The Effects of a Formal Citizen Participation Program on Involvement in the Planning Process: A Case Study of Portland, Oregon
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The Effects of a Formal Citizen Participation Program on Involvement in the Planning Process: A Case Study of Portland, Oregon

Sy Adler and Gerald F. Blake

Abstract This article explores the formal program of citizen participation in planning in Portland, Oregon. The program implements several of the most important recommendations made by advocates of more effective participation. This analysis covers the extent to which participation is equitably distributed across the city and whether shifts in the level of mayoral support affect participation. The program does appear to equalize the capacity to participate, compensating for socioeconomic variations, with the exception of one area where neighborhood associations have historically been weak.

Although neighborhood participation in planning activities has become institutionalized in many cities in the United States (Rohe and Gates 1985; Rich 1986; Thomas 1986), this practice is especially deeply rooted in the local political culture of Portland, Oregon. One indication of the depth of the local government’s commitment to citizen participation was the success of the city’s Office of Neighborhood Associations (ONA) in the 1988-1989 budget process. As a result of its ability to marshal citizen support, ONA was one of a very small group of city agencies that received an increase in its budget during a time when most others suffered cutbacks (Oliver 1988). The evolution and dynamics of Portland’s neighborhood-based system of citizen participation in planning is discussed in this article.

The structural, program, and operational aspects of the Portland system are particularly interesting because they embody, in practice, several of the most important recommendations made by advocates of more effective participation (Rich 1986; Rohe and Gates 1985). Among the recommendations for increasing citizen involvement are the following:

- city government funding for operation of neighborhood associations, so these organizations can gain access to community organizers and publish newsletters;
- establishing nonprofit, tax-exempt status for neighborhood organizations to allow them to seek additional sources of financial support;
- developing preservice and in-service training for neighborhood activists;
- establishing an early notification process, whereby neighborhood organizations are brought into the planning of city actions at the earliest possible stage; and
- assuring the active cooperation and support of local government officials, particularly top agency officials.

Rich (1986) suggests that additional sources of funding may help to mitigate the routinizing impacts of dependence on local government financing. He also notes that cities should notify neighborhoods without expecting a response in most cases. In this way, the neighborhoods maintain their ability to determine their own agendas.

The Portland system incorporates these recommended elements. Given the political and program commitments that are in place, we explore the patterns of neighborhood participation across the city in the process of regulating land use. We focus on the extent to which participation is equitably distributed across the socially and economically diverse parts of the city. We also address whether these patterns have changed over time in relation to shifts in the level of political support from elected officials. We are particularly interested in the contribution of district level organizations to neighborhood participation. District organizations provide citizen par-
participation and other services to neighborhood associations under contract with the city government.

Our discussion of participation is grounded in an analysis of the ways neighborhood associations have responded to notifications by the Portland Planning Bureau of zone change and conditional use permit applications. We begin by theorizing responding as a form of participation, and relate responding to other forms and the dynamics of participation discussed in the literature. We then analyze the structure and operation of the Portland participation system, focusing on the evolution of the district level organizations. Our analysis of response patterns follows. We conclude with a discussion of the significance of our findings for the character of neighborhood participation in planning and the future of the Portland system.

Responding as a Form of Participation

We conceptualize responding to notifications as an indicator of the capacity of neighborhoods to mobilize in opposition to unwanted change. Responses—positive as well as negative—are indicators that neighborhoods are on alert status. We see expressions of opinion, particularly of disapproval or concern, as initial steps in the process of mobilizing for defense. Zone change and conditional use permit applications are likely to generate uncertainty for neighborhoods. Zoning ordinances may be thought of as constitutional agreements between a local government and those who have invested in real property that will govern the future course of land development in an area. Applications for change are likely to be perceived by investors as potential threats to the stability of existing agreements.

