



# MEMORANDUM

DATE: May 3, 2016

TO: Councilmember Tim Burgess, Chair, Affordable Housing, Neighborhoods & Finance Committee

CC: Councilmember Lisa Herbold  
Councilmember Rob Johnson

FROM: Kathy Nyland, Department of Neighborhoods  
Tom Van Bronkhorst, Department of Neighborhoods

RE: Response to Council SLI 18-2-A-1 (DON programs and City Council districts)

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## **Background:**

As part of the 2016 Adopted Budget, Council requested that the Department of Neighborhoods (DON) develop a plan to reorient its programs around the new City Council district structure with a primary focus on the Neighborhood District Coordinator (NDC) program and a goal for more equitable community engagement. This report to the Council describes issues identified relating to alignment of District Councils, the relationship between the City and District Councils, and the role of Neighborhood District Coordinators. DON will submit the second and final part of this report to the Council by July 15.

The City is currently divided into 13 neighborhood districts. This district system grew out of a 1987 Seattle City Council resolution (Res. 27709) to promote, support, and involve citizen participation at the neighborhood level. Each district has a District Council which is comprised of representatives from community councils, nonprofit organizations, and business districts. The councils provide a forum for consideration of concerns and for the sharing of ideas for solutions to common problems.

Subsequent resolutions refined and altered the initial resolution, including establishment of the City Neighborhood Council (CNC) – a citizen-led advisory group comprised of elected members from each of the City's 13 District Councils.

DON field staff, known as Neighborhood District Coordinators (NDCs), serve as a community liaison and resource to the District Councils, among other things. These positions were initially created to help support the neighborhood planning process begun in the late 1980s. Though slight changes to the NDC program have been made over the years, including modification as a result of budget cuts, the program's role and responsibilities have not been formally updated since 2001.



## **Methods and Approaches:**

Our review included ongoing discussions with all of the current NDCs and several former DON employees; interviews with 15 District Council Chairs; presentations at eight District Council meetings for which an invitation was received; interviews of 13 additional District Council members – both past and present; and review of numerous documents, audits, and articles. While largely anecdotal, we believe results from a more formal survey of District Council members would likely have garnered comments in line with those expressed by District Council Chairs or the many other interviewees with experience both inside and outside the District Council system. Our goal is to accurately reflect the ideas and concerns (and in some cases strong concerns) of those we spoke with or interviewed.

## **Our Challenge – Expanding Outreach and Engagement City-Wide:**

Seattle’s population demographics are changing and DON needs to re-envision our approach to public engagement; re-think how to best connect with underrepresented communities; and retool our strategies to reach a broader cross-section of Seattle’s population, including ethnic and cultural groups, seniors, youth, home-owners, and renters.

Outreach needs to be more than cookie-cutter presentations to District Councils and Community Councils. We need to expand, tailor, and coordinate our efforts to eliminate barriers, encourage broader community participation, and build resilient engagement strategies.

Meeting fatigue on the part of both community members and department staff is real. The City offers residents many opportunities to engage via advisory councils and citizen or community advisory groups on a variety of issues, including precinct advisory groups for the Seattle Police Department, community center advisory groups for Seattle Parks and Recreation, and homelessness community advisory committees for the Human Services Department and Office of Housing, to name just a few. The exhaustive nature of our current system takes a toll on our volunteer-led organizations. Recently, in the District Council system, some struggled to find volunteers willing to participate on Neighborhood Matching Fund District Council Review Teams. Too often a small number of engaged residents are asked to attend multiple meetings on a variety of subjects, answering the same questions over and over for different departments, leaving them to ask why City departments don’t talk to each other more and do a better job of coordinating meetings.

These are just a few of the challenges to building broader inclusivity.



## **District Councils – Inclusive Outreach:**

We have heard from residents active in the system that “District Councils work for us.” The current system does work for those who can access and participate within it. When you consider the entire population of Seattle residents, District Councils represent a valid, yet narrow, niche. However, they don’t work for everyone.

