

Draft Work in Progress For Review and Discussion Purposes Only

# Office of City Auditor

**Seattle District Council System  
Needs Renewal**

**June xx, 2009**



City of Seattle  
Office of City Auditor

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To help the City of Seattle achieve honest, efficient management and full accountability throughout City government. We serve the public interest by providing the Mayor, the City Council, and City department heads with accurate information, unbiased analysis, and objective recommendations on how best to use public resources in support of the well-being of the citizens of Seattle.

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City of Seattle  
Office of City Auditor

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Susan Cohen, City Auditor

June xx, 2009

The Honorable Greg Nickels  
Seattle City Councilmembers  
City of Seattle  
Seattle, Washington 98104-1876

Dear Mayor Nickels and City Councilmembers:

Attached is our report, **Seattle District Council System Needs Renewal**. Our purpose for this work was to determine whether Seattle's district council system is fulfilling the purposes specified in Seattle City Council Resolutions 27709 and 28115, and identify recommendations for improving the system.

We have invited and incorporated responses from XXXX.

We appreciate the excellent cooperation received from the Department of Neighborhoods and the many citizens who provided information and insights during our review process. If you have any questions regarding this report or would like additional information, please call me at 233-1093 or Mary Denzel at 206-684-8158. To improve our work, we ask our readers to complete and return the evaluation form at the back of this report.

Sincerely,

Susan Cohen  
City Auditor

Enclosure

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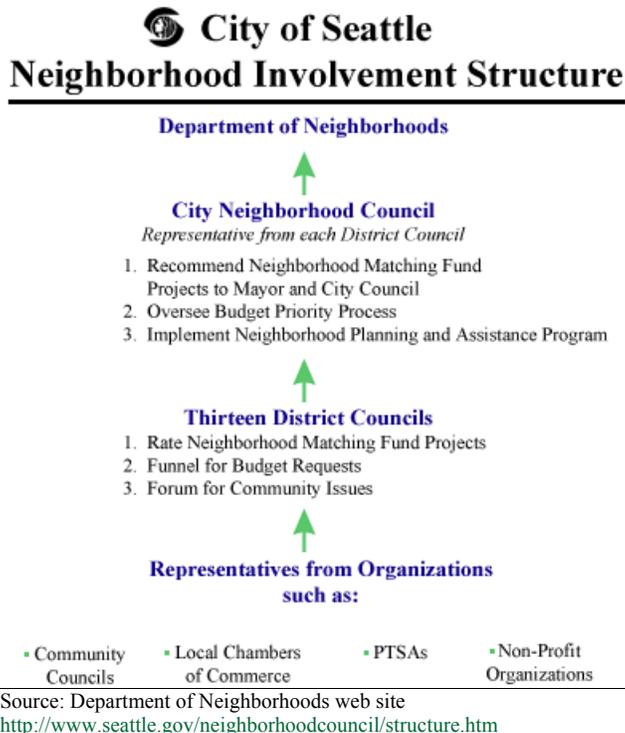
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## I. Introduction and Overview

At the request of Councilmember Sally Clark, the Office of City Auditor was asked to review the City’s district council system and examine how other cities’ community participation systems function. Seattle has 13 geographic districts with numerous organizations that take an interest in the affairs of their community including, among others: community clubs or neighborhood associations, business groups, social service agencies, parent-teacher associations, ethnic associations, crime prevention councils, block watches, and gardening communities. Each district is served by a Neighborhood Service Center staffed by a Neighborhood District Coordinator from the City’s Department of Neighborhoods.

The City’s 13 formal district councils were created to provide a regular forum so that neighborhood organizations could send representatives to exchange ideas, address common problems, and disseminate information back to their respective organizations. District councils are one of many methods the City uses to engage with its citizens and businesses. The City provides each district council with meeting space and occasional support for communication and outreach. The City also provides limited administrative staffing an “enhancement fund” of up to approximately \$500 per council.



Seattle’s neighborhood involvement process has been regarded as a model of civic engagement. Citizens who participate in their neighborhood organizations and district councils volunteer countless hours to share information, address neighborhood concerns and exchange information with each other, City departments and elected officials. The City also uses the district councils to formally review and prioritize applications for City funding programs that target neighborhood-level projects. In addition, a number of City officials use the district council system as an efficient way to disseminate information to community members who are linked to large groups of people in other community organizations, a sort of “one stop shopping” for getting the word out on City initiatives. These functions of the district council system clearly provide value both to the City and the participants. Yet City officials, residents and community representatives have

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questioned how representative the district councils really are, what efforts are being made to expand participation, and how useful district council input to the City really is.

