



City Neighborhood Council

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DISTRICT COUNCILS:

- Ballard
- Central
- Delridge Neighborhoods
- Downtown
- East
- Greater Duwamish
- Lake Union
- Magnolia/Queen Anne
- North
- Northeast
- Northwest
- Southeast
- Southwest

October 26, 2011

Seattle City Council
P. O. Box 34025
Seattle, WA 98124-4025

CNC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 2012 BUDGET

Dear City Councilmember:

City legislation assigns an important role in the budget process to the City Neighborhood Council and the thirteen District Councils that comprise it. CNC sent budget recommendations to you July 13 (seattle.gov/neighborhoodcouncil). In consultation with the District Councils, CNC has reviewed the Mayor's proposed budget and has the following additional comments.

Neighborhood District Coordinators. CNC is not reconciled to last year's disproportionate cut in authorized NDC positions from 13 to 10, and strongly opposes the Mayor's proposal this year to further reduce this number to 9. We appreciate that the City Council did not allow the number of NDC positions to drop below 10 when the Mayor last year proposed to reduce it to 7. We urge the Council to resist further cuts in the number of NDCs authorized, and to look into ways of restoring their number to the original 13.

Neighborhood District Coordinators involve residents and businesses directly with their government. They build citizen engagement, community self-help and stewardship. They provide the Executive and Council with strategic advice on responding to community concerns, and they bring grassroots ideas into the bureaucracy. They are the City's best means of outreach. Please do not cut these essential positions further.

Contracting of City outreach and involvement. CNC believes that City departments are overusing the private contracting of outreach and involvement efforts. Lacking the experience of City staff, outside contractors in effect charge the City in part for informing themselves about contacts already known to the City employees who often find themselves spending valuable City paid time to provide them to the contractors. And when the contracts end, the City's investment is lost, leaving no institutional memory such as remains when outreach efforts are undertaken by City employees.

When departments feel that outreach cannot be done by their own staff, before considering private contractors they should be encouraged to turn to Department of Neighborhoods staff. Such an arrangement is the Neighborhood District Coordinator Outreach and Engagement Pilot Project laid out in DON's September response to Statement of Legislative Intent #116-1-A-1. CNC is puzzled, however, that the pilot project has the NDCs providing these outreach services free to the other departments. CNC suggests that the other departments reimburse DON for services by NDCs that the departments would otherwise be paying private contractors to do.

Public Outreach Liaisons. For Seattleites who don't understand English, and where City staff are not available who speak or write their language, there is a place for the use of private contractors who are fluent in that other language. However, CNC is concerned that the DON's September response to Statement of Legislative Intent 116-1-A-1 states that the Executive plans to expand the use of the POL model to seniors, renters, and youth. In recent years, the City has steadily reduced its outreach efforts to the general public (including to seniors, renters, and youth, most of whom are fluent in English, and benefit as much as others from general outreach efforts). If new outreach funds are available, we suggest that they first go into restoring general outreach efforts and to restoring NDC positions that were eliminated last year--or at least keeping the one NDC position that is further proposed for elimination in the Mayor's budget. City staff (especially the NDCs) should continue or increase their specific outreach to seniors, renters, and youth rather than have the City pay private contractors for outreach to these groups.

The design of the Public Outreach Liaison program raises questions of cost-effectiveness and responsibility. City funds go to a non-profit organization which (after keeping a percentage for itself) contracts with the POLs, thereby reducing the funds available for outreach and reducing the Public Outreach Liaisons' accountability to City goals and ethical standards. A better model is for City departments to determine first if City staff or volunteers are already available for these tasks. If the department still finds need for a Public Outreach Liaison, it should contract with that person directly rather than through a non-profit intermediary.

Department of Finance and Administrative Services. The budget adopted last year transferred the Customer Service Bureau from the Department of Neighborhoods to the Department of Finance and Administrative Services (FAS). The proposed budget would also transfer the Neighborhood Service Centers (NSCs) from DON to FAS. These functions have been in DON since its founding. For the budget savings achieved, CNC supports their transfer to FAS, but with two provisos: (1) that CNC continues its advisory relationship regarding the Customer Service Bureau and the Neighborhood Service Centers; and (2) that the ombudsman function of CSB and the NSCs be strengthened. Regarding both of these concerns, CNC appreciates reassurances received at its Oct. 24 meeting from FAS Director Fred Podesta. Seattle needs checks and balances such as are provided in King County by its Ombudsman and Office of Citizen Complaints, and CNC urges that the Customer Service Bureau and the Neighborhood Service Centers be managed more toward that end. The significant oversight that FAS has over other departments gives it leverage to ensure prompt addressing of public requests and complaints processed by the Customer Service Bureau. And like CSB, the Neighborhood Service Centers, especially through their resident DON neighborhood district coordinators, must place a high priority on ensuring that an inquiring member of the public not only connects with the relevant department, but that the response is the best that it can be.