Rich (1986) notes that neighborhood council members and activists were more likely to identify land-use and economic development issues as key neighborhood concerns than were members of the general public. This orientation fits with the perspective of city officials, whose focus on land-use-related economic development projects is pressed upon them by the rigors of intercity competition for mobile capital and labor. The outcomes of this competition have profound implications for the health of the property tax base (Elkin 1987; Peterson 1981). This is one reason why city officials have become strongly supportive of neighborhood participation. Their strategy is to facilitate the implementation of investment projects through the use of an early warning system that permits politically necessary adjustments to be made (Rich 1986; Rohe and Gates 1985). Local government officials are particularly attuned to the interests of property-owning groups—homeowner and business—for political reasons as well. Community activists—people able to facilitate the process of governing—are likely to be members of these groups (Rich 1986). Zone change and conditional use permit applications, therefore, constitute intermittent challenges that cause neighborhoods and city officials to question previous commitments.

Our conception of responding is similar to contacting a city government regarding problems (Sharp 1986), and making demands on city agencies (Haebelarle 1986). In her study of contacting behavior in Kansas City, Missouri, Sharp theorized that neighborhood organizations might play an important role in facilitating contacting, particularly by those poor, less educated, or minority citizens who might otherwise feel intimidated by officialdom. Sharp also hypothesized that the presence of a centralized complaint handling unit would be particularly important for those same citizens, who would be expected to have fewer connections with city agencies. She found, however, that contacting the centralized unit in Kansas City did not vary across education groups, and that minority groups did not especially use this unit. Sharp explained these findings by arguing that awareness of the centralized complaint handling agency—in part due to the presence of neighborhood organizations—was more equally distributed across the citizenry than awareness of other government access channels. The pattern of contacting the central unit, therefore, would be a function of neighborhood need, and not due to differences in awareness.

Haebelarle studied variations in the number of demands made on the city government by neighborhood associations in Birmingham, Alabama. He found that home ownership exerted a strong, positive effect on demand volume. He also found a negative relationship between income and demand volume, leading him to argue that the institutionalized means of expression, embodied in the neighborhood organizations, was working well to represent the interests of those who were formerly without voice. An active association, however, which was related to the existence of neighborhood identity, enhanced the likelihood of articulating demands independently of socioeconomic status.

Similar results were reported by Rich (1986) who found high levels of support for neighborhood councils among “underdog” groups—renters, members of minorities, and blue-collar workers—consistent with the idea that neighborhood participation has the potential to make city government more equitable. Rohe and Gates (1985) report that single-family residential neighborhoods (presumably composed of homeowners) and pre-existing neighborhood identities are associated with more effective participation programs.

In Portland, each neighborhood association receives a notice of a zone change or conditional use permit application, and the district offices provide citizen participation services to facilitate responding to notification. These services include technical assistance on land-use matters as well as financial and logistical assistance in producing and distributing neighborhood newsletters and arranging and conducting meetings. Therefore, awareness
the participation channel should be widely distributed throughout the city. A response is a formal written communication from the neighborhood association to the Planning Bureau indicating whether the association approves, disapproves, or has concerns regarding the proposed action.

Following Sharp, we would expect that the pattern of responding to notifications would not be related to either socioeconomic or demographic characteristics, but would be associated with the volume of challenges confronting the neighborhoods within a district. We examine socioeconomic and demographic profiles of the Portland districts and relate these to responses to notifications. Based on the studies previously discussed we analyze the relationship between responding to notifications and the percentage of residents who are nonwhite, the percentage of residents with at least some college education, and the percentage of owner-occupied households. Since parts of the city with larger proportions of homeowners and of residents with some college, and a smaller percentage of nonwhite citizens would, in the absence of a formal participation system, be expected to show higher response rates, relatively weak relationships between these variables and responding would indicate that the Portland system is compensating for these particular characteristics.

Several writers have discussed the significance of the broader political context for stimulating and sustaining grassroots activism (Rich 1986; Rohe and Gates 1985; Castells 1983; Henig 1982; Downs 1980). Rich points out that institutionalized structures, such as neighborhood associations, provide vehicles through which a community can mobilize without having to begin the organizational process from scratch each time a challenge arises. He notes, however, that these structures are used sporadically, largely in relation to changes in conditions external to the association. We explore whether political support from the mayor is associated with responding in general and with a propensity to express disapproval or concern about zone change and conditional use permit applications.

