SAINT PAUL DISTRICT COUNCILS est. 1975

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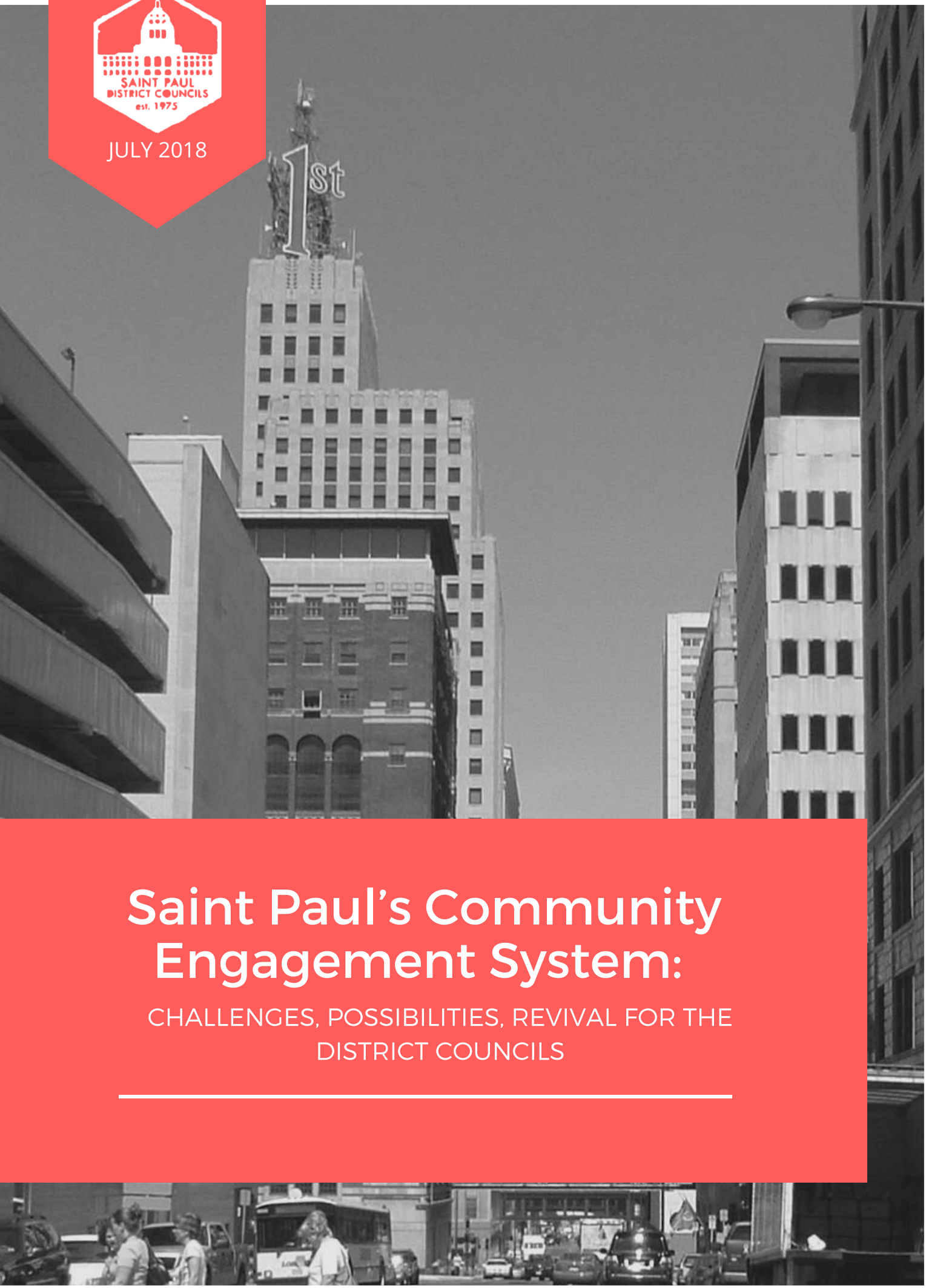

Saint Paul's Community Engagement System:

CHALLENGES, POSSIBILITIES, REVIVAL FOR THE DISTRICT COUNCILS

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Previous members: Deanna Abbot-Foster (District 4 Dayton's Bluff), Julie Reiter (District 13 Union Park), Monica Bravo (District 3 West Side), Sarah Goodspeed (District 12 Saint Anthony Park), Suyapa Miranda (District 12 Saint Anthony Park).

INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes Phase Two of a project supported by the City of Saint Paul's Innovation Fund. Phase One, reported to the City Council in May 2017, had two components. One report documented the current state of Saint Paul's four-decade-old District Council system. A second report compared Saint Paul's system with the formal community engagement efforts in three other cities: Boston, Massachusetts; Portland, Oregon; and Seattle, Washington. (See the appendix for report links).

The local component of Phase One summarizes the existing financial, staff, and volunteer resources of Saint Paul's District Councils; some of the prominent ways (historical and current) in which District Councils create lasting change in their neighborhoods and the city; the day-to-day priorities of District Councils; and how District Councils and the resident volunteers who drive them are woven into the fabric of Saint Paul's civic life. Phase One includes 10 "lessons learned" -- principles to follow for effective, equitable community engagement (see Page 5) – and suggests 8 tactics being used in other cities that Saint Paul could study and adapt.

Phase One focused primarily on cataloguing the capacity and operations of Saint Paul's District Councils. But during Phase One discussions, staff and board members began to voice some of the challenges Councils face. That was the starting line for this Phase Two project.

Phase Two gave staff and board members (and, ultimately, additional community stakeholders) the opportunity to discuss the challenges they see facing District Councils, both citywide and within individual organizations. These Phase Two discussions then began to identify specific ways in which individual Councils, city government, and District Councils as a system can pursue policies and activities that will make the city's community engagement efforts more effective.

METHODOLOGY

This Phase Two project was guided by 11 staff members from 9 District Councils.

Project leadership team: Liz Boyer (District 14 Macalester-Groveland) and Michael Kuchta (District 10 Como Park).

Project Steering Committee: Kathryn Murray (District 12 Saint Anthony Park), Kerry Antrim (District 6 North End), Lisa Theis (District 2 East Side), Lissa Jones-Lofgren (District 5 Payne-Phalen).

Previous members: Deanna Abbot-Foster (District 4 Dayton's Bluff), Julie Reiter (District 13 Union Park), Monica Bravo (District 3 West Side), Sarah Goodspeed (District 12 Saint Anthony Park), Suyapa Miranda (District 12 Saint Anthony Park)

The Steering Committee and a contracted facilitator, Barbara Raye, led:

- **Two discussions with District Council staff.**

  The first staff discussion, on Nov. 8, 2017, involved 23 participants from 16 Councils. It focused on these questions:

  - "Why do District Councils have a reputation for not doing important work? How could we improve this? How would this lead to achieving better equitable engagement?"
  - "What problems are inherent in our system? How could we do it differently? How could we allocate funds differently? How would this lead to achieving better equitable engagement?"
  - "Why don't Councils relate well to each other anymore? How could this be improved? How would this lead to achieving better equitable engagement?"

  The second staff discussion, on Feb. 1, 2018, involved 18 participants from 12 Councils. It focused on these questions, which evolved out of topics raised in the first staff discussion:

  - "How can we cooperate on day-to-day operations?"
  - "How do we spread the word on coordinating communication, messaging, storytelling?"
  - "How do we strengthen relations and maximize our impact in working with the city and beyond?"

- **Two discussions with volunteer District Council board members.** These discussions were on March 30 and April 1, 2018. Combined, these discussions involved 70 participants from 16 Councils. The board discussions focused on these questions:
    - "How can we build resources and capacity as a District Council system?"
    - "How can we build power and strength through collaboration with each other?"
    - "How do we engage people and organizations who are not currently involved in our work?"

- **Two focus groups and additional one-on-one conversations** with 10 "community stakeholders" who were identified by steering committee members. Most of these stakeholders had no ongoing relationship with their District Council. The conversations with stakeholders centered around these questions:
    - "What are you working on and what do you care about?"
    - "What does good public engagement look like to you?"
    - "What is your perception of District Councils, and how are we relevant to you (or not)?"
    - "How can we collaborate or partner with you in your work?"

In addition, the project led an in-depth conversation on May 9, 2018, among District Council staff and Joe Mendyka, Saint Paul's community engagement coordinator. The project leadership team met with Toni Newborn, the chief equity officer in the administration of Mayor Melvin Carter III, and had informal discussions with various City Council members during the project. Steering Committee members also reviewed a variety of reports and studies that assessed Saint Paul's citizen participation efforts through the past four decades. However, to maintain a fresh perspective, these reports (and their recommendations) were not reviewed until after this report was drafted. In that way, this project ensures that the recommendations contained here are contemporary, not recycled from the past. Nonetheless, it has become obvious that some issues – such as equitable outreach, funding, staff turnover, and consistent City support – have been challenges throughout the history of Saint Paul's citizen participation efforts.

DISCLAIMER

This report is informed by discussions with staff, board members, and others involved with or interested in Saint Paul's District Council system, including conversations with City staff and officials. Although it is influenced by multiple viewpoints, ultimately, the report deliberately takes a District Council perspective. It is intended to serve as a starting point for conversation, collaboration, and progress toward a more effective, equitable community engagement commitment in Saint Paul.

The specific recommendations and comments are based on the consensus of Steering Committee members after the input gathered through the process described herein. This report should not be interpreted as representing other District Council staff or volunteers individually or as a whole. This report does not commit Councils, staff, or leadership to any specific action. Opportunities to pursue or implement components of this report will arise if the recommendations are deemed worthwhile, and only after further discussion of specific actions.

