wide meetings and all participants will benefit from the experience. Educational and outreach activities should have the goal of increasing membership and the diversity of interests in unified neighborhood plan stewardship committees and events, not creating separate agency representation of subgroups.

Budget Proviso

The City Council's original intent was to find out about how the neighborhood plan update process would be conducted before releasing funds. Since the Executive has still not adequately outlined the process, we urge that the proviso be relaxed only for preparatory work. The Council should continue to withhold the remaining funds until the Executive explains how plans will be selected for updating, and how updates will proceed.

Conclusion

Assuming the concerns we have raised in this letter are addressed, the City Neighborhood Council supports moving ahead with the Assessment Phase. We urge the City Council not to fund the neighborhood plan update phase until the executive branch explains how it would work, and we reiterate our concerns that it be grassroots-driven and that neighborhood planning groups retain the option to engage their own consultants. We also urge, in accordance with the 2007 City audit, better focus on the implementation and integration of neighborhood plans into capital budgeting and departmental activities.

Thanks for your consideration. This letter was circulated for comment, discussed and authorized at the June 23, 2008 meeting of the City Neighborhood Council, and then circulated again before it was finalized.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris Leman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Chris Leman, Chair
City Neighborhood Council
cleman@oo.net

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Irene Wall". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Irene Wall, Chair
CNC Neighborhood Planning Committee
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cc: DPD, DON, district councils