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# How Seattle Is Dismantling a NIMBY Power Structure

At a time when rents are soaring and development is

# more contentious than ever before, a little-known city agency is rethinking its role in neighborhood planning.

STORY BY  
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For decades, activist homeowners have held virtual veto power over nearly every decision on Seattle's growth and development.

In large and small ways, these homeowners, who tend to be white, more affluent and older than the average resident, have shaped neighborhoods in their reflection — building a city that is consistently rated as one of the nation's most livable, as well as one of its most expensive.

Now — in the face of an unprecedented housing crisis and a **dramatic spike in homelessness** — that may be starting to change.

Last July, Mayor Ed Murray and the director of the city's Department of Neighborhoods, Kathy Nyland, announced that Seattle was cutting formal ties with, and funding for, the 13 volunteer Neighborhood District Councils that had been the city's chief sounding boards on neighborhood planning since the 1990s. Through this bureaucratic sleight of hand, Murray and Nyland signaled their intent to seek more input and feedback from lower-income folks, people of color and renters — who now make up 54 percent of the city — and away from the white baby boomers who have long dominated discussions about Seattle's future. The message: We appreciate your input, but we're going to get a second opinion.

A few months later, the Department of Neighborhoods doubled down on its commitment to community engagement, putting out a call for volunteers to serve on a new 16-member **Community Involvement Commission**, which will be charged with helping city departments develop “authentic and thorough” ways to reach “all” city residents, including underrepresented communities such as low-income people, homeless residents and renters. Finally, DON will also oversee and staff a second new commission, the **Seattle Renters' Commission**, which will advise all city departments on policies that affect renters and monitor the enforcement and effectiveness of the city's renter protection laws.

The shakeup has rattled traditional neighborhood groups, which have grown accustomed to outsized influence at City Hall, and invigorated some groups that have long felt ignored and marginalized by the city.

The shift toward a more inclusive neighborhoods department, and neighborhood planning process, is more than just symbolic; it's political. The homeowner-dominated neighborhood councils have typically

argued against land use changes that would allow more density (in the form of townhouses and apartment buildings) in and near Seattle’s traditional single-family neighborhoods, which make up nearly two-thirds of the city. Including more renters and low-income people in the mix could dilute, or even upend, those groups’ agendas.



Department of Neighborhoods Director  
and (Credit: The Rose Center for Public  
)

“Our city has changed dramatically since our district councils system was created three decades ago, and we have seen them over time become less and less representative not only of their neighborhoods but of Seattle itself,” Murray said last year.

His statement echoed a point Nyland made in a memo to the City Council back in May: “We have heard from residents active in the system that ‘District Councils work for us.’ ... However, they don’t work for everyone.”

Nyland should know. She came up through the council system, first getting involved in the Georgetown Community Council where she questioned the purpose of a new trash dump in the largely industrial neighborhood where she lived and owned a boutique called George with her partner, Holly. She also got involved with the Greater

Duwamish District Council and helped fight down a proposal that would have turned Georgetown into the city’s official strip club district. She eventually became the chair of the citywide Neighborhood Community Council, and recalls sending emails “at 1 in the morning in my pajamas sitting in my living room, because that’s when I had time to do it.

“We have systems in place that are not easy to navigate,” Nyland says, and people in established groups who say that “people are just choosing not to come to the meetings. ... What if someone works at night? What if someone has kids and can’t get a babysitter? What if someone can’t speak English? What if someone just didn’t know about the meetings? They’re not making a choice not to come. They can’t come!”

## REDEFINING THE RELATIONSHIP TO CITY HALL

Mohamud Yusuf came to Seattle as a refugee from Somalia by way of Nairobi, Kenya, in 1996, when the Somali community in Seattle was still “very small,” he recalls. Today, his community is thriving in areas like southeast Seattle, which is still one of the most affordable parts of the city, although rising costs are pushing many immigrants and refugees farther south, outside Seattle. Yusuf was a writer, activist and photojournalist in Somalia in the 1980s and 1990s, and 10 years ago, he started a newspaper called Runta News; “runta,” in Somali, means “the truth.” Today, Yusuf also works as a **community liaison to the city**, earning \$50 an hour to connect community members to city programs and services.

The changes at City Hall excite Yusuf. “I’ve been involved in the community since I was here but I’ve

never seen this kind of involvement,” he says. “What we needed was to be included, to be at the table and have a voice.”



Mohamud Yusuf came to Seattle as a refugee from Somalia in the 1990s and now works as a community liaison to the city.

