



October, 2019

Concordia Neighborhood Association: Neighborhood System Structural Reform

Dear Members of the Portland City Council,

The Concordia Neighborhood Association recommends that the City of Portland enact neighborhood system reform by making neighborhood association boards electable at the ballot box, in order to increase and diversify participation in these critical place-based organizations. For nearly 50 years, neighborhood associations have served as the foundation for activism to enhance and preserve our city's livability. While the neighborhood association system has much room for improvement, in terms of the diversity of people who participate, it would be a mistake to seek to disband or de-fund neighborhood associations, neighborhood coalitions, or related community or financial relationships. We believe that, instead, the focused reform of making boards electable by Multnomah County paper ballot must be considered alongside other efforts to diversify and broaden citizen participation in the community and civic life of our city.

We at the Concordia Neighborhood Association (CNA) are aware of the efforts of the Committee 3.96 to develop replacement language for this section of the City Code, in preparation for the eventual removal of this section of the City's code regarding the Office of Community & Civic Life and its relationship to the neighborhood association system of the City of Portland, and other civic organizations.

We at CNA understand that neighborhood associations in Portland, in general, tend to represent white, middle and upper class homeowners, and the opinions and preferences of this group as a whole. We are sympathetic to the current attempts to reform this system, and to broaden the City's engagement efforts to include a greater diversity of opinions sought from different cultural, religious, social, and community groups. Indeed, we are currently working to expand the diversity of our own organization, and have many ideas as to how the City and other local government partners could assist us with these efforts. We agree with and are in full support of City goals to increase diversity and representation, but we don't agree that crippling neighborhood associations in the process will lead to the most equitable outcomes.

We caution that removing City financial support from the neighborhood association and coalition system will produce very predictable outcomes: the wealthier neighborhood associations, which tend to be independent state-chartered 501(c)3s (like Concordia NA), will continue as

they always have, as they will have no trouble fundraising to pay for the additional insurance and other costs that may result. It is the less-well-off neighborhoods that would most likely suffer the most, resulting in even greater inequality than we see today.

We feel that it is important to mention the many positive benefits that our Neighborhood Association (NA) offers to our community, as an example of how our and other NAs deliver month-in, month-out street-by-street community building in our beloved Rose City.

Our neighbors remind us that some of the current and recent accomplishments and services provided by the Neighborhood Association system include:

- **Friends of Trees:** This organization would not have succeeded without the neighborhood system. Its first director came to neighborhood associations to find an existing network of people willing to volunteer to help make their neighborhoods a better place by planting hundreds of new trees each year. This network allowed Friends of Trees to quickly build relationships and grow, scaling up to its current citywide reach.
- **Concerts in the Park/Movies in the Park:** While many would love to give credit to the Parks Bureau, or to corporate sponsors, it's a fact that it is the local neighborhoods that provide the volunteer labor to perform the hard event planning and management work required to make each and every event a success. These events simply would not happen without neighborhood associations as the local community partners.
- **Neighborhood Cleanups:** There are many neighborhood cleanup efforts that happen, from the annual events that responsibly deal with tons of recycling and garbage every year, to alley cleanups and other events, often held in partnership with SOLVE, that help manage litter and illegal dumping across our city.
- **National Night Out:** This event continues to be relevant, allowing neighbors to reclaim streets from crime and violence through community building and fun, recreational activities.
- **Block Parties:** Neighborhood associations help to organize neighbors and businesses to hold annual block parties, including occasional events such as those in our local Foxchase area at 30th and Killingsworth, that bring together nearly a dozen local restaurants, businesses, neighbors, and visitors to take over portions of two city blocks for community-building events with food, art, and music.
- **Neighborhood Improvement projects:** Our neighborhood association sponsors projects such as intersection repairs that paint murals on intersections on bicycle routes, constructs planter boxes in planter strips between houses and the street for low-income households, and partners with other organizations to help sponsor initiatives to improve the neighborhood.
- **Community Newspapers:** Our own organization prints the Concordia News 11 months a year, bringing print journalism to our local community of 10,000+ people to bring a spotlight to under-represented people, groups, businesses, and efforts within our neighborhood. We know that while our paper may or may not be the best neighborhood newspaper in the city, it's definitely not the only one, and that many communities benefit from the local perspective brought by this micro-place-based journalism.

- **Partnerships with local faith and community based groups:** For decades, we have partnered with local faith and community groups to hold events, undertake neighborhood improvement initiatives, and work through local issues including those related to crime, livability, land use, transportation, planning, and the environment.
- **Community / business mixers / parties and social events:** Events such as happy hours and mixers allow neighbors to meet one another, build relationships, and take ordinary, everyday steps to build neighborhood resiliency through social cohesion.
- **Forums for discussions of city-wide and local issues:** Our neighborhood regularly reviews and participates in efforts to plan for a better tomorrow, within our neighborhood and the larger community within which we live. From transportation to land use to neighborhood democracy, neighbors engage with other neighbors to try to maintain and improve our high quality of life. Some of these efforts are productive, others misguided, but the nature of our democracy demands local engagement, and neighborhood associations provide the most local forum within which this may occur.
- **Advocacy platforms:** Neighborhood associations famously banded together to stop the demolition of a wide swath of inner Southeast Portland by the Mount Hood Freeway project (but not before a few houses were torn down along Powell Blvd). More recently, neighborhood associations worked with other advocates to stop the Columbia River Crossing project, and on a more pro-active note, to advocate for regional bicycle and pedestrian trail systems to connect the homes of neighbors of all economic and social backgrounds with destinations for work and play, so as to provide greater access to work, leisure, and nature without requiring the use of the automobile.

