

Committee for a Better New Orleans/Metropolitan Area Committee

Draft Model for Citizen Participation Program

[This draft model was assembled by CBNO/MAC in October 2004. The beginnings of the model came from a full year of national research, including site visits to Portland (OR), Washington (DC), Chicago, and Birmingham (AL), as well as attendance at numerous public participation conferences. Following this research, CBNO/MAC conducted a series of public meetings in March and April 2004; the extensive citizen input acquired at these meetings is the primary basis for this model.]

Mission Statement

The mission of the Citizen Participation Program (CPP) is to enable citizens to have a greater say in city government decision-making and priority setting, and to give government officials an effective means for communicating with the people. The CPP will provide an additional tool for citizens and city officials to communicate with each other and work together. Ultimately, the CPP is a vehicle for each individual citizen to have a direct impact on the policies and actions of city government.

Structure

The CPP will have a three-tiered structure, with Neighborhood Councils, Community Coalitions comprised of representatives from the Neighborhood Councils, and a citywide Citizen's Voice Council comprised of representatives from each Community Coalition.

Neighborhood Councils

Existing neighborhood associations will form the basis of the Neighborhood Council tier. In areas where no viable neighborhood association presently exists, the two preferred options are to expand existing neighborhood associations to include such areas, or to establish new Neighborhood Councils. In areas where association boundaries overlap, an attempt will be made to negotiate new, non-overlapping boundaries. In a few places, very small adjacent neighborhood associations will be asked to consider merging. Ultimately, a full city map that indicates the accepted boundaries for all the Neighborhood Councils will be prepared and kept updated.

Neighborhood Councils will be nonprofit organizations, with monthly meetings, and will establish their own bylaws, although they must conform with a few guidelines that will be standard throughout the CPP (see Membership below). They will elect their own officers, board members and representatives to the Community Coalitions. Officers and board members will be required to attend a CPP training session. Officers and board members will be held accountable for their Neighborhood Councils in the following areas:

- Neighborhood Councils must follow their own bylaws.
- Neighborhood Councils must follow CPP guidelines.
- Neighborhood Councils shall be subject to normal public meeting laws.
- Neighborhood Councils must demonstrate legitimate neighborhood participation in meetings and decision-making.
- Neighborhood Councils must demonstrate that they have taken significant outreach efforts in order to ensure that they are legitimately representative of a neighborhood, as reflected in their membership.

Neighborhood Councils will receive logistical and other support from staff at the Community Coalition level. They will not receive regular funding through the CPP, although some funds may be available through the Community Coalitions (see Funding).

Community Coalitions

Approximately seven to ten Community Coalitions will be established by general region of the city (i.e., Lakeview, Lower Ninth, Gentilly, etc.). Every Neighborhood Council within the region of a particular Community Coalition will send one representative to the Community Coalition. Uniform bylaws will be set for all the Community Coalitions, which will also be nonprofit organizations, and they will elect their own officers and representatives to the citywide Citizen's Voice Council. They will be able to set up committees on issues as they see fit. They will meet every other month.

The Community Coalitions will be the chief conduit for information to and from city government and the CPP. Therefore, a major role of the Community Coalition will be to feed information, accurately and promptly, to the Neighborhood Councils, and conversely, to gather input from the Neighborhood Councils to convey to city government. In addition, when the city wishes or is required to hold public input meetings, city departments and agencies will partner with the Community Coalitions to organize, publicize and conduct such meetings. Community Coalitions will also serve as arbitrators among Neighborhood Councils in their area, and should be the environment for resolving any disputes between or within Neighborhood Councils.

The Community Coalitions will have a small staff, including an Executive Director, who will be hired by each Coalition. The Executive Director will conduct the meetings, although he/she will not have voting rights. Staff members will be required to complete specific CPP training. Staff qualifications will include conflict resolution, facilitation skills, organizational skills, communications skills, and experience in community organizations and activism. Staff responsibilities will include supporting the Neighborhood Councils within their area, maintaining communication with city government, and maintaining a high level of organization within the CPP structure. Staff members will frequently attend Neighborhood Council meetings, and do presentations on various issues and questions facing the neighborhoods; they will also help arrange for city officials to speak at meetings. They will work with the Neighborhood Councils on outreach, communications, organizational issues, programs, and some training and fundraising. Staff will also compile an annual report for each Community Coalition.

Citizen's Voice Council

This body shall consist of two representatives from each Community Coalition. It will meet at least once per year, with provisions for calling additional meetings. The annual meeting will be attended by the Mayor and City Council, along with other top officials such as department heads.

