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# Assessing the effects of neighborhood councils on urban policy and development: The example of Tacoma, Washington

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## Abstract

Neighborhood councils form an important and sometimes problematic layer in the governance system of many cities across the USA. The literature on these institutions has focused mainly on their hypothesized role in facilitating citizen participation in neighborhood and city planning. Less work has explored the experiences of neighborhood councils as placed-based institutions theoretically embedded within, and therefore ostensibly reflective of, the overall social and political geography of the city. In particular, little research documents the actual local development priorities, fund-raising capacities, project achievements and scalar tensions associated with neighborhood councils operating in different neighborhoods of the same city. Using a perspective based on extant literatures in urban politics and public administration, this paper offers an analysis of the neighborhood council experience in Tacoma, Washington, USA. While these councils are still “segmented” from the core of urban politics, the paper argues, certain institutional reforms could unlock their long term potential as more “transformative” spaces of local governance. © 2010 Western Social Science Association. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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Neighborhood councils constitute an increasingly important layer within the governance systems of many American communities (Box & Musso, 2004; Cooper & Kathi, 2005; Musso, Kitsuse, & Cooper, 2006). Neighborhood-driven reform movements *per se* date back to at least the municipal arts and city beautiful campaigns of the latter 19th century, if not earlier (Chaskin & Abunimah, 1999; Krueckeberg, 1983). But the modern neighborhood movement, especially the formal institutionalization of council systems in the administrative architecture of American local government, is largely a child of the 1960s, reflecting dissatisfaction with

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urban renewal programs as well as the Great Society ethic of maximum feasible participation in the use of federal funding. Accordingly, their empirical record as local government institutions, particularly in regard to facilitating more progressive urban development, is of general theoretical importance. This paper considers the empirical record of the neighborhood council system in Tacoma, Washington in light of general theoretical expectations associated with local democracy in urban America.

## 1. Neighborhood councils as urban institutions

Urban governance systems in the US are subject to considerable debate. In the empirical context of U.S. central cities such systems arguably relate urban development to two basic questions. The first question — Who governs cities? — has frequently involved analyses of elite coalitions, growth-machines, and pro-growth regimes (Dahl, 1961; Hunter, 1953; Logan & Molotch, 1987; Molotch, 1976; Painter & Goodwin, 1995; Peterson, 1981; Stone, 1976). Stone (1989), for example, argues that the “iron law” of regime formation in US cities invariably links patterns in city politics to an alliance of politicians and business interests who champion land-use intensification through (and for) economic growth. Following this general claim, urban political researchers should expect, as often than not, a set of policy forces that “. . .alter the landscape in more or less identical fashion from place to place,” to borrow Hackworth’s (2005, p. 485) ecological language, because of “certain systematic processes” now operating in advanced US capitalism (e.g., Beauregard, 2005; Sanders, 2005; Strom, 2003; cf. Peterson, 1981).

In contrast, the second question — Do different kinds of “opportunity structures” influence answers to the first question? — emphasizes more contingent readings, wherein place context, social agency, political choices, path-dependency, and institutional innovation in the face of these wider systematic forces may be equally (or possibly even more) significant in shaping the spatial and institutional development of particular cities (e.g., Clavel, 1986). Here the local state is not simply theorized as an inert arena, as long stipulated both by pluralist and neo-Marxist approaches to urban politics, but an independent institutional actor in its own right, legally nested within wider political formations (Frug & Barron, 2008) and thus shaped by complex path dependencies at various scales (Dilworth, 2009). Theoretically important, then, are the potentially more diverse developmental consequences of opportunity structures, including politico-administrative reform of governance structures within municipalities (Anderson, 1989; Fannin & Hellreigel, 1985) as well as between municipalities and other authorities (Friskin & Norris, 2001; Orfield, 1997; Rusk, 1993, 1999; Savitch & Vogel, 1996).