10 Rules for Effective, Equitable Community Engagement

1. Is well-resourced with consistently reliable funding.
2. Includes intentional cooperation and communication among neighborhood organizations and city departments.
3. Combines geographic engagement with culturally-based outreach that crosses geographic lines to reach traditionally under-represented populations.
4. Combines project-based engagement from city departments with grassroots resident-based engagement supported by independent neighborhood organizations.
5. Seeks partnerships among city staff, neighborhood organizations and institutions, residents and businesses, foundations, and others.
6. Supports long-term community building in neighborhoods, not simply reaction to one-time projects driven by city departments.
7. Is deliberate, intentional, legitimate, and visibly credible, not just a required box on a checklist.
8. Looks for opportunities to innovate.
9. Makes expectations and realities clear to all involved, early in the process.
10. Honors the commitment, expertise, and sincerity of resident volunteers.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is easy to identify challenges that Saint Paul's District Councils face. Lack of vision, however, is not one of them. Increasingly, the staff and board members of District Councils are ready for revival. They are ready to help the city's community engagement process evolve into one that is more robust, effective, and inclusive. They want opportunities where neighborhoods can act collectively, have an impact citywide, and begin to unite in common purpose. They are seeking opportunities in which Councils can better fulfill their responsibilities as a bloc, rather than on their own, while still maintaining their individual identities. In short, the leaders of District Councils want to collaborate.

Citizen participation, community engagement, or by whatever name is in vogue, is at a pivotal, transformational phase in Saint Paul. District Councils, City staff, elected officials, and allies need to demonstrate that we can work constructively, in good faith, with commitment, and with the highest intentions, to deliver genuine opportunities. The residents of our city -- our neighbors now and in the future -- deserve our best effort so all their voices and wisdom will be counted.

This project recommends some very specific actions that individuals and organizations can take. We classify potential solutions, recommendations, and constructive action steps in three broad categories:

- Building effectiveness collectively
- Building effectiveness internally
- Building effectiveness in partnership with the City

PUTTING PRINCIPLE INTO PRACTICE

The work done in carrying out this Innovation Fund project already has begun producing the commitment and collaboration among District Councils that this report envisions. There is clear evidence that the culture and outlook of District Councils as organizations is shifting. It is evident in the way most Councils are viewing themselves as colleagues, rather than competitors, and in the frequency in which most Councils look for opportunities to put that principle into practice. This shift can be documented in three areas:

Staff meetings. In recent years, fewer than half of all Councils participated on any regular basis in the monthly, citywide District Council staff meeting. During this project, however, Steering Committee members took on the responsibility of reconvening these meetings. They provided a more-robust infrastructure than in the recent past. The result: considerably stronger participation. This year, every meeting has been attended by staff from at least two-thirds of the Councils; every Council has been present at one time or another. This increased participation generated additional benefits: stronger trust and relationships, a renewed sense of shared mission, and capacity for additional projects across Councils.

Equity work. Getting all 17 District Councils to agree on anything is practically unheard of. So it is hard to overstate the significance when all 17 Councils agreed to submit a joint application for the City's annual Innovation Fund. Instead of competing against each other for funds, the Councils agreed to split the grant evenly in 2018, 2019, and 2020. They committed to work simultaneously to build equitable engagement into their day-to-day operations, and to ensure that equity becomes a priority in every neighborhood in the city, from the ground up. The agreement includes a shared definition of what constitutes equity work; commits Councils to working on three specifics type of change; and builds in mutual support and accountability.

Board members. For the first time since the early years of Saint Paul's citizen participation initiative, District Council board members from across the city had an opportunity to meet, compare notes, uncover common ground, and share aspirations. These conversations revealed a widespread desire by board members to meet more regularly with each other and become resources for each other. The conversations also revealed a desire for opportunities where Councils – that is, neighborhoods – can act collectively and have an impact citywide, not just on their own turf.

BUILDING EFFECTIVENESS COLLECTIVELY

In many ways, Saint Paul's District Council system is more fragmented than coordinated. It is 17 independent nonprofit organizations, committed primarily to their geographically designated areas. Reality often forces Councils to compete for funding and other resources.

Discussions with District Council staff and board members, however, reveal a deep desire to work together, rather than compete. They want to meet the needs of their specific neighborhoods, but want to do more than just protect their own turf.

The more than 500 board members and staff who "are" the District Councils believe collaboration can address the nitty-gritty operations of how Councils work. Collaboration can guide the principles of how Councils prioritize their actions. Collaboration can outline how they hold themselves accountable to themselves, to their communities, and to each other. Among areas that hold the most promise for collaboration:

Resources. The paid and unpaid individuals on District Council staff, boards, and committees represent tremendous human capital. Effectively tapping their potential requires:

- Standardized, specialized, and regular training that is relevant to the distinct work and roles of District Councils.
- Mentorship, in which Councils and their leaders utilize each other's expertise and experiences to build collective wisdom.
- Support for each other on issues and during organizational challenges.
- Ensuring that District Councils play a fundamental role in the Serve Saint Paul initiative to inspire volunteerism and leadership development.

Eliminating duplication. Because District Councils are 17 individual organizations, staff naturally duplicate efforts when they perform the same routine administrative, financial, and communication work separately. This limits time available for organizing residents and dealing with neighborhood issues. Councils can explore reversing this by pooling "back office" tasks and creating readily accessible "toolkits" of best practices and resources.

Relationships. Strengthening individual relationships is vital if Councils expect to collaborate successfully. Tactics to make these relationships institutional, so they survive the routine turnover of boards and staff, can include annual board summits, quarterly leadership meetings, and developing a "compact:" an agreed-upon set of values, expectations, and principles to guide meetings, interactions, and how Councils work together.

Focal points. Councils should pursue intentional alliances around common issues, interests, or circumstances. They should, at a minimum, build geographic alliances when they are physically adjacent or share City Council wards. But these focal points could also be topical (regardless of whether Councils are contiguous) or around issues where Councils can collaborate on wider structural changes.

Identity and communication. Councils need to create – and adhere to – an inspiring, common narrative to share with residents, media, elected officials, foundations, and potential allies. This messaging should provide consistent language in public presentations, on Council and City websites, and provide the foundation for broader multi-media efforts in which Councils and their community members describe (in their own words) the value of District Councils' work and accomplishments. Councils should also look for opportunities to hold joint activities that raise their profile across geographic boundaries.

Staff retention. Councils need to work individually and collectively to reduce traditionally high rates of staff turnover, which reached 70 percent in the last three years. This level of attrition costs Councils, neighborhoods, and the city continuity, consistency, and institutional knowledge. Key areas to address include the dynamics of board-staff relationships and improving staff pay and benefits.

BUILDING EFFECTIVENESS INTERNALLY

Although part of a larger "system," District Councils are independent 501(c)3 organizations with their own fiscal, governance, and management responsibilities. As such, there are actions that each Council can take individually to build greater effectiveness and capacity within their own organization.

Financial and in-kind support. Regardless of whether the City strengthens its commitment to the District Council system financially and otherwise, individual Councils should look to widen and deepen the tangible support they receive from their communities, from foundations, from local colleges and universities, and from other institutions. This should include deliberate and targeted appeals for financial donations, as most nonprofits do. Councils should also identify specific technical needs, then seek expertise among local residents or institutions that can offer their time or services pro bono, as parts of class projects, or under similar arrangements.

Volunteers. Councils should make options available for volunteers beyond serving on the board. Providing meaningful volunteer experiences reduces the burden on staff and current board members, which reduces the opportunity for burnout, which makes them more effective in core areas. Short-term projects or special events often provide an entry into the organization for talented and committed community members, give them a way to make an impact in an area they care about, or allow the Council to accomplish a task it otherwise could not take on. Unsuccessful candidates for their board should be approached and asked if there is another way they are willing to be involved. When appropriate, Councils can expand the expertise of one of their committees by holding a joint committee meeting with another Council. Councils should not focus exclusively on internal needs, but also look at broader opportunities for leadership development, including recruiting to place community volunteers on the city's 30 boards and commissions.

Provide leadership development. Turnover and loss of institutional knowledge are significant challenges for District Councils. Especially as Councils more successfully engage under-represented residents, it is crucial to provide leadership paths and groom new activists who demonstrate commitment and potential. In addition to making sure these new volunteers

receive citywide District Council training, individual Councils should be sure to utilize formal staff and volunteer development opportunities through such sources as the Serve Saint Paul initiative, Wilder's Neighborhood Leadership Program, or the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs.

Strengthen identity. Individual Councils and Councils systemwide can improve their visibility and the perception that residents hold of them. The fact is, District Councils are unknown or misunderstood by too many people. It is a daunting challenge to overcome, especially for organizations that don't have extensive communication capacity or PR firms on retainer. But Councils – and City staff and officials – should not be shy about promoting District Council accomplishments and taking credit for what they achieve. Rather than simply reacting to issues that arise around them, Councils should identify a vision for the themselves and their communities, including their goals and values.

Be more visible. Higher visibility in the community must include making outreach routine. Councils must go beyond simply holding meetings. They must dedicate staff or volunteers to outreach: door-to-door, at locations or activities where residents already hang out, at community events sponsored by other organizations, or simply by setting up "office hours" in a local park, business, or public housing community. Councils will need to dedicate particular effort, persistence, and patience to reaching residents who are immigrants or live in rental communities. Consistent, successful outreach will require partnerships with a variety of existing community activators, culturally based organizations, and businesses. While doing this, Councils will have to simply listen: Instead of going in with a set agenda or prescribed solution, they need to go in with open eyes, open ears, and an open mind. This will be how their organizations become more equitable, more inclusive, and more accurately reflect their communities as a whole. It will transform not only who is at the table, but what priorities and whose priorities are discussed at the table.

