

# From Neighborhood Association System to Participatory Democracy Broadening and Deepening Public Involvement in Portland, Oregon

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Citywide neighborhood systems are powerful public involvement tools, but even the most developed neighborhood systems struggle to involve the full diversity of people in a community. Portland, Oregon, has earned a national reputation for its strong tradition of neighborhood involvement and a culture of participatory democracy. However, in recent years many Portlanders have felt left out or disconnected from civic life and local decision making.

In 2005, Portland began a comprehensive review of its thirty-five-year-old neighborhood association system. This process—known as Community Connect—assessed the system’s strengths and weaknesses and sought ways to “strengthen involvement in Portland’s communities, create a welcoming environment for public participation, and reinvigorate the partnership between community and government” (Community Connect, 2008, p. 5). This effort especially focused on how to involve groups in the community that traditionally had not been involved, particularly people of color and members of Portland’s growing immigrant and refugee community. Community Connect gathered input from a variety of individuals and groups in the community and from city government leaders and staff. The result was creation of a comprehensive, five-year strategic plan to dramatically improve public involvement in Portland.

This new strategic direction, combined with significant additional funding, allowed the City of Portland’s Office of Neighborhood Involvement (ONI) to join with neighborhoods and community-based organizations to implement a range of new initiatives and programs. One of the most important advances so far has been development of new partnerships with groups that serve people of color and

immigrants and refugees. These groups are strengthening their relationships with each other, with neighborhood association leaders, and with city government.

Portland’s experience can offer some valuable insights and lessons to communities that want to increase public involvement and strengthen participatory democracy. This article presents background on Portland’s community engagement system, describes the recent system assessment and new programs, and lays out important lessons learned.

## Origins of Portland’s Neighborhood System

In 1974, the Portland City Council created Portland’s formal system of neighborhood associations. Today the system includes ninety-five neighborhood associations, which cover nearly the entire territory of the city. The neighborhood associations are divided into seven coalition areas. Neighborhood district offices in each coalition offer technical assistance and community organizing support to their neighborhoods. Five of the coalition offices are independent nonprofits run by boards of neighborhood association representatives, and two are run by city staff. The coalition offices receive the majority of their funding from ONI (prior to 2006–07, this totaled about \$1.2 million per year). In addition to the neighborhood program, ONI also administers other community-related programs: Elders in Action, the Disability Program, Crime Prevention, Graffiti Abatement, Liquor License Notification, the Mediation Program, and others.

In the 1970s and 1980s, community engagement had strong support from Portland city government leaders and staff. ONI (then ONA, the Office of Neighborhood Associations) helped community

members create new neighborhood associations. The city had many opportunities for people to get involved. Nearly all city agencies had budget advisory committees that involved community members in setting budget and program priorities. Neighborhoods could identify and propose capital improvements through a formal “neighborhood needs” process. Planners from the Portland Bureau of Planning worked with community members to create formal neighborhood plans across the city. In the late 1980s, Jeffrey Berry and other researchers from Tufts University identified Portland as one of five cities that were national models of participatory democracy. During the same period, Robert Putnam gathered data that identified Portland as one city in which community involvement was increasing, while it was declining in nearly all other U.S. cities.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Portland’s community engagement system began to erode. New city council members did not have the same strong understanding of and support for community involvement. Oregon voters approved property tax limitations that began to limit local government funding. Funding for Portland’s neighborhood system stagnated even as the population continued to expand and become increasingly diverse. Many of the signature programs lauded by the Tufts University research team were ended, including bureau advisory committees, the neighborhood needs process, and neighborhood planning. Political leaders began to reorient ONI’s focus away from active community empowerment and more toward delivering direct city services and serving the public involvement needs of elected officials and city agencies.

Conflict increased as community activists and city government officials battled over a number of high-profile community projects. City officials complained that neighborhood associations were too insular and reactive. Neighborhood activists complained that the city increasingly was shutting the public out of important decisions. Other community groups complained that neighborhood associations

had too much power and that neither city government nor the neighborhood associations listened to them.

In 2004, Mayor Tom Potter was elected—with widespread grassroots support—on a platform of reengaging Portlanders with their city government. Mayor Potter committed to creating a culture of partnership between city government and the community. During his four years in office, Potter initiated a range of new community involvement initiatives and programs. One of these initiatives was a major review of Portland’s community engagement system, known as Community Connect.