**Structure and Evolution of the Portland Neighborhood Participation System**

Our study is organized around the six district level organizations that provide citizen participation services to neighborhood associations. These associations contained most of the city's population during the 1979-1985 period. The district entities have histories and characters that are as varied and distinct as the sections of the city they serve. The role of this tier in the participation system has been a source of controversy since the origins of a formal structure in the early 1970s.

Portland's formal structure evolved from a cooperative effort by the Planning Commission and a neighborhood association to develop a land-use plan for a specific area. The association had first mobilized in opposition to the expansion of a hospital and later to the construction of a freeway. Seeking to rationalize the process of citizen participation in subarea planning, the commission proposed the creation of district planning organizations. The city council created a District Planning Organization Task Force in 1971 to study the proposal, and to develop a more general program for relating neighborhood groups and city hall. The task force recommended a two-tier structure, including neighborhood planning organizations and district planning organizations. Matters affecting more than one neighborhood in a district would be addressed by the district organization. Districts would be created by the Planning Commission and would have full-time staff to facilitate neighborhood participation. They would also be used by other city agencies for service planning. One-half of the members of the task force supported a third tier—a council of district representatives—to advise the city council. In 1973, a new mayor, who was strongly supportive of neighborhood activism, added a proposal for a new city hall bureau to administer the system.

During the course of developing an implementing ordinance, however, intense opposition to the district level organizations surfaced. Many neighborhood association leaders were concerned that this new tier, which would be closely tied to city agencies, would override neighborhood association influence in city hall. When the city council created the Office of Neighborhood Associations (ONA) in 1974 and set up the formal structure for participation, the district tier proposal was dropped. ONA would coordinate and facilitate participation, but would not conduct the process. Moreover, ONA was placed under the jurisdiction of a city commissioner who was not identified with the neighborhood movement in order to obviate concerns regarding political machine-building. The suggestion of a citywide tier was not taken up (Abbott 1983; Pedersen 1974). City officials, however, continued to search for a means of rationalizing their relationship with the neighborhood associations, and of efficiently allocating city funds to support participation. Over time, a contractual relationship evolved between the city council and District Coalition Boards (DCBs) that were organized by neighborhood associations. Three district-level organizations had been established independently prior to the creation of ONA. Three others were formed as a result of ONA's initiatives.

Two of these previously existing organizations, Inner Northeast Neighbors and Southeast Uplift, were established in relation to the Model Cities and Office of Economic Opportunity antipoverty programs of the 1960s. In both cases, city officials were instrumental in getting the organization process started, but community-based leaders soon began to assert control over program development. Southeast Uplift has evolved into the largest
district organization, pursuing the widest range of activities, and having the most sophisticated management capability. The organization has used its tax-exempt status to a much greater extent than other district offices to secure funding from a variety of sources in order to add staff members and programs. The third district, Neighbors North, emerged largely as an effort to pursue an autonomous course of economic development. North Portland activists, for reasons of geography and political history, have sought to maintain an identity independent of the city, having long felt neglected by city hall (Abbott 1983). The other three organizations, Central Northeast Neighbors, Neighborhoods West/Northwest, and Southwest Neighborhood Information, were stimulated—rather than mandated—by city hall after the formal participation structure was put in place at the neighborhood association level. DCBs emerged as nonprofit, tax-exempt entities composed of representatives from the neighborhood associations in the districts. The boards contracted with the city government to employ staff to provide citizen participation services through field offices. Crime prevention services were added later. Staff members are employees of the DCBs rather than of the city. A second tier of sorts has, therefore, evolved, although an effort to clarify the relationship between the independent neighborhood associations and the DCBs and their staff has only recently been undertaken (Kolemaine 1986; Newhall 1986). An informal third tier has emerged as well, in the form of meetings of district office staff members.

The dominant conception of the relationship between neighborhoods and district offices is that the offices are not to act autonomously. They are supposed to facilitate neighborhood association activities, and take up issues that are explicitly referred to the district level by the associations. The district offices are expected to facilitate a neighborhood response to notifications of zone change and conditional use permit applications. While DCBs are notified at the same time as neighborhoods in their districts are informed, they are not expected to respond in the district’s name unless specifically asked to do so by the neighborhoods. One recent case served to reinforce the dominant conception: an office advocated a particular position on a large-scale land-use issue that divided the neighborhoods within the district. The controversy led to the dissolution of the DCB, and was one of the key issues generating an interest in specifying the district-neighborhood relationship.