Central to the discussion of “opportunity structures” — or what public administration scholars have called “open bureaucracies” — is what many see as the potentially helpful role of neighborhood-based institutions in conceiving, implementing and/or recasting urban development policy, perhaps even forming an institutional infrastructure upon which a more transformative/progressive politics might emerge (see e.g., Thomas, 1982, 1983, 1987a,b). These institutions range from non-profit housing groups to community development corporations — both of which have received considerable attention for many years (Keating et al., 1990; Silverman, 2001; Stoecker, 1997). Less progressive, but also new sub-municipal forces,

include home ownership associations, which have also received growing attention of late, particularly by those working on US cities who link them to the “neoliberal” privatization of both urban space and urban citizenship (Chen & Webster, 2005). One key theme in this work is the exploration of patterns associated with how neighborhood institutions link cities with citizens, including efforts to sort out the role of socio-economic status and felt needs in structuring citizen involvement in local public administration (Thomas, 1982).

Formally established neighborhood councils in the US are surprisingly less well understood, though high-profile systems like the one recently established in Los Angeles have started to attract more academic attention of late (Bryer & Cooper, 2007; Cooper & Kathi, 2005; Cuff, 2004; Musso, Weare, Oztas, & Loges, 2005). Most of the formal work on US neighborhood councils treats them sympathetically, even when their empirical experience appears to fall short of their theoretical potential as spaces of democracy and administrative reform (Thomas, 1987a,b). A core hope appears to relate to deepening participation in governance and is based on normative arguments for more responsive local government. For some researchers neighborhood councils are like other organizations that engage with neighborhood-level dynamics, such as community development corporation (CDCs) or non-profits (Chaskin & Garg, 1997; Salsich, 1999). Because these entities are closer to the ground, some feel they activate dormant citizen involvement in governance, creating a more legible arena of civic engagement where none previously existed and perhaps overcoming alienation from the local state and public bureaucracy (Cooper & Kathi, 2005). Once established, neighborhood councils help with the more efficient delivery of urban services by providing practical knowledge about the precise investment of scarce public resources (Box & Musso, 2004; Cooper & Kathi, 2005).

Other researchers, who generally share these positive expectations, also see the broader administrative potential for neighborhood councils. For example, a few researchers have explored their institutional capacity to bridge diverse groups of people and thus create new administrative mechanisms to organize, prioritize and coordinate the place-based activities of scattered entities in neighborhood development (Kathi & Cooper, 2005; cf. Davis, 1991). Kathi and Cooper (2005) argue that neighborhoods can democratize the administrative state, wherein citizens are more than recipients of technical information or agents for occasional consultation. Instead, council structures can provide mechanisms through which citizens transform “mere opinions” about public policy into “actual judgments,” a process of civic transformation wherein people take responsibility for making policy choices amongst competing alternatives. For scholars of urban planning, where the notion of communicative rationality is extensively discussed as a mechanism to “face power” (Forester, 1989), neighborhood councils potentially meld two kinds of instrumental knowledge: top-down professional knowledge and “bottom-up” lay knowledge (Maeyama, 2006; Salsich, 1999; Yinon-Amoyal & Kallus, 2005).

Still others argue that councils (and other neighborhood entities in the US) can contribute to regeneration initiatives by building social capital in the form of trust and bonding between community groups and their leaders and then by linking this “capital” to wider political institutions within the urban polity. Purdue (2001) explores this theme through an analysis of “transformational” and “transactional” leaders within urban neighborhoods in the UK. Musso et al. (2005) extend this ambitious claim to the more radical possibility that neighborhood councils — once established — even possess the potential to challenge elite-dominated governance through

what they see as the construction of “network effects” that “cross-cut traditional community cleavages.”

