

Seattle, Washington

The city has a long and rich history of civic engagement. In the 1990s, it built upon this with its policy design of neighborhood planning, which became part of its larger comprehensive plan, *Toward a Sustainable Seattle* (1994). This has since been updated, further supplemented with a climate action plan, and complemented by other innovations, such as the Puget Sound Partnership for estuary protection and restoration.

Many challenges persist, not the least of which are high housing costs, homelessness, and tensions over diverse and equitable forms of representation in the city's neighborhood and planning systems. Nonetheless, the city has been moving forward on these and other fronts.

Background

- *form of government*: mayor-council
- *population*: approximately 753,000 in 2019. Of this, 66 percent are non-Hispanic white, 8 percent African American, 14 percent Asian, 7 percent Hispanic or Latino, .4 percent Native American, .9 percent Pacific Islander
- *geography and land area*: approximately 84 square miles, between Puget Sound (northwest Pacific Coast) and Lake Washington

Organizing traditions

Seattle has a rich history of engagement from neighborhood and community problem solving to environmental and labor organizing.

- *labor movements*: the famous General Strike of 1919 stands out.

References:

Robert L. Friedheim, [*The Seattle General Strike*](#). Centennial edition (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018).

Cal Winslow, [*Radical Seattle: The General Strike of 1919*](#) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

- *neighborhood associations*: called “community councils” in Seattle, these go back many decades.

References:

Jeffrey Craig Sanders, [*Seattle and the Roots of Urban Sustainability: Inventing Ecotopia*](#) (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), chapter 5 and epilogue.

Marie Rose Wong, [*Building Tradition: Pan-Asian Seattle and Life in the Residential Hotels*](#) (Seattle, WA: Chin Music Press, 2018).

Barrett A. Lee, et al., “Testing the Decline-of-Community Thesis: Neighborhood Organizations in Seattle, 1929-1979,” *American Journal of Sociology* 89 (1984): 161-188.

City of Seattle, *Citizen Participation Handbook: Seattle Model City Program* (1972).

- *ecotopia*: a strong tradition of environmental organizing and the emergence of a culture of “ecotopia.”

References:

Jeffrey Craig Sanders, [*Seattle and the Roots of Urban Sustainability: Inventing Ecotopia*](#) (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

Matthew Klinge, [*Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle*](#) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

David B. Williams, [*Too High and Too Steep: Reshaping Seattle’s Topography*](#) (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

Ernest Callenbach, [*Ecotopia*](#). 40th Anniversary Epistle Edition (Berkeley, California: Banyan Tree Books, 2014).

- *Native American ecological culture*: struggles for fishing rights, tribal sovereignty, and recognition as legally enfranchised stakeholders and culturally enabled storytellers in the urban environment. Billy Frank’s key role in fighting for the salmon and the Nisqually River. He served as chairman of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission and was a founding member of the Leadership Council of the Puget Sound Partnership (below).

References:

Charles Wilkinson, [*Messages from Frank’s Landing: A Story of Salmon, Treaties, and the Indian Way*](#) (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

Coll Thrush, [*Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place*](#). Second edition (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).

David M. Buerge, [*Chief Seattle and the Town That Took His Name: The Change of Worlds for the Native People and Settlers on Puget Sound*](#) (Seattle, WA: Sasquatch Books, 2017).

Neighborhood innovation

The participatory movements of the 1960s and 1970s led political scientist Margaret Gordon and her colleagues to characterize Seattle as having become a “strong mayor, strong council, watchful citizens network.”

The city at first largely ignored the resistance to unchecked development and grassroots neighborhood planning that emerged, although it did encourage various forms of self-help, land-use review boards, and further formation of community councils. Only in the mid-1980s, and especially after the ballot approval of a “citizens alternative plan” by a wide margin in 1989, did the city begin to respond in a more robust fashion. As a result, the largely top-down downtown plan of 1985 was put on hold.

Councilor Jim Street provided the leadership in city council. He began public hearings and got the council to support a process of learning from other cities that had already instituted some form of neighborhood involvement in planning and land use. Portland, Oregon, and St. Paul, Minnesota, were high on the list.

Several innovations resulted.

- [Department of Neighborhoods](#) (DON): established in 1987, under the 13-year leadership of Jim Diers, who leveraged his skill set as a relational faith-based community organizer in Seattle’s distressed Rainier Valley. Diers also brought his experience convening deliberative citizen councils in the Group Health Cooperative of Puget Sound, seen by some health policy analysts as among the most innovative in the nation.

DON sponsored ambitious leadership training in neighborhoods and across the city, and further developed the neighborhood service centers as places not only to deliver services (voter registration, business licenses, utility bill payment), but also to convene civic actors to build relationships and collaborate on public projects.

A citywide neighborhood council oversaw the 13 district councils. Over the past few years, the overall structure has been changed considerably (below).

Service center coordinators served as city staff for the district councils, under whose umbrella the independently organized community councils were clustered. They also served as one-on-one relationship brokers across various associations, as well as when there were disputes among them.

Such brokerage occurred, for instance, between the main Chinese benevolent association and a prominent Japanese grocery store in Chinatown/International District to reach agreement to build the Chinese ceremonial gates at both ends of King Street.