Based on our review of Seattle's district council system, the citizen participation systems of other jurisdictions, and research on public participation, we identified four key elements that impact the effectiveness of the City's district council system:

1. The role of district councils
2. Governance and group dynamics
3. City resources and support provided to the district councils, and
4. Responsibility for records associated with the district councils.

Based on our review, we made 10 recommendations covering these four key issue areas.

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## II. Objectives, Scope and Methodology

The objective of this audit was to determine whether the district council system is fulfilling the purposes specified in Seattle City Council Resolutions 27709 and 28115. We reviewed all legislation that addresses the district council system, previous studies including an audit of public participation approaches in Seattle, and interviewed more than 50 individuals including district council officers and participants, elected City officials, and other City officials and employees that have roles in the district council system. We attended district council meetings in every district, including a break away group in the Southeast District, and the "umbrella group" called the City Neighborhood Council. We also reviewed the neighborhood participation practices of thirty-six jurisdictions and interviewed neighborhood-participation staff from nine jurisdictions. We conducted our work between September 2008 and April 2009.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## III. Background

The City supports multiple structures for two-way communication with its citizens including:

- The district councils and City Neighborhood Council;
- City-appointed citizens advisory committees in the police, utilities and other departments (ongoing);

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- Ad hoc advisory committees established to oversee levy expenditures or particular construction projects;
- Block watches;
- Numerous specialized boards and commissions; and
- Public hearings, workshops and/or other events focused on particular issues.

Supporting these structures uses City resources such as staff time to assist with numerous activities, including, but not limited to: 1) organizing, publicizing and sometimes documenting meetings; 2) providing meeting space; 3) developing and presenting information; 4) providing informational materials; 5) conducting investigations and writing reports; and 6) occasionally providing food, parking costs, and honoraria.

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### Formation of Seattle's District Council System

Seattle's system of 13 district councils was established in 1987 through Resolution 27709, which created the Neighborhood Planning and Assistance Program. The district councils were originally intended to provide networking opportunities between resident and business groups from the same geographical area of the City. The same resolution also created an "umbrella" group to whom each district council sends a representative: the City Neighborhood Council (CNC). In 1989, through Resolution 28115, the City attempted to modify the system to allow and encourage participation from more neighborhoods and from a broader diversity of racial and ethnic groups.

These resolutions also assigned the Department of Neighborhoods the responsibility of:

- Staffing the City Neighborhood Council and the district councils,
- Providing meeting space,
- Cooperating with the Community Service Centers (now called Neighborhood Service Centers) in the development and facilitation of neighborhood organizations and leadership, and
- Maintaining the community organization mailing list.

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### Original Role of the District Councils

Resolution 27709 lays out the objectives of the district council system as follows:

- Create a partnership between the City and its neighborhoods
- Provide the neighborhoods with tools and resources for planning and development which reflect their needs and values
- Design City plans, regulations and programs to suit the diverse character and development patterns of the City's neighborhoods
- Strengthen and coordinate City departments' responses to neighborhood problems and requests for help.

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- Foster cooperation and consensus among diverse interests within neighborhoods
- Encourage constructive settlement of disputes involving neighborhood groups, prospective developers and the City
- Facilitate communication between neighborhood regarding common concerns

According to Attachment A to Resolution 27709,

District Councils shall provide a forum for consideration of common concerns including physical planning, budget allocations and service delivery and for the sharing of ideas for solutions to common problems. [Resolution 27709, Attachment A, section 2 d, 1987]

Although Resolution 27709 states that district councils shall provide a forum for consideration of common concerns and sharing of ideas, several current and past City officials involved in the establishment of the district councils indicated that the district councils were not expected to provide policy direction to the City on issues. Rather, district council meetings were intended as a place where representatives of neighborhood organization could hear about policy issues and then take these issues back to their respective organizations—providing a tool for information dissemination. In turn, the local community organizations, at their discretion, could take policy stances and attempt to directly influence city policies or decisions. This intent is reflected in Resolution 27709 Attachment A, 2 e, which states:

Neighborhood business and residential groups will continue to determine their own boundaries and will remain free to deal directly with City departments and elected officials as they have in the past.