Make accessibility a reality. Traditional ways of doing "Council work" do not always provide community members an easy way to get involved. In particular, Councils need to examine how they hold meetings and, as much as possible, modify what they do. First, recognize that the timing of meetings – typically on a weeknight – can exclude huge numbers of community members who face work, family, or other commitments. Similarly, the location of meetings can be an obstacle. To counter this, Councils should occasionally schedule meetings on a different day, at a different time, and in a different location. They should look at other ways to involve more people, including providing child care and livestreaming or recording and archiving their meetings. At the meetings themselves, recognize that the formality,

rigidity, and adherence to parliamentary procedure can be too confusing, too intimidating, too uncomfortable, and flat-out unwelcoming for too many segments of the community. Councils should take a deep, objective look at their meetings: the room set-up, the structure, the processes and language used. Then, whenever, possible, they should modify how they do meetings to make them as informal, welcoming, and neighborly as possible, as often as possible. Councils also need to examine how they manage the conflict that can be the natural result of providing a forum to work through issues. The goal here, as much as possible, should be to channel people and their energy toward solutions, not endless debate.

CHAPTER 3 PREVIEW

BUILDING EFFECTIVENESS IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CITY

As the City of Saint Paul re-imagines community engagement, this project encourages City officials to recognize District Councils as the natural and best centerpiece for a comprehensive, citywide network of resident engagement that is based in and driven by the neighborhoods. No matter how much City departments and City staff improve their internal community engagement protocols and expectations, Councils could and should provide the nucleus for genuine partnerships with City departments, other geographically based organizations, and constituency-based organizations.

It is hard to imagine how project-driven, drop-in engagement from City Hall can match the ongoing presence, long-term commitment, and local wisdom and context that result from the core work that District Councils do. Drop-in engagement cannot produce the relationships and leadership development that District Councils produce. Therefore, this project recommends that Saint Paul demonstrates a genuine commitment to and a stronger attitude of collaboration with the District Council system it created.

Make a commitment. Too often, the City seems to have an institutional ambivalence toward District Councils. In the initial public draft of the City's 2040 Comprehensive Plan, District Councils are rarely mentioned. The steering committee for the City's evolving pedestrian plan has 29 members, but not one position is designated for District Councils. The City's direct funding for District Councils is stagnant and, in some ways, eroding. The position of Community Engagement Coordinator lacks focus and a defined mission. Collaboration with District Councils by City staff and officials seems to be selective, inconsistent, and depend largely on the individual involved or the issue at hand. In some cases, City staff seem to prefer their professional expertise over the ground-level and day-to-day expertise and insights that District Councils can offer on neighborhood dynamics or a particular situation. These are all areas that constructive collaboration can and should reverse.

Strengthen City financial support for District Councils. In 2018, District Councils will receive $1,088,371 through their Community Engagement grants, which is their main source of City funding. Funding for individual Councils ranges from $51,873 up to $109,475, based on metrics such as population, poverty levels, jobs, and non-English speakers in the district. For most Councils, this is not enough, on its own, to support full-time staff and essential office costs. As Phase One of this project documented, District Councils do a significant amount of outside fund-raising. Councils, as a whole, provide a 3:1 "return on investment" – attracting $3 in outside funding for every $1 the City provides. But City support, in perception and in real terms, has decreased over time. In 2006, for example, primary funding to District Councils (which, at that time, was divided into Community Engagement and Crime Prevention grants) was $1.2 million. If that funding had been adjusted for inflation, District Councils would be receiving an additional $300,000 in City funding than they actually receive today.

Maximize available resources. The City can do more than provide additional funding to help Council staff and volunteers become more efficient and effective:

- **Leverage existing funding.** The City routinely seeks matching funds for infrastructure projects, economic development, or other initiatives. It does not take the same approach to community engagement. If it did, the City could achieve more with the money it already invests. This additional funding could provide District Councils additional resources. Whether through foundations or other levels of government, including Ramsey County, the City and District Councils should pursue joint requests to outside funding sources.
- **Steer funding to District Councils, not outside consultants.** Use existing money to allow Councils to lead the community engagement efforts during public "open houses" and "information sessions" that are part of City projects.
- **Eliminate restrictions on city funding.** Some of the basic City grants that District Councils rely upon (including Community Engagement and COPP) forbid spending in areas such as food and fund-raising. Both of these restrictions hinder Council work. The City should eliminate, or at least reduce, these kinds of restrictions whenever possible.
- **Reduce paperwork and streamline grant processes.** City Engagement, COPP, STAR, and All-In contracts all utilize different application and reimbursement processes. Standardizing and upgrading these processes could reduce the administrative burden and duplication of effort required by Council staff (and probably City staff, too). The standardized application method developed by the Minnesota Council of Foundations could be a model.
- **Share information and access.** District Councils often lack full information on projects they are asked to weigh in on, because they don't have access to the core files and systems where this information is stored. Councils need the same information as City staff. Sharepoint, Amanda, GIS, rental property contact information, property ownership information through Ramsey County – these all are databases that Councils could utilize, but currently lack the access, training, or subscriptions to use.
- **Develop translation and interpreter services.** Most Councils do not have the funding or staff skills to communicate in languages beyond English even occasionally, let alone regularly. Councils and the City should collaborate on building a corps of competent translators and interpreters for the major languages spoken in each neighborhood.

- **Encourage participation by youth.** The City's original 1975 guidelines that set up District Councils prohibited residents younger than 18 from voting in District Council elections. Many District Council by-laws still reflect that prohibition. If that prohibition is, in fact, still City policy, it should be eliminated.
- **Institute a "360 review."** Just as District Councils are held accountable by their residents and through their City contracts, we recommend a structured, 360 review process in which District Councils can collectively review the engagement processes of each City department; highlight individuals and approaches that are getting it right; and identify those that are not.

Invest in the system. As described above, the City's direct funding for District Councils is decreasing in real terms. Among other impacts, this contributes to staff turnover that is 70 percent over the past three years. This is not sustainable. A high-achieving system requires a commitment to fair compensation; an increase in City funding has to be one piece. In addition, most District Council staff lack such vital benefits as health insurance and retirement funds. The City should help Councils – as a system -- explore opportunities to provide benefits to their employees. Investing in the system also makes the City a necessary partner in creating and implementing a core level of standardized training for Council staff, board members, and key volunteers – and for City engagement staff, too. Finally, City departments need to maximize their relationships with District Councils. This can include bringing in Councils as equal partners early on to strategize with City staff on what to anticipate and how to handle engagement around a specific project or initiative. In can include holding more meetings in neighborhoods rather than Downtown, establishing regular procedures that involve District Councils in City programming and outreach, and establishing a point person in each department who will be the primary contact for District Councils.

(Re)define City community engagement expectations. The position of what is now called the Community Engagement Coordinator has been a conundrum for decades. What is clear to District Council staff and board members is that the current structure is not working as well as it needs to. Therefore, this project recommends that:

- City officials, District Council representatives, and the current Coordinator meet to create a clear job description and annual work plan
- The City moves toward creating a cohort of community engagement specialists within key departments; this cohort would work with the Coordinator and with District Council staff to develop and implement standard engagement expectations
- District Councils have a formal role in developing performance metrics for and evaluating the work of the Community Engagement Coordinator and City engagement specialists

Synchronize planning documents and processes. The oversight (so far) by the City's 2040 Comprehensive Plan to include District Councils in any meaningful way is only one example of where citywide and neighborhood planning is out of sync. A more strategic and thoughtful alignment of these resource-intensive planning cycles would lead to greater efficiency and, very likely, produce plans that have a greater rooting and ownership in the community.

THE NEXT STEP

This project recommends some very specific actions that individuals and organizations can take to develop a community engagement process that is more robust, effective, and inclusive. In many areas, however, it is intentionally vague on many of the details; determining those details is the role of collaboration.

The 1975 documents on which Saint Paul's planning districts are founded contain this policy statement: "Citizen participation is a process, not a structure." With that principle in mind, and as a first step toward greater collaboration, this project recommends creating a formal work group to nurture collaboration. This work group should include the Community Engagement Coordinator; representatives from District Councils; a representative from the Mayor's office; representatives from Parks and Recreation, Planning and Economic Development, Police, Public Works, Safety and Inspections, and other City agencies as appropriate; and representatives from constituency-based organizations or other community organizations as appropriate.

A significant finding of this project is that the simple act of coming together, face to face, to hold meaningful discussions around shared mission is transformational. Doing so sparked a growth in trust and collaboration among District Councils. The next step is to ignite this spark within the larger ecosystem of engagement in Saint Paul.

PUTTING PRINCIPLE INTO PRACTICE

In addition to the recommendations and ideas identified in this report, two things are clear: the value of the annual Innovation Fund, and the value of process itself.

In Phase 2, the mere process of working through and carrying out the project sparked a shift in the culture and outlook of District Councils as a collection of organizations. The examples below are clear evidence that District Councils as a whole can adapt, can embrace change, and are open to a more comprehensive leadership role in and beyond their specific neighborhoods. This is a shift that, if seized upon, has lasting implications for the future of community engagement in the City. None of this likely would have happened without the availability of the Innovation Fund.

The Innovation Fund is supposed to support collaborative work that District Councils would find difficult, if not impossible, to do on their own, and the kind of work that has citywide impact.

The first hints that the Innovation Fund could indeed spur innovation came with the Healthy Transportation for All initiative in the Fund's early years. Phases 1 and 2 of this Community Engagement project and the 2017–2020 projects on Equity (see Page 20) are further evidence of what Councils can achieve in this framework.

The most immediate impact of this Phase 2 project is the noticeable change in the way most Councils view themselves as colleagues, rather than competitors, and the frequency in which most Councils look for opportunities to put that principle into practice. This project itself took a deliberate approach to create a Steering Committee with wide geographic representation and individual members who, at least initially, were not always on the same page. The growth in trust, shared responsibility, collaboration, and common vision exhibited by Steering Committee members is an example of what District Councils can accomplish citywide, if there is genuine commitment, support, and desire.

This transformation in mindset was identified as a need both by staff and by board members. It has yielded direct results in at least three other areas: staff meetings, equity work, and board members.