As Seattle’s population has become increasingly diverse, with immigrants and refugees from Southeast Asia and East Africa adding to Latino, African American, and East Asian groups, ethnic and other associations achieved official recognition in the neighborhood

system. However, this system was reorganized in 2016 partly in response to perceived inequalities of voice.

- [Neighborhood Matching Fund](#) (NMF): this was established within DON in 1989 and provided grants for neighborhood generated projects that commit to matching these funds with in-kind contributions, cash, and/or labor (physical, professional, artistic). The grant fund grew from a modest \$150,000 in its first year – when it won the Innovations in American Government Award from Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government – to \$4.5 million in 2001. As of 2020, the fund has distributed a total of \$64 million, with matches amounting to \$72 million.

Over time, ethnic and immigrant associations, youth groups, and others not defined by neighborhood boundaries became eligible for NMF grants.

Civic groups have utilized NMF to restore streams and wetlands, reforest hillsides and ravines, plant community gardens (below), build playgrounds, paint murals celebrating local heroes and ethnic culture, and construct major works of sculpture, such as the Fremont Troll, now famous to tourists around the world. Many have funded community-school partnerships for school gardening and environmental education.

References:

Jim Diers, [Neighbor Power](#): *Building Community the Seattle Way* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

Carmen Sirianni, [Investing in Democracy](#): *Engaging Citizens in Collaborative Governance* (Washington, DC: Brookings Press, 2009), chapter 3.

Margaret Gordon, Hubert Locke, Laurie McCutcheon, and William Stafford, "Seattle: Grassroots Politics Shaping the Environment," in H.V. Savitch and John Clayton Thomas, eds., *Big City Politics in Transition* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1991), 216-34.

Ezekiel Emanuel and Linda Emanuel, "Preserving Community in Health Care," *Journal of Health Politics, Policy, and Law* 22:2 (1997): 147-184.

Community gardening

Seattle, a northwest port city with a moderate climate, has a long growing season and one of the most institutionally robust systems of this type. Like many others, it emerged amidst often difficult land-use conflicts among local groups and development interests.

Several factors stand out in field building for Seattle’s community gardens:

- *rich civic history*: the city has a rich history of civic, countercultural, and urban ecological engagement, much of it place-based and linked to Model Cities and community councils (above).

In 1974, a Northwest Conference on Alternative Agriculture was organized in Ellensburg in the central part of the state and drew upon a loose network of ecotopian, bioregionalist, and food co-op activists from Seattle and elsewhere.

- *early institutionalization*: innovation by the city occurred early, with the donation of an old truck farm in 1971 by the Picardo family (initially managed by a nonprofit), quickly followed by the addition of 8 more community gardens on city owned land within a few years and then more by the end of the decade.

This formalized the [P-Patch Community Gardening](#) program, in honor of the Picardos, but with the “P” culturally inscribed in the mantra of “passionate people producing peas in public.”

- *DON and NMF complementarities*: while the P-Patch program grew slowly during the tight city budgets of the early 1980s, it was complemented by other forms of institutionalization, especially DON and NMF (above). The department of neighborhoods incorporated P-Patch into its structure in 1997. Voters passed a \$198.2 million Pro Parks Levy in 2000, which included further funding for community gardens.
- *institutional supports*: Seattle’s community gardens have benefitted by an emergent and expansive web of other supportive institutions. These have included:
 - *Washington State University King County Extension*, with its master gardener and food education programs.
 - *Neighborhood Design/Build Studio* at the School of Architecture, University of Washington, whose students and faculty have assisted the civic gardeners who perform the bulk of physical labor.
 - *Seattle Housing Authority*, with its Cultivating Communities and Cultivating Youth gardens for low-income residents.
 - *P-Patch Trust* raises additional funds to support low-income community gardens and gardener fees.
 - *Lettuce Link* assists low-income gardening families and children, as well as distributing extra produce from various gardens to food banks and women’s shelters across the city.
 - *Seattle Tilth Association* offers workshops and operates a children’s garden.
 - *Race and Social Justice Initiative*, initially introduced within the department of neighborhoods, added an explicit racial equity toolkit to community garden planning, which has significantly helped to expand food-security gardens in low-income and immigrant communities.
 - additional land is provided by Seattle Public Utilities, Seattle City Light, and the Department of Parks and Recreation.

References:

Jeffrey Hou, Julie M. Johnson, and Laura J. Lawson, [*Greening Cities, Growing Communities*](#) (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009). Clear scholarly writing and design guidance, combined with case studies and beautiful photographs.

Megan Horst, “Fostering Food System Transformation: An Examination of Planning in the Central Puget Sound Region,” Ph.D. dissertation (Seattle: University of Washington, 2015).

Marcia Ruth Ostrom and Raymond A. Jussaume, Jr., “Assessing the Significance of Direct Farmer-Consumer Linkages as a Change Strategy in Washington State: Civic or Opportunistic?” in C. Clare Hinrichs and Thomas A. Lyson, eds., [*Remaking the North American Food System: Strategies for Sustainability*](#) (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 235-259.

Toward a Sustainable Seattle: comprehensive and neighborhood planning

In 1994, the city developed its comprehensive plan, *Toward a Sustainable Seattle*, in response to the state’s Growth Management Act (GMA) of 1990.