Yusuf recounts a recent effort to get the Somali community involved in a long-range plan for Seattle Public Utilities, which provides the city’s trash service and drinking water. Instead of just making materials available in Somali and other languages upon request, the city sent outreach workers to meet with community members where they already were — in neighborhood community centers, in libraries and during English-language classes at the local Goodwill — and talked with them, in their own language, about what forthcoming changes will mean. They taught the immigrants how the city’s sanitation system works too, equipping residents with knowledge they will be able to use next time there is a question about trash collection or clean water in their community.

“The people I talked to were so happy to know more about where the water goes,” Yusuf says. “They would say, ‘We all know our garbage goes away, but we didn’t know where it was going. We are drinking clean water now at home, but we didn’t know who was doing it.’”

Nyland’s reform can be traced back to a 2009 audit of the district councils that found an obsolete system that did not reflect the city’s true demographics. “The system is dominated by the presence of longtime members whose point of view is overly dominant at both the district council and city neighborhood council levels and potentially not representative of their communities,” the [city audit](#) found. “The district councils in general are not sufficiently representative of the communities they

nominally represent,” it concluded.

The disconnect was even deeper in 2016, when a report by the neighborhoods department **found** that while the population of Seattle was becoming younger, more diverse and more evenly split between homeowners and renters, “residents attending district council meetings tend to be 40 years of age or older, Caucasian and homeowners.”

“If you’ve ever gone to some of these community meetings, they’re just deadly dull, and the same 25 people have been there for 100 years,” City Council Member Sally Bagshaw says.

At a meeting of the Ballard District Council in northwest Seattle immediately after the announcement, district council members seemed shell-shocked by the city’s decision to cut them off. Sitting around a horseshoe of tables at the area’s branch library in northwest Seattle, they took turns grouching about the change. One member argued that the mostly white, mostly middle-aged council should be considered diverse, because “this group represents homeowners, environmental groups, businesses and other organizations.” “We have people here from every state,” he added. Another suggested that the city had made the move in haste, without a plan to replace the councils. “If you’re going to get rid of the current plan, you need to have a new plan in place before you get rid of the old one,” he said.

**“Right now, we’re just planting seeds. We might not see the results for a long time.”**

At another recent meeting of the group formerly known as the Magnolia/Queen Anne District Council, which represents a wealthy enclave just south of Ballard, one member asked plaintively, “Why do we have to encourage certain groups to come? Why can’t it just be an open forum?”

In a sense, traditional neighborhood groups are right to feel threatened. Nyland’s announcement, coupled with her department’s new emphasis on outreach to communities that have rarely had a say in city decisions, represents a fundamental shift in the very definition of the “neighborhoods” department. By emphasizing outreach to underserved groups such as renters, immigrants and refugees, Nyland is shaking up traditional notions of community engagement and redefining community as something based not on geographic proximity, but on personal and cultural affinity.

“It’s kind of taking off in a way that I can’t keep up with,” says Sahar Fathi, a member of Nyland’s team. “We get a lot of emails from people who are like, ‘We want this to come to our community. We’re starting to go into places where people have never heard of us, and they don’t even know what government services are’ — including, she says, “communities we didn’t even know existed.” In Seattle, a city of about 650,000, 25,000 residents were born in another country; of the 120 languages spoken there, the city’s liaisons collectively speak at least 65.

Fathi is one of Seattle’s relative newcomers. The Boston-born Iranian-American moved to the Emerald City a decade ago, when she was in her early 20s. After a stint as a legislative aide to City Council

Member Mike O'Brien and an unsuccessful run for the State House of Representatives, she put her background as a lawyer and immigrant rights advocate to work as a policy analyst for the city's Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs. These days, Fathi oversees DON's **Public Outreach and Engagement Liaison** program, which recruits and pays community members like Yusuf to serve as links between the city and marginalized groups. The liaisons' job duties include everything from driving people to resource fairs where they can sign up for city assistance programs, to facilitating meetings at community gathering places and interpreting for city staffers, to engaging people in their first language in larger community discussions over neighborhood spending, parks programs, and planning debates.



“Before, the city would say, ‘We have a pedestrian master plan meeting, and we want people to come and give us feedback,’” Fathi says. “With all due respect to the pedestrian master plan, there are a lot of people who can barely afford to pay rent. So how do we meet people’s needs first and then build their capacity” to come to meetings about city policies that affect their neighborhoods.