Civic engagement fairs. We reiterate our July 13 letter's urging that existing funds in the departments and in the offices of the Mayor and City Council enable each year in different parts of the city six or more civic engagement fairs. A possible model is the "gathering of neighborhoods"

that the Delridge and Southwest District Councils have jointly sponsored yearly. These events bring members of the public, businesses, community groups, and public agencies and elected officials together under one roof to publicize and leverage existing government resources by reaching and empowering volunteers, many formerly unfamiliar with the available governmental and community resources. Significant resources from the Department of Neighborhoods and other departments, as well as the Mayor's office are currently going into the Mayor's Town Hall Meetings, whose attendance would be greater with the changes suggested here. The Mayor's Town Hall Meetings, in addition to plenary sessions, also have a fair-like format, with booths for face-to-face contact. We suggest that more could be done if these same resources went into civic engagement fairs co-sponsored jointly (if they wish) by one or more district councils, with the Mayor's Town Hall Meeting a feature, and with one or two City Councilmembers (on a rotating basis) also included. We request that the Mayor and Council, working with CNC, design these civic engagement fairs to enhance the impact of the substantial resources already going into the Mayor's Town Hall Meetings.

Webcast of board and commission meetings. A low-cost initiative recommended in our July 13 letter even amidst budget cuts is the webcast of meetings of its boards and commissions, almost none of which are now recorded or made available on the City web site or through the Seattle Channel. Open government and civic engagement would benefit from this inexpensive technology that can be managed by board members themselves or by City staff who are already in attendance.

Public safety. The crime prevention coordinators advise and organize citizens and businesses to help police officers deter and catch perpetrators. CNC appreciates that the Mayor's proposed budget would reauthorize four of the current seven crime prevention coordinator positions, but urges the Council to reauthorize seven positions and ensure that City funds are available for them, as the Mayor's budget uses City funds for only one, with three others paid for with uncertain federal funds. If existing agency budget categories cannot fully fund seven crime prevention coordinators, CNC urges exploration of their relocation to alternative budgets and agencies as suggested in our July 13 letter.

Parks and Seattle Center. The City must fully maintain its park and Seattle Center structures, roads, paths, gardens, and ecosystems as an obligation to current taxpayers and future generations. Recent years' cuts in painting, carpentry, metal work, plumbing, electrical repair, pruning, watering, cleaning and trash pickup place our parks and Seattle Center in unprecedented jeopardy, inviting serious damage that costs more to fix in the long run. The Mayor's proposed budget begins to reverse past neglect, but is only a start.

Community centers. These centers are a vital component for neighborhoods and important for community-building. CNC urges that the Mayor and Council recognize the harm to public health and welfare, especially among youth, from limited operating hours. The proposed budget's reallocation of hours uses criteria that seem to disadvantage smaller centers and those without gyms. The reallocation of hours should be regarded only as a temporary measure until full hours can be restored to all community centers.

Seattle Department of Transportation. Street maintenance is lagging, especially for the non-arterials (most neighborhood, business, and industrial streets) which are 60 percent of Seattle's lane mileage and 40 percent of the maintenance backlog. Neglect today allows deterioration that becomes more costly to repair with every passing year. The proposed budget allows further growth in the backlog of repairs needed on non-arterial streets, which receive few funds from the transportation levy. For

these streets the proposed budget adds no funds, and eliminates the entire chip-seal preventive maintenance program. We oppose this \$565,000 cut, as well as the \$208,076 reduction in repair of stairways, often the only route along certain street rights of way. Also the City should be proactive in reducing the extreme road and bridge damage from vehicles that exceed weight limits (either illegally or because, as with buses and solid waste pickup vehicles, laws exempt them from these limits). If it is not, please budget for more maintenance spending as a tradeoff for not taking more cost-effective measures to avert this damage.

Seattle Public Utilities. CNC opposes the following proposals: \$50,000 reduction in rat control; \$100,000 reduction in collection of litter from receptacles in parks and public spaces; \$92,000 reduction in authorized funds for graffiti removal; and \$130,000 reduction in the Seattle reLeaf reforestation program.

Office of Economic Development and Office of Housing. CNC is concerned that proposed merger of OED and OH does not save enough in City funds to justify weakening the distinct purposes of these important offices.

Public-Private Partnerships. Recent controversies over private uses of City land and facilities have not been well served by different agencies' piecemeal approach and a lack of oversight. In the current budget climate, new public-private partnerships are likely to be proposed, and it is more important than ever that the public receive earlier and more complete information about such proposals, and that independent experts vet the proposals to ensure that they are consistent with the public interest. The Public-Private Partnership Panel that the City Council authorized in the 1990s was well-designed to provide this oversight. It is our understanding that the authority for this panel still stands, and that with some funding, it can again be convened, and should be.

Tax Expenditures. Just as at the federal and state levels, Seattle foregoes millions of dollars in potential revenue by waiving or reducing taxes for favored businesses. An example is the unusually low rate of Business and Occupation Tax that was created solely for Frank Russell Investments. Another is the Multifamily Tax Exemption, substantially reducing property taxes in exchange for claimed reductions in rent that may not be worth the City expense. With revenues so tight at present, CNC suggests that these and other tax expenditures be reviewed and, if the public interest is not well-served, that they be repealed or substantially reduced.

Thanks for your consideration of the above recommendations. A draft of this letter was distributed to the District Councils for comment and revision, and was discussed, revised, and unanimously approved at the October 24 CNC meeting.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chas Redmond". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Chas Redmond, Chair
City Neighborhood Council

cc: Mayor, City Budget Office, Department of Neighborhoods, District Councils