The public discussion was also framed by a “Peirce Report” (i.e. Neal R. Peirce) of 1989 appearing in the *Seattle Times* that called for smart growth, open space, and urban villages. New urbanists were also quite active in Seattle; Doug Kelbaugh wrote a report for city officials in 1992, “Envisioning an Urban Village: The Seattle Commons Design Charrette.”

In addition, Sustainable Seattle was formed as a nonprofit in 1991. Its “sustainability indicators,” developed through a process of extensive community forums, became important in Seattle and the broader regional, national and global movements for sustainable cities.

The comprehensive plan was quite amenable to sustainability, as well as to the idea that the city should be planned around different types of “urban villages,” classified in GMA according to housing density and level and type of projected business activity. The urban village rubric followed the famous terminology of urbanist and activist Jane Jacobs.

Despite these quite amenable components, however, the release of the plan caused an uproar in the neighborhoods because they had not been consulted. Much distrust still lingered from the failed downtown plan in the late 1980s.

In response, Mayor Norm Rice, the city’s first African American mayor who had been quite skeptical of neighborhood empowerment as a strategy to improve equity and services, consulted with his planning director, Gary Lawrence, as well as with Jim Diers at DON. Rice became convinced of the deeper public philosophy underlying this approach and gave a major speech on the need to engage neighborhoods actively in planning, if local planning groups in turn agreed to the planning goals of equity and opportunity.

Diers and his partners convened a large public meeting plus workshops at the University of Washington that included several hundred neighborhood, environmental, and other activists, as well as key staff in the relevant departments and other stakeholders. This led to a policy design team (“the Gang of Eleven”) and a larger learning network to develop a framework for moving forward.

The city council specified five core goals of the new design: community, social equity, environmental stewardship, economic opportunity, and security. These were to be realized within the comprehensive plan’s growth predictions for new jobs and housing in the urban village strategy.

All 37 neighborhoods that had been targeted for growth in the comprehensive plan (later reconfigured as 38) agreed to the specific process components in the new policy design for neighborhood planning. In return, they could access city funding to support their civic planning process, initially set at \$4.8 million over two years and later extended for two more.

Substantial funding for proposed projects had to wait for bond approval by voters, though the chances for this received an enormous boost from the civic, professional, and democratic legitimacy of the planning process.

The policy design of neighborhood planning contained five core institutional features:

Neighborhood Planning Office (NPO)

This office – separate from DON – was established to enable citizens to plan in ways that generated trust and legitimacy within neighborhoods, as well as to build the skill sets needed for complex projects. Karma Ruder, who headed the office, brought a deeply relational view to the civics of neighborhood planning. Her office aimed to secure these goals in various ways:

- *training*: the ten project managers in the new office received months of up-front training to complement the skills they initially brought to their job, such as land-use planning, housing, communications, finance, and community organizing. Each was assigned several neighborhoods to help develop their plans and skill sets.

Enlisted in training were organizations such as the Assets-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University (now at DePaul University in Chicago), the University of Washington School of Business, and the Seattle-King County Council on Aging Housing Task Force.

- *continuous learning*: all project managers were expected to learn from one another, such as land use from some staff and housing from others.

All were expected to learn how to build relationships within neighborhoods and across local civic, business, and other associations that may have different interests and perspectives, even a history of contention among each other. In effect, project managers were all expected to become relational and assets-based community organizers.

As NPO director Karma Ruder recounted, the bottom line for hiring staff was that “all had to believe that the community had wisdom ...and be willing to trust and believe in it.”

- *advisory committee*: this had representatives from the district councils, the citywide neighborhood council, and the new local planning groups, as well as from the city council, the planning commission, and city departments (in nonvoting roles). It helped provide further direction, such as the mandate for all planning groups to prioritize the various projects that might be recommended in their plans and to estimate costs.

Inclusive visioning

Each neighborhood planning group was expected to be inclusive in its visioning process, and thus to do a “stakeholder analysis” of which groups were at the planning table and which were not. This was designed to:

- *reduce participatory biases*: the inclusive visioning requirement was based upon the recognition that homeowners were typically more involved in neighborhood affairs than renters; families with children in local schools more involved than young people; middle class and educated white people more involved than immigrants and people of color, especially lower income folks. Much experience and extensive research confirmed such biases.
- *interrogate each other*: to reduce such participatory biases, each planning group was required to analyze the barriers and imbalances in its processes, and to come up with alternative ways of engaging people, if necessary. Did they consider doing surveys at food banks to get the views of homeless people? Did they do special outreach to small businesses that did not show up at community meetings? Did they meet with association leaders in areas with larger numbers of renters or poor people?

The inclusive visioning expectation was accompanied by a warning and a threat from NPO to the local planning groups:

- *warning*: if you do not work with a broad enough range of groups or if you systematically ignore or exclude some, your plan will lack enough legitimacy to be implemented.

- *threat*: if you persist in not deliberating in an inclusive manner or reaching out to build relationships, the planning director will hold up the funds designated to conduct the second round of planning, which were substantial (\$60,000 to \$100,000 for each planning group).

Indeed, the city council may ultimately not approve your plan if their own formal review and neighborhood tours (below) reveal lukewarm support or outright dissent among groups not adequately consulted.

Tools for empowering citizens

The policy design was premised on the idea that if neighborhood residents and civic associations were to do good planning work and to be accountable for that work, the city had a responsibility to help provide tools to enable and empower them.

