Close to Home
Residents' Perspectives on District Scale Sustainability Initiatives

I. INTRODUCTION

Neighborhood-, or district-, scale sustainability initiatives are emerging across the country. These initiatives try to promote policies and practices that support the three "legs" of the sustainability stool: environment, economy and equity. Every initiative is unique, reflecting the particular conditions in a specific neighborhood and/or the priorities of the initiative's staff and funders.

This report addresses questions about the attitudes of residents: What are the common needs and aspirations, opportunities and challenges important to the people actually living in these neighborhoods?

To the degree that engaging residents is a goal, how can these initiatives connect to core community values and concerns? What are the on ramps to make district-scale sustainability initiatives locally relevant? What do neighbors themselves want from their neighborhood?

To answer these questions, we partnered with the Bullitt Foundation, which supports a number of district-scale sustainability initiatives in the Pacific Northwest. While we gathered

Children wade at Cal Anderson Park in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood. Photo: Andrew Smith

input from all Bullitt grantees involved in these efforts, we decided to focus public opinion research on two service areas: The Capitol Hill Ecodistrict in Seattle and the Living Cully initiative in Portland. The two neighborhoods are very different in their demographics and history, giving us a chance to sample a wider range of opinions and perspectives. Cully has long been an under-served area of Portland, with higher poverty rates, lower household median income, higher percentage of Hispanics and blacks (37%) than Portland as a whole (25%). The Capitol Hill district, adjacent to downtown Seattle, is a cultural and entertainment destination, home to high concentrations of artists, young adults and the LGBT community. It also includes some of Seattle's most expensive homes.

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Unlock the Power of Communication

In April 2014, we conducted two focus groups in each neighborhood. We followed up with a series of interviews with Spanish speaking residents in the Cully neighborhood, since that important constituency was underrepresented in the focus groups. As expected, there were differences evident in each group's discussions that reflected everything from the socioeconomic variation between the two neighborhoods to unique dynamics in each group. However, there were also important similarities in respondent perspectives: similarities and themes that suggest these findings may be expected to apply more broadly to communications advocating neighborhood development based on environmental, economic and social justice values.

II. KEY FINDINGS

1. **The "environment" is the neighborhood:** When asked to describe the "environment" and environmental concerns, respondents from both neighborhoods thought first about issues relating to crime and safety, neighborhood appearance, and social interactions. They did not mention other traditional green issues such as recycling and energy use.

2. **The term "Ecodistrict" is largely without meaning:** Respondents had neither a negative nor a positive reaction to the term. They simply didn't know what it meant. More detailed program descriptions yielded better reactions.

3. **Housing is a core concern:** Although these two neighborhoods are in very different phases of gentrification, respondents had remarkably similar concerns about development patterns. Participants perceive that their neighborhood has changed and is changing fast, and are very concerned about these changes, for themselves personally and for what they value about the neighborhood. Rising costs of real estate and concomitant changes in the neighborhood's population and culture are seen as real and present threats.

   > *"A lot of people don't leave Capitol Hill ever. Except for work. Because it has everything you need."*
   >
   > *-Eric, 37, white male, Capitol Hill*

4. **Local businesses matter:** Concern over gentrification and development went beyond housing. Respondents worried that local businesses (as opposed to chains) would be forced out as well. Local businesses are seen as a key thread in the fabric of the community.

5. **Traditional green concerns invoked disinterest and even suspicion:** Energy efficiency and green buildings were often perceived as luxuries, not relevant to the real places where people live and work. People are suspicious of "greenwashing."

6. **People are proud of their neighborhoods and diversity:** Respondents from both neighborhoods are proud of and identify with their neighborhood. They say diversity of race, ethnicity, age, income and culture is a vital part of their neighborhood identity. They value the history and cultures of the neighborhood, and cite local sub-groups within the neighborhood, knowing your neighbors and social connectivity as important benefits of living there.

7. **Residents feel both empowered and uncertain how to exercise influence:** Respondents recognized that most of the decisions that affect their neighborhood are made outside the community or even the city where they live. Yet they still feel empowered to influence these decisions, or at least obligated to try.

