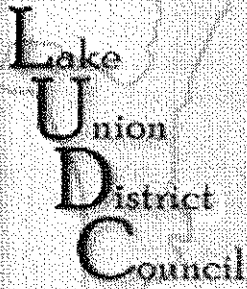


LAKE UNION DISTRICT COUNCIL



An official City of Seattle advisory body
created under Mayor/Council resolutions

c/o Seattle Department of Neighborhoods
PO Box 94649
Seattle, WA 98124-4649

November 9, 2016

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

RE: FUTURE OF THE DISTRICT COUNCILS

To the members of the City Council:

As one of Seattle's 13 district councils that were created and sustained by City Council resolutions 27709, 38115, and 28948, the Lake Union District Council consists of neighborhood associations, chambers of commerce, and non-profit groups based within the neighborhoods of Cascade, South Lake Union, Westlake, Fremont, Wallingford, and Eastlake. Its meetings are open to the public, and public comment is always welcome.

At its August and September meetings, the Lake Union District Council discussed the Mayor's proposals that would remove City funding from the district councils, revoke their 27-year status as official City advisory bodies, and establish a Community Involvement Commission "to advise and make recommendations to the Mayor and City Council on the development of plans, policies, regulations, strategies, and community grant funding processes that advance equitable public engagement and civic participation." This letter and its attachment provide our comments on the Mayor's proposals.

A Community Involvement Commission is a good idea, but it is a bad idea to defund and decertify the District Councils until the Commission can come to its own judgment about them. The Lake Union District Council encourages the City Council to establish a Community Involvement Commission. We request the City's help in improving the equity and effectiveness of our outreach and engagement, and we look forward to dialogue with the Commission, City Council, Mayor, and Department of Neighborhoods toward that end.

LUDC urges the City Council to resist the effort by the Mayor, before the Community Involvement Commission is even created, to defund the district councils and to revoke their status as official City advisory bodies. Please don't trash the City's many years' investment in the district councils as avenues for engagement and participation. Let the Community Involvement Commission weigh in on whether the District Councils should be improved rather than defunded and decertified. The 2009 City Auditor report on the District Councils found the Department of Neighborhoods primarily at fault for the problems of the District Councils. The Commission may agree that executive branch should provide resources and guidance to the District Councils so that they can act most equitably and effectively.

If the district councils didn't exist, it would be necessary to invent them. We believe that the Community Involvement Commission will find that designing policies and delivering programs in any large city can't be done effectively without geographically focused involvement structures that engage the people who live or work in different areas; and without public meetings where these people can discuss decisions with public officials and with one another.

The district councils are the only City advisory bodies that hold monthly public meetings throughout Seattle, close to where people live or work. While digital participation has its place, the City's own research shows that one fifth of the population lacks web access. T

To attend or speak at a public meeting, one does not need web access or even need to know how to use a computer.

Meetings can be better than digital engagement for understanding and compromise. Public meetings are a time-tested means for people with diverse backgrounds and views to understand one another and to find mutual agreeable solutions. At their best, the District Councils have bridged gaps between races, between homeowners and renters, and between residents and businesses. With help from City government to improve their equity and effectiveness, they can do better. Digital media methods tend to encourage misunderstanding and anonymous invective. The face-to-face context of a public meeting encourages civility.

Participants in a public meeting who cannot speak or understand English would greatly benefit from the language access services that the Mayor's proposed resolution envisions. The Lake Union District Council supports this part of the proposed resolution. We request that language access services be provided to the District Councils that meet the thresholds of populations in need.

Heed audit report on District Councils' need for better administrative support. To give up on the District Councils now would reward the executive branch for ignoring the 2009 City Auditor's finding that their primary problem was a lack of administrative support. While Mayors Nickels and McGinn contributed to this neglect by underfunding the District Councils, Mayor Murray took this neglect to extremes. He and his current Department of Neighborhoods director launched in July a wholesale attack on the District Councils, without ever bringing their concerns to the District Councils, nor providing resources to address them. The Lake Union District Council asks the City Council to direct the Mayor to work with the District Councils to address these concerns, not bludgeon them with criticisms unaccompanied by guidance or resources.

Staffing is neither unique nor disproportionate. "Whereas" clauses in the proposed resolution and ordinance falsely state that the District Councils and the City Neighborhood Council receive unique and undue staff resources. There is nothing unique about a department spending some staff resources for the official City advisory bodies it administers; every official City advisory body receives staff assistance. The only thing unique about the District Councils and the CNC is that they receive FAR LESS staff assistance than any of the other official City advisory bodies.