STAFF MEETINGS

For years, District Council staff met monthly in what is known as the EDCO meeting – for "executive directors" and "community organizers." In recent years, however, interest and attendance dwindled. Eventually, fewer than half of all Councils participated on any regular basis. The meetings vanished, at least as a monthly expectation. This was caused in part by staff turnover among directors who had played key convening roles, in part by a change in staff in the city's community engagement coordinator position, and in part by a growing sense among Council staff that the meetings lacked purpose and were a waste of their time.

Through discussions that were designed by the Phase 2 Steering Committee, District Council staff identified what would make these meetings worth attending again. They prioritized potential topics, enough to set an agenda for at least a year.

This project's Steering Committee members have been trusted to convene the meetings for the foreseeable future – providing a more-robust infrastructure than in the past. Staff have begun working on a "compact," a set of principles and commitments to guide interactions among Councils. Since the revival of the monthly EDCO meeting, participation has been noticeably stronger: each meeting has been attended by staff from at least two-thirds of the Councils, and every Council has been present at one time or another.

INNOVATION FUND EQUITY WORK

Getting all 17 District Councils to agree on anything is practically unheard of. This is especially true if the topic affects budgets or impacts capacity for work already being done. So it is hard to overstate the significance of what happened this year: All 17 District Councils agreed to submit a joint application for the City's annual Innovation Fund. Instead of competing against each other for funds, the Councils agreed to split the grant evenly. They agreed to do this for the next three years: 2018, 2019, and 2020.

Why did they do this? It is hard to overstate the significance of that, too. All 17 Councils are eager to commit additional resources so they can do serious work on building equitable engagement into their day-to-day operations. By working simultaneously, the Councils intend to ensure that equity becomes a priority in every neighborhood in the city, from the ground up.

The spark for this Council-based equity work came from a separate 2017 Innovation Fund project, led by the District 1 Community Council. Those funds provided a grant for six District Councils to begin or advance their local equity initiatives. The success of that "pilot project" encouraged other Councils to push the work citywide in future years. These conversations -- which brought unprecedented agreement on the application, goals, and implementation -- happened because Councils were at the table together. They were at the table together as a result of this Phase 2 project.

After Councils reached the equity agreement among themselves, they pushed their proposal through City Hall when it languished in the transition after the 2017 municipal elections. Upon final City approval, Councils created a universal template for a work plan, which provides a standard framework of accountability, regardless of where each Council is in their individual process.

The work plan for the equity project creates the outline described on the next page.

Foundation:

Equitable engagement is a deliberate approach to ensure that all community members have access to a District Council's decision-making, planning, and programming.

Equity work uses research and community engagement to better understand the nature and extent of inequalities, and the historical decisions that led to the emergence of disparate opportunities and results.

Equity becomes a key value as District Councils evaluate actions and outcomes. Racial equity should be at the core of this work. But efforts also should address additional disparities that councils encounter in their neighborhoods. Examples could include disparities based on income, age, gender, immigration status, or among renters and homeowners.

Defining equitable engagement:

- District Council staff and volunteers will more accurately reflect the communities they serve
- District Councils will review and adopt policies and practices that intentionally create space for residents who currently are under-represented
- District Councils will pursue systemic work that reflects the needs and priorities of residents who have been under-represented historically

Accountability and support:

District Councils will participate in a network of peer support and best practices with each other or similar grassroots, place-based organizations.

Beyond the equity work supported by the Innovation Fund, a small group of Council staff are taking the lead in seeking matching funds from area foundations and other sources, so neighborhoods have even more support and opportunities for effective, equitable engagement. A parallel effort proposes seeking funds for a citywide "poster project." This project would engage artists to lead community conversations in each planning district. The conversations would give residents an opportunity to examine and define their historical and contemporary community identities. The hoped-for result: a series of 17 posters illustrating the vision residents have of Saint Paul and their neighborhoods in the 21st century.

BOARD MEMBERS

Just as this Phase 2 project created new opportunities for conversation and cooperation among District Council staff, it also created unprecedented opportunities for volunteer board members from across the city to meet, compare notes, uncover common ground, and share aspirations. These conversations among board members inform many of the findings and recommendations of this report. These conversations also revealed a widespread desire by board members to meet more regularly with each other and to set up other ways of serving as resources for each other.

Unknown to them, this goal parallels what was standard practice in the early years of Saint Paul's citizen participation initiative. In those early years, board presidents met quarterly. The City and/or major institutions sponsored several "better neighborhood forums," which were retreats or assemblies of District Council staff and/or board members.

District Council staff are following through by scheduling an initial series of "happy hours" and "coffee hours" for board members and other key volunteers. What happens at these informal events will dictate what forms future networking takes.

BUILDING EFFECTIVENESS

As staff, board members, and community stakeholders examined their individual organizations and the citywide system as a whole, it was easy to identify challenges that District Councils face. Some challenges are structural; others are relational. Some are internal; others are external. Some are self-inflicted; others are largely beyond their control. Some are a matter of perspective. Some result from deliberate decisions; others result from inertia. Some result from a lack of resources. Some result from lack of vision.

Lack of vision, however, is not evident in conversations with District Council staff and board members. The main challenge becomes identifying, researching, prioritizing, then actually implementing and ingraining these potential solutions.

With those goals in mind, this report classifies potential solutions, recommendations, and action steps into three broad categories:

- Building effectiveness collectively
- Building effectiveness internally
- Building effectiveness in partnership with the city

CHAPTER 1

BUILDING EFFECTIVENESS COLLECTIVELY

The District Council system may seem like a "system" to a newcomer or from the perspective of City Hall. On the ground, however, it is not a coordinated system. Instead, it has evolved into a system that is fragmented. It is 17 independent nonprofit organizations committed primarily to their geographically designated areas of the city. Maximizing their effectiveness locally can, in reality, force Councils to compete against each other for funding, for other resources, or for being a priority on someone's work list.

Discussions with District Council staff and board members, however, reveal a deep desire to work together, rather than compete. These individuals – paid and volunteer – "are" the District Councils. Their current mindset: Opportunities where Councils can exercise power and influence, and better fulfill their responsibilities, as a bloc, rather than as individuals, while still maintaining their individual identities. They want to meet the needs of their specific neighborhoods, but don't want to just protect their own turf. They want opportunities where Councils – that is, neighborhoods – can act collectively, have an impact citywide (in some cases, even farther!), and begin to unite different parts of the city in common purpose. In short, the leaders of District Councils want to collaborate.

Collaboration can address the nitty-gritty operations of how Councils work. It can guide the principles of how Councils prioritize their actions. It can outline how they hold themselves accountable to themselves, to their communities, and to each other. Holding the sustained conversations and laying the groundwork for the structural changes that collaboration implies will not be easy. The work stretches the capacity and time of individuals who already are stretched. It could, in some cases, require participating Councils to delegate some autonomy. It certainly will require intentionality, transparency and, most importantly, trust. But the potential is thrilling. Here are areas that hold the most promise for collaboration among District Councils.

Resources

Combined, Saint Paul's District Councils have more than 500 paid and unpaid individuals on staff, on their boards, or participating regularly in their committee work. That is tremendous human capital. Here are some action steps to effectively tap the tremendous potential of those individuals:

- ☐ **Training.** Create and implement a core level of standardized training for staff, board members, and key volunteers that is tailored to the distinctive work that district councils do. This training should include topics relevant to leaders of any well-run nonprofit, including fiduciary responsibility and the expectations and responsibilities of board members and leadership. But it should also include topics such as zoning literacy, financial literacy, norms for public meetings, cultural responsiveness, and being active in an advocacy organization. Staff training, in particular, should focus not merely on necessary tasks, systems, finances, operations and other hard skills, but also on actual engagement skills and asset-based approaches to Council work.

- ☐ **Mentorship.** Councils and their leaders can take steps to utilize each other's expertise and experiences to build collective wisdom on better engagement. At the simplest level, it could mean brainstorming to create checklists on what works in handling common challenges that Councils face. Topics could include transportation and development issues, handling the negativity of social media, and tactics for guiding community conversations away from fear and emotion toward informed solutions. At a deeper level, experienced staff and board members could act as advisers and consultants to Councils struggling with a controversy in their community.

- **Support.** Councils are unique organizations in unique neighborhoods, but they have the same mission. This common mission creates a duty to protect each other when one Council is under duress. This also suggests an opportunity to support each other when one Council is facing an issue (such as licensing or variances) that can set a precedent for other neighborhoods. It provides the possibility of sending board and staff as emissaries to each others' meetings – whether simply to broaden each others' horizons, or because it can be more effective to hear a potential solution from the outside rather than from the inside. Another option: Gain perspective by appointing a board member from another Council to the hiring committee for a key staff position.

- **Serve Saint Paul.** District Councils could play a fundamental role in Mayor Melvin Carter's proposed Serve Saint Paul initiative. District Councils already engage more than 500 volunteers citywide and reach exponentially more. They are proficient not only at providing meaningful, constructive ways for volunteers to contribute to their communities, but at developing leadership and connections at the neighborhood level. Whether on their own or in combination with other neighborhood- or constituency-based organizations, District Councils could and should play a central role in this initiative.

Maximize existing staff, resources

Because District Councils are 17 individual organizations, staff naturally duplicate efforts when they perform the same routine administrative, financial, and communication work separately. These administrative operations can easily dominate staff time. Time spent on administrative tasks restricts how much effort Councils can dedicate to actual community outreach, organizing, and engagement. Councils can explore steps to reverse this:

- **Pool "back-office" duties.** Bookkeeping, contract administration and compliance, and communication are tasks where it seems possible for Councils to hire shared staff or contractors. Boards and staff should explore setting up "hubs" in which shared administrators handle these kinds of tasks across multiple districts. Delegating tasks in this way could free up time and money that directors and organizers could dedicate to engagement. (Several councils already perform a version of this by pooling their liability insurance.)