District Councils can continue to welcome new and emerging community groups and organizations. However, expecting District Councils to be the singular focus for expanding community outreach and engagement is unfair and setting them up for failure. This is particularly true when many District Council members choose to define “community” as neighborhoods that are geographically based, leaving out those who build and experience community around non-geographical concepts, like language, ethnicity, religious affiliation, or issue-based interests. Some District Council members feel that engagement should focus entirely on bringing new community groups or organizations into the District Council system. Having the City engage with communities in a process that is outside or separate from the District Council system could be seen as divisive. However, it is unclear that the existing District Council system is sufficiently flexible to meaningfully serve as a voice for all Seattle residents. Our final report will include specific recommendations about a path forward that considers these concerns.

In 2013, DON collected snapshot demographic information from 150 District Council members. Participation was voluntary so not all District Councils were represented. The collected results indicate that District Councils work for a limited segment of the overall population. As the charts below show, residents attending District Council meetings tend to be 40 years of age or older, Caucasian, and homeowners.

This is in contrast to the Seattle population:

- Median age is 36;
- 34% are people of color; and
- 48% own their residence, while 52% rent.<sup>1</sup>

Just this month, the Pew Research Center released population estimates, showing that the size of the millennial generation has now surpassed Baby Boomers. By definition, the millennial generation included anyone 18- 34 years old (as of 2015). According to reports, there are now 75.4 million living millennials in the U.S., which is a half-million more than the 74.9 million living baby boomers.

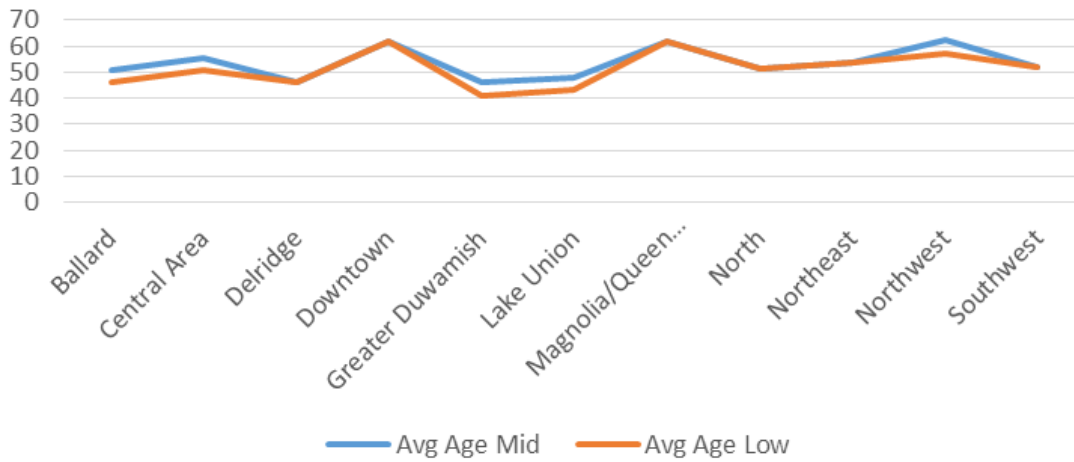
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<sup>1</sup> 2010 Census: Office of Planning and Community Development