### **Portland System’s Strengths and Challenges**

Portland’s community engagement system has many strengths and many challenges. Neighborhood association activists continue to put in thousands of volunteer hours doing good work on community projects and neighborhood cleanups, producing and distributing neighborhood newsletters, and engaging with city government on a range of city projects and policies. The neighborhood system goes on being a training ground for new leaders. The City of Portland’s ongoing funding for the community involvement system has been part of the city’s long-time commitment to public involvement.

At the same time, some who say that neighborhood associations are too dominated by homeowners and people who are white and middle class have criticized the neighborhood system. Others say neighborhood associations do not reach out enough to their communities. They complain that the meetings are not inviting to newcomers and focus too much on land use issues, and not enough on important social issues, events to allow people to meet and network, and fun hands-on projects.

Portland has changed since the neighborhood system was first created in 1975. The city, which historically has been very white, is growing increasingly

diverse. Steve Johnson's research shows that the height of Portland's neighborhood system's influence was in the 1970s and 1980s, when the city was much more homogeneous. The number of immigrants and refugees moving to Portland surged in the 1990s. Today, many immigrants and refugees from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the former Soviet Union are increasing the richness and diversity of the community. Also, the number of community organizations and interest groups in Portland has grown dramatically since the 1970s; neighborhood associations today are just one of many vehicles in which community members can choose to become involved.

Groups representing people of color and immigrants and refugees say that neighborhood associations do not talk about the issues they care about. They also say Portlanders tend to see their city as very progressive, with a strong focus on sustainability and environmental and lifestyle values. But many people of color in Portland still see the existence of a subtle racism that leads people in Portland to ignore or minimize the needs and perspectives of diverse groups in the community.

Despite Portland's national reputation for openness in government, city government has a reputation among some community members of not being willing and able to engage effectively with the public. Portland's unique commission form of government disperses executive power among the city council members and allows individual city agencies greater latitude for experimentation. However, this also makes it difficult to ensure consistency in the quality of community involvement across city government. The quality of involvement processes varies from one city agency to another and within agencies. Many city officials and staff are leery of involving the public and are not familiar with and experienced in using effective public involvement strategies and tools. People are not likely to stay involved if they do not see their involvement making a difference. One cultural competency expert in

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### Community Connect

In 2005, Mayor Potter initiated a major review of Portland's community engagement system. The mayor charged the group with revitalizing the system, with special attention to involving traditionally underengaged groups in the community. This process, known as Community Connect, involved a diverse, eighteen-member volunteer group that worked for more than two years. The group described the existing engagement system, reviewed models from other communities, and engaged in extensive community outreach to identify obstacles to greater involvement and solicit ideas for needed changes. One best practice used effectively by Community Connect was minigrants, which engaged community groups in hosting focus groups or conducting outreach among their constituents to gather input for the process.

Community Connect members achieved some important insights. They determined that not everyone defines community by their physical surroundings. Many people find their primary community by joining with people having a common identity (as in cultural and ethnic-based groups) or common interests (as through churches, PTAs, environmental

groups, social justice groups, and so on). An engagement system that relies solely on geographic neighborhood associations likely will miss engaging many people in the community. Viewing the neighborhood association system as an important foundation but not the full structure needed has been a major shift for many neighborhood leaders in Portland.

Community Connect identified other needs. Its members found that the city was obliged to reach out to people who are not engaged, get them out of their homes, and involve them in some aspect of civic life. Once people are engaged, they need help developing leadership and participation skills and building strong and effective community organizations. Community organizations must also help connecting with one another. Community leaders have to understand and support expanding involvement to include more groups and have the skills to build these relationships. City government culture needs to change to be more willing and able to work with the community. Formal mechanisms are required to ensure that community members have a voice in important local decision-making processes.

In January 2008, the Community Connect members presented to the city council their final report along with a “comprehensive road map for strengthening Portland’s civic life” known as the Five-Year Plan to Increase Community Involvement. The group’s recommendations included thirty strategies grouped in three goal areas:

1. Increase the number and diversity of people involved in their communities.
2. Strengthen community capacity.
3. Increase community impact on public decisions.

The City of Portland Office of Neighborhood Involvement began implementing many of the strategies identified by Community Connect before the report was finalized and accepted by the city council.

## Implementation

In fiscal year 2006–07, the Office of Neighborhood Involvement was funded to start a number of innovative programs to respond to Community Connect. Three consecutive years of strong funding have supported creation of a range of new programs and initiatives and the seeding of important new partnerships.