The umbrella group – the City Neighborhood Council - was originally designed to have one business and one residential representative from each district council. This was later changed to one representative from each district council, either the chair or an alternate. In contrast to the district councils, the responsibilities assigned to the City Neighborhood Council explicitly included providing recommendations and advice to the City, and were spelled out as follows:

The responsibilities of the City Neighborhood Council shall include i) review (and) recommendations regarding City budget issues including the general fund, capital and block grant budgets and the Neighborhood Matching Fund; ii) advice on policies necessary to the effective and equitable implementation of the Neighborhood Planning and Assistance Program. [Emphasis added].

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### City Use of District Councils

City elected officials and department representatives frequently attend district council meetings to provide information and solicit feedback on City-sponsored programs or projects. District councils have been entrusted with the responsibility of ranking and

recommending top priority projects in their district for two City grant programs: the Neighborhood Matching Fund and the Neighborhood Project Fund<sup>1</sup>.

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## IV. Summary Findings and Conclusions

In current practice, participants in the district council system, including City personnel, disagree regarding several issues, including:

- The purpose of the councils,
- Who is in control of governance issues such as membership and voting,
- What kind and level of City support will be provided, and
- What district council system records must be retained by the City.

This lack of consensus raises the question: **Who is the City trying to reach through the district councils and for what purposes?** The City established district councils and the City Neighborhood Council by City Council Resolution, and provides limited staffing and funding for the district council system. While City resolutions are non-binding and the City has no formal authority over district councils, the City has exerted pressure on the district councils to increase the diversity of their membership. The City has been inconsistent in its activities by sometimes behaving as if the City has no authority, and sometimes as if it has substantial authority over district council outreach and membership, communication, and governance. This inconsistency has contributed to confusion and conflict in the system.

While it is in the mutual interest of the City and the district councils for district councils to be representative of the communities in which they are located and welcoming of various views, backgrounds, and interests, some district council members have seen the City's active role in outreach as intrusive and manipulative. To effectively achieve mutual interests the City must revisit and update the formal guidance for the district council system to clarify the roles and responsibilities of both City and citizen participants in the system. This audit identifies several improvements and recommendations to increase the effectiveness of the district council system.

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<sup>1</sup> The Neighborhood Project Fund is a shortened name for the neighborhood Street Fund/Cumulative Reserve Sub-fund (NSF/CRS) that funds street and parks projects proposed by citizens.

## V. Purpose of the Councils: District Council Roles Need Clarification

We found through our interviews with City officials and district council participants that there are conflicting understandings of the purposes and influence of the district councils. Most City officials regard them as one type of voice among many they hear from. District council participants were split in their perceptions, with some flatly stating the district councils have no power, but are valuable for networking, education and local problem solving. Other participants believed the City should give deference to district councils as representatives of large membership organizations, and the City should be more appreciative of the countless volunteer hours citizens dedicate to district councils. Many of the district councils seem to function well for information sharing, education about government and other local issues, and cooperating to address problems. However the sometimes-conflicting perceptions and lack of clear guidance regarding the role and purpose of district councils have led to problems ranging from indifference and lack of participation in some district councils to open hostility and conflict in others.

Resolutions 27709 and 28115, through Attachment A for each, loosely define the characteristics and roles for the district councils:

- They were to be made up of representatives of organizations, including:
  1. Business organizations who wish to participate
  2. Neighborhood organizations who wish to participate
  3. Other representatives, “at the discretion of the district council. The District Council will seek to reflect the geographic, racial, cultural and economic characteristics of the district.” [Quoted from Attachment A to Resolution 28115].
- Their purposes included:
  1. Consideration of common concerns including physical planning, budget allocations and service delivery,
  2. Sharing of ideas for solutions to common problems,
  3. Review of and comment on the City budget,
  4. Playing an advisory role on updates of the City’s comprehensive plan, and
  5. Reviewing and prioritizing applicants for certain City grant programs (Neighborhood Matching Fund, Neighborhood Project Funds).

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### City Officials and Citizen Participants Expressed Mixed Opinions on the Value of the District Council System

**The City Perspective:** Many City officials are not aware of the content of the founding resolutions, though there is general awareness that the district councils receive City support. Staff in City departments and elected officials find the district councils a convenient place to make contact with groups of dedicated citizens who are knowledgeable about City processes and particular neighborhood issues. Yet many City

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officials are concerned that there is little turnover among district council participants, and that they reflect the views of only a narrow segment of citizens made up primarily of Caucasian business owners and middle class residential property owners. Furthermore, several officials viewed district councils unnecessarily bureaucratic and duplicative of community council, business association, and City Neighborhood Council activities. While acknowledging the experience and knowledge-base of long time participants in the district council system City officials place district council and City Neighborhood Council input in the broader context of all citizens and groups they hear from.