Attached are detailed comments on the Mayor's proposed resolution and ordinance. We suggest that the ordinance be shortened to focus only on creation of the Community Involvement Commission; and that the resolution be set aside for a year, to be considered (and substantially amended along the lines suggested in the attachment) only after the Community Involvement Commission has completed its report.

Sincerely,



Suzie Burke
Coordinator of the Lake Union District Council

ANNEX TO 11/9/16 LETTER: LUDC's SPECIFIC RESPONSES TO THE MAYOR'S PROPOSED RESOLUTION AND ORDINANCE ON "PUBLIC OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT"

The following comments supplement LUDC's Nov. 7, 2016 letter to the City Council. On Sept. 26, Mayor Ed Murray sent to the City Council a resolution and ordinance whose titles on "public outreach and engagement" do not disclose the destructive impact they would have in defunding the 13 district councils and the City Neighborhood Council, and in revoking their status as official City advisory bodies.

The Lake Union District Council supports the establishment of Community Involvement Commission. LUDC suggests that the proposed ordinance be amended to focus only on that purpose. The ordinance should not repeal current law directing the Department of Neighborhoods to staff the district councils and CNC. LUDC also suggests that the proposed resolution be set aside for a year, and be considered (and, we suggest, be substantially amended along the lines suggested below) only after the Community Involvement Commission has completed its report.

PROBLEMS WITH THE MAYOR'S PROPOSED RESOLUTION

1. Mission narrowed. The first "whereas" clause would dramatically narrow the official mission of the Department of Neighborhoods to be as follows: "to support and build inclusive partnerships across the City in order to provide Seattle communities with equitable access to government resources." This mission completely eliminates any mention of neighborhoods. It should restore language from the original mission of the Department of Neighborhoods: "preserving and enhancing Seattle's diverse neighborhoods, empowering people to make positive contributions in their communities, and bringing government close to all people, ensuring that it is responsive."
2. Volunteers undervalued. The seventh "whereas" clause states that "Mayor Murray recognizes and appreciates the numerous hours District Council and City Neighborhood Council members spend in service to their communities as active and engaged volunteers." LUDC welcomes this affirmation, but notes that the Mayor's proposals, on the contrary, reflect a dismissive attitude toward these advisory bodies and their members.
3. Meetings undervalued. The eighth "whereas" clause states that "active participation in district council and City Neighborhood Council proceedings generally requires an ability to regularly attend evening, in-person meetings, a form of public involvement that commands a significant, ongoing commitment of volunteer hours and does not work for all." There is no acknowledgement here or anywhere else in the proposed resolution that the district councils and CNC are just 14 of the City's 60 official advisory bodies, all of which, in the words of the resolution "generally require an ability to regularly attend evening, in-person meetings." [Note: a few advisory bodies, including one district council, meet in the early morning before business hours.]

Public meetings are a fundamental means for people with diverse backgrounds and views to understand one another and, in a civil way, to find mutual agreeable solutions. Social media and other decision venues that do not involve face-to-face discussion can be notoriously polarized and a source of division, not to mention being dependent on broadband access that, according to City research, about a fifth of the population lacks. The "town meeting" format is fundamental to democracy, and for good reason. Meetings that are open to the public offer an unrivaled opportunity for people to interact with public officials, and with each other. Most digital participation lacks a similar transparency.

4. "Unique and prioritized" access? No. The eleventh "whereas clause" censoriously describes the Department of Neighborhoods' practice of "providing District Councils and the City Neighborhood Council with unique and prioritized access to City resources." But there is anything unique about using staff to assist an official City advisory body. In order to function, EVERY official City advisory body receives staff assistance. The only unique thing about the district councils and the CNC is that each receives less City staff assistance any of the other official City advisory bodies

It is difficult to take seriously the criticism of the District Councils for receiving staff help from the Department of Neighborhoods when the one finds in the proposed ordinance (p. 8) that these same staff resources would be transferred to the proposed new Community Involvement Commission. The Commission deserves staffing, but so do the District Councils.

5. Repealing fundamental charters. Section 5 of the proposed resolution would "supersede" Resolution 27709 (1987), Res. 28115 (1989), and Res. 28948 (1994). If that means "repeal", then the proposed resolution would entirely eliminate the legislative charter and guidance for the district councils and the City Neighborhood Council as official advisory bodies, including regarding the Neighborhood Matching Fund. We suggest that the City Council revise the proposed resolution to keep the following language that it passed in the resolutions mentioned above:

District Councils. ... "Each neighborhood district shall have a District Council consisting of representatives of all community councils and neighborhood business organizations within the district who wish to participate. Other representatives may be added at the discretion of the District Council. The District will seek to reflect the geographic, racial, cultural and economic characteristics of the district. District Councils shall provide a forum for consideration of common concerns including physical planning, budget allocations and service delivery and for the sharing or ideas for solutions to common problems. ... The District Councils shall be staffed by the community service centers."