8. **Lack of information and leadership from trusted institutions are barriers to engagement:** Residents frequently said they did not get adequate information about what is happening in their communities until after the fact. They also felt that traditional local institutions such as neighborhood associations have ceased to truly represent their interests.

9. **This void represents a real opportunity for district-scale initiatives:** Respondents believe that new leadership can emerge – from government, from local businesses, and from the non-profit sector – that will improve the community for current and future residents. They hope that it does, and many of them believe they themselves would support such leadership, if it addresses their core concerns.

III. NEIGHBORHOOD IDENTIFICATION

Respondents in both communities express a strong personal commitment to the neighborhood. Over half of the respondents in both locations have lived in or near their neighborhood for more than 10 years. Homeowners and renters, lifers and new-comers talk about the neighborhood with a depth of feeling and evident sense of connection. They're proud of living there.

"There" is a somewhat variable concept. Boundaries are not universally agreed upon, and are subject to change over time. Black residents who use the name "Cully" and white residents who describe "North Portland" are likely not working from exactly the same mental map. More relevant than street boundaries are social geographies, or mental mapping that occurs around schools, family and personal history, race and ethnic community, and sub-neighborhoods.

"It's more family-oriented. A lot of community gardens, community activities, farmer markets, really close-knit."

-Dana, 43, African American male, Cully

When asked to describe their neighborhood, respondents in both locations generated lists of assets, including cultural vitality and diversity, transportation access, recent improvements in safety and community services, and social connection. In Capitol Hill, assets included LGBT culture, arts and youth, entertainment, physical beauty and walkability. In Cully, respondents emphasized family and social connection, and are specific about recent and coming improvements, including a new park, new cafes and destinations.

Respondents also describe their neighborhood in terms of what it lacks, including, in Cully, access to quality food stores, community gathering places, and, in Capitol Hill, the feel and appearance the neighborhood had a few years ago. But both the negatives and the positives cited reflect respondents' strong identification with the neighborhood.

In both neighborhoods there is a strong connection to locally owned business as opposed to corporate chains. In Capitol Hill, there was a buzz in both focus groups about the closure of a pizza parlor that had been open for years, the owner "selling out" to a developer planning a residential complex. In Cully, we reached out to Latino business owners themselves and found the connection with the neighborhood was reciprocal.

"We tried to help each other mutually because if they are nearby and support as then we can give them a discount or even free services. The residents are accepting us and in return we should be able to give back to them. That is how I see it. The participation between the residents and the businesses is very important to me. " – Male Latino business owner, Cully

Customers line up at Bauhaus Coffee on Capitol Hill. Photo: Lars K Solsken

IV. HOUSING AND DEVELOPMENT

In both communities, one a "hot market" and the other underdeveloped but poised to change, the rising cost of housing and real estate are top-of-mind for most respondents. Home owners and renters alike see this as a threat to their own security, and many are concerned about being priced out by property tax or availability. They speak with passion, and are in wide agreement about the consequences for the neighborhood's character and culture, of lower income residents being pushed out of the neighborhood.

In Capitol Hill, these are identified as younger people, service workers and cultural workers, including the area's large LGBT community. Some respondents in Seattle oppose greater density development – specifically, new multi-unit "apodment" buildings of one room micro-apartments. But their objections to these are based on blocked views, building design, parking and aesthetic consequences, not on the influx of renters. Those opposed to apodments agree with other participants that spiraling real estate costs are a threat to the neighborhood.

In Cully, the community consequences are understood in terms of race and class. The African American community sees an invasion of mostly younger middle class whites (symbolized by planned or projected Starbucks openings), and frequently cite the nearby Alberta district as a painful and ominous example of African Americans being pushed out by development and gentrification. White respondents in the groups

agree with this perspective, and believe what they value in the neighborhood is threatened by excluding lower income and especially non-white residents.

Respondents in both communities link the affordability of housing to the consequences for locally owned businesses, particularly the risk of losing their leases. Respondents reason that chain stores and restaurants are not committed to the neighborhood the way local business owners are. Many local businesses are cited by name, and described as an asset to the community, both as unique destinations and as points of community leadership or interaction.