A major change was realignment of Portland’s community engagement system to support the Community Connect recommendations. Potter appointed a new ONI director who had strong experience in community empowerment and working with people of color. This new director revitalized the ONI Bureau Advisory Committee (BAC) and made it a central focus of community discussion and policy setting for the agency. ONI BAC membership historically had been made up primarily of neighborhood association representatives. The BAC members invited representatives of organizations serving people of color and immigrants and refugees to join them, and slowly, over the past three years, more and more have chosen to do so.

ONI staff and the BAC members revised ONI’s mission to embody the Community Connect goals. The new mission established that ONI’s primary purpose is community empowerment—not serving the public involvement needs of city leaders or city agencies. ONI also worked with neighborhood coalition leaders to prioritize the Community Connect goals and recommendations in ONI’s contracts that guide the work of the neighborhood coalition offices.

ONI initiated a number of new programs to strengthen the neighborhood system, including a popular neighborhood grants program. For the first time, ONI also funded leadership development, organizing, and community outreach by organizations that serve people of color and immigrants and refugees. In addition, ONI created a program dedicated to increasing the capacity of city government

staff to work effectively with community members. Additional resources were devoted to other programs, among them consulting and facilitation expertise to help resolve chronic community conflicts and encourage community dialogues on difficult issues, involvement by people with disabilities, and development of a new performance measurement system to track progress toward meeting the Community Connect goals.

The Portland City Council also created a new Public Involvement Advisory Council (PIAC) and charged the citywide group with developing public involvement guidelines and standards for city government agencies. PIAC's membership includes equal numbers of city staff and community members. The participation of city staff members in the group increases the likelihood of their future buy-in to and implementation of the group's recommendations.

All these programs and initiatives were made possible by a significant increase in city government funding for community involvement; it has totaled \$3.1 million in new funding over three years. Many of the programs included incentives to encourage collaboration and relationship building between organizations, especially between underengaged and neighborhood associations.

#### **New Programs and Funding**

The new programs and their related funding levels include those described here.

**Strengthening the Existing Neighborhood System.** Significant new resources were put into the community to strengthen Portland's existing neighborhood system:

- An additional community organizer position was created for each of the seven neighborhood district coalitions (\$700,000 over two years).
- Increased funding to support neighborhood association communications with their residents (e.g.,

newsletters, Websites, and so on; \$285,000 over three years).

- A popular Neighborhood Small Grants program was created that led to an explosion of creative projects by and between neighborhood associations and other community organizations and leveraged significant community resources (\$600,000 over three years).
- A staff person was hired at the Office of Neighborhood Involvement to lend additional support and assistance to the neighborhood system (\$93,973 for one year).
- The Neighborhood Community Engagement Initiative funded several collaborations between neighborhood district coalitions and underengaged communities (\$135,000 over three years).
- The Fund for Accessible Neighborhoods allocated funds that neighborhood district coalitions and neighborhood associations used to reduce barriers to participation in neighborhood association meetings and community events, including language translation and interpretation, child care, transportation, and ADA accessibility (\$60,000 over two years).

**Involving and Strengthening Traditionally Underengaged Groups.** For the first time, ONI also dedicated funds specifically to build leadership capacity and community organizing among people of color and immigrants and refugees in Portland. This Diversity and Civic Leadership (DCL) Program included two main elements: the Leadership Academy (\$210,000 over three years), and the Organizing Project (\$567,000 over two years).

The Leadership Academy conducted leadership training through local community organizing groups that work with people of color and immigrants and refugees. One of the Leadership Academy projects was the Pan-Immigrant Leadership and Organizing Training (PILOT) Program. The Center for Intercultural Organizing and the Latino Network each led about fifteen participants through a series of

training sessions over twelve months and then brought the groups together for additional cross-cultural training. Training topics include basics of city government, introduction to community organizing, meeting planning, turnout and facilitation, volunteer recruitment and base building, politics of oppression (poverty, class, gender, immigration status, race), power analysis, issue selection, and campaign planning.

The DCL Organizing Project included funding for community-based organizations that serve underengaged groups and that traditionally have operated in more of a service provider model. The program seeks to develop the organizations' outreach and community organizing capacity and increase participation of their constituents in civic governance. The organizations include the Urban League of Portland, Native American Youth and Family Center, Latino Network/Verde, and Immigrant Refugee Community Organization (IRCO). Engage '08 was IRCO's project under this initiative. Forty-one members of Portland's Slavic, African, and Asian immigrant and refugee communities participated in civic workshops, visited city hall, and met with government leaders. The program focused on community organizing, helping participants feel more comfortable with government and developing their leadership skills. Many participants had never engaged with government or even thought they could. Program graduates now serve on city boards and commissions and budget workgroups, and they are actively engaging with neighborhood associations and other community organizations.