**District Council Participant Perspectives:** District council participants we interviewed were mixed in their assessment of the value of the system. The district council chairs and other participants we interviewed were often much more familiar with the content of the founding resolutions than City officials. Many valued the opportunity to network and address common concerns with residential, business and other interest groups located in the same area, and to hear from invited speakers. However, we also heard complaints from some participants that the City does not seem to accord much respect to the district councils. Several participants stated “the district councils have no power.” One participant provided two examples of this lack of respect for the district councils: 1) the City’s decision not to use the district councils as the sole citizen-review mechanism to evaluate grant applications under the recent Bridging the Gap Levy and 2) failing to provide regular assistance in creating and updating district council web sites. District council participants are often active in several civic engagement groups and contribute many hours of effort to civic affairs. They provide a core group of generally well-informed citizens<sup>2</sup>.

The lack of clear, shared understanding about the role and purpose of the district councils has created some problems:

1. In 2005 through 2007 the City engaged the Southeast District Council to implement City programs and policies including the Southeast Action Agenda and the outreach process for discussions of the Community Renewal Act. These actions on the City’s part gave the impression that the district councils are agents of the City and representative of their districts. Because there was not universal support for these processes in the community, the City’s use of the district council in this way has contributed to ongoing conflict in the Southeast District. The City placed itself in the middle of these conflicts, rather than maintaining a hands-off approach where district council members settle their issues among themselves.
2. When district councils convey policy opinions, and City officials or district councils themselves characterize these opinions as a show of “broad community support” that justifies official decisions, it accords power to votes at the district councils. Some examples of this use of the district councils:

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<sup>2</sup> The Director of the Department of Neighborhoods pointed out that the request for web site upkeep service has been beyond the City’s resources.

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- Several interview subjects reported that in 2006 the City Council cited the Southeast District Council’s letter supporting detached accessory dwelling units as “broad community support” for the extremely controversial measure. This infuriated community members who opposed the measure.
- Recently a member of one district council filed a suit against their district council for falsely claiming to represent the position of all members in a City land use decision process.

In these instances district council participants perceive that they lose or gain influence with the City depending on their dominance on the district councils. This has created power struggles on some district councils, and ongoing conflict among those with differing opinions. In some instances this has caused disgruntled participants to drop away from participation in the district councils or to form separate or rival groups. Some district council representatives sit on several groups with overlapping membership (splinter groups), which can allow the same group of people to become “representatives” to the district council from multiple splinter groups. Meanwhile members of breakaway groups believe the City does not accord their group(s) the same power as the “official” district council.

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### Models Used by Other Jurisdictions

We reviewed thirty-six jurisdictions’ websites, and interviewed staff from nine of these jurisdictions including Seattle to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the range of programs used to promote neighborhood participation. The neighborhood programs we examined varied considerably in specific elements; however, we summarized them into three general categories based on the level of support the jurisdictions provide: very limited support, moderate support, and substantial support. Tables 1 and 2 below summarize the jurisdictions’ programs we reviewed.

**Very limited support jurisdictions** support individual neighborhoods to organize and communicate, including providing such tools as a registry, web site links, limited publicity, model bylaws, and in some jurisdictions limited training. These jurisdictions do not further organize groups into larger districts like Seattle, and generally leave the groups to function independently.

**Moderate support jurisdictions** provide ongoing support for neighborhood councils that are “umbrella groups” of representatives from more localized neighborhood organizations. These jurisdictions provide such things as meeting space, web site hosting, publicity, training, guidebooks, templates, administrative staffing, periodic conferences and/or social gatherings, and funding for community improvement programs such as matching grants. These jurisdictions may establish boundaries and criteria for membership, and screen groups for adherence to the criteria. However, these jurisdictions provide limited or no financial support to the councils.

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**Substantial support jurisdictions** formally appoint members to the neighborhood councils or fund elections, provide annual financial support to the councils and/or provide paid staff to the councils. In most cases, these councils use their funding and staff to supply the services noted above (meeting space, publicity, training, etc.).