A customer orders at Taqueria Santa Cruz in North Portland. Photo: VJ Beauchamp

Respondents believe, from their own experience, that market forces and political influence of developers and affluent buyers will determine the outcome, but some are eager to suggest, and others receptive to, possible strategies for push-out protection. These include supporting local businesses as well as policies aimed at preserving and creating housing stock at a range of price points. Development is seen as a positive, when it creates better conditions and local jobs for neighborhood residents. Especially in Cully, respondents talk about how the neighborhood has improved in recent years and ask, so now that I've stuck it out, am I going to be forced to move? This includes not only residents but business owners.

"If you can't have young people living on Capitol Hill, …Those are your musicians, your artists. If you make it impossible for them to live here, then you're going to have another kind of Disneyfied, so-called cute neighborhood that only the shi-shi can afford." (Erica, 51 African American female, Capitol Hill)

 "I think 20 or 30 years from now, they're going to kind of say, "What were we thinking?" (Steven, 50, white male, Capitol Hill)

" There needs to be a place where the bartenders, the boylesque, the burlesque, drag performers, every artist, all of my people, all the weird people need somewhere to live." (Michael, 45, white male Capitol Hill)

"In the push out of gentrification I kind of feel like I'm just holding on there in Cully and not being pushed further out." (LaKeitha, 34, African American female, Cully)

"We live in the neighborhood but we feel like we might be evicted, we don't feel safe. We came here to work and we'll hang in there until we're evicted. It's a very safe neighborhood." (Latino business owner, Cully)

"We had majority African Americans. Now we have a lot of Caucasians. Lots of them. It's like they have all the low-income people to move out so they can renovate the property and make it where it's more expensive. A lot of people had to move out and couldn't afford it." (Elisaetta, 48, African American female)

"The people who brought the community together or invested in making it a community, the cool things, activities and adding different businesses to the community, we lose those people at the same time we're losing our character and everything." (Adolph, 47, African American male, Cully)

"All that cheap property got bought and now it's all cafes and boutiques and bookstores and coffee shops and stuff like that."   (Jim, 44, African American male)
Is that a good thing?
Jim: "Yeah."

"It makes it more of a real neighborhood, more cohesive and a lot more activities people can do." (Tim, 62, white male, Cully)

V. SAFETY AND COMMUNITY INTERACTION

Like escalating real estate prices, safety and security concerns are frequently cited by respondents in both locations as immediate threats to the community, both personally and communally. In Capitol Hill, residents are concerned about public drug use, homelessness, street altercations tied to a burgeoning bar scene and an increase in hate crime directed at the LGBT community. In Cully, concerns include public drug use, poverty, abandoned property, accessibility, traffic and pedestrian safety. Threats to safety are frequently mentioned in response to questions about the neighborhood's "environment."

Personal safety is closely linked to what residents most value in the neighborhood – the feeling of social connection and personal pride. When respondents describe neighborhood assets such as schools, parks, and local businesses or destinations, they describe them in terms of people getting together, seeing your neighbors, and simply feeling comfortable in the neighborhood. While respondents clearly believe

that improved infrastructure, more effective policing, and city policy must address their safety concerns, they also believe that knowing your neighbors, and personal responsibility for keeping the neighborhood safe, is an important strategy.

"People don't feel safe. They're putting Q patrol back out because they're not feeling safe. And the complaint I keep hearing, people move into the neighborhood because it's vibrant and it's all these wonderful things, and they're tearing it down, and it's going away." (Erica, 51 African American female, Capitol Hill)

"-- not giving in to the nonsense and the violence and the drugs and the prostitution. I'm going to stay there. It's my home, it's been my family's home, my brother's home. I'm going to stay here and see this through 'cause that's what they would've done." (Kenny, 46, African American male)

VI: ECODISTRICTS AND SUSTAINABILITY

The term "EcoDistrict" is unfamiliar to respondents and by itself raises questions of scale, from a single green building, to a block, to a larger defined geographic boundary (which may or may not conform to mental maps of the neighborhood). While the term itself did not yield any positive reactions, neither did it raise any strong negative ones when used alone. When we tested actual descriptions of programs, we got different results.

Participants were unfamiliar with the term EcoDistrict, and the term itself did not yield positive or negative reactions – though it did prompt questions about who will do what.

