

# **CITIZEN PARTICIPATION EVALUATION**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
March, 2000**

Seattle Planning Commission

# **Citizen Participation Evaluation Executive Summary**

## ***Project Description and Background***

This report documents an evaluation of citizen participation by the Seattle Planning Commission, carried out in collaboration with the City Council, the Strategic Planning Office and the Department of Neighborhoods. It was initiated to address issues associated with ongoing stewardship of neighborhood plans and the relationship of this stewardship with other established City initiated and sponsored, geographically-based citizen participation.

“The overall purpose of this evaluation project is to provide guidance to the City (Council and Executive) on effective geographically based citizen participation models and techniques that should be supported by the City.” (Scope of Work)

While citizen participation occurs in many forms within our community, the scope of the evaluation has focused on citizen participation that is formally initiated and supported by the City and that involves specific roles and responsibilities for citizens and City departments and staff.

## ***The Project Scope and Process***

Planning Commission staff collected and analyzed data including citizen surveys, on City-supported geographically based citizen participation programs. Commission staff also collected information through interviews and materials from other American cities on best practices and lessons learned from citizen participation.

Citizens were involved throughout this evaluation project in several ways. An independent planning consultant hired by the Planning Commission conducted focus groups and in-depth interviews with City staff and citizen stakeholders. The consultant also administered and evaluated written and phone surveys of citizens and prepared a findings report (based on a combined total of 200+ respondents). Three stakeholder Roundtables, jointly sponsored with City Council, were held at key points in the evaluation to gather input and share information with citizens involved in citizen participation (July 7, August 18, and November 8, 1999; with 20 – 30 citizens attending each event).

Progress reports by Commission staff and the consultant were made to the City Council’s Neighborhood, Growth Management and Civic Engagement Committee, the Executive’s Community Development Cluster, the Planning Commission, and the City Neighborhood Council on progress of the evaluation.

The Planning Commission’s Final Report and Recommendations has been submitted to the City Council for action. They will determine what action to take, and if legislation is involved, will hold a joint public hearing with the Commission to get public response/input to proposed legislation prior to Council action.

## ***Key Findings and Conclusions***

The following findings and conclusions are based on analysis of the survey research conducted by the consultant and Commission staff on City supported citizen participation groups.

### ***General Findings***

Opportunities for citizen participation in a variety of areas have expanded over the past ten years in the City of Seattle. An increasing number of citizens are engaged in City-initiated participation as well as in grass roots organizations.

Increased attention to involving citizens in the City's work has yielded good results. Survey results show that people involved in the City's citizen participation processes generally find their experience is meaningful and believe they have been able to make a difference and accomplish changes in their community. These findings confirm that citizen participation opportunities are more accessible than in the past.

In particular, the recently completed Neighborhood Planning Project has trained thousands of citizens and many City staff to work together to accomplish important goals and priorities for managing growth and maintaining our quality of life.

There are still concerns about coordination and responsiveness by the City. However, citizens surveyed made good suggestions for getting people involved, including opportunities to work on small, short-term projects or events; having an impact on issues earlier in the process; having a well-defined and easy-to-understand process for meeting City guidelines and specifications and more involvement of City officials in the neighborhood.

### ***Key Elements of Citizen Participation***

Results from the evaluation's focus on several aspects of citizen participation, including accountability, representation, outreach, communication and group dynamics are summarized below.

#### ***Accountability and Representation***

Guidelines or expectations regarding accountability and representation vary among City-supported citizen participation programs and do not always appear to be correlated with the group's responsibilities (e.g. increased accountability tied to increased responsibilities).

Most groups would like to be more representative of the interests and stakeholders in their communities, but often have difficulty maintaining representation and accountability over time. With the exception of a few groups (e.g. the Neighborhood Planning groups), there are no clear incentives or dedicated resources to meet expectations regarding representation or accountability. Nor are there any consequences for not meeting such expectations.

Expectations about accountability vary, but most people believe that their group is or tries to be accountable to its members. And most groups expressed a desire to be more representative, although fewer than half of the survey respondents felt that their group currently is representative of the majority opinion in their community.

The Neighborhood Planning Program placed the most significant requirements on neighborhood planning groups regarding accountability and representation, including demonstrated effort and results in outreach, communication and validation.

All groups indicated that they have difficulty getting to constituents of color, those who are renters, have low-incomes, and are disabled or from different ethnic groups (often recent immigrants). This was reinforced by the profile of survey respondents who were mostly white, middle class and homeowners, consistent with anecdotal observations of people active in City related participation efforts. Other cities studied reflect similar challenges to obtaining broad representation.

### ***Outreach and Communication***

Outreach efforts are limited in most groups and tend to be focus on people who can attend meetings and events. In particular, limited resources and difficulties in carrying out non-traditional outreach (translators and translated materials, etc.) result in little outreach to non-English speaking people.

Neighborhood Planning groups have done the most extensive job of outreach to diverse groups in the community using City resources (funds and Outreach Toolbox) allocated to accomplishing this goal.

District Councils were established in part to provide improved communication between the City and neighborhood organizations. This has worked in some areas, but since participation varies among District Councils the effectiveness overall varies.

Both City supported and grass roots citizen groups view communication as important although they rely on few tools to actually communicate with constituent groups. For example most people surveyed get information about upcoming events and issues affecting their neighborhood from community and city newspapers and from City newsletters.

Survey respondents identified communications *between* community organizations and within the neighborhood as important to making citizen participation more effective and meaningful.