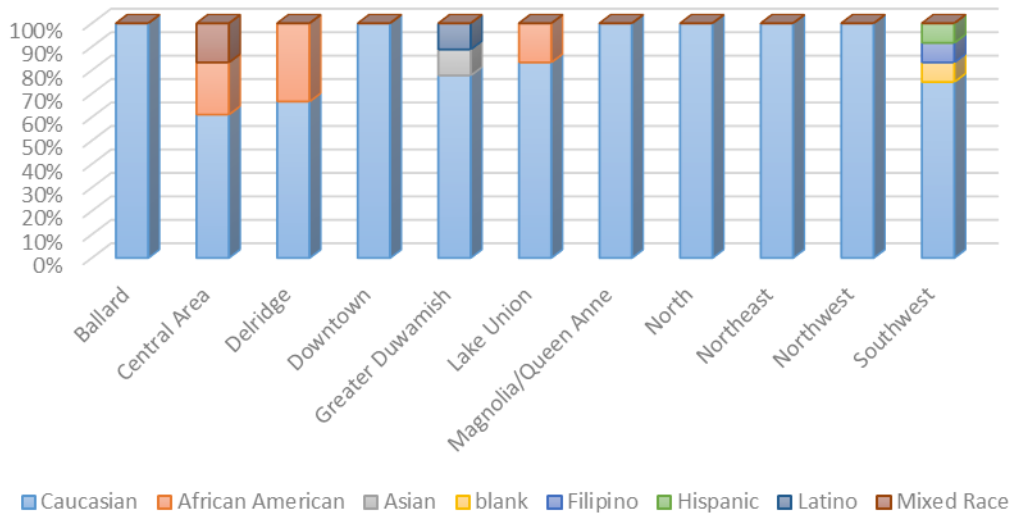
## 2013 Average Age by District Council

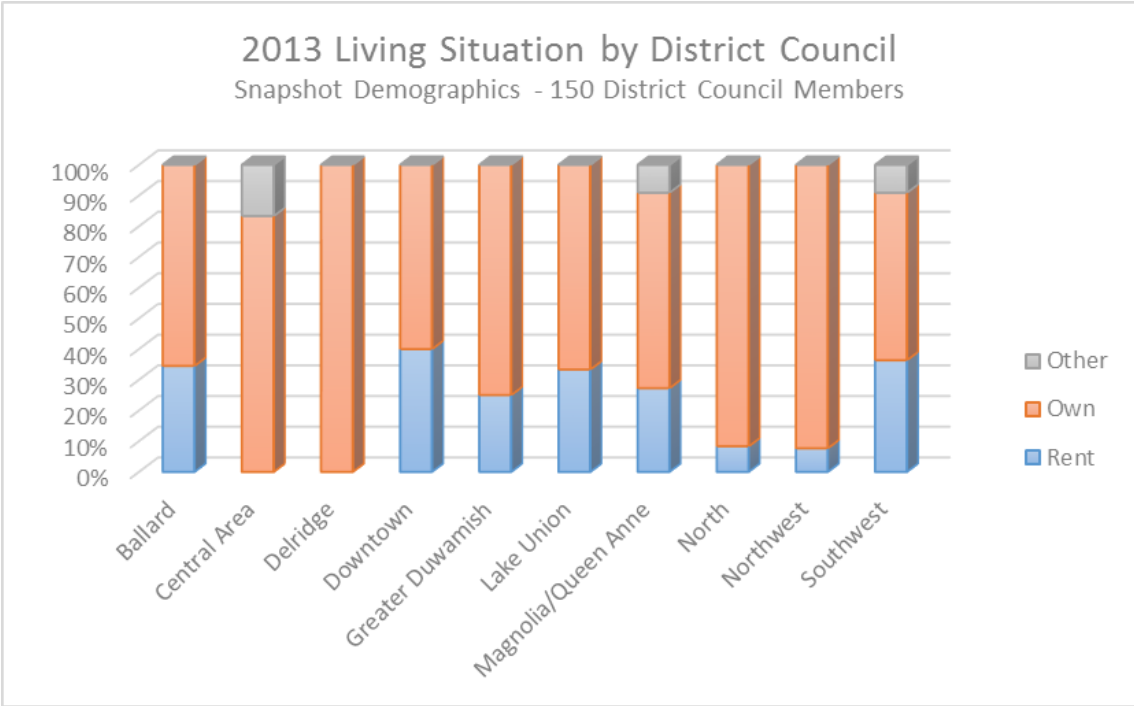
Snapshot Demographics - 150 District Council Members



## 2013 Race/Ethnicity by District Council

Snapshot Demographics - 150 District Council Members





**Neighborhood District Coordinators (NDCs):**

The role of NDCs to date has been that of advocate, mentor, facilitator, and administrator for District Councils. Brought on to empower and help guide neighbors through the Neighborhood Planning process, NDCs have over time developed relationships with neighborhood advocates that are built on trust. It is these relationships that many feel are key to bridging the communication and trust divide between District Councils and City government. However, it is these same close relationships that have raised several questions, as the role of the NDCs is unclear to some. Are they community advocates? Are they City liaisons? Can they be both?

In 2016, DON will spend over \$1.2 million dollars on the NDC program for outreach and engagement to Seattle residents. This is largely spent on labor costs. Of the 11 FTEs in the Outreach and Engagement Division, shown below, there is one Division Director, one NDC Supervisor, one administrative support staff, and eight NDC positions.

