



The League of Women Voters of Portland

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DATE: July 16, 2019

TO: Code 3.96 Committee
Office of Community and Civic Life Director, Suk Rhee
Commissioner Chloe Eudaly

CC: Mayor Ted Wheeler
Commissioners Fish, Fritz, and Hardesty

FROM: League of Women Voters of Portland
Debbie Kaye, President
Debbie Aiona, Action Committee Chair

RE: **Civic Life Code Change Project**

The League of Women Voters of Portland recently became aware of the Code 3.96 Code Change Project and appreciates the opportunity to provide a recommendation for next steps. The League first studied Portland's Neighborhood Associations in 1973 and completed an updated two-part study in 2006. League members developed a detailed position derived from the study on which we base our comments to your committee. The position states that the structure of the grassroots, independent Neighborhood Association system, effectively supported by the City through coalition offices or otherwise, has "the potential for serving the public good by providing important opportunities for civic participation and improving neighborhood livability."

A July 10, 2019 [Oregonian story](#) indicated that a number of community members active in their neighborhood associations were not sufficiently aware of the Code 3.96 Committee's work and do not adequately understand the ramifications of the recommendations. This possibly may be true for other residents. Moreover, in our review of the materials on the website, we came away with a number of unanswered questions, including those below, and are unsure what these changes will mean for the residents of Portland.

The League recommends that once the Code 3.96 Committee determines its proposal is ready for public review, it should schedule one or more public forums to address questions and accept comments and suggestions from interested community members. The committee can use

that feedback to consider making adjustments to the proposal before sending it to City Council, if warranted. This would require extending the timeline, but would have the advantage of delivering a more fully developed proposal to City Council. It is hard to tell from the initial code language available on the website what the proposed changes will mean for Neighborhood Associations and other community organizations.

The draft code language raised some questions the League encourages you to consider:

1. The intention of the City's current Neighborhood Association system is to give every resident of Portland the opportunity to participate in city land-use decisions. This is a requirement of Oregon's Statewide Planning Goals and Guidelines: Goal 1: Citizen Involvement. How will Portland residents be given the opportunity to participate in all phases of the planning process, as required by our state land-use laws?
2. Neighborhood Associations are required to hold open meetings, provide public notice, and post agendas and minutes. This is supposed to give community members who do not have time or do not choose to participate on a regular basis access to the information they need about how these associations, which are recognized by the City, are acting in the community interest and how the community can provide input. If these requirements that promote transparency are no longer required or effective, then what will be required for community groups to be officially recognized by the City? How will the public be provided avenues to stay informed and participate in a way that ensures a conduit for public input?
3. We understand the existing contracts district coalitions have with the City may be reconfigured and other entities could be chosen to replace them sometime in the future. If that is the case, will those entities provide services to Neighborhood Associations that are similar to the services provided by the district coalition offices?

The League places a high priority on effective public participation and transparency. The League also recognizes that Neighborhood Associations should not be the only avenue for civic engagement with Portland's government. If the current system isn't working for community members, the League is interested in understanding why and how new systems would be better.

In light of the growing public awareness of the proposed changes, the lack of clarity about how those changes will affect community involvement, and the benefits of presenting a well-designed proposal to City Council, we urge you to take the time to arrange opportunities for the public to offer its feedback and suggestions for your consideration.