

To: City Council, OCCL Director Suk Rhee
From: King Neighborhood Association
Date: July 14, 2019
Re: Civic Life proposed 3.96 Code Change

Dear City Leaders,

The Board of the King Neighborhood Association (KNA) is very concerned about the 3.96 Code Changes being proposed by the Office of Community and Civic Life (OCCL). We respectfully ask that you consider the following concerns before you take action that could irrevocably affect our community.

Lack of transparency from OCCL

OCCL's rejection of accepted standards of communication, process, and engagement has been deeply troubling. The committee charged with revising code 3.96 met six times before neighborhood associations were notified of the process. This lack of neighborhood association (NA) involvement creates the perception that OCCL has intentionally avoided public scrutiny while making critical changes to city code.

Denigration of the democratic process

Although Portland's NA system has gone through many changes and revisions since its introduction in the early 1970s, it continues to be recognized as an important grassroots counter-balance to government institutions of power. This is especially important for a city with an at-large commissioner form of government without regional representation.

The proposed code change appears designed to gut the hard-won democratic, countervailing influence of NAs by deleting any mention of them in City code (hence eliminating their standing) and replacing dedicated funding with a highly uncertain competitive bid process.

Oppositional citizen voices would likely be unable to receive funding, allowing the City to quash democratic grass-roots involvement unless it aligns with the current political environment and ideologies.

Increasing diversity

The primary criticism of the NA system is not that the system doesn't work, but that it is not inclusive of the diverse voices within our communities. We acknowledge this can often be the case. The difficult reality for most citizen organizations is it can be incredibly challenging to recruit and engage diverse members of the community for what is often seen as time-consuming and boring work.

We want to be clear: KNA is extremely interested in the City's support to attract more participation from our diverse neighbors! We strongly believe the answer is not to reduce our standing and credibility, but to provide desperately needed, dedicated funds and leadership development for us to be more successful in this important work.

Dividing our communities

Unfortunately, this code change will likely create division between people who belong to neighborhood associations and our neighbors involved with special interest groups. Instead of looking for ways to bring community members together, the OCCL will encourage groups with specific interests and smaller focuses to compete against NAs – and each other – for funding.

Accountability

Finally, maintaining transparency and accountability is a vital element of a functioning democratic system. The current code change removes previous meaningful language in favor of vague, general sentiments that do not have a place in government code.

This is especially true of the removal of current requirements to hold open, publicly advertised meetings, to record and post meeting minutes, and to be publicly accountable for money spent. While an argument could be made that not all groups naturally operate within these guidelines, this seems to suggest lower expectations of certain groups, that they are incapable of being able to learn about democratic processes.

Most people are naturally intimidated by procedures we are unfamiliar with, but we learn by doing. It is an important democratic value that our institutions and civic groups remain accountable to the public. This is another opportunity for the OCCL to bring people together and provide leadership training and guidance to all community groups to enhance the process for the betterment of all.

Stereotyping and misunderstanding

It is difficult not to resent the stereotyping of Neighborhood Association volunteers as being wealthy, white, and older - the dismissive implication being all NAs have a uniform agenda of promoting moneyed, exclusive interests at the expense of others.

Many NA members and volunteers who serve do not fit this narrow stereotype. This is especially true for the King neighborhood where residents have been historically marginalized for decades. These residents are de facto members of our NA and their concerns remain a central focus of our organization.

KNA's most important work is fighting against the overwhelming gentrification and displacement our neighborhood has experienced for many years. We are actually fighting to *maintain* the diversity of our neighborhood and represent the needs of our long-term residents who have lost so much.

Conclusion

OCCL has an important mission of fostering civic engagement, but we believe the proposed code change will have the opposite effect. We implore the City to maintain the NA system, and focus instead on providing the support and resources we need to be more effective in reaching out to and involving our more diverse neighbors. Help bring us together, not tear us apart.