- ☐ **Create resource toolkits.** Councils should reduce situations where staff, often working independently and in isolation, inadvertently re-create the wheel by rediscovering something a staff member somewhere else already solved. Council staff citywide should create and have access to a database of best practices; sources of interns, community service volunteers, student researchers, project-driven grants, speakers, vendors, translation and interpretation services; and "go-to" people in city departments, foundations, other activist organizations, colleges and universities.

Relationships

Historically, District Council staff and board members too often have let personalities or inertia get in the way of common work. Strengthening individual relationships is vital if Councils expect to collaborate successfully. Making these relationships institutional is vital if collaboration expects to survive the routine turnover of boards and staff. Some action steps:

- ☐ **A "compact."** District Council staff create and commit to an agreed-upon set of values, expectations, and principles to guide meetings, interactions, and how they work together. (This compact already is being drafted.)
- ☐ **Board summits.** Council staff organize an annual, citywide summit for board members in which board members learn about each others' activities and can discuss issues of mutual concern.
- ☐ **Leadership meetings.** Board members and committee chairs from District Councils citywide meet quarterly to keep each other in the loop and discuss issues of mutual concern.
- ☐ **Rubbing elbows.** Board members from District Councils citywide schedule occasional happy hours or coffee hours, to provide a way for them to build professional and personal relationships through informal gatherings that are not agenda-driven. (The first of these kinds of events already are under way.)
- ☐ **"Phone tree."** Board members from District Councils citywide voluntarily create a website, closed Facebook group, listserve, or similar platform through which board members can connect with and contact each other.

Focal points

Individual Councils already collaborate on an ad-hoc basis. Systemwide, Councils have demonstrated that there are issues around which they can collaborate informally. In the future, deeper collaboration will mean intentional alliances around common focal points. These focal points should not be limited geographically; they can be alliances built on topics or policies that have significant impact on several neighborhoods, whether or not the neighborhoods are physically adjacent.

- ☐ **Geographic.** Councils can start with their borders, which often are county or state roads that generate pedestrian, traffic and development issues. Similarly, Councils that share wards also should seek areas of common work and leverage. The four East Side District Councils, for example, already have begun meeting monthly to provide support and address issues that impact them collectively.
- ☐ **Topical.** Identify where interests overlap, even if Councils are not contiguous. Possible issues include housing, density and gentrification; displacement of businesses, artists, or other community members; and immigration. Similar opportunities exist along major transportation corridors or in dealing with major developments such as the soccer stadium. These alliances give Councils a reason to deliberately and collectively develop a common strategy to create influence and become a joint force. Healthy Transportation for All and the Stop for Me pedestrian safety campaign are recent examples of initiatives that demonstrate cooperation among councils on a common issue that ignored geography.
- ☐ **Structural.** Just as Councils can support each other in individual initiatives, they have opportunities to collaborate on broader structural change. The West Side Community Organization's "development scorecard" is one example with potential. East Side councils are studying how to duplicate District 1's example of a Youth Council. Board members have floated the idea of changing the City Charter so District Councils can appoint one member each to the Planning Commission.

Identity and communication

Councils as a whole lack an inspiring common narrative to share with residents, media, elected officials, foundations, and other potential allies. Messaging that does exist can seem inconsistent, outdated, and bureaucratic. The need to better sell themselves also is not a new challenge for District Councils. A 1998 Center for Neighborhoods study said, "Neighborhood organizations need to better articulate their role in the community." The 2004 City Council Research report noted, "People don't get involved because they don't understand what District Councils do."

Some steps Councils can take system-wide to change this:

- ☐ **Define themselves.** Create an "elevator speech" that speaks clearly to what Councils are, what they do, what they've accomplished, and what they aspire to. The Phase One report of this project provides extensive context; the summary spelled out in the accompanying breakout box provides a starting point (see Page 30).
- ☐ **Market themselves.** Using their elevator speech as a foundation, Councils can use common language to promote themselves and their successes. At the very least, this language should be adapted for their individual websites and promotional materials, in joint grant and project applications, and to replace existing language on the City's web page about District Councils.
- ☐ **Tell their stories.** Councils typically lack multimedia expertise. But this expertise is available in their communities, in schools, and through organizations such as Forecast Public Art and the Saint Paul Neighborhood Network. Councils should explore ways to engage in communal story telling. One potential approach: Use the Story Corps model to create video, audio clips and other media that give staff, board members, and volunteers the opportunity tell the value of District Council work in their own words. Another approach: A poster project that enlists artists from all 17 neighborhoods to engage in community conversations that help define neighborhood identities. The artists then create a poster series that connects the City's past with its present and future, connects the people within individual communities, and connects communities with each other.
- ☐ **Hold joint activities.** Councils could raise their visibility as a system by sponsoring events that ignore neighborhood boundaries. Food for thought: Slow Roll bicycle rides across several districts, large-scale Open Streets events, or community events (such as ice cream socials) scheduled to happen on the same day citywide.

Celebrating District Councils

District Councils are woven into the fabric of our neighborhoods and the city at large. We are the spark behind community-building work. Our work can be as fleeting as an open-mic night at a local library and the melting sugar cone of a neighborhood ice cream social. It can be as permanent as Phalen Boulevard, the Capitol Region Watershed District, or additional stations along the Metro Transit Green Line.

District Councils are the backbone of block clubs, crime prevention programs, and fundamental livability initiatives; a wide range of neighborhood environmental and beautification projects; and neighborhood planning that is incorporated into the city's Comprehensive Plan.

District Councils work to improve life where we live. We give residents a constructive way to combine their voices, so decisions reflect on-the-ground, lived wisdom. We organize to make sure decisions are made from the bottom up, not the top down. We provide the conversation space and grassroots energy for rolling out citywide initiatives, and push issues onto the table for citywide action.

We provide a hub for partnerships and cooperative efforts among residents, elected officials, agency staff, developers, institutions, and businesses. On a day-to-day basis, we provide a focal point for constructive neighborhood discussions and recommendations on economic development, zoning, housing, planning, transportation, safety, environmental, livability, and other issues.

We play key roles in such positive, annual events as local National Night Out parties, neighborhood festivals, community gardens, Citywide Drop-Off days, and the Neighborhood Honor Roll.

We routinely educate neighborhood residents about city initiatives, compile and communicate city news and outreach opportunities to our networks of neighborhood activists, and host community meetings. We increasingly focus on expanding equity in our organizations and in our neighborhoods – expanding not just who is involved in decision-making, but also which issues become priorities.

Staff retention

Community engagement is a field in which relationships are fundamental. That puts a premium on longevity, continuity, and consistency. Yet high staff turnover has long plagued District Councils; it was cited as one of the major challenges as far back as a 1996 report by the League of Women Voters Saint Paul. That has not changed: At 12 of the 17 District Councils, executive directors or other lead staff have been on the job less than three years. That kind of turnover – 70 percent – demonstrates that retention at Councils is a system-wide problem; improving that requires a system-wide approach. In addition to paying attention to the dynamics of board-staff relationships, board members need to make a concerted effort to improve pay and benefits.

- **Pay.** Directors in particular need a deep skill set to do their work well, including expertise in finance, administration, communication, volunteer and program management, grant-writing, conflict resolution, public relations, organizing, meeting facilitation, policy analysis, zoning, licensing, and engineering, to name a few. But compensation levels and job responsibilities make it difficult to attract or retain skilled staff for long. Salaries are low; overall compensation averages $44,700, based on in federal 990 filings. Hours are irregular, and challenges are many.
- **Benefits.** Health insurance, retirement plans, and similar monetary benefits are virtually nonexistent for staff. Councils should actively pursue ways to form or join pools to provide benefits; professional employee organizations or the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits' proposed Association Health Plan are two potential options for group health insurance.
- **Job descriptions.** Board members could standardize job descriptions of key staff positions across the system.

BUILDING EFFECTIVENESS INTERNALLY

CHAPTER 2

Although part of a larger "system", however loosely structured, District Councils are each independent 501(c)3 organizations with their own fiscal, governance and management responsibilities. As such, there are actions that each can take individually to build greater effectiveness within the organization.

Throughout this project, Council staff members shared a desire to take on many of the actions described below. Some were hampered by a lack of capacity or resources, other by external issues. However, it was clear that even incremental progress made to expand capacity, strengthen identity, or become more visible and accessible would be beneficial.

Expand and diversify capacity

Though there are dozens of ways for the City to strengthen its commitment to the District Council system, financially and otherwise (see Page 41), Councils can take steps on their own to gain financial breathing room and deepen their pools of expertise and volunteers. In general, Councils can do more to seek additional funding, technical support, and personnel from their communities, from foundations, from local colleges and universities, and from other institutions.

- ☐ **Funding.** As Councils redefine themselves individually and as a system, and engage a broader cross-section of their neighborhoods, the clarity of their mission and visibility of their work should present more opportunities to seek direct grassroots contributions, as most nonprofits do. This should include deliberate and targeted appeals for financial donations.

- ☐ **Skills.** Councils are almost always spread too thin. They should identify specific technical needs, then seek expertise among local residents or institutions that can offer their time or services pro bono, as parts of class projects, or under similar arrangements.
- ☐ **Volunteers.** Councils should make opportunities available for volunteers beyond serving on the board. Follow up with unsuccessful candidates for the board and ask if there is another way they are willing to be involved. Short-term projects or special events often provide an entry into the organization for talented and committed community members, give them a way to make an impact in an area they care about, or allow the Council to accomplish a task it otherwise could not take on. At the same time, providing meaningful volunteer experiences reduces the burden on staff and current board members, which reduces the opportunity for burnout, which makes them more effective in core areas. Other options: Don't focus exclusively on internal needs – look for opportunities to place community volunteers on the city's 30 boards and commissions. Or, when appropriate, Councils can expand the expertise of one of their committees by holding a joint committee meeting with another Council.
- ☐ **Assets outside the neighborhood.** Councils increasingly deal with issues and problems that are not parochial, but regional. Board members seem eager to identify common issues and commit to long-term efforts across geographic barriers. Councils that team up on solutions should be able to parlay that collaboration to engage institutions (beyond City government) that can provide financial and technical assistance to support this joint work.
- ☐ **Leadership development.** Turnover and loss of institutional knowledge are significant challenges for District Councils. Especially as Councils more successfully engage under-represented residents, it is crucial to provide leadership paths and groom new activists who demonstrate commitment and potential. In addition to making sure these new volunteers receive citywide District Council training, individual Councils should be sure to utilize formal staff and volunteer development opportunities through such sources as Wilder's Neighborhood Leadership Program or the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs. As mentioned above, District Councils could and should play a central role in the Serve Saint Paul initiative.

