



The League of Women Voters of Portland

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DATE: November 12, 2019

TO: Mayor Ted Wheeler
City Commissioners Eudaly, Fish, Fritz, and Hardesty

FROM: League of Women Voters of Portland
Debbie Kaye, president
Debbie Aiona and Carol Cushman, Action Committee

RE: City of Portland Civic Engagement: Code Chapter 3.96

The League of Women Voters of Portland (League) promotes inclusive, active, and informed participation in government. In response to member and community interest, the League first studied the Portland neighborhood association system in 1973. We completed a two-year follow-up study in 2006.

We support the goals of greater inclusivity and improvements to the City's civic engagement programs and acknowledge that City Code Chapter 3.96 would benefit from an overhaul that recognizes the broad responsibilities assigned to the Office of Community and Civic Life (Civic Life). However, it is premature to replace the existing Code Chapter 3.96 language describing the current structure without offering a suitable alternative for consideration. In the absence of a thoroughly articulated replacement, the City will be left with an unacceptable vacuum in its civic engagement structure.

The League supports the requirement in the resolution for a multi-bureau work group charged with providing recommendations for City bureaus' civic engagement practices and methods, and cross-referenced responsibilities for public involvement between the bureaus and Civic Life. It is essential that those work group meetings be open to the public for observation. In our experience, processes of such intense public interest benefit from informed and accessible public participation. By listening to the discussions and understanding how the work group arrives at its conclusions, interested community members will be better able to evaluate and respond to the work group's recommendations.

The League urges City Council to **require** a thorough public process as a follow-up to the multi-bureau work group and stakeholder engagement effort. The follow-up process should include a broad group of Portlanders experienced with inclusive civic engagement. The community group should be given the time and staff support it needs to reimagine a system that establishes clearly articulated roles for the City and recognized organizations. This updated approach should recognize both geographic and non-geographic interests and broaden accessibility to information and civic involvement.

In addition, we believe that the new system should define criteria for City recognition and the rights and responsibilities of organizations wishing to be recognized as participating members of the City's civic engagement programs. It should clarify the kinds of City decisions in which recognized organizations will be invited to participate and how Civic Life and other bureaus will support their participation and their contributions to broad community livability. Civic Life also should be charged with continuing to expand the depth and breadth of organizations engaged in city decision-making.

Finally, expanding the number of recognized organizations will mean a greater need for City support. The work group, community group, and Civic Life should examine what a more robust civic engagement system will cost.

Thank you for providing the public the opportunity to offer feedback on this project. As an organization that places a high value on meaningful and inclusive public participation, the League believes it is of the utmost importance to continue the process. It will take more time, work, and community involvement to design an updated civic engagement system that brings more voices to the table and gives both the public and the city the certainty of a clearly articulated program. Until that new system has been presented to the public for its consideration, the existing Chapter 3.96 should remain in place.