The history of the district tier in Portland illuminates the conflicts that currently press on the district offices. From the neighborhood viewpoint, DCBs and their staff members are expected to reflect the character of their neighborhood associations, to follow through on consensus decisions generated at the neighborhood level, and generally to serve neighborhood needs. In the view of many at city hall, the offices are viewed as transmission belts for city agencies seeking to meet participation norms, and to deliver participation services. Rich notes that city officials tend to see neighborhood organizations “as primarily information-gathering and disseminating mechanisms for city government . . . They stressed the advisory, administrative role . . .” rather than their political representation role (1986, 62).

Portland’s governmental structure probably intensifies these conflicts. Rohe and Gates (1985) found that city councils elected at-large tended to enhance the effectiveness of participation programs because officials elected at-large were likely to be less threatened by neighborhood leaders than officials elected to represent particular districts. At-large elected officials are also likely to be more interested in the information and feedback aspects of participation, because they have fewer such sources of information than district-based officials. Portland has an at-large, nonpartisan council; however, its commission form of government probably increases the tendency of elected officials to see neighborhood organizations as vehicles for information-gathering and dissemination. Each councilmember is the top official of several operating government agencies, a manager as well as a legislator. A managerial orientation may dispose councilmembers to look to neighborhood associations for management-enhancing indicators of agency performance, as well as coproduction possibilities.

**Responses to Notifications**

We analyzed responses to notifications sent by the Portland Planning Bureau to neighborhood associations regarding zone change and conditional use permit applications for four years: 1979, 1981, 1983, and 1985. These years were selected in order to assess the impact of mayoral support on the pattern of participation. The first year, 1979, was the last year in office of a mayor who had been a strong supporter of neighborhood activism. In 1981 a new mayor, who was widely held to be indifferent to the neighborhoods, took office. We examine 1983 in order to explore the effect of continuing mayoral indifference. A neighborhood activist took office as mayor in 1985. Data are from interviews with key actors in the neighborhood participation system and from case files of the Portland Planning Bureau.

The neighborhood associations were notified of 680 applications during these four years (Table 1). On a per-1,000 household basis, Southwest neighborhoods had the largest number of cases, nearly four times as many as the Central Northeast neighborhoods, which had the fewest. The total number of cases ranged from a high of 213 in 1981 to a low of 140 in 1985.

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1. Mayor Neil Goldschmidt left office in fall 1979. His successor was identified as a strong supporter of the neighborhood movement.
The relative similarity in overall district response rates, with the exception of the North Portland neighborhoods, is evident in Table 2. Excluding North Portland, four-year response rates for the districts range from a high of 35 percent in the West/Northwest to a low of 24 percent in the Central Northeast. North Portland neighborhoods, however, responded to only 11 percent of the notifications they received.

In order to assess the significance of demographic, socioeconomic, and challenge variables for the pattern of responding, we used multiple regression with neighborhood associations as the units of analysis. Associations which had to deal with fewer than four cases during the study period were excluded from the analysis. Forty-six neighborhood associations, confronting 568 cases were analyzed. Demographic and socioeconomic data were taken from the 1980 census. The findings are presented in Table 3.

The absence of significant relationships between the socioeconomic, demographic, and challenge variables and response rates is one of the key findings of our analysis. The absence of a significant relationship between home ownership and responding, which differs from results discussed earlier, is a strong indication that the Portland system is compensating for the tendency of home owners to be more active in land-use matters than renters. Similarly, the absence of a significant relationship between years of schooling and responding indicates that the participation system has contributed to greater equity in the capacity to respond. However, when responding is analyzed at the district level (Table 2), neighborhood associations in North Portland, whose residents have the fewest years of schooling, have a much lower response rate than the other five districts. The absence of a significant relationship between minority group status and responding is consistent with the idea that a centralized notification process and the supportive activities of the district offices contribute to equalizing the capacity to respond. The absence of significant relationships between race, education, home ownership, and response rates—together with the relative lack of variation in overall response rates by district—indicates that the Portland system has successfully generalized awareness about this channel of participation and has contributed to an equalization of the ability to articulate neighborhood interests. The North Portland neighborhoods, however, are an exception to this pattern. These findings parallel those of White and Edner (1981) who did not find significant relationships between socioeconomic and demographic characteristics and participation in Portland neighborhood associations.