Strengthen identity

Just as Councils systemwide can improve the perception that residents hold of them, individual Councils can do the same. The fact is, even the Councils that are best at communication don't reach the majority of residents in their neighborhood. Partly as a result of that, District Councils are unknown or misunderstood by too many people. The fact that many residents don't know Councils even exist is a key point raised by residents who were part of this project's focus group and one-on-one conversations. Among those who do know about District Councils, some think Councils are too powerful, some think they are worthless, some think they are part of City government, and others question to whom Councils owe allegiance.

Reputations may be based on ancient history, on the results of one issue, or on whether a Council agreed or disagreed with an individual. Councils often are targets of (and tools of) people who are inherently negative. One common perception is that Councils are primarily white institutions, or homeowner institutions. Another paints them as dens of bickering complainers.

These are daunting descriptions to overcome, especially for organizations that don't have PR firms on retainer. But if it is true that most residents genuinely don't know what District Councils are, it also means Councils have plenty of opportunities to make a good first impression. A good first start:

- ☐ **Promote accomplishments.** Councils cannot always control their reputation. But they do have impact and influence. When Councils achieve something, they need to take credit – especially when they do good work, and important work. City staff and officials need to do the same thing.
- ☐ **Promote a vision.** In an era of fractured national discourse, and increasingly fractured discourse at the state level, what happens at the neighborhood level can be a welcome alternative. The nature of the work often means District Councils react to issues, rather than define them. Too often, Councils deal with the issue of the moment, rather than being free to pursue long-term goals. That reality can affect how residents perceive and engage with Councils. But Councils have a better chance of defining their own identity when they act, not react. Rather than sitting back and becoming a forum for opposition, Councils should identify a vision for themselves and their communities. Councils should always remember to tell their own story, to define what they do in their own words, to define their goals and values – in other words, to define themselves, so other definitions of them have little validity.

Be more visible

Living out their mission of engagement is every Councils' everyday challenge. Engagement takes so many different forms, it is nearly impossible to do it all well all the time. Councils are expected to provide information, take positions (often on tight schedules), organize and unify neighbors, coordinate social events, mediate disagreements, promote community health and healing, hold decision-makers accountable, be present, and more. Finally, remember to have fun, because not everything has to be business.

The most successful Councils will make the goal of the equity Innovation Fund project a reality: They will be organizations that more accurately reflect their communities as a whole – not only in who is at the table, but in what is discussed at the table. Do community members see themselves – and their priorities – reflected? This is not a new challenge, though it is more acute because of the changing population of Saint Paul. Several studies of District Councils over the decades have cited the challenge of more equitable representation. Some ways to make that more likely:

- ☐ **Make outreach routine.** Don't stick to the office or the monthly meeting; be present in the neighborhood. Dedicate staff or volunteers to outreach: door-to-door, at locations or activities where residents already hang out, at community events sponsored by other organizations. Have board members make the rounds during National Night Out. Often, reaching residents who are immigrants or live in rental communities takes persistence. Give it time. Don't have a transactional expectation; focus on just being there and being human. Look for alternatives: sometimes, as District 1 has demonstrated, youth can be the bridge – connecting the Council to more of the community today, and developing community leaders for the future. This project's focus groups, in particular, pointed out the need and challenges of reaching newcomers and renters. Renters, who are now a majority of households in Saint Paul, present particular challenges of access. District Councils will not be able to do consistent, successful outreach to renters on their own; it will require partnerships with a variety of individuals, organizations, and businesses, plus coordinated efforts with City leadership to fully integrate renters into the social fabric of our community.
- ☐ **Explore partnerships.** Look for opportunities to work with existing community activators and culturally based organizations. Create board ambassadors to key organizations or businesses.

- ☐ **Don't rely solely on meetings.** Supplement standard meetings with less-structured community forums or "coffee hours" at which community members can generate ideas or provide honest feedback in a more social setting. Set up "office hours" outside the office – in a park, in a business, in the lobby of a public housing community.
- ☐ **Listen.** Don't go in with a set agenda or prescribed solution. Have open eyes, open ears, and an open mind. Opportunities will come.

Make accessibility a reality

Most of the time, most Councils are seen as rigidly structured organizations. They revolve around meetings, committees, process, and parliamentary procedure. Some of this is necessary, at least some of the time. But much of it is too formal, too confusing, too intimidating, too uncomfortable, and flat-out unwelcoming for too many segments of the community. Much of this structure is not conducive to constructive conversation, not for newcomers, and probably not for many old-timers, either. Similarly, many people are put off by the conflict for which Councils naturally provide a forum. But Councils can use controversy to their advantage: It can be positive if they can channel people and their energy toward solutions, not stalemate.

Traditional ways of doing "Council work" do not always provide community members an easy way to get involved. In too many ways, Councils are not set up to be inclusive of Saint Paul's diversifying population and demographics. Given that the mission is bigger than individuals, and the cause is bigger than the people in the room, councils can do a self-examination on these practices:

- ☐ **Meetings.** The timing of meetings – typically on a weeknight – can exclude huge numbers of community members who face work, family, or other commitments. Similarly, the location of meetings can be an obstacle. Does the location geographically favor one part of the community? Is there enough parking? Can residents in a wheelchair get there? Is public transportation nearby? Are there adequate signs to get community members to the room they need to be? The antidotes are relatively obvious: At least quarterly, schedule meetings on a different day, at a different time, in a different location – and spread the word. Offer child care, so families with youngsters don't feel excluded. Committees should exercise the most flexibility: Hold a meeting at or near the site of a major issue – or at least closer to the people most affected. Or, livestream meetings, so people who cannot attend can keep tabs from home or watch at a later time.

- [ ] **Formality v. flexibility.** Yes, conducting business or facilitating a productive discussion requires a certain level of order and protocol. But not all the time. Councils should take a deep, objective look at their meetings – especially board meetings. (Visit other Council board meetings for comparison.) The goal: Be as informal, welcoming, and neighborly as possible, as often as possible. Areas to assess:
    - How is the room set up?
    - Are residents greeted when they arrive?
    - Can residents see and hear the board?
    - Can they see and hear each other?
    - Does the board introduce itself?
    - Does the chair explain how the proceedings will go?
    - Is there an agenda, so residents can follow proceedings?
    - Is the agenda published in advance?
    - When and how can community members raise issues?
    - Is the agenda flexible enough so a big issue can be discussed and acted upon early in the meeting?
- [ ] **Language.** It's a given that meetings are likely to be conducted in English. But Councils should examine if they are doing everything reasonably possible to reach and involve those who are not in the majority culture. Can other avenues be used, such as having interpreters available at meetings, or translating key documents into languages that are commonly spoken in the community? On a different tack: Language at meetings can be a barrier even for educated English-speakers. Does the chair adhere to the letter of Robert's Rules and to jargon that people in authority prefer? Or, whenever possible, does the chair instead take a more informal approach – call it Bob's Rules – and state in plain language what's going on?

CHAPTER 3

BUILDING EFFECTIVENESS IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CITY

As the City of Saint Paul recommits to and re-imagines community engagement, it should not overlook or underestimate the accomplishments and potential of the city's unique District Council system. District Councils are the natural hub for a comprehensive, citywide network of resident engagement that is based in and driven by the neighborhoods. Councils could and should provide the centerpiece for genuine partnerships with City departments, plus other geographically based organizations and constituency-based organizations.

It is possible that City departments and City staff will transform themselves to become dedicated practitioners of community engagement. It is possible that administrative policy will genetically incorporate public participation into City initiatives large and small. Nonetheless, the advantage of District Councils is straight-forward. The project-driven, drop-in nature of engagement coming out of City Hall cannot match the ongoing presence, long-term commitment, and local wisdom and context that result from the core work that District Councils do. Drop-in engagement cannot produce the relationships and leadership development that District Councils do. Therefore, this project recommends that Saint Paul utilize District Councils – not outside consultants or independent efforts by City department staff – as the nucleus for a partnership on actual engagement activities as much as possible.

This project's research found consistent themes and opportunities to improve District Council relationships with the City. Some rely primarily on actions the City must take; others rely on actions the Councils must take. Any progress will depend on true partnership: a commitment to cooperation and an attitude of collaboration. We don't always have to agree; in the real world, a resilient system becomes stronger when challenged. But in ways large and small, in policy and in execution, the City must demonstrate a genuine commitment to the District Council system it created. And on a day-to-day basis, staff and volunteers all must value and nourish the organizational and personal relationships that make this unique system work – and can make it work better.

Make a commitment

It is telling that in the initial public draft of the City's 2040 Comprehensive Plan, District Councils not only do not figure prominently, they are rarely mentioned at all. This Plan is a foundational component of City planning and policy. This Plan guides future decision-making and funding. The City is crafting a vision for reducing inequities, jump-starting neighborhood economic vitality, expanding housing affordability and access, and making the streetscape safer and more vibrant, among other goals. But it does not build into the equation the very network of citizens that is the most durable, reliable and knowledgeable demonstration of ground-level participation the City has.

Up to this point, City staff have informed District Councils about the Plan process, but they have not directly sought input from Councils. Pop-up meetings, which broaden the opportunity for "everyday" residents to have a say, are a worthwhile innovation. Indeed, they are an innovation that District Councils could build into their own practices. Developing a Comprehensive Plan while overlooking the more than 500 volunteers who are the heart of the District Council system is not a way to build on the City's assets.