Several types of tools were developed so that each neighborhood center designated for planning had a full array on hand to facilitate exploration and deliberation. Today, of course, such tools are far more sophisticated and available online in many cities than they were in the mid-1990s, when this process was first gearing up.

- *GIS tools*: geographic information system tools enabled each planning group to access neighborhood-specific data on demographics, land use, transportation flow, system capacity, and environmental constraints. They could print maps and aerial photographs for reports and public presentations.
- *guide books and manuals*: guides were tailored to each relevant city department, as well as to outside resources, to enable planning around housing, land use, environmentally critical areas, open space, block watches, public school partnerships, historic preservation, human services, biking and pedestrian facilities, and urban forests.

Some guidebooks had already been developed with the \$100,000 in award money from the Harvard Innovations in Government Award for NMF.

The manual on environmental projects, for instance, listed the resources of the Seattle Metrocenter YMCA, which housed the Y's national Earth Service Corps (a service learning program, with significant AmeriCorps staff support) and Sustainable Seattle's office. It also listed some one hundred or so other resources in the burgeoning field of civic environmentalism.

Not all tools for neighborhood planning were well designed, and some were produced too late in the process to be of optimal use. Many local activists knew more than the NPO staff hired to assist them. But as NPO downtown project manager John Eskelin noted, the very process of developing the toolkits, whatever their limits, compelled city departments to "begin thinking more like citizens."

Further planning and design capacity were provided by:

- *design review boards*: alongside the planning process, design review boards began to oversee the design features of the larger residential and commercial projects beginning in 1994. The boards included neighborhood representatives and professionals in design, development, and business.
- *private consultants*: each neighborhood planning group could also use its city funds to hire its own consultants, thus providing independent analysis and enabling visually rich and well documented presentations at the Alternatives Fair to which the entire neighborhood was invited.

Formal review and citizen accountability

The policy design of neighborhood planning was one of accountable autonomy. Local planning groups had considerable autonomy in developing a holistic vision of sustainable and equitable development for their neighborhoods and then configuring a mix of projects that they would like to see as part of that vision. Yet they were accountable to other key actors in the city for planning work that was technically credible and democratically legitimate.

Among those many components that nurtured a process and culture of mutual accountability were the following:

- *review and response*: all neighborhood plans were sent to the Strategic Planning Office, which organized a “review and response” team. The team reviewed several key questions for each proposed plan, such as:
 - was the plan consistent with the overall comprehensive plan and urban villages rubric?
 - did the plan comply with all laws, such as environmental ones and the Americans with Disabilities Act?
 - did the plan adequately document its participation process and inclusive visioning?
 - did the plan list potential nongovernmental partners for funding and implementation of specific items? These might include a community development corporation, nonprofit social service organization, civic or environmental group, or local business and developer.
 - did the plan set priorities, as well as cost estimates for the dozens of items typically in each plan?

Plan items were specified in a detailed “approval and adoption” matrix, and plan narratives and matrices for each neighborhood were made available on the city’s website, thus enhancing transparency across neighborhoods and among broader publics.

The matrices were, in effect, summaries of proposals refined through extensive public deliberation and one-on-one communication tapping numerous sources of local community, public agency, and city council expertise and trust. They were positioned within a broad neighborhood vision that various stakeholders committed publicly to work on together.

Even as many items were typically assigned to one office, as in other planning documents, they aspired to be “coproduction spreadsheets,” and some were later implemented in that vein.

- *city council's neighborhoods committee*: the council is the democratically elected and deliberative body most responsible for final approval of plans, which it delegated largely to its committee on neighborhoods and community development. The latter exercised its authority by:
 - reviewing each plan, including the feedback from the review and response team of agency staff.
 - inviting each local planning group to present at city hall and to respond to further questions and concerns.
 - assigning each councilor as a “steward” for several neighborhoods to oversee and facilitate.
 - conducting a formal public hearing in each neighborhood.
 - organizing neighborhood tours (sometimes with the mayor) to further validate local opinion and participatory process.
 - mediating several plans where the neighborhood planning group was stalemated and could not reach consensus.

Councilor Richard Conlin, a founder of Sustainable Seattle earlier in the decade, chaired the process, and Sally Clark served as the key staff person. Clark later won a council seat, and then as president of the city council helped to shepherd Seattle’s Climate Action Plan (below).

Project managers as relational organizers

Key to their role was to be able to weave “a very elaborate web of trust” (Karma Ruder) among various neighborhood stakeholders working on a plan, as well as among the agency staff most relevant to their work.

Mayor Norm Rice (1990-1998) and then mayor Paul Schell (1998-2002) strongly signaled these expectations to their department heads in one-on-one meetings and at facilitated retreats, who in turn communicated such expectations among mid-level and street-level staff.

Relational work of the project managers occurred in various ways:

- *broker one-on-ones*: among various actors, either to open new doors or to attempt to bridge strong differences that may have emerged in the planning process.
- *translate*: between vernacular understandings in neighborhoods and expert cultures within agencies.
- *exit*: when tensions grew between a project manager and a neighborhood planning group, one or the other might request a transfer, thus utilizing the “exit” option within an overall policy design for “voice” to keep the process moving forward.

These five institutional features were key to moving the neighborhood planning process forward. But, of course, implementation posed other challenges.