We don't want to see the baby thrown out with the bath water. We see this kernel of goodness provided by the neighborhood associations of Portland, and we want to feed it, water it, and see it grow to be able to deliver even greater good to our community.

If the diagnosis of the problems with the current neighborhood association boils down to a lack of representation of the full community by the association boards (and therefore by the associations), then the simplest solution that logically follows is obvious: the system needs to become more democratic.

Currently, the CNA Board is elected at our annual meeting in November by Association members (residents, property owners, and employees of businesses within the Association boundaries) who attend the event in-person. This means that, out of our neighborhood of roughly 10,000 people, between 16 (the minimum number of members required to meet quorum) and perhaps 50 people decide the leadership of the Association. More people don't show up because people have busy lives, working to pay the bills, raising children, and partaking of the many other opportunities to have social lives and enjoy the great outdoors in our beautiful region. We get it.

It is more difficult for renters to find the willpower to attend a meeting in a neighborhood that they just moved in to, and don't know how much longer they may be staying in, even if they do

have the time, resources, and position in life to take time out of their busy schedules to attend neighborhood association meetings in person. We suspect that's why, out of our Board of roughly a dozen members, only one is a renter (the rest are homeowners). Indeed, our Media Team recently discovered that, for historic reasons that may or may not have reflected some sort of initial exclusionary intent, the Concordia News was only being delivered to single-family homes in our neighborhood; we then worked with the post office to make sure that the paper is also now delivered to apartments, so that renters are not structurally excluded. We also hand-deliver stacks of the paper to nearly every retail business within our neighborhood, so that it is accessible to all. (We also post portions of its content online, at concordiapdx.org.)

Towards the goal of promoting and enabling more diverse participation in the most local geographic units of our democracy, in the spirit of founding father Thomas Jefferson's concept of a Ward republic¹, we make the following set of recommendations:

- **Re-structure neighborhood association elections** so that the members of NA Boards are directly elected using paper ballots in general elections administered by Multnomah County, alongside members of the board of the East Multnomah County Soil and Water Conservation District, and all those circuit court judges that always run unopposed. Surely, our local neighborhood associations, that provide so much in the form of community building activities, are important enough to rate at least this basic level of recognition. Most neighbors certainly interact with activities put on by the associations more so than those put on by the E.M.S.W.C.D., much less the local circuit court (not to diminish the importance of either).
- **To broaden the base of neighborhood representation**, ensure that neighborhood association board nominations can be made by as little as a single person, for free, and conduct extensive outreach to all community-based organizations within each neighborhood to ensure that their members are aware of the opportunity to be elected to serve on the neighborhood association board.
- **To ensure that the focus of each neighborhood association remains positive**, dedicate a meaningful percentage of revenue from on-street parking, both from residential permit programs and from meters, towards neighborhood improvement project programs co-managed by each association, in partnership with the City and neighborhood coalition offices. Neighbors could then help decide where and when to build bulb-outs, place benches, stripe crosswalks, plant trees, place public art, hold events, and otherwise work together to help achieve and maintain community livability goals. This revenue stream could be used in combination with other funding sources to help deliver more livability outcomes in shorter periods of time.
- **To head off efforts by some neighborhoods to slow the development** of much-needed new homes during our extended housing crisis, the city should provide more by-right fast-approval development pathways in all neighborhoods, so that if projects are proposed that meet

¹ Per Wikipedia, "Ward republic is a concept promoted by Thomas Jefferson to place most of the functions of government in the ward, a small subdivision of a county or municipality. Jefferson thought of this concept as his favorite: "The article nearest my heart," wrote Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval in 1816, "is the division of counties into wards". His proposal was that such wards consist of no more people than can all know one another and personally perform the functions of government for one another. Although his proposal was not generally adopted, there have been partial implementations of the idea in small townships, school districts, voting precincts, and neighborhood associations." (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ward_republic)

adopted development and design standards, they can be approved administratively, without the opportunity for delay presented by discretionary review and lengthy public involvement and appeal processes.

- **To ensure that neighborhood livability is protected rather than destroyed by new development**, neighborhood associations should be empowered to work with the City to develop and officially adopt neighborhood design standards that work as a part of a citywide form-based code to allow each neighborhood to articulate and enforce its own local design character, as long as those regulations don't impede achievable FAR, height, density, or other factors measured by the Buildable Lands Inventory that are related to the ability to provide sufficient development capacity within our Urban Growth Boundary.

With these changes, we believe that the goals of the 3.96 code reform effort can be achieved through a "YES/AND" effort that broadens the stage for community involvement, allowing more members of our community to become engaged in the citywide dialogue that is the backbone of good governance and community-building. We believe that greater diversity helps to strengthen the tapestry of our community; and that by empowering neighborhood associations as geographically based community organizations, they can help provide the crucial avenues for engagement that are rooted in ties to place, as envisioned by the founding fathers of this country and successfully implemented in locales such as Washington D.C. that already have neighborhood-level community organizations elected through the local government's elections division.

To allow these changes to be made, we encourage the City Council to pause the 3.96 code reform effort, to allow time to develop this new elections system and implement it as a part of the effort, in partnership with other community partners, including the Multnomah County Elections Division.

Our neighborhood association system needs to change, to evolve and meet the needs of our current times. Let's give it the respect it deserves by giving the time that is needed to responsibly make the big changes we suggest in this letter.

Signed,

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