The Citizen's Voice Council will be a nonprofit organization. Its bylaws will be established through the CPP process. It will elect its own officers. The overall Director of the CPP will be responsible for organizational matters related to the Citizen's Voice Council (see Administration below).

The Citizen's Voice Council will replace the Master Plan Advisory Council.

Membership

Participation in the CPP is free to all qualified citizens aged 16 or older. Neighborhood Councils may ask for voluntary membership dues, but are not be allowed to charge mandatory dues.

Membership in the Neighborhood Councils shall be available to:

- Residents of the neighborhood
- Property owners in the neighborhood
- Owners of businesses in the neighborhood
- People who work in the neighborhood; however, they will be non-voting members
- Representatives from institutions in the neighborhood, such as schools, churches, etc.; however, they will be non-voting members

Individuals will have to provide some acceptable proof of meeting one or more of the above membership requirements. All members of a Neighborhood Council, except as noted above, will have full voting rights. A uniform document of participants' rights and responsibilities will be prepared for use throughout the CPP.

Funding

Funding for the CPP will come from a variety of sources; however, the primary source will be the City of New Orleans. The funds will come from a dedicated source; possible CPP funding sources include a property tax millage or an annual assessment on Sewerage and Water Board bills. The funding source must not be a part of the annual budget process and therefore subject to review and renewal each fiscal year.

Funding through the CPP will be primarily directed to the Community Coalitions. They in turn may use funds to support the Neighborhood Councils, for programs, outreach, communications, etc. They may also offer certain "grants" for special projects to the Neighborhood Councils. Community Coalitions must prepare annual budgets, which will be approved by the Coalition members and the CPP Executive Administrator.

As nonprofit organizations, both the Neighborhood Councils and the Community Coalitions are free to seek grants. Corporations, foundations, the government, and individuals may be solicited for funding; however, grants to any entity within the CPP must be free of any potential conflict with the core mission of the CPP. Community Coalitions are allowed to bid on certain government contracts that are congruent with their work; examples might include citizen trainings, communications projects, citizen organization projects, etc.

In addition, the overall CPP Administrator may seek grants and other funding for the Program, again with the restriction that any such funding must be free of potential conflicts.

Administration

The CPP will be overseen by a full-time Executive Administrator. This person, and his/her office, shall be a distinct department within New Orleans city government. The Council of University Presidents will nominate three individuals for this position; the Mayor will then select one nominee, and the choice will be confirmed by the City Council, by a simple majority vote. In order to remove the Executive

Administrator from his/her post, the Mayor will have to submit a recommendation to terminate to the City Council, which must pass the recommendation with a minimum of five votes.

The Executive Administrator and CPP office will be responsible for overall administration of the CPP, including matters such as insurance, legislative issues, development of staff and volunteer training programs, overall organization and operations. The Executive Directors of the Community Coalitions will meet regularly with the Executive Administrator. Community Coalitions may also request meetings with the Executive Administrator at any time; such requests shall be honored promptly.

Neighborhood Councils will have minimal direct interaction with the Executive Administrator and CPP office, excepting that a procedure shall be developed for addressing grievances between a Neighborhood Council and its Community Coalition.

Overall, the CPP must be kept as independent from city government and city politics as possible, while maintaining a strong and formal link to government policy-setting and operations.

Mandate/Legal Status

The Citizen Participation Program shall be codified in a legal document, and shall be formally adopted as part of the New Orleans City Charter.

All tiers of the CPP have the right to address any issues facing the city, as long as there is some clear tie to their geographic area. The primary focus, especially at the Neighborhood Council, will be livability and quality of life issues.

Specifically, all zoning and land use issues, including all development or redevelopment plans, that impact a neighborhood shall be brought to the Neighborhood Council(s) impacted by such issues. This shall include land uses permitted by zoning, especially if they involve new construction. A mechanism will be constructed through which such issues are brought to the Neighborhood Councils for formal review, with established routing and time frames. Information presented to the Neighborhood Councils shall be warranted to be comprehensive and accurate; violations of this policy shall be cause for overturning any future permits and approvals. This review by the Neighborhood Councils shall occur before any such issues or plans are brought before the City Planning Commission or City Council, and any permits are issued. As part of this mechanism, thorough and valid notification processes shall be developed. The developer or city agency pursuing the issue or development shall bear full responsibility for the notification process; and proof that notification was made, and that the Neighborhood Council review took place (including official meeting minutes), or that the Neighborhood Council declined to make such review, shall be required before any permits may be issued or approvals granted.

