



September 7, 2019

To: Mayor Ted Wheeler
Commissioner Chloe Eudaly
Commissioner Nick Fish
Commissioner Amanda Fritz
Commissioner Joann Hardesty

Cc: City Auditor Mary Hull Caballero

Dear Mayor and Commissioners,

On behalf of the Laurelhurst Neighborhood Association (LNA), **I request you vote “no” on the proposed changes to City Code Chapter 3.96** governing the Office of Community and Civic Life (OCCL).

The Neighborhood Association System Serves Our Place-Based Communities.

Portland is ranked 5th nationally in volunteering among cities.¹ Our 40-year old Neighborhood Association System is one of the primary ways that Portlanders volunteer to help, improve, and represent the communities that form around the places where we live and the people who we live among: our neighborhoods and our neighbors. Portland has about 95 recognized neighborhood associations organized in 7 district coalitions.

The LNA and its associated volunteers contribute many thousands of annual hours to: maintaining Laurelhurst Park, the Laurelhurst Arches and other public places in the neighborhood; raising funds for community needs including local schools; preparing for civil emergencies through our Neighborhood Emergency Team; bringing the community together by organizing or informing of promoting neighborhood-wide picnics, garage sales, block parties and play streets, tours and events; planting trees and neighborhood clean-ups; providing input to city bureaus on local permitting, development, and demolitions; improving pedestrian safety; and more. Most recently, the LNA formally supported a large affordable housing development by Laurelhurst and our volunteers are developing an elder support program to help senior citizens age in place.

In a city government lacking district council elections, neighborhood associations are the only form of place-based representation that many Portlanders have.

¹ Volunteering In America, <https://www.nationalservice.gov/serve/via/cities>

City Auditor Recommended Improving OCCL, Not Dismantling The Neighborhood Association System.

The City Auditor examined OCCL in 2016.² The Auditor's report identified significant deficiencies in OCCL's operation, oversight, accountability and governing code, and recommended improvements to OCCL's services to both the Neighborhood Association System and to identity-based communities. The Auditor's did not recommend that the Neighborhood Association System be dismantled, but that is what OCCL is seeking to do.

The Code Changes Will Dismantle The Neighborhood Association System.

Current Code 3.96 (attached) establishes the Neighborhood Association System and OCCL's duties:

1. Code 3.96.010 establishes Portland's Neighborhood Association System and establishes OCCL as the city bureau responsible for the system.
2. Code 3.96.030 establishes neighborhood associations and their role in Portland's planning and budget process, and standards for city recognition of neighborhood associations. These standards include open elections, decisions by board vote, public meetings, published minutes, non-discrimination, and disabled access - in short, good and transparent civic practice.³
3. Code 3.96.040 establishes district coalitions and their role in training and supporting neighborhood associations and promoting public participation.
4. Code 3.96.050 requires city agencies to notify neighborhood associations of planning actions, to include neighborhood associations in planning, and to notify neighborhood associations of pending decisions.
5. Code 3.96.060 requires OCCL to assist neighborhood associations and district coalitions, be an information source for neighborhood associations, establish standards for neighborhood associations and district coalitions, and promote public involvement in the Neighborhood Association System.

Proposed Code 3.96 (attached) eliminates all existing code relating to the Neighborhood Association System, neighborhood associations and district coalitions. The proposed code:

1. Will not provide any standards for neighborhood associations to meet in order to be recognized by OCCL.
2. Will not protect neighborhood associations from being stripped of recognition at the Director's discretion.
3. Will not provide, establish or state any civic role for neighborhood associations or district coalitions, recognized or not.
4. Will not require OCCL to provide any service or assistance to neighborhood associations or district coalitions.
5. Will not require city agencies to notify neighborhood associations of plans or decisions.

The OCCL Commissioner and Director claim that "nothing will change" for neighborhood associations. Granted, they cannot force Laurelhurst residents to disband the LNA. But their proposed code eliminates all roles of the LNA and other neighborhood associations in Portland's civic life, and all of OCCL's obligations to neighborhood associations. Under proposed Code 3.96, Portlanders can still try to have neighborhood associations, but Portland won't have a Neighborhood Association System.

² <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/auditservices/article/597834>

³ <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/civic/40260>

OCCL's Code Process Was Opaque, Excluded NAs, And Biased.

The LNA and other neighborhood associations were not notified of the code revision process.⁴ That failure violated city code 3.96.050. Neighborhood associations were not meaningfully represented in the advisory committee selected by the OCCL Director.⁵ A recent Oregonian article, citing internal communications by OCCL and comission staff, suggests the code revision process was influenced by bias against Portland residents who volunteer with neighborhood associations.⁶

The Proposed Code Fails To Clearly Establish OCCL's Responsibilities And Duties.

The proposed code is effectively a “vision statement”. It fails as actual operative city code governing a bureau.

Proposed Code 3.96.040 and 3.96.050 are an extraordinarily expansive listing of aspirational goals, in language so expansive and vague that OCCL will not actually be obligated to do anything in particular. The code:

1. Does not require OCCL to provide any particular benefit or service to any particular community groups.
2. Does not establish any standards for determining which community groups will receive benefits or recognition.
3. Does not allow OCCL to be held accountable to deliver any particular result or maintain any particular defined program.

The code will vest broad discretion in the Director and Commissioner to expend OCCL’s \$14 million budget without accountability or council-approved guidelines. City bureaus should operate under a code establishing clearly defined duties and responsibilities. This code will exacerbate, not address, the deficiencies identified in the Auditor’s Report.

⁴ Yohannes Winta, Policy Advisor for Commissioner Eudaly, confirmed to two members of the LNA board that OCCL never sent notice to neighborhood associations of the code revision process.

⁵ Of the 25 persons on the committee, only 4 had previously been on the board of any neighborhood association.

⁶ <https://www.oregonlive.com/portland/2019/08/change-to-portland-neighborhood-groups-is-stalled-records-show.html>

The Proposed Code 3.96 Changes Should Be Rejected

On behalf of the Laurelhurst Neighborhood Association, I request that City Council:

- 1) **Reject the proposed changes to Code 3.96.**
- 2) **Require OCCL to carry out its established duties to maintain and support Portland's Neighborhood Association System.**
- 3) **Reject future changes to the code unless developed through a new, transparent, inclusive, unbiased process with new leadership and a new advisory group that fully represents neighborhood associations.**
- 4) **Direct OCCL to improve its services to all of Portland's communities including both place (neighborhood)-based and identity-based associations.**

Sincerely,

Jeff Martin
President, Laurelhurst Neighborhood Association

Authorized by unanimous vote of the LNA board on August 13, 2019,