Neighborhood Associations and Their Relevance to Section 3.96

I am honored to have been able to serve on the 3.96 Committee for the past few months.  I have been impressed with the knowledge and experience that committee members have contributed to the process.

ONI was founded to recognize and facilitate Neighborhood Associations' participation in City government. Neighborhood Associations rose out of grassroots activism. In the early years of land use planning, urban renewal and slum clearing were threats to low income neighborhoods, communities of color, and immigrants. Building freeways was thought as a solution to everything, even at the cost of tens of thousands of housing units. The car was paramount. Downtown was dying as people moved to the suburbs. Historic buildings were torn down and replaced by parking lots. Portland’s air quality was bad from the traffic and congestion. Unchecked development was killing our City.

In the 1970’s Neighborhood groups successfully fought the Mt. Hood Freeway and a huge parking garage where Pioneer Place now stands. Neighborhoods Activists blocked the expansion of Harbor Drive, which separated downtown from the river.  The Harbor Drive freeway was removed and replaced with Waterfront Park.  The Mt. Hood freeway would have cleared a large section of the east side for hundreds of blocks. Hospital expansion in NW Portland was clearing hundreds of units of low cost housing until neighborhood activists successfully fought for a Hospital Master Plan to preserve housing.  The Downtown Plan, adopted in 1972, outlined a path to the walkable downtown we have today.

In 1973 Oregon adopted the nation’s first comprehensive land use planning strategy. Urban growth boundaries were established around cities to preserve farmland and forests and to concentrate development in urban areas. Every jurisdiction within the state was required to produce a land use plan that allowed for development of housing, industry, commerce, transportation infrastructure, and preservation of open space for agriculture, forestry, and recreation. Citizens were tasked with creating these plans with support from their respective jurisdictions. Neighborhood groups under various names are responsible for shaping our City as well as our State. Neighborhood Associations were one of the first places women’s voices could be heard on equal footing with men’s.

Neighborhood associations are still very much active in land use planning and all other issues of livability within their geographic boundaries, including transportation, safety, air quality, and access to open space. NA also partner with other groups and NA where there is mutual benefit.  The Pearl District NA with OTCT formed a Joint Task Force on Homelessness. They are working with private developers on the successful opening of the Navigation Center under the Broadway Bridge.  NA also worked with the Clean Air Initiative to get proper pollution controls in place for Bullseye Glass. In my neighbor-hood we are partnering with Sylvan Highlands NA, Metro, The Oregon Rail Heritage Center, and other private groups to restore the full run of the Washington Park Zoo Railway.

It is important to give other grassroots organizations an equal voice in City governance. This should not be done by eliminating or diminishing NA structure. The ONI Standards help NA be transparent, accessible, and democratic. Civic Life would be better served by supporting collaboration and mentorship between all citizen participation groups. It would be helpful for NA to have a list of citizen groups within Neighborhood Association boundaries. Civic Life could help facilitate outreach between all citizen groups.

Some members of the 3.96 Committee and some City staff have fallen into stereotyping Neighborhood Associations and their members. This stereotyping is being used to dismiss the concerns of NA regarding open meeting rules and other ONI Standards that help NA function effectively. I understood that the 3.96 Committee was formed to update code language to be more reflective of the ways Portlanders organize and communicate with each other and City government. Neighborhood Associations represent the largest number Portlanders. There is a developed communication structure between NA and the City. This is a resource that can be expanded to include more groups. By not listening to the NA about what is necessary for their continued success, City staff and members of the 3.96 Committee are going against the mission statement of Civic Life.



Hilary Sundeleaf Mackenzie