A minority of research on neighborhood councils is less sanguine about their theoretical potential as political agents of planning and administration much less their empirical record on urban social transformation. Here neighborhood councils benefit from the “side-payments” of growth-oriented regimes, usefully “segmented” from the core power structure through participation, coordination and legitimization functions. This more structural view challenges what Purcell (2006) has recently called the “local trap” as well as older skepticism by others about an unproblematic mapping of the grassroots as inherently good or more effective in mitigating large-scale urban problems in contemporary US society (Harvey, 2000; Lake, 2002). The key issue here, as the urban geographer Knox (1984: 76) originally put it, “[is] whether neighborhood councils can really be made a focus for genuine public participation [and transformation] without generating into an elaborate exercise in public relations or lapsing into the hands of a self-selected knot of local *prominenti*.” In this context, Martin and Holloway (2005) link the limitations of neighborhood governance in St. Paul, Minnesota to growing ethnic diversity. Ultimately, they conclude that

the city is fragmented along multiple dimensions at multiple geographic scales. Its significant racial and ethnic cleavages do not correspond to political units for urban governance – units that form a basis for citizen involvement and community development within the city. The governance structure in fact reinscribes or reinforces economic inequalities across the urban landscape, even as it enables some areas to foster a district-wide political and social identity that partially transcends significant racial and ethnic fragmentation (p. 1110).

Martin and Holloway (2005) do not dismiss these entities but instead delineate the links between uneven social geography and political effects. Other useful contributions in this vein of *geopolitical* scholarship include Regulska (2003) and Yinon-Amoyal and Kallus (2005), both in a non-US context. Regulska (2003) links participation in council systems to the ideological and spatial formation of civil society in Warsaw. For their part, Yinon-Amoyal and Kallus (2005) analyze spatial variations in the “intensities” of citizen involvement in local-level planning (e.g., land use, infrastructure, housing) in two different council systems in two different Israeli cities. Despite their potential in integrating “local knowledge” into planning practice, however, they conclude that “planning authorities fail to acknowledge them” (p. 102).

This literature provides context for the analysis of the neighborhood council system of Tacoma, Washington, a traditionally working-class central city of approximately 200,000 anchoring a metropolitan region of nearly one million people just south of Seattle. Politically, Tacoma is a socially liberal community, generally voting for Democratic rather than Republican candidates and supporting local liberal agendas such as gay rights and, more recently, sustainable urban development. At the same time, there are broad disparities in the socio-economic status of various council areas such that a number of low-income areas have pressing social needs.

Given Tacoma’s overall political orientation, several key questions arise: is the city addressing the needs of its most disadvantaged populations by directing more neighborhood council resources to low-income areas than to affluent districts? In turn, is each neighborhood council using available monies to address the most pressing local needs, thereby exhibiting significant

empirical differences in spending patterns? Put more generally, can we map the city’s neighborhood councils as evolving political spaces increasingly capable of transforming the local urban development agenda toward more progressive ends, or, in contrast, are these councils simply “segmented” spaces — useful political fora to keep neighborhood activists “busy” with the concrete but small, largely conventional, and politically unthreatening work of neighborhood management?

In general, we find that to date Tacoma’s neighborhood councils have been largely co-opted as “segmented” spaces (Fainstein & Fainstein, 1982), though we also believe they have transformative potential over the long term. Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data on the disbursement and utilization of public funds, we develop our argument by focusing on the emerging geography of intra-urban equity and equality as manifested empirically by the spending patterns of neighborhood councils and the associated funding process developed by the city of Tacoma. In addition, we consider these patterns qualitatively within the context of a series of tensions between the municipal authority and the local councils. This analysis is based on 65 interviews conducted with both city and neighborhood-level actors. Interviewees included neighborhood council members, elected city councilors, and key city staff members. The interviews were conducted jointly by the co-authors. Through open-ended questions the interviewees were asked about project priorities, the relationships that neighborhood councils have with the city and with one another, perceived weaknesses and strengths of the system, and the role of neighborhood councils in developing neighborhood identity and cohesion. With an eye on their transformative potential, we ultimately relate the evolving system to issues of necessary institutional reform as well as to theoretical literature on the limitations and possibilities of “opportunity structures” in the spatial and social management of the contemporary American city.

