

Eudaly, staffers bungled efforts to change Portland neighborhood association rules, emails show

By Gordon R. Friedman | The Oregonian/OregonLive

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Commissioner Chloe Eudaly pictured during a meeting of the Portland City Council. Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian.

Portland Commissioner Chloe Eudaly has acknowledged a bureau under her control badly mishandled efforts to change the rules regarding neighborhood associations by failing to consult and involve the groups, newly released emails and text messages show.

The files reveal that the bungled undertaking led to intense pushback from neighborhood leaders and a lack of support by the City Council. That in turn has led Eudaly to delay the change and launch a damage-control campaign.

Text messages also show Eudaly's policy director, Jamey Duhamel, made plain her scorn for neighborhood associations, casting them as dominated by rich white people clueless about their misguided sense of entitlement.

In defending her office's effort to end a system of special powers afforded only to neighborhood associations, Eudaly has said elevating the voices of groups organized around non-geographic affiliations such as race, ethnicity or status as renters would be beneficial for Portland. Neighborhood associations, she has said, tend to be dominated by older, white homeowners and push their interests rather than the needs of a diverse, growing city.

Eudaly, who has explained she sees herself more as a renter than as a resident of a neighborhood, has said the proposed changes are not meant to impugn neighborhoods or curtail their powers, but to extend such powers to other worthy groups.

Yet the plan has backfired spectacularly, the emails and texts help to show. The communications were released to The Oregonian/OregonLive in response to a public records request.

Neighborhood association leaders say they were not consulted about the proposed changes by the city's civics bureau, the Office of Community & Civic Life, of which Eudaly is commissioner-in-charge. A proposed update to the city code approved by a panel managed by the bureau proved anathema to the associations because it would repeal the laws that establish them.

In her texts and emails, Eudaly appears to have come to grasp the political fray she has entered by waking the sleeping giant that is Portland's 95 neighborhood associations.

"I'm not having an engaged and vocal constituency turned against me, no matter how righteous the goals, due to a lack of engagement by the very bureau that is charged with civic engagement," Eudaly texted on July 18.

She sent that message to Suk Rhee, director of the civics bureau, and Winta Yohannes, a policy adviser.

"I think we're going to have to delay this item and undertake an engagement process with the NAs," Eudaly texted Rhee and Yohannes, referencing neighborhood associations.

Also on July 18, Eudaly emailed a supporter and asked her to co-author an op-ed in favor of the changes. The supporter, Kathleen Saadat, wrote to Eudaly that her goals were laudable, but the process had been "greatly flawed."

Saadat, who served on the panel that drafted the code change and who ultimately voted for its approval, said she was nevertheless "deeply concerned" neighborhoods had not been "fully informed" of Eudaly's efforts. Saadat warned that the oversight left the commissioner vulnerable to accusations of back-room politicking.

Eudaly forwarded Saadat's message to Rhee, the civics director, and Yohannes, the policy adviser. "Not the response I was hoping for, but I can't say I completely disagree," Eudaly wrote.

"I'm very frustrated right now," the commissioner continued. "It didn't need to go down like this, I don't know if I'll have the votes, and I'm not feeling confident in the process. So, what are you going to do to engage the neighborhood associations and successfully move this forward?"

Rhee replied that she spoke with Saadat and was optimistic she could be counted on to support the code change.

"I do not like the position I've been put in," Eudaly wrote back to Rhee, "so I'm looking for how we've engaged with NAs, how their concerns are being reflected in the code change, and what you suggest we do moving forward given how controversial this has become and the fact that I currently don't have the votes to pass this."

Changing city code requires three "yes" votes of the five-member City Council. Commissioner Nick Fish has told Eudaly he cannot support the change as currently envisioned but is open to workshopping the idea, said his chief of staff, Sonia Schmanski. It's unclear where Mayor Ted Wheeler and Commissioners Amanda Fritz and Jo Ann Hardesty stand.

In another email, Eudaly said she has found it "so hard to convey to neighborhood advocates how much I appreciate their efforts" while also explaining they "do not represent all Portlanders."

"They feel blamed, which is not my intent. They want me to fix their shortcomings for them, which is not my job," Eudaly wrote. She said she feels an obligation to make Portland more inclusive but "can't wait for 95 neighborhood associations, largely dominated by white, middle class, middle aged community members to figure out how to do that."

Text messages released by Eudaly's office also show Duhamel, the commissioner's policy director, expressing open disdain for neighborhood associations.

Duhamel sent those texts to Mustafa Washington, Mayor Ted Wheeler's operations manager, during a May 2018 City Council meeting at which many addresses in Southwest Portland were changed to new South Portland ones to make the city 911 system more effective.

Though the change was thought to be non-controversial, about a dozen people gave testimony on it at the meeting, which frustrated Duhamel.

“Why is this taking so long, ffs? Like WE GET IT ALREADY!! Who are they trying to convince?” she said in a message to Washington, using an acronym that includes profanity.

Several who testified were neighborhood association members who complained of costs associated with changing their addresses. A resident of the chic Riverdale neighborhood made a comment about her neighbors being “well-educated, high-income, high-caliber individuals,” which Duhamel perceived as haughty and insensitive.

“How you like that ‘high income, high caliber’ bull—,” Duhamel texted to Washington. “This is why we need our neighborhood associations in their place. They get too much power and voice.”

Washington responded, “I never thought this would be this big of a deal.”

Duhamel: “Well they are white and ‘high caliber’ soooooooo ... any inconvenience is a big deal to their cozy lives. HOW DARE WE STRESS THEM OUT!!!”

Washington: “LOL, there are definitely more important issues than this.”

Duhamel: “So. Much. Privilege.”

In an interview, Duhamel said she regretted her words. She said she has long been an activist and frequently fought against neighborhood associations, and her comments were made under that mindset.

“This is one of those moments where I really saw myself as an activist speaking truth to power. What I realize now is neighborhood associations also see themselves in that way,” Duhamel said.

“I wish I had chosen my words better. I wish I had not said that at all,” Duhamel said. “I am very regretful about how this is going to come out and how it will be perceived by neighborhood associations or people in general who want to give testimony and not feel they are being judged for it.”

Duhamel said she “absolutely” supports every person’s privilege to testify to the City Council and said the way she engages with constituents “has to also evolve.”

— Gordon R. Friedman