



City Neighborhood Council

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August 10, 2007

Mayor Greg Nickels
P.O. Box 94749
Seattle, WA 98124-4749

NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING – REACTION TO EXECUTIVE PROPOSAL

Dear Mayor Nickels,

The City Neighborhood Council (CNC) and its Committee on Neighborhood Planning have worked closely with the executive branch and City Council for eighteen years to enable and continue a vigorous Seattle program for neighborhood planning. Seattle's innovations in neighborhood scale planning have generated considerable interest, both in the U.S. and abroad. We are quite sure others will be looking to us on how citizens' involvement and participation are maintained and how the neighborhoods' desires are still respected in the next process of updating our Neighborhood Plans.

This letter is our initial response to your concept proposal for updating neighborhood plans. We want to make sure that future planning efforts do not detract from the gains in citizen involvement which those plans fostered. With this in mind we offer the following observations and questions based on what we have heard to date of the process for "updating and standardizing" Seattle's 38 neighborhood plans.

First Impressions and Caveats

We need to be clear on the reasons a neighborhood plan document would be updated and what criteria would be used in making that decision. We are concerned that, in an effort to standardize or conform the plans to some as-yet-unknown benchmark, we risk the unique nature of each plan and the unique circumstances in each neighborhood that are reflected in its plan. Growth patterns and the adequacy of the city's response to growth are certainly motivators for opening some plans, but there is more to gain from the process of neighborhood planning than merely setting revised growth targets.

Ultimately the neighborhood planning process was about community building and citizen engagement, and those values should not be lost this time around.

We offer the following guidance as a response to the approach to neighborhood planning that the Department of Planning and Development and the Department of Neighborhoods presented at the initial Sounding Board meeting on July 23, 2007, and discussion at the July 24 meeting of CNC's neighborhood planning committee and the July 30 CNC meeting.

Comments on Organizing the Neighborhood Plan Update Process

- While we understand the desire to make the process more efficient for City staff, we don't think that efficiency should be the primary driver for the structure of the neighborhood plan update approach. We think that the concept of doing a data- and fact-driven analysis of which plans are not meeting or are exceeding housing and job targets, should provide a prioritized list leading to whatever "grouping" will be done. Please don't lock in a sector-based approach until that analysis is completed. It's possible that different plans should move forward in the same year (based on the priority assessment) even if they are not in the same geographic sector.
- The growth rates, demographics and city investments "background report" will provide useful information and statistics, but each Neighborhood Planning/Stewardship Group should be given the opportunity to review a draft report prior to its release so that the community and city staff can agree on what the data represents.
- The other "background report" on relevant policy documents is described as having citywide scope. This could miss the mark. What is needed is not a citywide compilation but a more refined analysis of how the various citywide plans and policies affect each neighborhood plan.
- We support the one-year duration within each "grouping" as long as the one-year period applies to the amount of time used in the public outreach and validation process. The data collection and planning/staging phase should start prior to the one-year window so that all data is ready to go at the very beginning.

Aspects of the Proposed Process that Need Improvement

- City-funded contracting with Neighborhood Planning Groups to conduct planning activities worked well and should be continued. Of course, neighborhoods that prefer to have City staff plan for them should be allowed to do so.
- The effort to limit what topics may be addressed is counter to the principle that the Neighborhood Planning/Stewardship Groups are to address what is important to their community. If a Neighborhood Planning/Stewardship Group believes that several of the topics now labeled as "optional" are critical to their ability to encourage and sustain growth, the community should be able to include those.