Other examples also demonstrate an institutional ambivalence toward District Councils:

- The steering committee for the City's evolving pedestrian plan has 29 members, but not one position is designated for District Councils. This structure is in spite of the fact that District Councils played a founding and ongoing role in Saint Paul Walks, which led to the City's most visible and well-known pedestrian safety campaign: Stop for Me.

- The City's direct funding for District Councils is stagnant and, in some ways, eroding. (See box below.)
- The position of Community Engagement Coordinator lacks focus and a defined mission. (See Page 47).
- Many City departments have various levels of commitment and approaches to community engagement, but most do not seem to coordinate with each other or with District Councils as part of their mission. Many Councils can give examples of collaborative work that should be celebrated. But more common are examples where reliance on, involvement with, or promotion of District Councils by City staff and officials is selective, inconsistent, and depends largely on the individual involved or the issue at hand. Many Council staff perceive, from the City side, the absence of a sense of shared mission. In some cases, Councils describe a disregard for the expertise and insights that they can offer at the outset into neighborhood dynamics or a particular situation.

It doesn't have to be this way – and it shouldn't. Not in principle. Not given the City's basic fiscal challenges. And not given Saint Paul's potential. This project envisions a robust, more inclusive engagement system that revolves around District Councils, a process that uses both neighborhood and professional credentials to deliver innovative, people-centered community engagement. In the pages that follow are some suggestions on how to make that happen.

City financial support for District Councils

The Community Engagement grant is the main source of City funding for District Councils. In 2018, Councils receive a total of $1,088,371. Most of this -- $743,371 – is General Fund money; an additional $345,000 comes from federal Community Development Block Grants for the 10 District Councils that qualify for such funding. Six councils receive the minimum amount of funding: $51,873. The other councils receive funding up to $109,475, based on metrics such as population, poverty levels, jobs, and non-English speakers in the district. Community Engagement grants account for about 0.19 percent of the City's annual budget.

District Councils can get smaller amounts of additional City funding under other grant programs for specific activities. These include:

- Funding from the Community Organization Partnership Program, which is distributed on a ward level
- All In recycling grants, which range from a minimum of $800 to as much as $4,300 for Councils that agree to carry out additional waste reduction activities, including organizing a Citywide Drop-off Event
- Neighborhood and Cultural STAR grants, for specific capital or arts projects

A few Councils also have offices in City buildings at favorable lease rates.

The Innovation Fund has been a competitive grant program enabling District Councils to carry out projects that have a citywide impact and would be beyond the scope of a Council's typical day-to-day work. The fund provides about $100,000 a year. This Engagement Project and the Equity pilot project described on Page 21 are the most recent examples of how District Councils have collaborated to use this Fund. For 2018, 2019 and 2020, Councils have agreed to split the Fund evenly (about $6,000 a year) to do intensive work on equity in their neighborhoods.

Maximize available resources

The District Council system, as created by the City Council in 1975, is made up of 17 independent 501(c)3 organizations. There are advantages to this structure, especially in the ability of each Council to reflect and act on the distinctiveness of its neighborhood(s). However, there are inefficiencies, too. Councils as a whole duplicate a staggering amount of administrative work. Those administrative necessities leave Council staff with less time to pursue other work that makes a direct impact or empowers residents. As referenced on Page 26, Councils need to explore ways to consolidate these administrative duties. But the City also can take concrete steps to help Council staff and volunteers become more efficient and effective, and to maximize their talents and resources.

- ☐ **Leverage existing funding.** The City routinely seeks matching funds for infrastructure projects, economic development, or initiatives such as the recent 8-80 Vitality Fund. It does not take the same approach to community engagement. If it did, the City could achieve more with the money it already invests. This additional funding could provide District Councils additional resources to expand their effectiveness and scope in their neighborhoods. District Councils have begun exploring some of these opportunities on their own. For example, Councils are looking

for foundation grants to bolster the $300,000 in Innovation Fund money that they and the City are committing to equity work through 2020. Councils also are investigating the Bush Foundation's large-scale "government re-design" grant to truly help revitalize citizen engagement in Saint Paul. For either or both of these initiatives to truly succeed, the City will need to be a willing and active partner. Similarly, in transportation and other areas, Councils deal routinely with Ramsey County staff and policies, and routinely perform public engagement around County issues. Yet Ramsey County does not provide direct engagement funding to Councils. The City and Councils need to pursue joint requests to these and similar outside funding sources.

- ☐ **Steer funding to District Councils, not consultants.** On larger projects, City departments increasing hold public "open houses" and "information sessions." Sometimes these are facilitated by City staff. But sometimes they are facilitated by outside consultants – or firms hired by outside consultants who have City contracts. District Councils may not have the subject matter expertise of the consultants (i.e. engineering), but they almost certainly have the engagement expertise. Whenever possible, the City should strive to make it a condition that funds designated for engagement be used to "hire" District Council staff. It provides another level of investment and support for Councils individually and the system as a whole.
- ☐ **Eliminate restrictions on city funding.** Some of the basic City grants that District Councils rely upon (including Community Engagement and COPP) forbid spending in areas such as food and fund-raising. Both of these restrictions hinder Council work. The first cuts off a basic means of community-building; the second makes it difficult for Councils to expand their capacity. Neither restriction contributes to sustainable organizations. The City has shown with its flexibility on the Innovation Fund that it is willing to eliminate at least the food restriction. It should also examine what other restrictions it can eliminate, or at least reduce.
- ☐ **Reduce paperwork and streamline grant processes.** The Minnesota Council of Foundations has a standard application so nonprofits can provide the same basic organizational and financial information to multiple funding sources. Saint Paul could take a similar, standardized approach to the forms, information, and documentation it requires from District Councils. City Engagement, Innovation Fund, COPP, STAR, and All-In Recycling, for example, all utilize different approaches and levels of technology and automation in their application and reimbursement processes. Standardizing and upgrading these processes could reduce the administrative burden and duplication of effort required by Council staff and probably City staff too.

- **Share information and access.** One of the original and core functions of a District Council is to issue recommendations on zoning variances, liquor licenses, and economic development proposals. These can be high-profile and emotional topics. The chances of holding an orderly and productive neighborhood meeting on these types of topics often is directly related to how much accurate and timely information is available to consider and share. However, District Council staff and board members do not have routine access to much of this information. ENS notices – one of the core requirements when the City set up formal citizen participation in 1975 -- typically provide only a copy of the first page of the application, but no additional details. District Councils are regularly included on the email notices of site plan review meetings. However, details of the plans themselves are unavailable for review and comment, because they typically are stored in the Sharepoint database, which requires a City of Saint Paul email to access. If the input of Councils is truly welcome, Councils need the same information as City staff. Sharepoint, Amanda, GIS, rental property contact information, property ownership information through Ramsey County – these all are databases that Councils could utilize. But Councils lack the access, training, or subscriptions to use them – which limits the work they can do as organizations, and limits the information they can provide residents.
- **Develop translation and interpreter services.** One of the basic accommodations to increase resident participation is to make sure Councils can communicate in languages beyond English. Most Councils do not have the funding or staff skills to make this possible even occasionally, let alone regularly. Councils and the City should collaborate on building a corps of competent translators and interpreters for the major languages spoken in each neighborhood, and the funding to compensate this work. This includes ASL interpreters and a lending library of equipment for residents with hearing impairments.
- **Encourage participation by youth.** Among the City's original 1975 guidelines that set up District Councils, one of them prohibited residents younger than 18 from voting in District Council elections. Many District Council by-laws still reflect that prohibition. If that prohibition is, in fact, still City policy, it should be eliminated.
- **Institute a "360 review."** District Councils interact with nearly every City department over the course of time. Although departments all operate under the umbrella of "The City," each department has individual operating procedures, policies and norms. Some procedures are openly communicated, such as public hearings and ENS

notifications. Some are more nuanced; they are learned over time though regular interactions. In either case, District Councils are uniquely poised to give constructive feedback on individual department approaches. During our research, we heard a desire both from District Council staff and from volunteer board members to collaborate with the City on a 360 review of city departments and processes. While this is happening to a certain extent on an informal level now, it is highly dependent on the working relationships of individuals. Just as District Councils are held accountable by their residents and through their City contracts, we envision a 360 review as a structured process in which District Councils can collectively review the engagement processes of each City department, one at a time; highlight individuals and approaches that are getting it right; and identify those that are not.

Invest in the system

- **Provide more funding.** The section above highlights ways the City can help Councils expand capacity with little or no additional financial outlay. But Councils do need more money. Direct funding has not increased, yet demands and expectations have. For most Councils, the core community engagement contract is inadequate to cover basic office functions and retain even one full-time staff person. The skills required to perform the types of work expected of councils are complex. Staff require expertise in finance, administration, communication, volunteer and program management, grant-writing, conflict resolution, public relations, organizing, meeting facilitation, policy analysis, zoning, licensing, engineering – and being sociable, just to name a few. Staff turnover in the past three years is roughly 70 percent. This is not a sustainable structure. It only sets the Councils, and the City, up for disappointment, if not outright failure. A high-achieving system requires a commitment to fair compensation. An increase in City funding has to be one piece.
- **Make benefits possible.** Salary is not the only form of compensation that District Council staff lack. So are such vital benefits as health insurance and retirement funds. If the City truly wants to invest in and support its District Councils, it should help them – as a system -- explore opportunities to provide benefits to their employees. Ways of doing this through the city, through professional employee organization arrangements, or through the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits' proposed Association Health Plan are among potential options.
- **Provide regular, customized training.** The City is a necessary partner in creating and implementing a core level of standardized training for City engagement staff and Council staff, board members, and key volunteers.