Implementing the plans

The neighborhood plans embodied sustained deliberative, relational, and mutually accountable work over several years. Some were more detailed than others, some more diligent in exploring nonprofit and other partners to work with city agencies, and some embodying deeper consensus among neighborhood stakeholders than others.

Many were not so good about estimating costs. Sally Clark, however, vigorously defended this expectation: “The neighborhoods were often surprised at the costs. But this [matrix process] was very educative for them. It gave them a sense of how much it costs to run a city... This gets us closer to honestly governing ourselves.”

Overall, the process was very successful, and indeed quite innovative in developing a complex collaborative and pragmatic democratic process.

Implementation, however, presented still further challenges, such as funding proposed projects, decentralizing city departments to work closely with neighborhood groups, and transforming organizational cultures. Many of the projects proposed in the plans were indeed implemented, but changing economic and political circumstances, as well as ongoing civic shifts among neighborhood groups, put a premium on dynamic adjustment. The city was only partly successful here.

Among the challenges were:

- *funding implementation*: as the plans were nearing completion across the 38 neighborhood planning groups and the city council approval process was wrapping up, only a relatively small fund was available to begin implementation.

Mayor Schell had defeated the candidate representing those in the neighborhoods that were largely opposed to growth, which the planning process was designed to

accommodate in a sustainable manner. Thus, NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) tendencies were held in check.

Funding the many hundreds of projects in the approved plans was partly secured by bond and levy measures that covered common items in the plans. These included such things as libraries, parks and open space, and low-income housing. Approximately \$430 million was raised from the initial bonds and levies, much of which could be targeted for items in the neighborhood plans.

These bonds and levies represented a familiar form of direct democracy voted on by the public at large. In this case, however, direct democracy as an expression of public will was anchored in the democratic legitimacy that had been generated by the deliberative and relational work of the neighborhood planning groups, as well as of the city council and agency “review and response” team that helped to ensure mutual accountability. Of course, advocacy groups also campaigned for the specific bonds and levies.

Voters, in short, were impressed by the civic work of the local planning committees, but were also reassured by the democratic accountability of the larger process.

- *decentralizing departments*: the city decentralized many departments into six sectors, overlapping police precincts and most district council boundaries.

This was designed to enable further collaboration between the departments and the “planning stewardship” groups that succeeded the planning committees in each area. They were comprised mostly of representatives of existing community councils, district councils, and several new organizations that emerged during the planning process.

An interdepartmental team (IDT) coordinated the work of departments in each of the six sectors to respond to the integrative and holistic quality of the neighborhood visions and plans.

“Neighborhood development managers” (aka “sector managers”) were hired in each of the six sectors to help support the neighborhood groups, to coordinate the IDTs, and to help map and mobilize further resources for community development. Several staff were carried over from their previous roles as project managers, and several new staff were hired.

Sector managers helped to generate further resources and other forms of support (beyond those in the bonds and levies) in several ways:

- *champions*: locating and nurturing champions within city agencies to allocate regular department budgets for projects in the neighborhood plans, which the mayor also urged.

Many departmental plans (urban forest management plan, Center City Seattle plan, comprehensive drainage plan) built directly upon the neighborhood plans. In addition, consulting neighborhood plans became a legal requirement or department procedure in some departments.

- *seek funding*: helping to raise money from private foundations, developers, arts commissions, utility companies, mitigation funds, state programs, and the Neighborhood Matching Fund.
- *negotiating*: with various actors as circumstances changed, and new opportunities and obstacles emerged.

The neighborhood development managers thus became a key lynchpin in generating further trust, relationships, and resources within and across city bureaucracies, local groups, nonprofits, and other stakeholders to help move implementation forward in an effective but also flexible and adaptive manner.

- *transforming cultures*: part of the strategy to decentralize department structures was to also transform organizational cultures of these city agencies.

The core of this was to embed more deeply among professional staff those kinds of skills and routines that would lead them to engage the “planning stewardship” groups and others in the community in plan implementation, as well as in other aspects of their department’s work. “Begin thinking more like citizens,” as Eskelin, who transitioned from project manager to sector manager, had observed.

Some departments responded well, others resisted, and still others had mixed responses, depending on street-level staff, local neighborhood pressure, and support upwards in the bureaucratic hierarchy and in the mayor’s office.

- *Public libraries*: staff had conducted forums during the planning phase and campaigned for the library bond. They articulated a civic professional mission within “the most democratic of institutions [that is, libraries] in helping citizens engage in self-governance.”

Many of the new branch libraries were designed to enhance further local knowledge for environmental and community problem solving, and to accommodate other community-based strategies (a community development corporation, neighborhood service center, affordable housing) within their building complexes.

- *Parks and Recreation*: staff, especially younger staff, responded well to the local plans; they also had an approved bond to support their work.

- *Transportation:* the DOT head at the initial stage of implementation was very supportive, but when he left there was less support at the top.

Nonetheless, the department hired Pamela Green, a former community organizer and DON district coordinator for Southeast Seattle, as well as an active board member of the King County National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), to help with projects such as the light rail.

Green brought her commitments to racial and social justice and her skills as a relational organizer to an unforeseen and difficult challenge when contaminated soil was discovered during construction on 45 sites (relocated dry cleaners, gas stations, homes with leaky oil tanks) along a four and one half mile stretch in Rainier Valley. She had to work with environmental justice activists, as well as 240 remaining businesses (many owned by new immigrants), to delay construction and hence business opening while remediation was undertaken and additional community development funds were accessed.