**2016 Outreach and Engagement Budget:**

Staff	11	\$1,270,000
Non-staff		\$20,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>\$1,290,000</b>



A significant portion of DON's outreach and engagement efforts are focused around the District Council system, including the staffing of District Councils and provision of casework and constituent services to community members, including District Council members. As previously mentioned, the last official update of the NDCs' job description was completed in 2001.

Today, a new opportunity exists to review and reflect on what a re-envisioned role for NDCs might look like. Clarity on this issue and defining the future role of NDCs will go a long way toward creating reasonable expectations, measurable outcomes, better accountability overall, and a more equitable allocation of resources.

Both NDCs and residents have recognized that individual NDCs have different styles and strengths. While individuality is to be expected, individualism combined with limited supervision can result in inconsistent service delivery. Based on feedback we've received, some NDCs can be very proactive, offering specific suggestions or help, while others are much more observers, attending community meetings and not speaking.

"It would be helpful if people who work with the NDCs knew what the job description entailed, so that expectations can be set and consistency expected," said one District Council memo on the role of NDCs. When it comes to NDCs' relationships with District Councils, rethinking strategies and reinventing systems could ultimately create more consistency for the NDCs as well as other programs within DON. However, the thought of revising staffing levels has caused deep concern on the part of many District Council chairs who have come to rely on NDCs for not just advice and consulting but also, in some cases, for administrative support. Yet some chairs have agreed that while a reduction in City-funded staffing would pose a challenge, that it would not spell the end for their District Council.

City Councilmembers have recently increased their office budgets to add district staff to provide constituent services. This development not only points to the changing landscape for constituent casework but could also provide an opportunity to review NDC duties in order to avoid duplication of effort and free up time for other outreach projects including engaging new communities and capacity building.

### **District Council Boundary Alignment:**

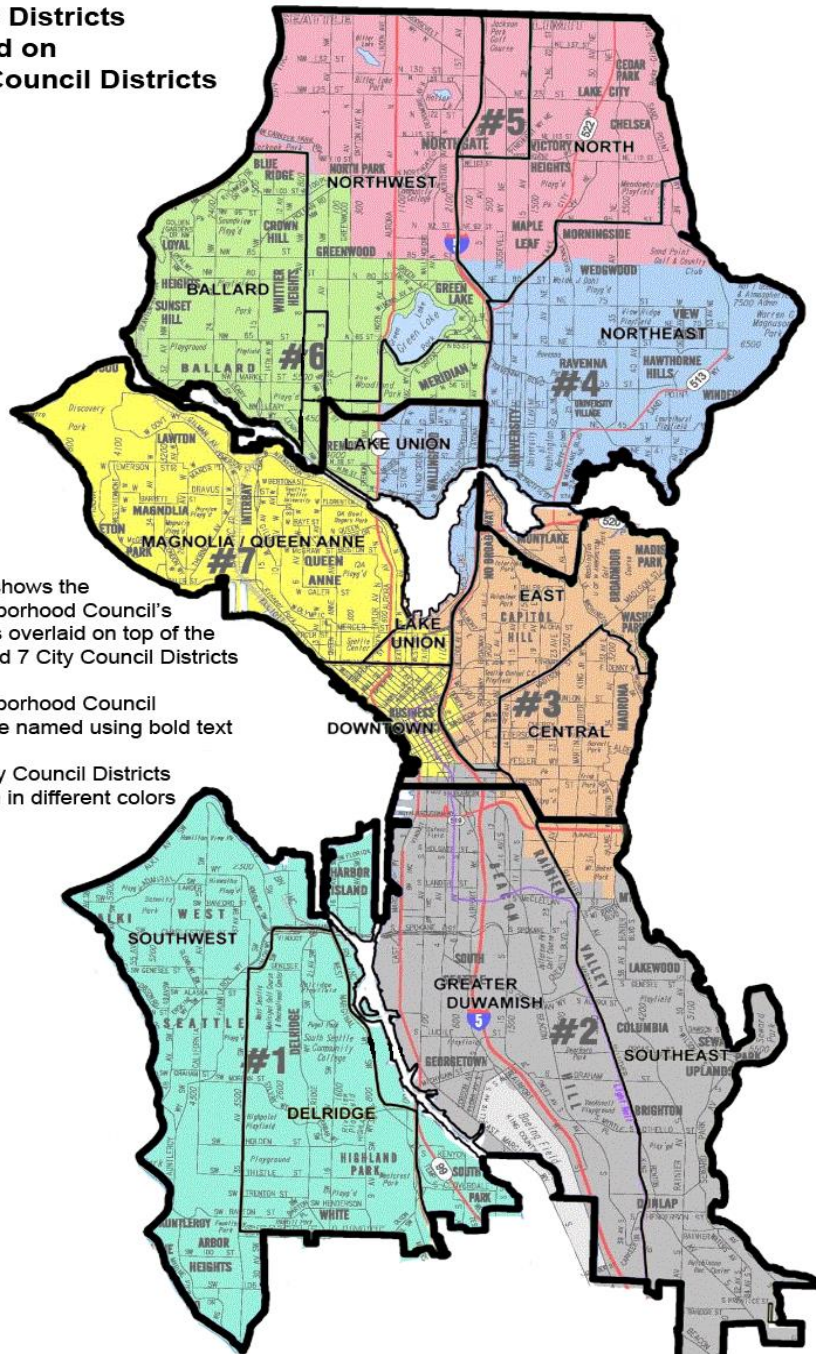
While alignment of District Council boundaries with new City Council district boundaries makes sense from an organizational perspective, the majority of District Councils oppose boundary realignment for a variety of reasons. Some worried that they would lose their "fair share" of the "City resource pie" that they have fought long and hard to get. Other concerns included new City Council district boundaries cutting through established neighborhoods, fear that some District Councils would be combined with others within a City Council district, or a belief that City Council districts have artificial boundaries that will evolve over time.