#### **Additional Programs**

Other new programs include the following:

- *Public Involvement Best Practices Program.* ONI hired a staff person to strengthen the community involvement capacity within city government. In recognition that integration of a system is a two-way street, this program empowers the commu-

nity by opening the doors to city agencies. This staff person supports the new Public Involvement Advisory Council, coordinates a monthly networking meeting of city public involvement staff (the City Public Involvement Network), and advises city agency staff on public involvement processes (\$164,497 over two years).

- *Effective Engagement Solutions Program.* An ONI staff person with strong facilitation, mediation, and intercultural communication skills helps design and facilitate collaborative approaches to resolving chronic community conflicts and high-stakes community meetings, and encourages community dialogues on challenging subjects. One highly successful example is the Restorative Listening Project, which brought together members of Portland's long-time African American community with new white residents to talk about the impacts of gentrification (\$153,142 over two years).
- *Performance Measurement.* ONI hired a contractor to support development of a new performance measurement system to allow ONI to more effectively track the progress of its programs toward achieving the Community Connect goals (\$50,000 over two years).
- *Disability Program.* This program, which had been disbanded because of budget cuts in the past, was reconstituted. The Portland Citizens' Disability Advisory Committee is in the process of becoming a formal city commission, which will increase its stature and clout.

#### **Important Themes and Lessons Learned**

Portland has made significant progress in addressing the weaknesses in its community involvement system. For the first time, the city has a long-term strategic plan to broaden and deepen community involvement, especially on the part of people of color and immigrants and refugees. A recent discussion with city staff and neighborhood leaders identified some important lessons learned from Portland's recent experience.

**Reach Beyond “Geographic” Community.** Effective involvement of a broad spectrum of community members requires recognition that people define *community* in different ways. Geographically based neighborhood association systems remain the easiest place for many communities to start. However, communities also need to look at how people gather and work together and build a system that supports and involves a range of community groups. Portland is benefiting from a renewed focus on encouraging “participatory democracy”—broadening and deepening community voice in local decision making at all levels—not just maintaining a neighborhood system focused primarily on improving neighborhood livability.

**Use a Bottom-up Approach.** The City of Portland and ONI have played an important role in supporting and sometimes guiding the evolution of Portland’s community involvement system. However, ONI has been most effective when it focuses on empowerment and working collaboratively with community leaders rather than trying to impose system changes from above. In Portland, most of ONI’s resources go out into the community rather than supporting a large number of ONI staff in City Hall.

**Build Relationships and Trust on Many Levels.** You need to tackle the issues of effective engagement at multiple levels in the community and within city government. Building relationships and trust is vital. A broad, strategic, multilayered approach is required. Just a few pieces done in isolation will not work. In Portland, people of color had to work within their own groups first and then begin building relationships with one another before they were ready to begin engaging with neighborhood association leaders. Some of the biggest positive changes were the growing openness of neighborhood system leaders to seeing underengaged groups as equal and valued partners and the burgeoning number of personal relationships that are starting to bridge this previous divide. One important result has been unanimous

agreement and commitment—in the face of budget cuts—to jointly advocate for continued funding for the new system model, which includes underengaged groups and a refusal to return to the previous solely neighborhood-based system of the past.

**Be Willing to Let Your Language Evolve.** Be aware of the language you use. Terms such as “citizen involvement” can be a deterrent for immigrant and refugee community members. Also, “underrepresented” somehow focuses on the group rather than government’s responsibilities to engage them. Developing a common vocabulary or understanding of terms such as “equity” and “people’s expectations” is important.

**Acknowledge Your History of Inclusion and Exclusion, and Talk About It.** People need to move past old resentments and build trust and a sense that working together is more powerful than going it alone. Portlanders tend not to talk about race, racial issues, and ongoing inequities and inequalities. Underengaged groups have complained, rightfully, that the city bestowed formal status and funding support on neighborhood associations, which left them out. Also, city government leaders need to acknowledge years of stagnant funding for community involvement and the loss of important public input mechanisms from the 1980s. Dedicating resources to underengaged groups and talking openly about these issues is necessary in building trust.