In sum: the policy design of neighborhood planning responded well to demands from local citizens, as well as expectations of elected officials and public agencies for accountability. Many of the components of the design were ambitious and creative, yet realistic and manageable. While far from perfect or conflict free, they produced workable plans that could also generate broader public support for passing bond and levy measures. A culture of engagement for a sustainable city and future initiatives was strengthened, yet not without some important shifts, which are still indeterminate or not well researched.

A few issues that persisted and helped lead to change and retrenchment are:

- *new mayor:* Greg Nickels (2002-2010) had a distinctively top-down style on neighborhoods, as well as towards the neighborhoods committee of the city council and the Seattle Planning Commission. He fired Jim Diers as head of the Department of Neighborhoods, although the city council responded by declaring “Jim Diers Day” in a celebration of his work. Nonetheless, Nickels did later pursue engagement through the Race and Social Justice Initiative (below) and became a national champion on city climate change.
- *budget cuts:* hard budget times followed the dot.com bust in the early 2000s and led to cutbacks, first by mayor Schell and then more substantially by Nickels, even when budget problems eased. This led to significant disinvestment in DON, as well as in the neighborhood development managers whose job was to coordinate and leverage further resources for plan implementation. Cutting these from six to three and then eliminating them altogether in 2003 was a genuine loss in system capacity for collaborative planning.

- *planning department*: while supportive in many ways of neighborhood engagement, some planners were genuinely concerned that not all neighborhoods had developed good plans or had addressed a full enough range of issues. Planners thus supported making more plan elements required, such as land use, transportation, open space, capital facilities, and utilities.

They were also concerned that the neighborhood planning process of 38 local committees working simultaneously did not allow them to deploy their own staff resources and new planning toolkits optimally. They supported ongoing, but staggered neighborhood planning.

These issues were addressed in the 2005 revisions of [*Toward a Sustainable Seattle*](#).

- *diversity and social justice*: the planning process addressed participatory biases, and some district councils brought in new groups beyond the traditional community councils, such a senior housing council, creek restoration group, or ethnic-based church or association.

Nonetheless, conflict emerged in some areas over representation. One key issue was whether a social service agency located in a neighborhood should have representation if it was primarily staff-based and did not directly involve clients and area residents in participating in local planning and community development activities.

Some in the community councils saw this as a violation of a core democratic principle, which was particularly worrisome when service nonprofits could potentially outnumber community councils in the larger representational structure. Nonprofit staff suspected community councils of using this as an excuse to exclude those serving poor people, youth, and recent immigrants, who did not always have the time, language skills, and cultural toolkits to enable effective participation on a par with middle class homeowners.

Diane Sugimura, head of the planning department, and Stella Chao, head of DON, jointly held some fifty community meetings across the city in 2007 and 2008 to try to address these kinds of problems. Both were committed to neighborhood participation, but also to social justice and diverse representation, which was a key goal of the city's formal Race and Social Justice Initiative, begun in 2004 under the auspices of the Seattle Office for Civil Rights.

The 2009 neighborhood plan update process in three Southeast Seattle and Greater Duwamish areas (New Holly-Othello, North Rainier Valley, and North Beacon Hill) built further upon their work and utilized "planning outreach liaisons" to convene 80 workshops, with a focus on 13 traditionally underrepresented communities. Some 1,650 participated.

The planning outreach liaisons were recruited as “trusted advocates” to help ensure that outreach and deliberation reflected diverse cultures, languages, and experiences, and that meetings were held in familiar community settings.

These initiatives seem to have yielded important successes and got much positive feedback from newer participants. Yet competing claims of fair representation among the local institutions, as well as within the reconfigured process, have persisted.

For instance, a newly engaged representative from an immigrant group might be questioned by others for not being aware of what local leaders and organizations from that very same group have been doing for the past several decades. The liaisons also may not act with the same evenhandedness among various community groups as the city staff in the Department of Neighborhoods or the Neighborhood Planning Office were trained to do, indeed required as part of the ethos and routines of civil servants.

A Community Challenge grant of \$3 million from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 2011 enabled Southeast Seattle neighborhoods to work on plan implementation in a way that enhanced equity in transit oriented development (TOD) by empowering and stabilizing existing businesses and residents around the new light rail stations. The process for the Community Cornerstones project expanded the array of core community organizing, ethnic, immigrant, and business coalitions that were part of planning.

Nonetheless, it built directly upon the legacy of neighborhood planning and the leadership- and capacity-building of the Department of Neighborhoods, yet arguably needed further capacity building investments to become more fully effective, as key partners argued.

In 2016, under mayor Ed Murray, the Department of Neighborhoods was reorganized, cutting formal ties and funding to the District Councils, in favor of greater outreach to renters, younger residents, immigrants and communities of color.

Some perceive the changes as enhancing diversity considerably and making room for multi-family housing in single-family homeowner areas, while others say the looser forms of engagement and disinvestment in civic capacity building and leadership development enhance the power of developers.

No scholarly research seems to have yet addressed these changes in depth, or how various opportunities for civic engagement, collaboration, and equitable participation have been affected. To be sure, all systems of local engagement have tensions that must be managed in the search for fair and effective empowerment. Despite setbacks, Seattle has been notably innovative.

