

# The Oregonian

## Editorial: City should make room for new voices without muting neighborhoods

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*By the Oregonian/OregonLive Editorial Board*

There's nothing controversial about the goals that Portland Commissioner Chloe Eudaly has in mind for the Office of Community and Civic Life. Eudaly and agency Director Suk Rhee aim to improve how the city engages Portlanders and increase involvement by those who haven't historically had much say in city policy. Their efforts to include renters, minorities and others in a public dialogue long dominated by mostly white homeowners in neighborhood associations are greatly needed and widely supported.



Aerial photography taken Saturday, March 10, 2018, of a neighborhood in SE Portland. Mark Graves/Staff LC- Mark Graves

The problem is that the office seems to be taking the most controversial way to get there.

As The Oregonian/OregonLive's Gordon Friedman reported, the civic life office is proposing changes to the section of city code that defines what the office does. But in rewriting the code, Eudaly and Rhee want to strip nearly all mention of the office's existing partnership with Portland's 95 neighborhood associations, which are the city's designated organizations for overseeing issues and activities within specific geographic boundaries. The proposal would similarly take out most mentions of district coalitions and business district associations.

Gone are lengthy passages confirming the role that neighborhood associations should play in enhancing the livability, safety or economic vitality of their communities. Similarly, the rewrite includes no mention of the city's responsibility to notify and include neighborhood associations in matters of livability.

Instead, the proposal highlights the importance of involving all Portlanders, punctuated with the sentiment that "the origins of our democracy include colonialism, white supremacy, and economic exploitation." The office, the draft rewrite states, must "support civic engagement as a powerful way to expose assumptions reflecting historical origins and rebuild our government institutions and practices to be more fair, just, and in service of all Portlanders."

Whether intended or not, the new wording suggests that neighborhood associations, which have helped build Portland, are relics of a white supremacist past that have no place in a future that values diversity.

That message is neither fair nor helpful in achieving Eudaly and Rhee's worthy goal of inclusion. While they are right to focus on expanding outreach, they should appreciate that adding voices to the discussion doesn't require muting others – the symbolic takeaway from deleting neighborhood associations from the

code. And neighborhood associations, as flawed as some might be in representing all voices, provide the services, events and opportunities that connect residents in their communities with one another. These are the groups that organize disaster-response teams, work with city staffers to set up movies in the neighborhood park, advocate for stop signs at dangerous intersections, bring in guest speakers to talk about public transit, set up block watches and work for safe routes for students to get to school. You cannot create an inclusive neighborhood spirit if there's no neighborhood spirit in the first place.

The proposal only inflames fears and intensifies suspicion among neighborhoods already uncertain about how new density laws will change their communities. The city does not need to give skeptics more reasons to mistrust government or more motivation to put up a fight.

Unfortunately, some of Eudaly's past proposals in other areas, such as rental policy, have done just that. By pushing so hard on behalf of some constituents, her proposals come across as more punitive than constructive. The erasure of neighborhood associations from much of the code strikes that same tone.

And there's no reason that the civic life office can't add more community groups to the list of recognized entities while demanding higher standards from neighborhood associations as well. Some associations have already changed the way they reach out to their community, from where they hold meetings to conducting them in multiple languages. Others are eager for help in attracting more residents and revitalizing their membership – practices that the civic life office should be sharing with neighborhood groups.

Certainly, revisions are needed. This city has changed significantly in its demographic make-up over the past four decades, much of which hasn't been reflected in neighborhood association boards. It's true that many Portlanders seek civic engagement through groups that align with their social, economic or racial identities more than their neighborhood. Neighborhood groups such as Living Cully and Albina Vision, both of which have shown innovative advocacy on housing and livability issues, have proven they deserve equivalent credibility as voices of the community. And some associations have stubbornly opposed zoning changes and development that are essential to Portland's longterm livability.

Eudaly and Rhee also raise valid questions about the benefits neighborhood associations receive, such as city funding, the ability to appeal land-use decisions at no cost to themselves, and exemptions from lobbying registration requirements. While removing mention of the groups from city code doesn't automatically change those benefits, they both concede such benefits could come under additional review. That's not a bad thing. The city needs to decide what neighborhood associations should achieve, whether such perks support a public purpose and what level of funding is appropriate. That analysis should extend to other community groups working with the civic life office as well, considering that many already receive city dollars. Additionally, neighborhood association members should do their own soul-searching about opposition to development. Fighting such modest changes as adding duplexes and triplexes in single-family neighborhoods says more about preserving their own fortunes than concern for that of the neighborhood – or city – as a whole.

But that's why it's so critical for Portlanders to find the common ground on which to build real solutions and protect it from unnecessary hits like the proposed code change. There's plenty of time to rework it before going to Council. Eudaly and Rhee should reach out to the longtime volunteers who have powered neighborhood associations for so long to help make that happen.