City Neighborhood Council. "Each District Council Chair or a designated alternate shall serve on a City Neighborhood Council. Additional positions may be added by the City Neighborhood Council, as needed in order to make the membership reflective of the City's diverse population. ... The Council shall be staffed by the Department of Neighborhoods, with responsibilities as designated for District Councils. Actions of the City Neighborhood Council shall be documented in an official public record and maintained at the Department of Neighborhoods."

Neighborhood Matching Fund. "A Neighborhood Matching Fund shall be established. ... The Fund shall be disbursed in matching grants to neighborhood organizations to address problems they have identified. ... The Matching Fund shall be administered through the Office of Neighborhoods in consultation with the City Neighborhood Council. The District Councils and then the City Neighborhood Council shall rate and rank the eligible applications for the Matching Fund. ... Matching Fund dollars shall not be used to replace dollars which would otherwise have been available to the neighborhoods from the City."

The Mayor's proposed resolution would commit a major disservice by repealing all of the above provisions. The City Council should revise the resolution to keep these provisions while the Community Involvement Commission considers any changes to recommend.

6. Terms and definitions displace community-building with government control. The proposed resolution includes a "Glossary of Terms" that "shall guide ongoing efforts by City of Seattle departments to develop, implement and periodically update community involvement plans and practices that prioritize equity." The proposed glossary is poorly drawn and at best premature, as such matters should be decided by the Community Involvement Commission.

The terms and definitions proposed in the resolution's glossary would place government at the center in controlling various demographic groups rather than the more appropriate and effective role of empowering these groups to interact and cooperate on their own. The terms and definitions devalue the Department of Neighborhoods' long-practiced equitable and effective community organizing, and would place Department in the role of enforcing the poorly drawn terms and definitions upon all the other City departments. Without major improvements in these terms and definitions, the Department will not be qualified to evaluate "each City department's progress on developing a community involvement plan." [sec. 1C]

“Community” is defined in the resolution glossary as “a group of people sharing a common experience or interest, e.g., residents of a neighborhood, faith-based congregations, business owners along a commercial corridor, members of ethnic and cultural groups, gardeners at a P-Patch, school based organizations.” These notions of community reinforce the tendency of people to communicate only with others of a similar demographic group. Community should be defined to encourage people to understand and cooperate with members of the public from other demographic groups. Central to the charter of the District Councils is that they are to represent residents AND businesses. Unless the Department of Neighborhoods recognizes the value of bringing such disparate interests together, it will not foster success in District Councils doing so.

“Participation” is defined in the resolution glossary as “Active engagement by community members in projects and processes that are meaningful to them. Methods of participation can include, but are not limited to, sharing ideas, contributing to decision-making efforts, and assisting with the implementation of new programs and strategies.” This definition does not recognize the particular value of face-to-face interactions between those who live or work geographically close to one another, as contributing to mutual aid, and adjustment that will make a functioning neighborhood more than the sum of its parts.

PROBLEMS WITH THE MAYOR’S PROPOSED ORDINANCE

1. Mission. In just the same way and the same words as with the proposed resolution (see above), the first “whereas” clause for the proposed ordinance narrows the mission for the Department of Neighborhoods to the following: “to support and build inclusive partnerships across the City in order to provide Seattle communities with equitable access to government resources.” This proposed mission statement focuses only on “dividing up the pie” rather than on how community-building can grow the pie (through physical improvements and new social bonds).

The proposed new Department mission lacks any sense of enhancing neighborhoods, such as through mutual aid, empowerment of people, and ensuring the responsiveness of government. In fact, it completely eliminates any mention of “neighborhoods”—certainly odd for a Department of Neighborhoods! The original mission of the Department of Neighborhoods was more expansive: “preserving and enhancing Seattle’s diverse neighborhoods, empowering people to make positive contributions in their communities, and bringing government close to all people, ensuring that it is responsive.” The City Council should insist on keeping major elements of the original statement of mission.