Reactions were mixed to this statement from Capitol Hill Housing:

The Capitol Hill EcoDistrict is a neighborhood based initiative promoting local and global environmental health and social justice by advancing progressive policies and projects within the Eco district's boundaries. We have an opportunity to create a model, sustainable, equitable neighborhood. You can help at home, on the road, and in the community.

Some respondents spoke of buzz words, and a level of distrust due to a lack of specificity, but most indicate an interest in finding out more – how will this be done? And, just as importantly, who will lead the effort? Interpretations of the statement vary wildly.

"I heard a lot of good words: health, social justice, progressive policies, local, I heard one word that did not fit in there and that's global." (Linda, 59, white female, Capitol Hill)

"Do they mean $15/hour wages? Who are their local partners? Are they working with all the different co-ops in the Hill? Are they working with Walgreens? Krogers?" (Michael, 45, white male, Capitol Hill)
Moderator: *In addition to recycling, reducing waste, energy efficiency, are there other things that you think of as being important for the neighborhood's environment?*

"I think we've got to do something about the crime, the drugs, and homeless people who are self-medicating because they're not getting any assistance from the state. It's about what neighborhood do you want to live in." (Erica, 51 African American female, Capitol Hill)

Respondents in Portland had largely positive responses to this statement from Living Cully coalition:

In Living Cully we reinterpret sustainability as an anti-poverty strategy, introducing new environmental assets to Cully in response to existing community needs: Health, employment, education, housing.

In particular, respondents were asked for reactions to the list of existing community needs, and they responded with broad agreement.

"I think truly that's a solid foundation to start from." (Kenny, 46, African American male)

"Increases pride, increases pride in the community." (Tim, 62, white male, Cully)

Respondents have two very different kinds of reactions to the terms "sustainability" and "sustainable community." How participants respond depends largely on the context in which the term is introduced.

When associated with traditional environmental issues, the term is divisive and widely misunderstood. To some respondents it suggests a "greenwashing" PR term, or is unrealistic, a purview of elites. Respondents, particularly in Seattle, are supportive of energy efficiency, and believe they themselves, and Seattle as a whole, excel at waste management. But they are unaware of and not very interested in city initiatives, and do not engage with interest. These topics do not play a prominent role in their reasoning about the neighborhood.

But when the word "sustainable" was raised spontaneously by a respondent, or discussed in the context of the neighborhood's economic and cultural life, respondents define it quite differently, and with a widely-shared positive attitude. Respondents believe that what makes a community sustainable is local jobs, homes people can afford, and opportunity for community members to interact and engage in community life. Far from being a divisive term, this definition of "what sustains our community" is unifying and inspiring to residents. It means sustaining what we value.

Student-produced mural at Rigler Elementary in the Cully neighborhood.
Photo: Tim Lauer

"Where people are buying things in the community and working right down the street. The kids are going to the school in the neighborhood." (Dustin, 33, white male, Cully)

"Being a little bit more self-sustaining, both in terms of a resource use, but even employment. Kind of completing the circle with a redeveloped area instead of importing energy, exporting waste and exporting people to go somewhere else to work instead of just having opportunities to work within or close to the building they live in." (Steven, 50, white male, Capitol Hill)

"I think from my sense the sustainability piece is sustaining the neighborhood feel and preventing what happened (displacement) in Alberta." (LaKeitha, 34, African American female, Cully)

VII: ENGAGEMENT & LEADERSHIP

Respondents mostly believe that city government is not reliable and pursues interests that sometimes work against residents' interests. Respondents cite a "revolving door" on land use policies, dependent on political shifts. They believe the city is more interested in increasing revenues from development than in meeting community needs.

Some respondents had recent or past experience with attending public meetings, and when, as in the Seattle women's group, the outcome was unsatisfactory, other members of the group expressed a sense of futility in influencing the course of events, expressing they experience the "same things over and over" or feel as though "my voice won't matter." When a respondent described a more successful experience with influencing a public decision, others in the group are cautiously hopeful, but point out that it's difficult to assemble citizens without

Volunteers helped landscape the entrance to the community garden at Rigler Elementary School.
Photo: AFS-USA

a singular focus or problem. Most residents describe themselves as being open to attending a public meeting, but say that its purpose has to be clear. They would want to know what decision makers will be present, not just engage in a neighborhood conversation.