One District Council recently wrote: “The North District Council has worked very hard over many years to be an effective organizing body. Realignment could derail all of the hard work that our members have put in over the years. In addition, our members fear that if our District Council becomes too large, it will not be able to respond as well to local issues in our community.”

Surprisingly, one District Council Chair suggested that the City force them to realign, noting that without such direction they may never be able to overcome organizational inertia. Another telling comment came from a former District Council chair who when asked about realignment said, “Why? District Councils will eventually figure it out and follow the money.”

### 13 CNC Districts Overlaid on 7 City Council Districts



This map shows the City Neighborhood Council's 13 Districts overlaid on top of the newly-voted 7 City Council Districts

City Neighborhood Council Districts are named using bold text

Seattle City Council Districts are shown in different colors

## **Next Steps/Opportunities:**

In 2009, the City Auditor conducted an audit of the District Council system concluding it was time for a “renewal” and making several recommendations, including the following:

- clarifying City objectives;
- avoiding characterizing District Councils or the City Neighborhood Council as representative bodies;
- establishing appropriate conditions for continuing City support of District Councils; and
- clarifying the level of staff support the City would provide.

According to a 2010 follow-up report by the Auditor, only one recommendation, improving retention of District Council records, was implemented. The final part of this report (due to Council July 15) will follow up on these findings.

As discussed earlier in this report, Seattle’s demographics are changing. Perhaps this is the time for some of the City’s systems and structures to change as well, to become more responsive and accessible to a new generation.

Today is a new opportunity to look at how we might improve and expand outreach and engagement as well as look at creating a system that is more reflective of community and more inclusive in nature. This could consist of minor modifications to creating an entirely new system that addresses needs. The following are opportunities to be considered:

- **Apply the Racial Equity Toolkit to our current NDC programs to get a deeper understanding of how we are allocating resources and who is truly benefitting and where gaps in service may exist.**
- **Determine the official role, if any, between District Councils and our current NDCs.** This includes defining what “support” means so we are more consistent in services that are provided.
- **Review Resolution 27709.** Review and consider updating the enacting resolution for the District Council system. For nearly 30 years we have largely relied on one system to meet our many citizen engagement and neighborhood empowerment goals. This review could also provide an opportunity to update the NDC job description.
- **Review other jurisdictions’ approaches to this type of outreach and engagement.** We are not alone in this challenge. Other cities are also working to develop best practices for outreach and engagement. DON will review these opportunities as it develops its final report to Council.