**Use a Multipronged Approach; Build Capacity in Community and in City Government.** System change is more likely if, at the same time you are increasing capacity for involvement in the community, you increase willingness and ability among city government leaders and staff to partner with community members. If you work only on the community side, outside government, you are unlikely to make inroads into formal decision-making processes; city government may not be receptive. Direct conversation and relationship building between city staff and

community members who interact on the front lines of community involvement can help advance this effort.

**A Strong Political Champion Is Essential.** Most of the progress made in recent years would not have been possible without the leadership of Mayor Potter. Many Community Connect recommendations were made by others in the past but never implemented. Potter made increased community involvement a major priority and brought visibility and significant funding to support the effort. His attention to the issue made people feel it was worth working on. However, it is not enough to have a mayor say “Just do it.” You need a comprehensive strategy, resources, and broad buy-in from people in government and in the community. To continue to make progress, over time elected leaders and city agency directors and senior managers have to understand and champion comprehensive community involvement.

**Seed Money Is Vital for Building Community Capacity.** Get money and resources out into the community! Seed money is a vital tool with which to engage people and leverage additional resources in the community. Portland’s new Neighborhood Small Grants program has been quite popular. The availability of resources has unleashed a lot of community creativity and engagement. The community can do much more with small amounts of money than government can.

**Staying the Course.** Some elected officials may expect immediate praise from community members for opening the door to greater community involvement. One long-time community facilitator and mediator said, “People who open the door [to something new] often are the most attacked . . . you’re accessible. It’s a small cost of doing business, and people may vent their frustrations on you because you are there.” ONI’s director said: “You do this because it’s the right thing to do, not because you expect kudos. You may still be getting criticized, but that’s okay. You’ve got to stay firm in your commitment.”

Portlanders have made major progress over the past three years. Not only has the involvement and representation of underengaged people and organizations increased but the system’s existing neighborhood association base has been reenergized.

**This All Takes Time.** None of this work happens quickly. It takes time for people to change their views and for relationships and trust to build between people and organizations and city government. Be patient, and commit to allowing the process to unfold organically.

**Tell the Story.** We all need to do a better job of telling compelling stories that answer the questions: Why is this important work? Who’s affected? How is it making a difference? Good stories are vital for building and sustaining broad support for community involvement.

## Conclusions

Portland has embarked on a fascinating and difficult journey to build a community involvement system that engages a broad spectrum of community members and perspectives and ensures that they can have an impact in shaping their community and local decision making. Portlanders have made major progress over the past three years. Not only has the involvement and representation of underengaged people and organizations increased but the system’s existing neighborhood association base has been reenergized.

Will the progress in Portland be sustained? In many cities, innovative community involvement programs identified with a particular leader often do not survive when the leader moves on. Portland’s Mayor Potter did not run for a second term. Portland’s new

## Web Links to City of Portland Websites and Documents

Office of Neighborhood Involvement, City of Portland  
<http://www.portlandonline.com/oni/>

Community Connect: Five-Year Plan to Increase Public Involvement (2008)  
<http://www.portlandonline.com/oni/index.cfm?c=43119&>

Diversity and Civic Leadership program (leadership and organizing support for underengaged groups)  
<http://www.portlandonline.com/oni/index.cfm?c=45147&>

Public Involvement Best Practices Program, Public Involvement Advisory Council (new council established to

develop public involvement guidelines for city government)  
<http://www.portlandonline.com/oni/index.cfm?c=48289&>

Citywide Public Involvement Network (network of city public involvement staff)  
<http://www.portlandonline.com/oni/index.cfm?c=48952>

Performance Measurement System  
<http://www.portlandonline.com/oni/index.cfm?c=47790&>

mayor, Sam Adams, has stated his support for greater public involvement but is still new to the office. How his support will manifest itself in a down economy remains to be seen. Fortunately, the new city commissioner in charge of ONI, Amanda Fritz, is a long-time neighborhood and community activist who has a strong commitment to community involvement. Hard economic times across the nation and in Portland are resulting in the need to cut the funding available to support community involvement.

No matter what happens, neighborhood leaders and leaders of other community-based organizations in Portland are working together for the first time and developing stronger relationships. Neighborhood coalitions and other community groups and city staff are documenting and sharing information about best practices and changing expectations about what good process looks like and the role the public can play in community decision making.

How will we know when we've succeeded? This article's coauthor, ONI Director Amalia Alarcon de

Morris, says it will be "at the point where good community involvement becomes a necessary part of doing government business."

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