In both Seattle and Portland, respondents indicated that the Neighborhood Associations have limited influence and have become part of the "system" and less in tune with neighborhood needs. One respondent characterizes the Cully Neighborhood Association as "mostly white dudes in their 50s and 60s."

"These groups aren't welcoming to young people, people of color, people who aren't homeowners." (LaKeitha, 34, African American female, Cully)

Local business leaders, and businesses in association, are seen as an important potential source of leadership, one that could exert greater influence on public decisions that would be in the interest of residents. Churches, public schools and institutions of higher learning are also seen as institutions with a real and/or potential positive influence in determining the neighborhood's future.

Volunteer Park attracts Capitol Hill residents year-round. Photo: Dave Lichterman

Several Seattle respondants mentioned Capitol Hill Housing as a positive force for community leadership and one respondent in Portland mentioned Living Cully in the same context. Certainly in Seattle and probably in Portland there were gains in credibility from association with a well-known neighborhood organization.

In Capitol Hill, respondents believe that the community's social history and "Northwest attitude" are grounds for hope that the community can determine its own destiny. In Cully, respondents who are very concerned about the invasion of middle class whites also believe that newcomers, some of whom have more education and more assets, bring new energy to the community and might help longer term residents influence the neighborhood's future.

I think a lot of (newcomers) are new, younger families with little children and they're excited. And I think those people have a different sense of power and access to government and those kinds of things than some of the people who have been here. Or at least they have more hope about it – and that's good. (LaKeitha, 34, African American female, Cully)

Respondents say they want more information about public issues affecting their neighborhood. In Seattle, neighborhood flyers, Capitol Hill Blog and social media are cited as important sources of information. In Cully, respondents indicate that they are underserved by existing neighborhood newsletters and news media. The schools are seen as important ways to get information and to bring the community together, and one respondents without school age children said she feels left out. When one Cully resident described the information and networking available through the Cully

pages of nextdoor.com, the rest of the group was excited to learn of it, and wrote down the url, saying they would look it up.

"Something that could really help is some kind of inspirational campaign for those who still live in the community, who have been there for many years, who still want to preserve that because I think the only way to change is really the mentality. When people rally around a local business, people really rally around the idea of not making these specific changes, they voice concerns." (Julio, 38, Latino male, Capitol Hill)

"I see all these leaflets that are being passed out because people are trying to stop that from happening. And I'm ashamed to say I've looked at those, I've taken some of them, I have not got off my butt to go actually go to the meetings. Because I do feel strongly that we need to look at that." (John B, 59, white male, Capitol Hill)

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Meet residents where they are, and that is not Ecotopia: Neighborhood residents in widely different communities share core values in thinking about their neighborhoods, including pride, connection, security, and economic opportunity. District scale initiatives should be framed in terms of these values.

- Through visual and verbal communications, evoke the pride residents feel in their neighborhood, and express pride in the people and institutions that are part of it.
- Invest in developing a clear understanding of what different groups of residents most value about the neighborhood, and start from these assets. Frequently name (and be a visible part of) the people, places, activities, events, and qualities that residents value.
- Introduce the values of safety and security high up in all communications, and always describe physical improvements to include reference to this value (e.g., not "parks" but "well-lit, well-maintained parks").

2. "Who builds what where" is the on-ramp for community engagement: Housing and real estate costs are of primary concern to residents, and an imbalanced housing market excluding lower income residents is seen as a threat to personal security, the local economy, and the community's culture and vitality. Neighborhood and district-scale planning and advocacy should lead with protecting the area's current population diversity and cultures.

- Use the phrase "pushed out" and variations such as "preventing push-out".
- Be specific about projects and policies that prevent people being pushed out. Let audiences know that the pattern of pushing out African Americans, Latinos, lower income and younger residents is not an inevitable force of nature.
- Local businesses are also an important part of the equation. Be sure to engage the owners of locally owned businesses. Feature local business vitality in outreach.