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Puget Sound Partnership (PSP)

In the 1987 revisions of the Clean Water Act (Section 320), Congress created the National Estuary Program (NEP), which provided funding for partnerships working to protect and restore major estuaries around the country. The Puget Sound Water Quality Authority was among the first of 28 that were created in the ensuing years.

It was restructured in 1996 as the Puget Sound Action Team to answer more clearly to state authority and then again in 2008 as the [Puget Sound Partnership](#), a state agency, but still operating in ways designed to enhance civic engagement and institutional partnerships in its work.

The NEP policy design provided an initial grant of \$5 million, on condition that the petitioning state or states agree to establish a multi-stakeholder management conference for the local NEP and commit to developing a comprehensive conservation and management plan (CCMP). This conference is housed typically in a federal or state agency, university, or nonprofit organization that serves as fiscal agent.

NEPs have no direct regulatory authority, but they can signal the kinds of state and local regulations and public investments they think are needed to fulfill their larger ecological mission. They gather and develop a broad range of tools, including those that help local publics assign an economic value to ecosystem services, to help guide local decision makers and voters in further investments, land use controls, and regulations.

NEPs are encouraged to raise further funds from public and private sources and to develop a wide range of other institutional relationships not dependent upon EPA. However, funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is typically renewed and sometimes increased. Funding also comes from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

The management conference must include several categories of actors: other public agencies (local, state, and federal), businesses, academic institutions, environmental and community groups, as well as a representative from the EPA regional office.

However, an essential aspect of an NEP baseline “institutional analysis,” as it is formally called, is to begin early to map a much broader range of the organizations in its institutional field that may provide distinct tools (regulatory, voluntary, incentive-based, planning, natural resource, public education, technical assistance), and hence civic, political, economic, and administrative opportunities and obstacles that may present themselves.

The [Puget Sound Partnership](#) (PSP) has refined and enhanced these design features in various ways.

- [Local Integrating Organizations](#) (LIOs): these are comprised of dedicated stakeholders at the local level who develop five-year local ecosystem recovery plans and provide support and guidance for implementation. As of December 2018, ten LIOs were organized, and only one area (Samish/Skagit watershed) was identified as an important gap. Plans are required to be science based yet be consistent with community needs and values. Settle is part of the South Central Action Area.

The Puget Sound Partnership provides LIOs with capacity building funds, resources, and liaison support via the Ecosystem Recovery Coordinators (PSP staff). Local public meetings as well as watershed and other groups pressed hard for this structure when local capacity building was neglected in the initial iteration of PSP in 2007-2008. Some were quite aware of the template for staff support in Seattle’s neighborhood planning design.

Structure varies from one LIO to another, but many include watershed association and salmon recovery groups (which have additional governance roles in salmon and steelhead recovery plans and councils), marine resource committees, educational organizations, businesses, nonprofits, special interest groups, and local and tribal elected officials and staff, as well as members of the public. LIOs are recognized officially as the local experts for ecosystem recovery.

LIOs meet regularly to coordinate projects, exchange research, identify strategic priorities, and discuss fundraising and spending. They may also recommend land use

regulations, coordinate and implement ongoing permit programs, and implement capital improvement projects and plans.

A key function of LIO's is to provide opportunities for broader public involvement in developing LIO ecosystem recovery plans and hands-on restoration work.

While the earlier iterations of the Puget Sound NEP provided grants to civic and tribal groups for public involvement, education and restoration – and thus established an important legacy – PSP has required greater prioritization of problems and more strategic use of resources closely aligned with the science-based analyses generated by academic and other partners and coordinated through the Science Panel, which is responsible for the [State of the Sound](#) report and website.

- *Ecosystem Monitoring Program*: watershed groups and other volunteer monitoring groups, as well as partners from agencies, tribes, and businesses, coordinate their work across Puget Sound to monitor environmental conditions and further inform the work of LIOs and other boards, teams, and panels. Monitoring in the sound leverages several decades of volunteer and professional monitoring experience within estuaries.
- *Ecosystem Coordination Board*: this 27-member board is designed to serve as the voice of the diverse partner groups. These include environmental groups, business interests, tribes, cities, counties, and port districts, as well as state and federal agencies. The role of the board is problem solving and practical aspects of the Action Agenda and implementation strategy.

This board is the major multi-stakeholder body that advises the [Leadership Council](#), comprised of seven appointees of the governor and serving four-year terms, as well as advising the executive director.

- *Strategic Initiative Leads and Advisory Teams*: the leads coordinate specific strategic initiatives across the entire sound, such as shellfish, habitat, and stormwater, as well as climate change, which overlaps all areas. Advisory teams work with the leads in developing priorities and coordinating with regional, local, and tribal partners to improve and adaptively manage the strategic planning process.

Federal agency staff provide support for this complex network of teams and councils, partly through a Memorandum of Understanding that includes EPA, NOAA, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Army Corps of Engineers, and others.

- *Puget Sound Environmental Caucus*: a group of environmental organizations advises the Ecosystem Coordination Board and the Puget Sound Salmon Recovery Council. It is composed of the Puget Soundkeeper, local and state chapters of major national groups (Sierra Club, Audubon, National Wildlife Federation, The Nature Conservancy), and other civic and conservation groups.