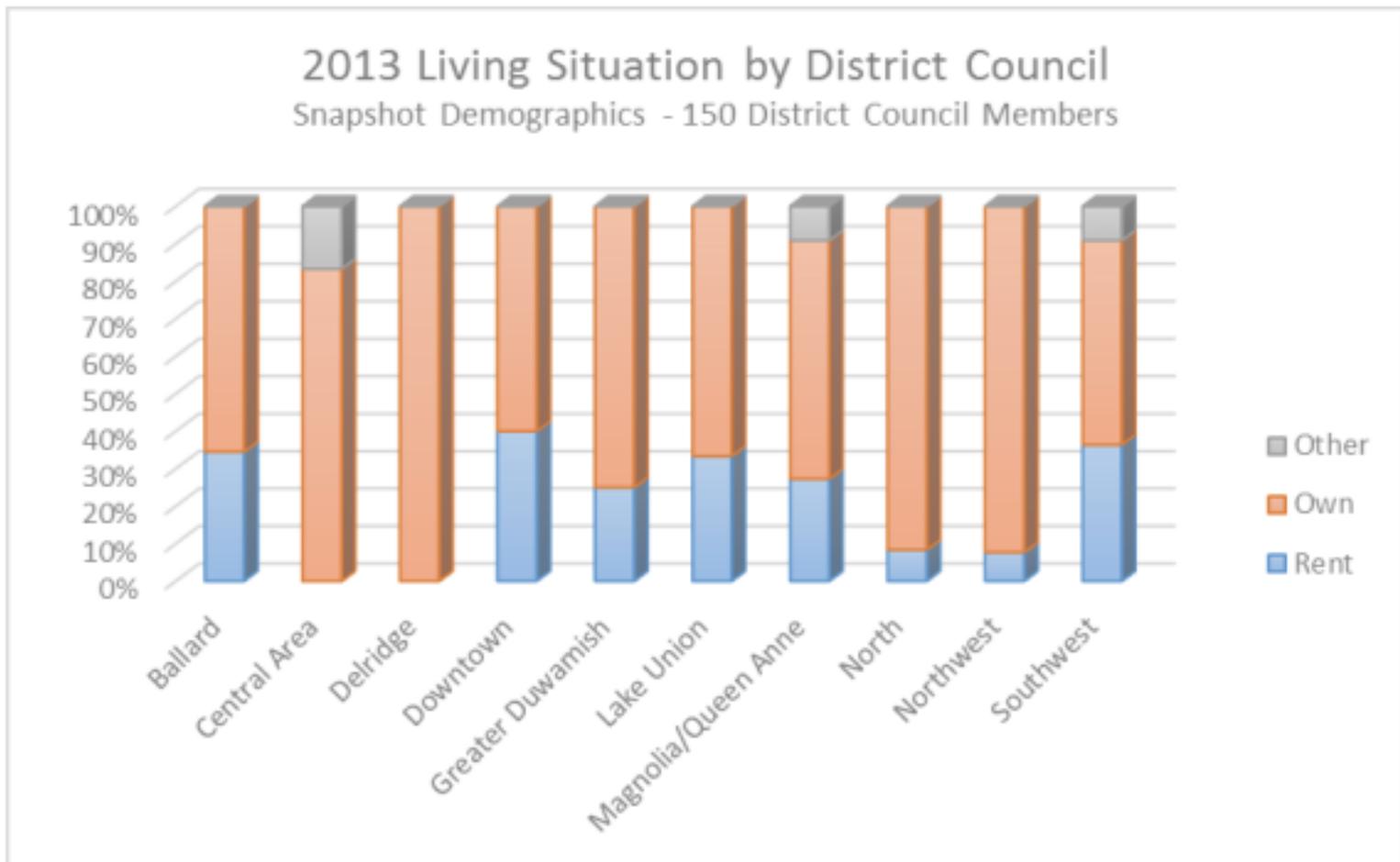
## **GOING BEYOND “A SEAT AT THE TABLE”**

Seattle’s modern neighborhood movement dates back to at least the late 1980s, when then-Mayor Charles Royer appointed neighborhood activist Jim Diers to head up the new Department of Neighborhoods and create the 13 neighborhood district councils and a citywide council made up of representatives from all the councils. Ever since, the district councils have enjoyed outsized influence at City Hall, staking out and defining “neighborhood” positions on issues and channeling city grant dollars toward their own **pet projects**, such as National Night Out events, neighborhood welcome signs and security lighting.

For decades, the councils advised the neighborhoods department on what “the neighborhoods” wanted, and if that advice happened to coincide precisely with the interests of the comfortable, white homeowners who dominated the council, nobody at the city seemed to mind. The councils frequently advocated against zoning changes to allow more development in or near the city’s single-family neighborhoods, including Murray’s **Housing Affordability and Livability Agenda**, which would upzone much of the city and require developers to build affordable rental housing. Neighborhood activists have shown up in force at council meetings and community briefings by city staff to oppose the HALA recommendations, and one neighborhood group has successfully sued to block an approved HALA rule change that would make it easier for homeowners to **build backyard cottages**.