3. The three legs of the sustainability stoop are not equally important to residents: While the "three-legged stool" of economy, environment and equity is a vital tool for analysis and policy development, it is inadequate as a communications frame for neighborhood engagement and development. Frame communications in terms of what people in these neighborhoods value.

- The traditional environmental panoply of issues such as energy efficiency and green infrastructure become part of the how, not the what. For example, in a neighborhood that lacks sidewalks, safety is the core concern, but the sidewalks can also be built in a way that promotes green infrastructure.

> *The environment is where we live, as well as the people. It's everything close – stores, parks, clinics.*
>
> *-Latina Female, Cully*

- Focus on issues such as diversity and housing affordability, neighborhood cultures, safety, local jobs, appearance and amenities, food stores, parks and community meeting places to create an on-ramp for discussion of environmental concerns.
- Some environmental issues such as parks, transportation and neighborhood beautification are crosscutting and offer real bridge opportunities.

4. District-scale initiatives need unique brands and value propositions. Simply branding an initiative as an "EcoDistrict" is empty calories from a communications perspective.

- Use the neighborhood name prominently in headlines and branding, but always talk about specific places and the decisions pertaining to those places.
- Think of the project area in terms of its social geographies, not by boundaries. This requires targeting communications to multiple groups of residents by ethnic, age and location groups.
- Through visual and verbal communications, evoke the pride residents feel in their neighborhood, and express pride in the people and institutions that are part of it. Invest in developing a clear understanding of what different groups of residents most value about the neighborhood, and start from these assets. Frequently name (and be a visible part of) the people, places, activities, events, and qualities that residents value.

5. A real need and opportunity exists for initiatives that respond to neighbors concerns: District scale sustainability initiatives have a real opportunity to fill a perceived void in institutional representation of local concerns, as long as they follow the recommendations above and lead with the issues that matter most to residents.

- The most powerful and effective medium is direct contact neighbor-to-neighbor. Recruit individual messengers and seek their commitments to "bring a neighbor" to the upcoming meeting.
- Invest in informational resources, especially including social media, and use them to tell the story of citizens engaged in moving the neighborhood forward, not just in relation to specific projects or initiatives, but more broadly to include any work that increases neighborhood interactivity and pride.

CONCLUSION

By design, the two neighborhoods that were the focus of this project are very different in demography, income level, density and many other measures. Certainly, those differences revealed themselves in the focus group results. In the Cully neighborhood, for example, respondents thought more frequently about resources and safety for children whereas in Capitol Hill respondents rarely mentioned kids in their lists of concerns. This reflects the fact that Cully has far more families with children living there. Likewise, the aesthetics of "apodments" and parking problems they presented were mentioned frequently in Capitol Hill but never mentioned in the Cully groups, reflecting the very different densities and housing stock in each community. These important differences underscore the need for highly localized branding, targeted research and messaging.

A band plays at the Sound Outside community event at Capitol Hill's Cal Anderson park.
Photo: Monktail Creative Music Concern

The similarities, however, among respondents from very different neighborhoods, are substantial and significant. These commonalities form the basis for our findings and recommendations. People care about where they live and want to influence the nature and rate of change in their neighborhoods. The onramps for engagement are the ones that start closest to community values and concerns. That can be a challenge for initiatives that are designed mainly to promote local contributions to larger environmental concerns.

It would be a mistake to assume, based on research in only two locations, that these strong common themes are universally applicable. We strongly recommend that additional research is necessary in other communities from different parts of the country and where different types of district based initiatives are in play. The work outlined here should create a strong platform from which to build additional lines of inquiry.

This research confirms that an important and compelling opportunity exists for district scale initiatives, and that neighborhood residents are ready to be engaged in their neighborhood's future. While such engagement may not be the initial or motivating factor in launching these initiatives, successful efforts will define themselves in part as helping residents participate in shaping their community's future.

APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Gender

Men (17)
Women (18)

Household Income

>$90K (5)
<$45K (15)
$45-90K (15)

Age

25-35 (10)
51+ (11)
36-50 (14)

Home Ownership

Own (17)
Rent (18)

Race

Hispanic (9)
Asian American (3)
African American (9)
White (22)