2. Equity. The eighth “whereas” in the proposed ordinance makes the same misstatement as does the eleventh “whereas” clause in the proposed resolution, namely that there is something “unique” that, as official City advisory bodies, the District Councils receive staff support from the Department of Neighborhoods. In order to function, EVERY official City advisory body receives staff assistance! Indeed, the only thing unique about the district councils and the CNC is that they receive less City staff assistance than do other official City advisory bodies. Thus the reference to their “prioritized access” to staff assistance is particularly inapt.
3. Language access services. Participants in a public meeting who cannot speak or understand English would greatly benefit from the language access services that the Mayor’s proposed resolution envisions. The Lake Union District Council supports this proposal and requests that language access services be provided immediately to those District Councils that meet the thresholds of populations in need.
4. “Neighborhoods” would no longer be part of the purpose of the Department of Neighborhoods. How ironic that in the first line of its new Department of Neighborhoods’ purpose (p. 3), this proposed ordinance would remove the very word “neighborhoods” as part of why the Department exists; the word should be kept.

5. Staffing would be denied to the District Councils and the City Neighborhood Council. The proposed ordinance (p. 4) redefines the function of the Department of Neighborhoods as no longer to "provide staff for the City Neighborhood Council and the district councils." The City Council should not agree to this repeal, but should retain the current arrangement until the
6. No longer to mediate community-department disputes. The centralization of the Department of Neighborhoods and its increasing role as an arm of the Mayor has diminished the Department's longtime role as "honest broker," a process that would be completed by the proposed ordinance's repeal of the current function to "mediate disputes between City departments and affected communities." [p. 4] One reason the City has not needed an ombudsman is that the Department of Neighborhoods has taken this assignment seriously. It should not be repealed.
7. Department will now "convene" public meetings, no longer help the public hold its own public meetings. Another instance of moving the Department of Neighborhoods away from community empowerment is the change (p. 4) of its function from the current ordinance's language ("facilitate community meetings on City issues and actions") to the proposed ordinance's language ("convene public meetings on City issues and actions"). As is seen throughout this proposed ordinance and the proposed resolution. The Department's long-celebrated effort to help communities organize themselves is now replaced by heavy-handed control. The City Council should not accept the Mayor's language.

The District Councils have greatly contributed to public engagement because, unlike the other City advisory bodies, which meet largely in City buildings downtown, they meet throughout Seattle, close to where people live or work. And they have many public meetings—well over 100 per year (thirteen different District Councils, each with about nine meetings a year). These meetings are major opportunities for members of the public to engage with City officials and with one another. The City should work harder to get word out the public about these meetings, not kill the meetings by defunding and decertifying the District Councils.

8. Neighborhood and community plans no longer to be developed or coordinated at the grassroots. Another step away from community empowerment is the proposed ordinance's repeal (p. 4) of the Department of Neighborhood's function to "develop [and] coordinate ... neighborhood and community plans and other actions to address such issues." Under the proposed new language, the Department would only help communities implement such plans. The obvious implication is that neighborhood and community plans will be developed and coordinated by government, no longer by grassroots groups under contract to the City government, as was previously the City's acclaimed model. The City Council should not accept the Mayor's language.
9. Undue faith in digital engagement. While the proposed ordinance and resolution disparage public meetings that have been a time-honored engagement tool, the only tools that the ordinance offers (p. 55) are for digital engagement, despite the City's own findings that about one fifth of the public has no digital access. It is odd for the Mayor and Department of Neighborhoods to disparage public meetings, when anyone is welcome there, whereas a large segment of the public cannot access the City's digital efforts; and when participation by e-mail, web surveys, and social media can be isolating, harsh, and rife with the potential for misunderstanding.
10. Top-down appointments create an echo chamber and need to be supplemented by selection at the grassroots. The Mayor and City Council may prefer to hear from people who they have appointed rather than from District Councils and CNC who are selected at the grassroots. But City officials will benefit from hearing a wide range of viewpoints, especially those they likely edit out in their appointments. A decision against grassroots selection of District Council members will also deny to the communities themselves the advantages of grassroots ideas and involvement. As demographic meet

face-to-face, the experience promotes civility, mutual understanding, cooperation, compromise, and team building, resulting in benefits for the entire City.

Conclusion. It is not too late for the Mayor and City Council to reverse the effort to weaken and sideline the District Councils. The District Councils want and need the resources and guidance to improve the equity and effectiveness of their engagement of the public. The 2009 City Auditor report on the District Councils (click [here](#)) found the Department of Neighborhoods primarily at fault for the problems of the District Councils. The City Council should insist that the Mayor provide resources and guidance to the District Councils so that they can act most equitably and effectively.