**Table 1. Jurisdictions' Neighborhood Association Support Levels**

<b>Limited Support</b>	<b>Moderate Support</b>	<b>Substantial Support</b>
Albuquerque, NM	Arlington, TX	Clark County, WA
Atlanta, GA	Bellevue, WA	Honolulu, HI
Baltimore, MD	Charlotte, NC	Kansas City, KS
Columbus, OH	El Paso, TX	Los Angeles, CA
Denver, CO	Ft. Worth, TX	Minneapolis, MN
Detroit, MI	Jacksonville, FL	New York, NY
Houston, TX	Long Beach, CA	Portland, OR
Indianapolis, IN	Memphis, TN	St. Paul, MN
Miami, FL	Oklahoma City, OK	Washington, D.C.
Milwaukee, WI	Sacramento, CA	Wichita, KS
Omaha, NE	Seattle, WA	
Virginia Beach, VA	Spokane, WA	
	Tucson, AZ	
	Vancouver, WA	

Table 2 displays additional information we obtained from interviews with nine jurisdictions on full time equivalent (FTE) staff devoted to neighborhood association support and in some cases annual budget information. Of the jurisdictions we interviewed, Honolulu, Minneapolis, and Ft. Worth noted that changes to reduce the historic level and mode of funding were being considered because of the current economic downturn, and Sacramento was holding positions vacant because of budget cuts.

All the jurisdictions we reviewed support active neighborhood organizing. At all levels of support the groups face the same challenges of attracting and retaining a representative and diverse group of participants and finding ways to productively discuss controversial issues, such as the pace of a neighborhood's development.

**Table 2. Jurisdictions’ Budget & FTE for Neighborhood Association Support**

<b>Jurisdiction</b>	<b>Support</b>	<b>Annual Budget</b>	<b>FTE<sup>3</sup></b>
Clark County, WA	Substantial	\$100,000 print/mail	0.5
Ft. Worth, TX	Moderate	No information	7
Honolulu, HI	Substantial	\$900,000 + elections \$	16
Minneapolis, MN	Substantial	About \$14 million for all	9
Portland, OR	Substantial	About \$300,000 each	12.5
Sacramento, CA	Moderate	No information	8
Seattle, WA	Moderate	\$500 <sup>4</sup> each district	2.5 <sup>5</sup>
Spokane, WA	Moderate	No information	3
St. Paul, MN	Substantial	\$37,000 each	No information

Groups are often sustained by a core of citizen activists whose composition changes little over many years. This experienced and knowledgeable core group is a resource to citizens and government officials. However, this can be a barrier to new participants who may feel intimidated in the face of such long-standing relationships and expertise. A staff member of the Honolulu Neighborhood Commission Office reported that since their councils were elected they were regarded as truly representative of the citizenry, and consequently fewer polls were needed to judge citizen opinions on issues. Except for Honolulu, we did not discern notable differences in participation or influence based on the levels of support provided to neighborhood groups.

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### Conclusions from Review of Other Jurisdictions’ Neighborhood Programs

- A primary function of neighborhood participation programs is to allow communication among citizens (both residential and business) and between citizens and government, and to encourage citizens to come together for mutual problem solving.
- Many of the objectives for neighborhood participation programs are achieved with a limited or moderate level of support. Effective approaches include government-supported tools that assist local neighborhoods to organize, publicize their existence to each other, and communicate. Useful, relatively inexpensive

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<sup>3</sup> For Honolulu and Minneapolis, staff costs are included in the annual budget figure. For the other jurisdictions staff costs are in addition to the annual budget.

<sup>4</sup> Until mid-2009 this figure had been \$1,000 per district for several years. Not every district council used the funds. Several districts pooled funds in 2007 to conduct a citywide neighborhood meeting.

<sup>5</sup> The 13 Neighborhood District Coordinators from Seattle’s Department of Neighborhoods devote approximately 20 percent of their time to supporting the district councils and the City Neighborhood Council (2.5 FTE). However, they spend substantial additional time supporting smaller, more local neighborhood organizations including local community councils, chambers of commerce, ethnic associations and issue-focused groups.

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tools include guidelines and templates, web linking or even web pages, and occasional all-group gatherings. A cost-effective method used by Sacramento to disseminate government-related information to citizens is to invite all citizens to regular (e.g. bimonthly) meetings held throughout the city where the city presents information and solicits feedback about pending projects or active issues in the area. An alternative method for government to communicate with citizens is to organize advisory groups to address specific issues such as crime, neighborhood planning, transportation, and capital projects. Seattle uses this approach frequently.

