LAKE UNION DISTRICT COUNCIL
c/o Fremont Neighborhood Service Center
908 North 34th Street
Seattle, WA 98103

September 22, 2010

City Neighborhood Council
c/o Department of Neighborhoods
700 Fifth Avenue, P.O. Box 34025
Seattle, WA 98124-4729

RE: STRENGTHENING THE DISTRICT COUNCILS AND CNC

To the City Neighborhood Council:

The Lake Union District Council urges a significant shortening and balancing of the "2010-2012 District Councils/DON Work Plan for Audit Response." The current (June 9, 2010) revision should be clearly marked as a draft. It has not been endorsed by the City Neighborhood Council or by any district council, nor should it be until it is revised to more closely match the draft that emerged in May from three meetings of a working group of district council representatives and Department of Neighborhoods (DON) staff. The changes made by DON leadership in producing the June 3 draft would impose an unsustainably heavy workload for districts and staff, distracting from their normal responsibilities. And it would leave the district councils and CNC out of decisions that could jeopardize their effectiveness as City advisory bodies.

The June 22, 2009 Office of City Auditor report, "Seattle District Council System Needs Renewal," had some valuable aspects, but did not provide historical and legal perspective, nor did it mention, or seek ways to protect, the most fundamental strength of the district councils and CNC—that they are the only City advisory boards or commissions whose members are selected entirely at the grass roots, rather than being appointed by the Mayor, City Council, or City agencies.

Given the limitations of the June 2009 audit, we suggest that the work plan focus only partly on the audit's specifics, and primarily on ways to strengthen the district councils, with our key recommendations as follows: (1) restore DON administrative support to the levels the districts previously had; (2) restore the districts' decision-making role in such programs as the Neighborhood Matching Fund and the Neighborhood Street Fund; and (3) restore DON reliance on CNC in the mediation and arbitration of conflicts within and between district councils, a role that worked well in the 1990s and whose takeover by DON has not worked well in recent years.

A particular problem with June 3 draft is its proposal that discussions and decisions about any changes in the district councils be in meetings of City staff with the chairs of the district councils--meetings which apparently would be closed to the public. This decision-making

model will not produce the best decisions, and will weaken the district councils and CNC, the forum by which the districts jointly meet and act. Unlike with the proposed meetings, CNC's by-laws require that all meetings be open the public, and ensure many other procedural protections. Because of scheduling conflicts, meetings that are restricted to district chairs will always lack some districts. According to City legislation (Resolution 28115), CNC membership already consists of district chairs, "except where a district has designated someone else to represent it." CNC meetings already have substantial participation by district chairs, but there could be a special effort to achieve maximum district chair participation once a year. It would be ironic if the future of the district councils were determined in a separate, closed, and non-inclusive process.

In addition to the above general suggestions for revising the June 9, 2010 draft of the "2010-2012 District Councils/DON Work Plan for Audit Response" we suggest the following specifics (page numbers are for the table version):

p. 1 The proposal for a "routine meeting of District Chairs and CNC Chair with DON and possible participation by Executive and CM O'Brien's office" should be replaced by "meetings of the City Neighborhood Council with DON and possible participation by Executive and CM O'Brien's office." (See explanation above.)

pp. 2,3 Regarding the proposed survey tool, add that it "will be circulated in draft to district councils and CNC for their comments, revision, and final approval."

p. 2,3 Regarding the proposed focus groups, add that "draft reports from the focus groups will be circulated early to the district councils and CNC for their consideration and comment."

pp. 1,4 References to "City Objectives" should be changed to refer to "recommendations by the DON director."

p. 4 The proposed "debrief session with District Council chair, CNC chair, DON, Executive, and City Council" should be replaced by a "meeting with the City Neighborhood Council, DON, Executive, and City Council." (See explanation above.)

p. 4 The reference to a "forum to discuss legislation options," should be revised to make it clear that the forum will be held only if any significant proposals for legislative change have emerged.

p. 5 The proposal to "finalize guidelines and revisit annually through established decision making mechanism" is followed, in a parenthesis, by: "(District Council chairs meeting)." The parenthesis should be revised to the following: "(City Neighborhood Council meeting in which, at least once a year, a special effort has been made to encourage participation by every district council chair)." (See explanation above.)

p. 5 The reference to outreach and public engagement includes the goal that "participation by people of color increases." It should be revised to state the goal as "Increase overall participation, including by people of color."

p. 7 Revise the reference to "Baseline Recommendations" as follows: "District Councils and the CNC will be fully involved in development of baseline recommendations, which will be presented to the Mayor and City Council only as approved by the City Neighborhood Council."

p. 9 The references to an "annual District Council Chair" [sic] and to an "Annual District Chairs meeting" should be revised to refer the following: "a City Neighborhood Council meeting in which, at least once a year, a special effort has been made to encourage participation by every district council chair."

p. 10 A desired outcome is listed as "Increase participation from under-represented populations." This desired outcome should be revised as follows: "Increase overall participation, including from under-represented populations."

p. 12 List a series of milestones for collaborative development of a district councils' "toolbox" or "toolkit."

p. 12 Regarding conflict resolution, add: "Restore City reliance on CNC for mediation and arbitration regarding disputes within and between district councils." (See explanation above.)

Draft document on "CNC's Prioritized Audit Recommendations." We also offer the following suggestions for the draft "CNC's Prioritized Audit Recommendations" that was sent out yesterday with the Sept. 27 CNC agenda, and also apparently sent to the City Council in early September. This document should be marked as a draft, as it was not circulated for prior comment or action to the district councils or to the CNC, none of which, to our knowledge, have endorsed it. It should state that the June 9 "2010-2012 District Councils/DON Work Plan for Audit Response" that it refers to is also a draft. And we suggest that this document give highest priority to strengthening district councils by such City actions as the following : (1) restore the advisory role that has been partially taken away from the districts in the Neighborhood Matching Fund, the Neighborhood Street Fund, and other opportunities for empowerment; (2) provide better outreach to the public about district council meetings and processes; and (3) establish and regularly update a web site for every district that wants one.

The above letter was discussed and authorized at the September 13, 2010 meeting of the Lake Union District Council.

Sincerely,

Suzie Burke

Suzie Burke, Chair