- *public communication and education*: to enhance communication and environmental education among broader publics, PSP provides funding, technical, and other resources to nonprofit organizations, such as the Seattle Aquarium, the university-based Sea Grant program, The Nature Conservancy, the Washington Environmental Council, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and tribal governments.

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Natural drainage systems (NDS)

NDS uses native and wetland plants and forest species to convert excessively wide and nonporous streets into porous ones with roadside bioswales and other features that help filter and reduce stormwater runoff. These provide opportunities for engagement and partnership with homeowners in street design. Watershed groups have increased their pressure on Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) on stormwater runoff alternatives.

Seattle provided an early model for natural drainage systems beginning in the late 1990s that captured attention in the field by securing prominent awards, including the Innovations in American Government Award from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University in 2004.

The city then persisted in its national leadership role, as evidenced most directly by its funding (with the Summit Foundation) and direct design guidance in the development of the elegantly presented and user-friendly *Urban Street Stormwater Guide*. This was issued as the official guide by the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO). Its forward was written by the director of Seattle Department of Transportation (and NACTO vice president) and the general manager/CEO of SPU.

Each of these agencies had experienced significant culture change in response to the neighborhood planning processes of the late 1990s and to the early implementation phase into the next decade, which established decentralized interdepartmental teams to continue to work in collaboration with neighborhood plan stewardship groups (above). Many plans called for watershed and creek restoration.

When Denise Andrews, a young policy analyst at SPU, responded to Mayor Paul Schell's (1998-2002) Millennium Challenge to spur innovative projects by assembling an interdisciplinary team that included a civil engineer and a landscape architect, she explicitly aimed to combine citizens' local knowledge of stormwater runoff with professional knowledge. Staff from DON helped her and her staff to learn how to work with neighbors, many of whom were reluctant to give up city right-of-way space where they parked extra cars – "their eighth car," as Andrews facetiously put

it in an interview. Active stewardship days enlisted neighbors to maintain the beautifully landscaped Street Edge Alternative.

Various urban creek groups had begun to form earlier; one of the earliest was the Carkeek Watershed Community Action Project in 1979, inspired by a local resident leading a Girl Scout group through a local park that discovered the degraded creek in 1965 and began to work on restoration over the years following.

Mayor Schell also initiated the Urban Creeks Legacy Program in 1999, which helped to place greater emphasis on urban runoff and to spur NDS.

This included the HOPE VI redesign of the High Point public housing project in the Longfellow Creek watershed in the lower-income Delridge neighborhood of West Seattle, owned and managed by the Seattle Housing Authority. It piggy-backed NDS onto the new urbanist and green building features of the design and included 1,600 residences in a mix of low-income, affordable, and market-rate units. The Delridge neighborhood plan was facilitated by long-time Filipino-American public housing resident and Delridge activist, Ron Angeles, in his role as department of neighborhoods staff.

Though applied differently in locations with varied cultural norms, development challenges, and hardened infrastructure obstacles, as well as citizen protest and mayoral shifts, NDS has emphasized “strategies of infiltration, flow attenuation, filtration, bioremediation with soils and plants, reduction of impervious surface coverage, and provision of pedestrian amenities.”

As Andrew Karvonen argues, this was to be accomplished as much as possible with “ecorevelatory design” features that would serve as a civic educational feedback mechanism visibly revealing relationships between human actors and natural processes.

Ecorevelatory design can be considered an important feature of “policy design for democracy.”

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Green building

The green building field began to develop in the 1990s with the founding of the [U.S. Green Building Council](#) (USGBC) in 1993.

Its LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rating tool is based upon a system of prerequisites and credits grouped under core categories, such as water efficiency, and energy and atmosphere. LEED for Neighborhood Development (LEED-ND), and more recently [LEED for Cities and Communities](#), can likewise serve as a tool for formalized neighborhood planning.

Seattle developed a Green Building team in 1999, and then formed City Green Building, which was later brought into the Office of Sustainability and Environment. It was the first city (in 2000) to develop LEED standards as a policy for public construction by one of the leaders of the green building movement, Lucia Athens. In her book, [*Building an Emerald City*](#), based largely upon Seattle, she discusses the opportunities for developing leadership and support among many stakeholders for a citywide policy.

The city has since developed one of the fifteen high performance downtown districts in the country, in conjunction with the American Institute of Architects, Architecture 2030 (a separate nonprofit founded in 2006), and other partners.

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Climate planning

The city published its first sustainability plan in 1996 and its first climate action plan in 2006. Mayor Nickels (2002-2010) became a leader on climate change among US mayors and Seattle was the site of the 2007 U.S. Conference of Mayors Climate Protection Summit.

The climate action plan was updated in 2013.

Carbon neutral community groups were convened by the city council to identify short-term action the city could take. Community meetings convened for further input, including in nine underserved communities and in the native languages of specific immigrant groups. Outreach was also enabled by public comments on an official website.

The climate action plan builds explicitly upon the neighborhood plans, the comprehensive plan (*Towards a Sustainable Seattle*), bicycle and pedestrian master plans, the urban forest plan, the transportation strategic plan, the consolidated plan for housing and community development, the food action plan, and other plans for solid waste, stormwater management, public utilities, and disaster readiness. It calls for engaging residents in a comprehensive adaptation strategy.

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