- The City’s objectives for the district council system include creating a partnership between the City and its neighborhoods and strengthening and coordinating City departments’ responses to neighborhood problems and requests for help. These objectives require the moderate level of investment because they require dedicated city staff time.
- Establishing umbrella groups whose members are ostensibly representing other groups has been associated with problems in several jurisdictions we interviewed including challenges to the legitimacy of the representative framework, lack of diversity and turnover among the members, and burnout caused by participating in multiple layers of groups (e.g., the local group, the umbrella group, and potentially additional meetings for officers or committee work).
- When government is the convener of the group, participants may presume the group is government-sponsored and that government has an ongoing duty to provide support for the group.
- The best approaches leverage the natural interest of participants, make pertinent information easy to access, facilitate dialogue, and provide for synthesizing the diversity of opinion in communications to decision makers.

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### Recommendations

1. **Renew the Citizen Engagement Process:** The City should consider conducting a renewed citizen-engagement process to more clearly define the role of the district councils and the appropriate relationship between the City and the district councils. The City should clarify how it uses the district councils and the City’s expectations, if any, in exchange for City support. Determine whether they are “city-sponsored” (like a City-appointed board or commission) or merely city-supported, independent groups. These determinations should address whether district councils and the City Neighborhood Council are subject to City regulations regarding ethics, open public meetings, and maintenance of public records. Consider a change in the names “district council” and “City Neighborhood Council.” The use of the term “council” suggests a representative body with some degree of authority. This may be contributing to the confusion about the role and purpose of the district council system.

2. **Provide Additional Guidelines:** If the City determines that a role of the district councils includes providing policy opinions and/or recommendations, consider developing additional guidelines to insure that all community participants' voices are included. Such guidelines might include identifying the groups participating in the district council vote on the issue, reflecting all viewpoints, and noting the tally of opinions on all sides of an issue. An alternative would be to recommend that the district councils be the place to gather information to bring back to the underlying membership groups, and to have those underlying groups communicate positions to the City.
3. **Realign District Council Responsibilities with Desired Role:** The City should align district council responsibilities with the freshly defined role. The City should assure itself that groups performing a function for the City, such as prioritizing applications for City grants, meet City standards for representation, inclusivity and diversity. (The City currently structures its final recommending-bodies for funding decisions with some positions appointed by the City to ensure diversity and inclusion. If the City renews the guidance for the district council system, it will need to take this factor into account.)
4. **Avoid Characterizing District Councils as Representative Bodies:** City officials should avoid characterizing district council opinions as representative of the broad community, since members are not elected but are self-appointed volunteers.

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## VI. Who Is in Control? City Involvement in District Council Governance Contributes to Conflict

The City has sent mixed messages about the nature of its authority for district council governance issues such as membership policies, conduct of meetings, voting rights, and the responsibilities of member-representatives. In recent years City officials have become more aggressive in efforts to make the district councils more inclusive and have engaged at least one district council (Southeast) in partnership to further City policy objectives; but the City has kept a hands-off attitude when conflict has erupted at meetings. This mixed behavior has left some district council participants with unfulfilled expectations for City intervention, and others resenting the City's intervention.

*City influences district council membership.* In accordance with current Mayor Nickels' Race and Social Justice Initiative and his Public Outreach Policy, the Neighborhood District Coordinators' performance standards charge them with helping the district councils become more diverse and representative. Some District Coordinators have

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sought out groups to bolster participation and in some cases have encouraged leaders who shared this goal to join the district council. Some of these new member organizations have not met the membership guidelines set forth in the bylaws of the district councils. For example, granting single non-profit agencies voting membership on the district council as “representatives” of the people they serve has created particular controversy, especially in the Southeast District, though some district councils welcome nonprofits as voting members. Because of City actions that appear to accord power to district council votes (noted above), some former and current participants perceive that membership is “stacked” by the City to ensure votes from the district council that support the Mayor’s programs. Some participants complained of conflicts of interest when nonprofit organizations vote at the district council and also receive regular funding from the City. Especially for the Southeast District Council, this intervention by the City in governance of the district council has contributed to ongoing conflict in the district.

