

Overlook Neighborhood Association

Christian Trejbal, Chair

overlookna@gmail.com



September 16, 2019

Portland City Council
1221 SW 4th Ave.
Portland, OR 97204
CC: Suk Rhee, Director OCCL

Re: Code section 3.96 changes

Dear Mayor Wheeler and Commissioners Hardesty, Fritz, Fish and Eudaly:

The Overlook Neighborhood Association (OKNA) asks that you not adopt the proposed changes to City Code Section 3.96. The current rewrite emerged from a flawed process. Portland absolutely needs to implement policies that empower all residents to become active participants in their government. However, rather than cast aside the city's internationally lauded neighborhood association system, the city should build upon it. The first step should be clear direction from council and a new 3.96 code revision committee that includes representation of all stakeholders.

OKNA applauds the city for starting this conversation. The 2016 City Auditor report on the Office of Neighborhood Involvement (now the Office of Community and Civic Life) made clear that change is necessary. Yet that change does not need to begin by throwing away everything that came before, as the current proposal does. Rather, the city should encourage neighborhood associations to continue filling their particular niche, help them to reach new audiences, and bring other groups representing Portland's diversity to the table.

The city cannot take that additive approach if it cuts neighborhoods out of the process from the get-go. OCCL's code rewrite process took place without neighborhood association engagement. We only learned about it late in the process when the work was nearly done and there was no opportunity to meaningfully contribute to a positive, productive conversation about the revision. Indeed, the committee had met eight times and gone through several code rewrites before OKNA and most stakeholders were even aware of what was happening. That flies in the face of the city's commitment to open public involvement.

Relying on the OCCL director to include neighborhood associations or any other group only through administrative rule is a recipe for exclusion as the political winds change. Portland's neighborhood association system is strong because the city supports its independence to challenge city decisions without fear of retribution. Other groups need that same security, but the code rewrite would take it away from everyone.

In Overlook, we have worked hard to engage with diverse neighborhood stakeholders. For example, we have prioritized ensuring that N Interstate Avenue is an active street with commercial, cultural and recreational spaces to serve residents. OKNA members took the lead on fundraising for a new playground at Patton Square Park. The neighborhood association has made sure that developers provide the sort of mixed-use development that is essential to an active transportation corridor. And we have supported the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center. These are all important in light of the large number of apartment and condominium buildings going up along the corridor, some of it affordable housing. Those thousands of new residents, many of them children, deserve the sort of active main street that the city has promised in the development code.

It is important to note, too, that neighborhood associations differ from many of the organizations that OCCL seeks to incorporate into the code. Neighborhood associations are geographically based. Everyone in Portland

can be an active participant in one. They also have publicly elected boards so that neighbors can change the leadership and organizational positions if they desire. Other community advocacy groups represent particular interests and have closed leadership selection. Neither approach is better; they are simply different. But the 3.96 code proposal does not recognize these differences. The existing code works well for neighborhood associations. Additions to the code could work well for other groups.

Fortunately, the city is not under any deadline to revise Section 3.96. There is no need to rush to pass a rewrite. **OKNA urges you to assemble a new code review committee with full representation from neighborhood advocates and other groups to conduct a truly transparent and open process.** Give that committee clear direction that neighborhood associations are valuable enablers of citizen democracy but that other groups belong at the table, too. And provide that committee with better oversight and leadership that does not come at the issue with hostility to neighborhoods.

Reset the process so that you can provide the leadership and oversight necessary to ensure a positive outcome that builds on past success. Thank you for your consideration and leadership.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christian J. Trejbal". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Christian J. Trejbal

Overlook Neighborhood Association, Chair