Decisions brought forth from the Neighborhood Councils shall, at every further step of the formal review process (i.e., City Planning Commission, Safety and Permits, City Council), be considered “rebuttable decisions”, meaning that if a city government entity acts in opposition to a decision of the Neighborhood Council, the rationale for such decision shall be presented in writing to the Neighborhood Council(s) from which the original decision emanated. Furthermore, in such cases, a thirty-day period shall be established before such decisions can go into effect, during which time the Neighborhood Councils shall have the right to pursue any other avenue of recourse. To facilitate this, a formal appeal process should be established and codified in the CPP legislation.

Similarly, any city department or agency contemplating major policy moves or activities shall be required to notify the Community Coalition(s) for the geographic areas impacted by their actions, which will often

require notification of all the Community Coalitions; they in turn will notify the Neighborhood Councils, who will discuss and, if so desired, vote on any recommendation. Such notice shall be provided no less than 45 days prior to making a final decision on the proposed action (to accommodate the monthly meeting schedule of the Neighborhood Councils). Neighborhood Councils will have the right to respond in writing to any departmental/agency proposals. If the proposed action is taken over the objections of a Neighborhood Council or Councils, the department or agency shall be required to provide a written rationale for why it took the action in the face of the objection, in the process countering the objection.

Additionally, the Neighborhood Councils and Community Coalitions shall have the right to raise issues of concern to them and have their concerns brought before the appropriate city government entities. Among the specific issues that the CPP may address include:

- Transportation/parking
- Access
- Neighborhood character
- Public safety
- Crime
- Trash
- Zoning
- Economic impact of a proposal
- Environmental issues
- Hazardous materials
- Neighborhood infrastructure
- Education
- The direction and use of tax revenues, especially those generated within a neighborhood
- City budget priorities

All city department heads shall be required to document any communications sent to and received from the CPP, and their responses to CPP input and decisions. Such documentation will be presented as part of the annual departmental budget process.

In addition, approval for all future elements of the Master Plan, and mandatory reviews of the individual elements of the Master Plan, shall go through the Community Coalitions of the CPP, and all official public input meetings for all city government departments and agencies shall be organized in partnership with the Community Coalitions. Review of the city's Five-Year Plan shall likewise be conducted through the CPP.

The CPP shall conduct an annual needs and resources audit. Every Neighborhood Council will participate in this audit, which will be directed by the Executive Administrator and CPP office. The results of this audit will be presented to the Mayor and City Council in due time for consideration in the city's annual budgetary process. As part of this process, the CPP should develop a "community scorecard" for use by the Neighborhood Councils and Community Coalitions. Also, individual Neighborhood Councils will be encouraged to develop neighborhood plans, and shall be supported by the CPP and other relevant government agencies in any legitimate effort to do so.

Outreach, Communications & Training

Ongoing efforts to reach every possible citizen in New Orleans must be at the core of the CPP. The effort must be broad-based, and must employ every possible means, traditional and non-traditional. Widespread and diverse participation in the CPP must be a top priority.

Outreach must include scheduling Neighborhood Council meetings at the most convenient possible times; providing transportation or transportation vouchers to the meetings; providing day care and/or homework assistance at the meetings; and making the meetings themselves as valuable as possible, including auxiliary programs ranging from informational (i.e., public health, Crimestoppers, adult education, etc.) to entertainment such as movies and music. Incentives to get people to attend meetings, such as providing meals, should be considered.

Communication about the CPP, its meetings and its projects should be widespread, targeted and distributed through every available means. Among the methods used to communicate about the CPP should be cable access television, newsletters, flyers, door-to-door volunteer efforts (under a block captain structure), telephone trees, e-mail, and church bulletins and other church communications. A CPP hotline phone number should be established and published widely. Participation in meetings and programs should always be tracked, and participants should be asked for their input on communications, programs, scheduling, etc.

Newsletters, both printed and electronic, should be prepared and distributed to all CPP participants on a quarterly basis. These would be the responsibility of the Community Coalitions, and should include individual sections for each Neighborhood Council within the Community Coalition's area. Content would include reports on meetings and activities, as well as information on important issues. Advertising could be solicited to help pay for the costs of the newsletters. The newsletters might also be able to serve as official communications organs for the city, which would then share the costs of producing and disbursing them.

Training of CPP participants will be essential to the Program's success. All officers and board members are mandated to go through a specific training. In addition, a variety of trainings should be offered to all participants, on topics such as effective participation in meetings, conflict resolution, the workings of city government, available government programs, etc. In addition, background information on all issues brought before the CPP should be provided.

As part of the training materials (which should be prepared, at least initially, in the central CPP office), a "how-to" guide should be prepared for the Neighborhood Councils. These guides would include all official CPP guidelines; the legal mandate of the CPP; information on how to run meetings and otherwise operate the Neighborhood Councils; information on how to work with city government; etc.