This training needs to be tailored to the distinctive workthat successful engagement requires. Staff training, in particular, should focus not merely on necessary tasks, systems, finances, operations and other hard skills, but also on norms for public meetings, cultural responsiveness, actual engagement skills, and asset-based approaches to community work. This training should be provided to every new Council and City staff member involved in engagement work, and offered at least a few times a year to newly elected Council board members. City and Council staff should be able to identify many of the topics of this training, but they also should utilize the specialized expertise of potential allies such as the Wilder Foundation's Community Leadership Program and the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute. (As it turns out, this is not a new concern, either: Some of this project's recommendations parallel a 2004 City Council Research report recommending that the City provide more technical support to District Councils.)

- **Maximize relationships.** Councils all have stories of City staff who walked into a local public meeting of one sort or another and were"ambushed" by hostile or skeptical residents. It's not constructive engagement, it is a bruising experience for staff to go through, and it can poison a topic for months or years to come. Almost all these stories have a similar component: District Councils were not brought in as equal partners early on to strategize with City staff on what to anticipate and how to handle it. As the administration of Mayor Melvin Carter builds a "public first" community engagement expectation into every department's mission, now is the time to prevent similar stories from being repeated. First, make sure Councils are at the table as City officials craft this community engagement expectation. Second, make sure the expectation builds a District Council partnership into it. In short, that means:
    - Involving District Councils and their neighborhoods at the ground level
    - Holding more meetings (such as meetings of the Planning Commission and its spin-off committees) in neighborhoods, rather than Downtown
    - Establishing regular procedures that involve District Councils in City programming and outreach
    - Including District Councils in community engagement planning meetings
    - Establishing a point person to be the primary contact in each department and for each project

The history of funding

Comparing City funding to District Councils over time is not always an apples-apples undertaking. In the past four decades, the City has used different sources and methods of funding citizen participation work. However, several measures suggest that, overall, the City's level of direct financial support to Councils is eroding.

Initially, all City funding to District Councils was competitive. The first funding formulas appear to have been established in 1990. Formulas underwent a major revision in 2004 and, except for population adjustments, have remained essentially the same since then.

From 1989-2013, Councils received separate Crime Prevention grants. (In 1992, the median Crime Prevention grant was $10,600 a year.) These Crime Prevention grants were eliminated and rolled into the basic Community Engagement grant beginning in 2014.

As Phase One of this project documented, District Councils do a significant amount of outside fund-raising. Councils, as a whole, provide a 3-1 "return on investment" – attracting $3 in outside funding for every $1 the City provides.

Nonetheless, in perception and in real terms, funding has decreased over time. A 1988 study by the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota stated: "Funding has remained constant while expectations have risen" and "Public funding is not sufficient to do all programs."

In 1975, the first year of the District Council system, the City allocated $267,000 in funding to the 17 Councils. Adjusting for inflation, that's the equivalent of $1.25 million in 2018. Instead, funding through the primary Community Engagement grant in 2018 totals less than $1.1 million.

In 2004, funding actually was cut by 7 percent in real dollars: from $722,112 to $668,847. By 2006, total funding (Community Engagement and Crime Prevention) to District Councils was restored to $1.2 million. But if 2006 funding had been adjusted for inflation, District Councils would be receiving an additional $300,000 in City funding than they actually receive today.

(Re)define City community engagement expectation

The City's Community Engagement Coordinator is housed in the City Council Research office. In the past, the position served a shifting variety of roles (see box on Page 49); in general, it was a resource in different ways for District Councils and their community engagement efforts. In 2015, after substantial discussion among City Councilmembers and District Council representatives, the job description was re-written. At the time, the position was envisioned as the first step toward an official "Office of Community Engagement," although the idea was a vague one.

Initial brainstorming included a variation on the Portland model, with an autonomous office staffed with community engagement experts in specific fields to serve as a resource both to City staff and District Councils. (See more about the Portland model in Community Engagement Systems in Three Places; link in appendix). Another line of thought saw the Office as a group of new or existing City staff members, all of whom had community engagement responsibilities within specific City departments. The Community Engagement Coordinator would bring them together regularly as a cohort that would collaborate on consistent resident engagement, maximize outreach opportunities, and strengthen partnerships with District Councils.

One person does not an Office make, so there was an understanding that it would take time and disciplined effort to achieve the envisioned "Office." The revamped position would serve as the first strategic hire in this long-term, systemic change of direction.

Fast forward to 2018: Time has passed, elected officials have come and gone, and District Councils and City officials have let the concept play out. Discussions with District Council staff and board members turn up a consistent conclusion: Neither the previous definition of the position, nor the current one, meets the needs of Councils. The process in 2015 led to a vaguely defined position with unclear expectations that lack specific goals and benchmarks. Therefore, we recommend exploring the following structural framework instead:

City officials, District Council representatives, and the Coordinator meet to create a clear job description and annual work plan. This work plan will be shared with District Councils; a significant part of the plan should anticipate specific needs of District Councils for that year, spell out the expectations for communication between the Coordinator and District Councils, and provide specific types of support the Coordinator will provide District Council staff and their volunteer leadership.

The City moves toward creating a cohort of community engagement specialists within key departments. This cohort works with the Coordinator and with District Council staff to develop and implement standard engagement expectations, and to develop and experiment with various forms of engagement that are successful for staff and residents alike. (Related to this point, see the "work group" recommendation at the conclusion of this report on Page 50.)

District Councils have a formal role in developing performance metrics for and evaluating the work of the Community Engagement Coordinator and City engagement specialists.

A long-running conundrum

The position that is now the Community Engagement Coordinator was created as part of the original citizen participation initiative, and was housed in Planning and Economic Development from 1976-1993. Training and convening monthly District Council staff meetings were among core duties. The position was eliminated in 1994. Grant managers within PED assumed some of the duties; Human Resources assumed some of the training responsibilities. In the early years of his administration, Mayor Christopher Coleman designated four of his policy staff to serve as liaisons to District Councils.

A 2004 City Council Research report recommended restoring the position, stating, among other things, that the "position should be well-defined and have performance evaluations by stakeholders." District Councils themselves, however, did not support the idea; they instead recommended that major City departments designate a specific contact person with whom District Councils would work. However, the position was restored in 2009 – in part, after a 2007 report from the League of Women Voters of Saint Paul recommended it. The position was redefined in 2015.

Synchronize planning documents and processes

The oversight (so far) by the City's 2040 Comprehensive Plan to include District Councils in any meaningful way is only one example of where citywide and neighborhood planning is out of sync. A more strategic and thoughtful alignment of these resource-intensive planning cycles would lead to greater efficiency and, very likely, produce plans that have a greater rooting and ownership in the community.

- ☐ **Explore alignment in the planning process.** District Councils are expected to develop and adopt updated community plans every 10 years. These plans then become amendments to the City's Comprehensive Plan. But City and neighborhood planning cycles frequently do not align. This does more than result in a lost opportunity for synergy and momentum in neighborhood investment. When district-level planning happens on the heels of a City planning cycle, or vice versa, it can be inefficient and confusing for residents, and waste both City and Council time. For example, District Councils routinely create detailed surveys to gather input for their plans. They go to great lengths to incentivize residents to complete the surveys and participate in the planning process. If planning cycles were aligned, a City survey could have a few additional questions for each district. Or outreach events could be coordinated around existing neighborhood events.
- ☐ **Dedicate consistent City support to district planning.** Creating a long-term plan is a daunting undertaking for any organization. When that organization has just one staff person, a shoe-string budget, and can't afford planning consultants, the process quickly becomes overwhelming. Because it is increasingly difficult to attract philanthropic support for planning processes, reliable support from the City for neighborhood planning is vital. If departments cannot dedicate enough existing staff time, the City and Councils need to create and innovate on viable alternatives.

THE NEXT STEP

The 1975 documents on which Saint Paul's planning districts are founded contain this policy statement: "Citizen participation is a process, not a structure." This project demonstrates in action (and envisions in its recommendations) how much that "process" can achieve.

Citizen participation, community engagement, civic engagement, or whatever name it goes by, is at a pivotal, transformational phase in Saint Paul. The residents of our city, now and in the future, deserve our best effort. We must seize this opportunity. We -- District Councils, City staff, elected officials, and allies – need to demonstrate that we can work constructively, in good faith, with commitment, and with the highest intentions. We must deliver genuine opportunities to gather all their voices and wisdom.

This project recommends some very specific actions that individuals and organizations can take to develop a process that is more robust, effective, and inclusive. It is intentionally vague on many of the details; determining those details is the role of continued collaboration.

As a first step in that collaboration, this project recommends creating a formal work group. A significant finding of this Phase 2 project is that the simple act of coming together, face-to-face, to hold meaningful discussions around these issues is transformational. Doing so sparked a growth in trust and collaboration among District Councils. The next step is to ignite this spark within the larger ecosystem of engagement professionals working in Saint Paul.

The work group will collaboratively develop the expectations and commitments that will infuse efficiency and equity into all levels of community engagement in this city. To maximize the effectiveness of its work, its first task should be to develop a compact of norms and values by which it will operate. The Community Engagement Coordinator should convene this work group, which should meet at least once a month at rotating locations. Members should include:

- Representatives from District Councils
- A Mayoral staff member focused on community engagement
- A representative from City Council Staff
- Representatives from City Departments, specifically Parks and Recreation, Planning and Economic Development, Police, Public Works, Safety and Inspections, and other City agencies as appropriate
- Representatives from constituency-based organizations or other community organizations as appropriate

Just as the process of this second phase of the Engagement Project was transformational for the participating District Councils, we expect that the process of convening, establishing and sustaining the work group will lead to a new era for community engagement in the City of Saint Paul. The time is now.

APPENDIX

District Councils: A Snapshot of Saint Paul's Community Engagement System
macgrove.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/District-Council-Snapshot-May-2017.pdf

Community Engagement Systems in Three Cities: A comparative analysis focused on achieving effective equitable engagement
macgrove.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Engagement-Cities-Report-April-2017.pdf

SAINT PAUL'S COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SYSTEM:

Challenges, Possibilities, Revival for the District Councils

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