In recent years, though, groups that have traditionally been left out of the process have started

demanding seats at the table, including advocates for transit-oriented development and immigrants and refugees, and renters. At a recent City Council briefing on the new renters' commission, Erin House, a renter, told the council, "I see conversations at both City Hall and in neighborhoods dominated by homeowners, often at the expense of renters' best interests. As a city, we need to find ways to correct this trend and give renters a seat at the table on conversations about Seattle's future."



(Credit: City of Seattle)

Last year's announcement severing ties with the neighborhood councils was a first step in that direction. For the first time since its inception in the late '80s, the city's neighborhoods department would spend as much time engaging with underrepresented communities as it did listening to the concerns of white property owners.

"DON has great programs," Nyland says, "but the department has not evolved with the changing demographics of the city."

Nyland's department is small relative to other city agencies, but it has found ways to connect with residents without a huge infrastructure. Ice cream giveaways at summer events. Crowd canvassing at the West Seattle Farmers Market. Plopping down in a temporary parklet on the annual (PARK)ing day. And partnering with organizations like the local Goodwill training center once a quarter, to offer services and information about opportunities to get involved with city initiatives. Some of the department's efforts have had mixed success. A recent push to engage people of color and low-income residents in the HALA planning process **fizzled** after the city failed to adequately prepare new participants and follow up when they stopped showing up. But others have been effective at getting new people connected to City Hall.

Nyland notes that many people bemoan the loss of neighborhood service centers, the “little city halls” where residents could talk to city staffers face-to-face. Most of those closed down years ago, the victims of city budget cuts and a population that increasingly does business with government online. Today, Nyland says, what people need more than storefronts is opportunities to engage with the city on their own time. That means telephone town halls instead of in-person presentations by city staffers; online surveys instead of public comment cards; and Skype calls instead of nighttime meetings in library activity rooms and church basements.

“My mantra is, people should be able to participate on their own timeline, from their own location,” Nyland says. “DON has been in existence for 30 years, and it has a lot of really important programs, but I think its mission and its purpose has gotten lost. We haven’t kept up with change. We haven’t refreshed. ... I mean, I can’t force people to participate, but we can create opportunities to make it easier.”

At the most recent Goodwill event, Fathi says, the public outreach liaisons came in and took over the second hour of a group of immigrants’ English as a Second Language class. First, they talked briefly — in 17 different languages — about the mayor’s upcoming education summit, which aimed to find solutions to address racial disparities in Seattle schools. Then, they signed the residents up for “all the services the city had to offer” — utility discounts, low-income transit passes and summer programs for kids. This may seem superficially unrelated to the kind of community building and neighborhood planning that is DON’s primary mission, but Fathi says it isn’t. “There are a lot of people who can barely afford to pay rent, so we ask ourselves, how do we meet people’s needs first and then build that capacity, and we think being a good government neighbor is the first step.”

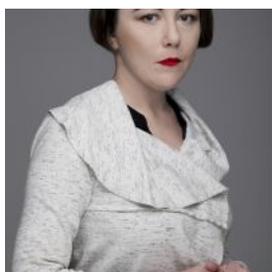
But what the next step holds is a question that some critics say hasn’t yet been substantively answered. Dustin Washington is an experienced community organizer in Seattle and the director of the American Friends Service Committee’s local community justice program. He used to be a member of a race and social justice roundtable created by Murray and is no stranger to City Council. To him, DON’s community outreach efforts are little more than meaningless lip service to cover for the mayor’s pro-gentrification, developer-friendly agenda. “When the mayor and the City Council want to engage with developers — the folks who really hold the power in the city — they don’t have to create any of these mechanisms,” Washington says. “You can set up any mechanism that you want, but I don’t think this mayor is truly interested in engaging with voices that have been left out of the process.”

In many ways, community activists who question the mayor’s sincerity and neighborhood activists who think the mayor is trying to shut them out are coming from the same place — a profound skepticism that the city is interested in hearing what they have to say. Nyland says she understands those concerns. “Right now, we’re just planting seeds,” she says. “We might not see the results for a long time.” Nyland urges skeptics on both sides to be patient and give her a chance to earn their trust.

Over in Magnolia, at the meeting of the group formerly known as the Magnolia/Queen Anne District Council (they’re still searching for a new name), members spent more than an hour crafting a new vision statement to reflect their new mission as an organization. On the second pass, they came up with

this: “This group is a catalyst for enhancing quality of life and community building by being a forum for all voices, leading to effective influence on government and in our communities through innovation, education and advocacy.” Hardly a full-throated endorsement of Nyland’s agenda, but it’s a start.

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*Alex Garland is a freelance photographer and reporter in the Seattle metro area. His focus is society and environment but covers any and all stories concerning his adopted home in the Pacific Northwest. If he’s not tracking down stories in the streets of Seattle, there’s a chance you’ll find him deep in the*

*woods or near a river.*

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