Finally, response rates are not significantly related to challenges at the neighborhood association level. When the data on cases per 1,000 households at the district level (Table 1) are examined, the three least challenged areas respond more frequently than expected, while the Southwest and the North respond less frequently (Table 2). The Southwest is the district with the highest socioeconomic standing in the city. Several writers have suggested that higher status citizens avail themselves of other channels of participation to which they have access, in addition to neighborhood organizations, when they wish to respond to a challenge (Sharp 1986; Haeberle 1986; Rohe and Gates 1985). The Southwest’s relatively low response ranking may, therefore, reflect use of these other opportunities.

### Table 1: Distribution of Cases for All Neighborhood Associations in Study, by District and by Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Total 1979</th>
<th>1981</th>
<th>1983</th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>Cases per 1,000 Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Northeast</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner Northeast</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West/Northwest</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Neighborhood Associations</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Ranked by percentage of owner-occupied housing units.

### Table 2: Percentage of Notifications to Which Neighborhood Associations Responded

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Total 1979</th>
<th>1981</th>
<th>1983</th>
<th>1985</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Northeast</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner Northeast</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West/Northwest</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Neighborhood Associations</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Ranked by percentage of owner-occupied housing units.

### Table 3: Effects of Demographic, Socioeconomic, and Challenge Variables on Response Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>T-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of owner-occupied housing units</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>-1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of population with some college education</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of population nonwhite</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cases per 1,000 households</td>
<td>-.001</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$R^2 = .054$  *N = 46*

Note: None of the independent variables are significant at the .05 level.
The bottom ranking of North Portland, especially given the relative frequency of challenges to the area, represents the limits of the Portland system in the face of weakness at the neighborhood association level. While the district organization in North Portland emerged prior to the city’s formal participation system, the neighborhood associations in North Portland have historically been weak. This finding supports that of Haeberle (1986) and Rohe and Gates (1985) regarding the importance of pre-existing neighborhood identities in stimulating participation. Since the dominant conception of the relationship between neighborhood and district has been one that restricts the autonomy of the district office, the district has been unable to take the initiative to compensate for the lack of activity in the neighborhoods. It appears that the neighborhood participation system has been unable to overcome the political culture of isolation that has historically characterized North Portland.

Responses and Mayoral Support

Data in Tables 1 and 2 indicate that neighborhoods faced the greatest number of challenges and responded more frequently in 1981 than in the other years examined. This was also the first year in office of a mayor who was widely considered indifferent to the neighborhood participation system, the first such mayor to hold office since the system was formalized in 1974. The neighborhoods responded more frequently during 1981 than when supportive mayors were in office because of the greater amount of political uncertainty neighborhood activists felt regarding the responsiveness of city hall to neighborhood concerns. The large number of challenges combined with mayoral indifference to enhance awareness of changing environmental conditions. Two years later, when neighborhood leaders saw that the participation system remained intact even without mayoral support, the response rate fell.

One interesting point to note, based on the data in Table 4, is the similarity in total disapproval/concern rates among the districts, as well as the level of the rates. It might be expected that neighborhoods are more likely to respond when they plan to express disapproval or concern than when they are going to register approval. As the data indicate, however, most districts respond in a negative way only a little more than one-third of the time. This highlights the significance of responding, in general, as a participatory, political act rather than as a more narrowly conceived oppositionist tactic.