*City refrains from handling conflict at meetings.* The Neighborhood District Coordinators and City Councilmembers we interviewed uniformly reported they believe it would be inappropriate for them to intervene if and when conflict arises at district council meetings. In this respect they regard the district councils as self-governing. At the same time, many participants reported an expectation that City officials who witness uncivil or threatening behavior at district council meetings should intervene to address the behavior. It appears that this issue was made more confusing because City involvement in adding members to the Southeast district council was one of the issues that led to open conflict, so the limits of the City’s responsibility were unclear. A study of Los Angeles’ extensive neighborhood association system found that a friendly, non-conflictive atmosphere at meetings is one of the most important factors potential participants consider in choosing whether or not to participate. Seattle’s district council system does not have effective mechanisms to address this important element of citizen participation, though the City provided \$100,000 for neighborhood leadership training in 2008.

*The City and many district councils do not address lack of communication between representatives and their organizations.* The resolutions establishing the district councils state that members will be representatives of neighborhood organizations. Some district council bylaws address the responsibilities of member-representatives to exchange information with and to duly represent the wishes of their member groups. But most district councils do not address the responsibilities of member-representatives. We observed at least one meeting of each district council and the City Neighborhood Council. We saw very little indication of two-way communication between member-representatives and their member groups. Interviews with district council representatives confirm that communication with their “represented” groups is inconsistent, irregular and in some cases nonexistent. Furthermore, the City’s efforts to increase the diversity of membership have not addressed what it means to become a member-representative. Both district council participants and City officials appear to behave as if being named a representative is sufficient to empower a member-representative to act as a representative whether or not there is two-way communication with their “constituents” on issues they vote on.

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*City involvement is central to some district councils' existence.* We found no documents that suggest a City role in district council governance. Former City officials and citizen activists who participated in the founding of the district councils reported that the district councils were intended to remain an independent, grass-roots organization receiving some basic City support in the form of administrative assistance from the City's Office (now Department) of Neighborhoods. Consistent with this understanding, each district council adopted unique bylaws, and there is some variation in the types of support they request and receive from the City. However, some district councils rely heavily on the City's Neighborhood District Coordinator. In one case, a district coordinator reported that the district council did not meet during the time of the district coordinator vacancy.

As noted above, Resolution 27709 that established the district councils provided only broad statements about membership and purpose. In subsequent years the City intervened to update the guidance in response to lack of participation.

- Resolution 28115 stated the City's support for increasing the diversity of participation on the district councils.
- Resolution 28948 in 1994 changed the representative structure of the City Neighborhood Council because of lack of participation. Instead of two representatives from each district council (one business and one residential representative) it became just one representative (the chair of each district council).

Governance practices vary among the district councils. All district councils have bylaws that specify having elected officers. District councils employ a mix of formal (Roberts Rules) and informal approaches to conducting meetings. There are two areas we observed where conflict has been particularly heated in some district councils: 1) voting on policy opinions and 2) membership.

- *Voting practices.* Some district councils have guidelines about voting on policy positions, others have none. Some have a policy that the District Council can issue a policy opinion if a simple majority of a quorum supports the position. Others specify that all points of view will be conveyed in any policy opinion along with who voted for each position. A few district councils explicitly avoid taking positions (e.g., the Northwest and Southwest district councils) and find the most value in addressing only those issues where they can work collaboratively with unanimous support.
- *Membership rules* vary widely among the district councils, but have become a point of controversy, particularly in the Southeast District Council. Because of the controversy in Southeast, the City Neighborhood Council suggested in its April 2008 meeting that each district council discuss the issue of legitimate membership. Some district councils have specific membership rules such as requiring membership organizations to have a minimum number of participants; not allowing a member to be counted towards the membership-count of more than

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one member group; and disallowing participation by political or service groups. Most specify that no single business or organization can be a member (leading to the controversy over the membership of single non-profit agencies). Most, but not all, specify that the organizations sending representatives to district councils must hold at least one open public meeting a year, have bylaws, and elect officers.

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### Recommendations

5. **Clarify the City's role in the governance of the district councils.** The City should address the following questions, and specify the extent of the City's involvement in each:
  - Should district councils be considered City organizations or independent, self-governing organizations?
  - Should the City influence the membership of the district councils?
  - Should the City enforce district council bylaws?
  - Should the City have a role in the conduct of the meetings?
  