- We are not completely clear on what is intended by “standardization” and, insofar as it has been explained to us, we disagree with that intention. Neighborhood Planning/Stewardship Groups who are happy with their plan (if the plan is on track relative to the growth targets) should not be required to reopen their plans just to achieve a level of standardization. We need clarity on the reasons to standardize the plans. It is our understanding that the current plans were prepared in compliance with the Growth Management Act even if they are not all formatted identically.
- We understand from the July 23 Sounding Board meeting that City staff would do the actual writing/editing of the final wording of the redone neighborhood plans to be submitted for adoption. An important lesson learned from the initial planning was that the community must “own” the plans, down to the final wording. When staff writes the plans, there is a potential for misunderstanding or miscommunication between the community and the author/editor.
- It appears that the neighborhood plans that would be placed first in line for updating will be those that are not meeting their growth or job targets. We suggest the more balanced approach of placing first in line those plans that have either not met, or have exceeded, their growth and job targets. An excess of new housing units or jobs over the planning targets raises the question of whether infrastructure and amenities are keeping up with the greater demand.
- A lesson learned from the first neighborhood plan process was the importance of having stakeholders receive consistent information and remain involved from the beginning if possible. The next outreach program must provide ways for all participants in a planning area to attend the same meetings or to have access to minutes or other electronic reporting.
- At the July 23 Sounding Board meeting, DPD and DON proposed that the update process could be accomplished with only two or three public meetings. This does not seem realistic, as planning must be in-depth to be meaningful. If the intent is two or three public meetings with multiple smaller, stakeholder focused meetings in between, then timely, objective and easily accessed documentation of all meetings is even more essential to allow for plan validation.
- This update process should not entirely replace the procedure created by City Council Resolution 30238. There must be a way to amend a plan without waiting for its turn in the cycle, which could be as long as six years under the executive branch proposal. Alternately, if a plan can only be updated on the sector cycle, then citywide policy changes such as Comprehensive Plan Amendments should not take effect until a neighborhood plan is updated and any changes have been validated at that time. Special interest groups should not be allowed to amend the neighborhood plans through any “backdoor” method.

Requests for Clarification about the Executive Proposal

- We need to know if a Neighborhood Planning/Stewardship Group will be able to say that their plan is OK and not in need of updating or any type of formatting changes.
- We need definition on what the City Council's role would be during the process of the updating and the community outreach period, and what the Council approval process will be.
- We need more information about the validation step of the process.
- We need to understand how any disagreements between the Neighborhood Planning/Stewardship Group and City staff would be handled and resolved. Will there be a mediation/adjudication process? We need to know if the Neighborhood Planning/Stewardship Group will hold line item veto power if City staff are allowed to do the final writing and editing.
- How will conflicts be handled between stakeholder groups within neighborhood planning areas, or between Neighborhood Planning/Stewardship Groups of adjacent planning areas?
- We are concerned about the possibility of City "agendas" getting in the way of a community process. If a neighborhood is not in agreement with a particular City policy, that neighborhood should be able to include its perspective in the plan, for the record. What will the City do to ensure an open process in that regard?
- We do not have much detail on the funding and staffing request that will be submitted in support of this effort. We believe that neighborhood-level planning is very important and should be funded accordingly. We understand the desire of the City to find existing resources in each department that can support this effort, but several dedicated positions are probably needed as well. In particular, DON should be seeking funds for significant outreach efforts.
- We need better definition on the role of the Sector Advisory Groups.
- We need better definition on how both the Neighborhood Planning Groups and the Sector Advisory Groups are formed. Are they expected to be volunteers? Would they be appointed by the neighborhood, City staff, City Council? What will each group be empowered to do? How will the City facilitate consensus and decisions within a Neighborhood Planning Group? How would the new process address current community/stewardship groups that are already in place and working to implement their plans? An organization or flow chart of the decision making process will be helpful.
- How will neighborhoods without a plan be addressed? Ways must be found to help those neighborhoods if they wish to plan.

In the years since their approval by the Mayor and City Council, the major concerns about neighborhood plans have focused not on any substantive deficiencies, but on their implementation or lack thereof. The Mayor and City Council should set clear goals for the next phase of neighborhood planning with respect to how the projects in the current Adoption and Approval Matrixes will be funded. This clarity will be particularly needed in areas where growth has already outpaced needed

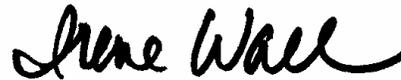
transportation and utility improvements, provision of open space and preservation of neighborhood character.

The above letter was discussed and authorized at the July 30, 2007 meeting of the City Neighborhood Council.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Chris Leman in black ink.

Chris Leman, Chair
City Neighborhood Council
Planning

Handwritten signature of Irene Wall in black ink.

Irene Wall, Chair
CNC Committee on Neighborhood

cc: District Councils
Neighborhood Planning and Stewardship Groups
City Councilmembers
Deputy Mayor Tim Ceis
Department of Neighborhoods Director Stella Chao
Department of Planning and Development Director Diane Sugimura