### ***Group Dynamics***

A sense of meaningfulness is critical to people's attitudes and willingness to participate. 80% of survey respondents believe the involvement of their group had a meaningful impact on their neighborhood or the community as a whole. Over 70% percent plan to stay involved in local government citizen participation efforts.

People draw meaning from their involvement for a variety of reasons, chief of which are seeing results and making a difference; using it as a way for people to work together for the community and for meeting other people; and being listened to by City/departments

How a group operates has an important impact on both the effectiveness of the group and individual members' likelihood of continued participation. Survey respondents identified the need for more effective leadership to make participation worthwhile for people.

### ***City Responsibilities and Defining Citizens' Roles***

City support engenders a feeling of increased effectiveness for citizen participation groups. Citizens in City-supported participation programs generally believe they are more effective in influencing the outcome of issues than those involved in non-supported groups.

Citizens emphasize the importance of the City's role in building and maintaining a sense of trust between citizens and local government. Participants in City-supported groups find the City fairly responsive and are evenly divided in whether adequate resources are provided for them to accomplish their work.

Survey respondents suggested that citizen participation could be improved by better communication (City listening; communication to and within the neighborhood), seeing clear results from the City for their efforts, and improved internal City coordination and efficiency of City processes.

Citizens and City staff believe City support gives citizen participation groups more capacity to reach out to many people, to plan and build support for projects and to engage people in hands-on activities. Some citizens, however, fault the City for inefficiencies, poor communication and coordination, and sometimes perceive resistance or unwillingness to respond to citizen initiatives.

## **Recommendations**

### **Objective A**

***Clearly establish and carry out the City's Expectations for City Initiated and Supported Groups, ensuring that citizen groups receive fair and consistent treatment***

- A1. Establish and implement clear guidelines for all City initiated and supported citizen participation groups and processes. (roles, responsibilities, and resources/support)
- A2. Institute oversight and monitoring processes for all City initiated and supported groups to assure that guidelines are met, including specific steps to be taken when such guidelines are not being met.
- A3. Ensure that roles are tied to expectations and support among City initiated and supported citizen participation groups. Assure consistency across departments in their efforts.

### **Objective B**

***Establish Clear Expectations and Capacity to Support City Initiated Citizen Advisory Groups and Processes.***

- B1. Define clear roles and responsibilities for City officials and staff in City supported citizen participation efforts.
- B2. Ensure that City departments, as part of their performance and accountability measures, include specific goals, actions and results for citizen participation.
- B3. Establish a Citywide goal that all staff that work with citizens demonstrate appropriate skills and competency in working effectively with citizens and in carrying out citizen participation processes. Implement through staff training.
- B4. Increase efficiencies of City initiated citizen participation processes where appropriate. Support DON's initiative to consolidate citizen participation in the Cumulative Reserve Fund (CRF) and Major Maintenance (MM) Fund allocation processes.
- B4a. Explore new models for carrying out City sponsored citizen participation, including organizing it along geographic lines rather than departmentally. Keep focus on making citizen participation accessible and effective for citizens in participation in local government processes.
- B5. Adopt a City of Seattle Commitment to Citizen Involvement

### **Objective C**

***Provide City Resources for City Supported Citizen Participation bodies and processes to ensure that Expectations Placed on Both Citizens and staff can be met.***

- C1. Provide adequate resources to each City-supported citizen participation process to ensure it will meet the expectations placed on both citizens and City staff.
- C2. Fully fund the DON Leadership Program as an ongoing program. Include a focus on building leadership capacity among citizens in or considering leadership roles and members of under represented groups.
- C3. Institute a biennial Community Congress as an opportunity and regular mechanism for sharing of accomplishments and challenges and for addressing issues encountered in citizen/City working relationships.

### **Objective D**

**Provide Ongoing City Support for Neighborhood Planning Stewardship Efforts, ensuring that they have capacity necessary to carry out their roles in implementing neighborhood plans.**

- D1. Complete development and implement clear guidelines for Neighborhood Planning Stewardship that clearly defines roles and responsibilities for stewardship groups/efforts and for the City
- D2. Allocate adequate resources to DON to support Neighborhood Planning Stewardship efforts in carrying out their stewardship roles and responsibilities (e.g. administrative needs, technical assistance in capacity building and outreach).
- D3. Establish a Neighborhood Planning Stewardship Advisory Group to provide ongoing advice to the City regarding neighborhood plan implementation.
- D4. Ensure that Neighborhood Matching Fund continues to be a significant funding source for Neighborhood Plan implementation projects.

**Objective E**

**Clarify and Improve District Council/CNC and Neighborhood Planning Stewardship Roles and Relationships.**

- E1. Recognize and confirm the separate and complementary roles of Neighborhood Plan Stewardship efforts/groups and District Councils.
  - C Validate the Neighborhood Planning Stewardship roles to implement neighborhood plans for designated neighborhood planning areas, maintaining an inclusive process.
  - C Validate the District Councils' role as a forum for communicating among neighborhood organizations and with the City and providing input to specific funding programs
- E2. Develop specific goals for outreach and representation and institute clear accountability measures for District Councils and City Neighborhood Council related to specific functions advisory/decision-making functions. Include a process for monitoring and assuring these goals are met.
- E3. Encourage District Councils and Neighborhood Plan Stewardship groups to participate in each other's organizations. At a minimum they should be expected to appoint a representative to one another's organizations.
- E4. Use the Proposed Neighborhood Planning Stewardship Advisory Committee to host periodic forums for the City Neighborhood Council and Neighborhood Planning Stewardship groups/efforts to meet with City officials in topics of mutual interest.