The pattern of total disapproval/concern responses over time is interesting as well. Following Rohe and Gates (1985) we might expect that negative responses would diminish over time, as both neighborhoods and investors applying for zone changes and conditional use permits become more sophisticated about the participation system. Rohe and Gates found that, in some cities, investors met with neighborhood associations to discuss their plans and to address potential problems early in the project development process, and this led to some projects being abandoned or significantly modified as a result of the participation system. These projects might have generated neighborhood opposition before the system was in place. Meetings between neighborhoods and investors have become commonplace in Portland. Moreover, Rohe and Gates note that participation programs more effectively reduce resistance to project implementation when they are not administered by the city planning agency, since planning agencies are often involved with projects that cause disruptive changes. Agency involvement may produce neighborhood suspicion as to the agency’s motives. In Portland, the participation system is housed in the Office of Neighborhood Associations, even though the neighborhood associations and the District Coalition Boards do respond directly to the Portland Planning Bureau.

Data in Table 4, showing that the disapproval/concern proportion rose in the last year, are inconsistent with the idea that resistance to project implementation should steadily decline over time. It is interesting to note that the years showing the highest overall levels of disapproval/concern are those in which mayors strongly supportive of the neighborhood system have been in office. Perhaps the presence of mayoral support enhances the willingness of neighborhood associations to articulate negative sentiments because neighborhood leaders perceive little possibility of retribution from city hall following such an expression.

Table 4: Percentage of Responses by Neighborhood Associations, Expressing Either Disapproval or Concern

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>1979</th>
<th>1981</th>
<th>1983</th>
<th>1985</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Northeast</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner Northeast</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West/Northwest</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Neighborhood Associations</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Ranked by percentage of owner-occupied housing units.

Conclusions

The nature of the data we have analyzed limits the conclusions we can draw. It does appear, however, that Portland’s system of citizen participation, facilitated by district-level organizations, works to equalize across the city the capacity to participate in the land-use decision-making process. With one important exception—the neighborhoods of North Portland—response rates to notifications from the Planning Bureau do not vary a great
deal and are not strongly influenced by either the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of residents or the volume of challenges confronting a neighborhood. The system appears to compensate for disadvantages that might exist due to race, housing tenure status, and schooling. The elements recommended for a successful program by many students of participation, incorporated in the Portland system, appear to work in practice. However, the resources made available by the city, and the ways these resources are delivered, have not been able to overcome either the historic political and cultural isolation of North Portland (reflected in the underlying weakness of the neighborhood associations there) or its smaller proportion of residents with at least some higher education.

Limitations in the data prevent us from addressing several important concerns, including the ways in which notifications are processed in different parts of the city, and differences in responding that might be due to the particular character or intensity of the challenges that neighborhoods and districts confront. To address these issues we plan to do case studies of major land-use concerns that have arisen in each district. These case studies will be designed to assess the significance of different types of challenges, as well as differing scales of impact. We also intend to examine the ideas and aspirations of the volunteers who serve their neighborhood associations as contact persons for land-use planning affairs.

The main question confronting the future of the Portland participation system is whether city hall and the neighborhood associations can sustain the creative tension that is embodied in the set of district-level organizations. The issues here involve much more than responding to notifications. Largely financed by the city government, these organizations adamantly maintain their autonomy from city hall. The district organizations increasingly translate city agency initiatives into locally oriented terms while they remain ultimately responsive to their neighborhood association constituents. The fact that the district offices largely reflect—rather than shape—the character of their constituents, however, has meant that a significant degree of variation in the operations of the district offices exists. Neighborhood activists embrace the differences, seeing the strength of the Portland system in them; the variations faithfully reproduce grassroots political reality. City hall, however, has been working to boost the managerial capabilities of the district offices up to the level of the most sophisticated, in an effort to create more operational uniformity. In addition, city agencies have come increasingly to use the offices to rationalize their own participation programs. These pressures combine to challenge both the autonomy of the district-level organizations and their responsiveness to constituent neighborhood associations. The success of the Portland participation system—rooted precisely in autonomy and responsiveness—intensifies tendencies to routinize the system, particularly during the administration of a neighborhood-oriented mayor. This has been the case in Portland since 1985. Continued success of the system depends on the capacity of volunteer activists to balance these tendencies, maintaining the focus of district offices on neighborhood concerns.

References

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