6. **Establish appropriate conditions for the City's continued support of the district councils.** For example, if district councils fail to attract diverse membership, or if district council members fail to act as representatives of the member groups who send them, the City should attach consequences such as removing City support services.
  
7. **City should explore ways to help councils reduce and/or handle conflict at meetings.** Because diverse, broad citizen participation is one of the City's goals in supporting the district council system, the City should consider ways to support district councils in reducing conflict at meetings. If the City continues to fund leadership training for community leaders, the City should specify that part of the training address managing and reducing conflict at meetings.

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## VII. The City's Variable Support of District Councils Leaves Participants Confused about City's Commitment

The City Council resolutions that established the district councils and City Neighborhood Council provide broad and somewhat vague guidance regarding City support for the district council system. Attachment A to resolutions 27709 and 28815 say the City's Office (now Department) of Neighborhoods shall perform four functions related to the district councils:

1. Staff the district councils and the City Neighborhood Council,
2. Provide meeting space,
3. Provide budget information by neighborhood, and

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4. Keep a mailing list of participating organizations.

Over the years the City has been consistent in providing meeting space for district council and City Neighborhood Council meetings. The City has been inconsistent in keeping mailing lists of participating organizations, and has abandoned the idea of providing budget information by neighborhood as impracticable.

The City's Neighborhood District Coordinators are inconsistent in the staffing services offered and supplied to the councils, and there is no clear statement of what duties are included in "staffing". Some District Coordinators provide agendas, meeting notes/minutes, and publicity, and also arrange speakers; some provide only some of these services. Some district councils get help with websites, but this service has not been universal. The lack of clear City guidelines about the kind of administrative support the City will provide to the district councils has led to some unmet expectations and resentment from district council and City Neighborhood Council officers and members about the level of support they can be expect.

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### Recommendation

#### **8. Clarify the intended level of staff support to District Councils and other groups.**

Clarify the kind of staffing to be provided by the City to district councils and other groups. The kind of support the City provides should optimize the City's objectives for the district councils, for example:

- If education and information-sharing are primary City policy goals for district councils, City assistance in the form of web site creation and updating would be a strong support for the networking and education function. This may reach a far broader citizen audience, and allow two-way communication, without requiring attendance at evening meetings, which is a barrier to participation for many citizens.
- If the City believes face-to-face networking is an important goal, consider multiple ways of achieving this. Several jurisdictions reported that annual or semiannual neighborhood-oriented events were more successful at drawing large, diverse groups than monthly meetings.
- If one City objective is to disseminate information to citizens, consider well-publicized, regularly scheduled meetings where anyone can come, as Sacramento does.

## VIII. The City Needs to Retain More District Council Records

As part of this audit we requested documentation of the history of the district councils such as rosters of past board members, agendas and minutes. Department of Neighborhoods staff is inconsistent about retaining and storing these kinds of documents. The City's resolutions do not address this responsibility. According to the Washington State Law regarding records retention, documents concerning City operations that are submitted to the City or that come into the City's possession, regardless of their source, become public records and should be stored and retained in accordance with Revised Code of Washington Title 40. The Washington Administrative Code, section 434-610-020 defines a public record as follows:

WAC 434-610-020: "Public record" defined.

"Public records" means any paper, correspondence, completed form, record book, photograph, map, or drawing, regardless of physical form or characteristics, and including records stored on magnetic, electronic, or optical media, and including all copies thereof, that have been made by any agency or received by it in connection with the transaction of public business. And includes any writing containing information relating to the conduct of government or the performance of government or proprietary function prepared, owned, used, or retained by the state or local agency regardless of physical form or characteristics. [emphasis added]

Some of the documents related to the district councils also have historic value and may be of interest to the City's Archivist for permanent preservation.

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### Recommendations:

9. **DON Should Continue Efforts to Comply with State's document retention laws.** The Department of Neighborhoods needs to ensure all staff members understand their responsibilities to comply with RCW Title 40, especially with respect to documents they receive copies of in association with their work supporting the district councils. The Department of Neighborhoods is aware of this problem and has an item on their current work plan to develop an improved records retention schedule and monitoring the process.
  
10. **DON Should Develop a Record Management and Retention Plan.** The Department of Neighborhoods should make a plan for managing district council records that are shared with or copied to the department, and consult with the City Archivist about records that should be submitted for archiving. The Department of

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Neighborhoods is aware of this problem and has an item on their current work plan to develop an improved records retention schedule and monitoring the process.