To simplify, Fig. 1 below posits a series of six possible effects associated with the empirical insertion of neighborhood councils into the “opportunity structure” of the local governance space. These six effects are progressively rare accomplishments in local political space, and are

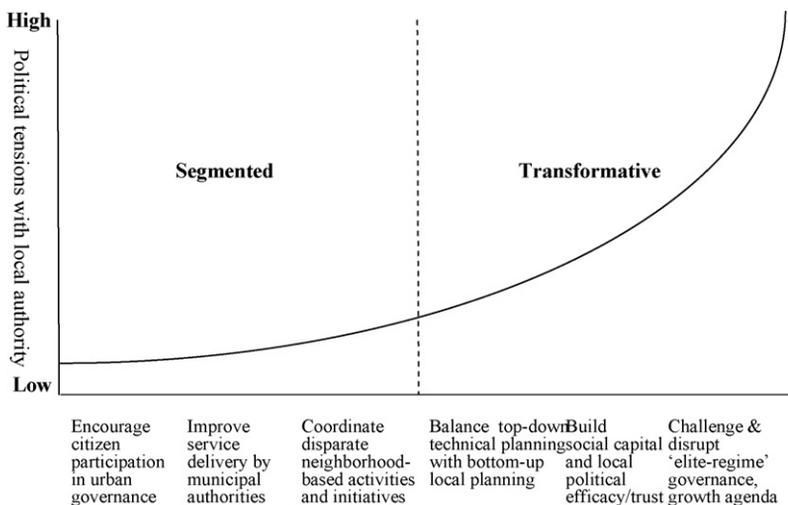


Fig. 1. Assessing the effects of neighborhood councils.

associated with mounting governance tensions. In our view, then, neighborhood councils that simply encourage citizen participation and/or improve service delivery amount to little more than “segmented” political spaces (Fainstein & Fainstein, 1982): viz. they do not substantially challenge the *status quo* and may in fact help to stabilize elite-regime hegemony. Under these circumstances, neighborhood councils are rather conventional institutions, doing pedestrian and non-controversial “work” within the city, at best, and possibly entrenching Knox’s “local *prominenti*,” at worst. Though more evolved, we also claim that basic “coordination” services, wherein local councils act to “triage” and “discipline” otherwise uncoordinated local needs, also operate to segment neighborhood from the core of urban power relations in US cities. For their focus here is policy administration, not urban politics.

In contrast, neighborhood councils that are able to confront ‘top-down’ planning with bottom-up activism, build local social capital/trust and/or perhaps even challenge and occasionally disrupt elite-regime governance policy focused on traditional economic growth issues are interpreted here as more “transformative” spaces. Again, it is politically much harder to “challenge elite-regime governance” than it is to “improve service delivery” or simply to get people “more involved” in urban governance. It follows therefore that only a few systems, if any, will alter the urban development agenda of a typical urban regime. Accordingly, Fig. 1 further posits that major shifts away from conventional policies of *segmented* administration, where neighborhood councils help business-oriented regimes carry out but not redirect a broader urban policy agenda, invariably produce political conflict within the governance structure of the city.

## 2. Tacoma’s Neighborhood Council System

Tacoma’s Neighborhood Council system was adopted in 1992 as a mechanism to allow residents of the city to identify problems facing their neighborhoods, advise city government of the issues confronting the various neighborhoods, and work with the city on possible solutions. The system grew out of a series of meetings in which nearly 1,000 residents gathered to discuss the needs and wants of various areas, to outline visions for individual neighborhoods, and to prioritize objectives necessary to realize those visions. One result of these meetings was the passage of Tacoma’s Neighborhood Council Program Ordinance. Within one year the councils were fully established and were granted 501 (c)3 non-profit status by the IRS. Further, they are independent in that they are not a part of the city’s governmental structure although they do receive funding from the city. Initially each neighborhood council had a liaison from city government who attended meetings as a representative of the city in order to address concerns and insure that lines of communication between the councils and city government remain open. This task was recently given to interns who report directly to the city manager and who are expected to respond to council requests for information and assistance within 72 hours. This allows the city manager to be kept fully informed about council issues and promotes better communication between the councils and the city. The city liaisons are heads of departments (e.g., the Director of Finance, Economic Development Director, Chief of Police, etc.) who themselves meet monthly to discuss matters raised at the various neighborhood council meetings. The councils thus share information.

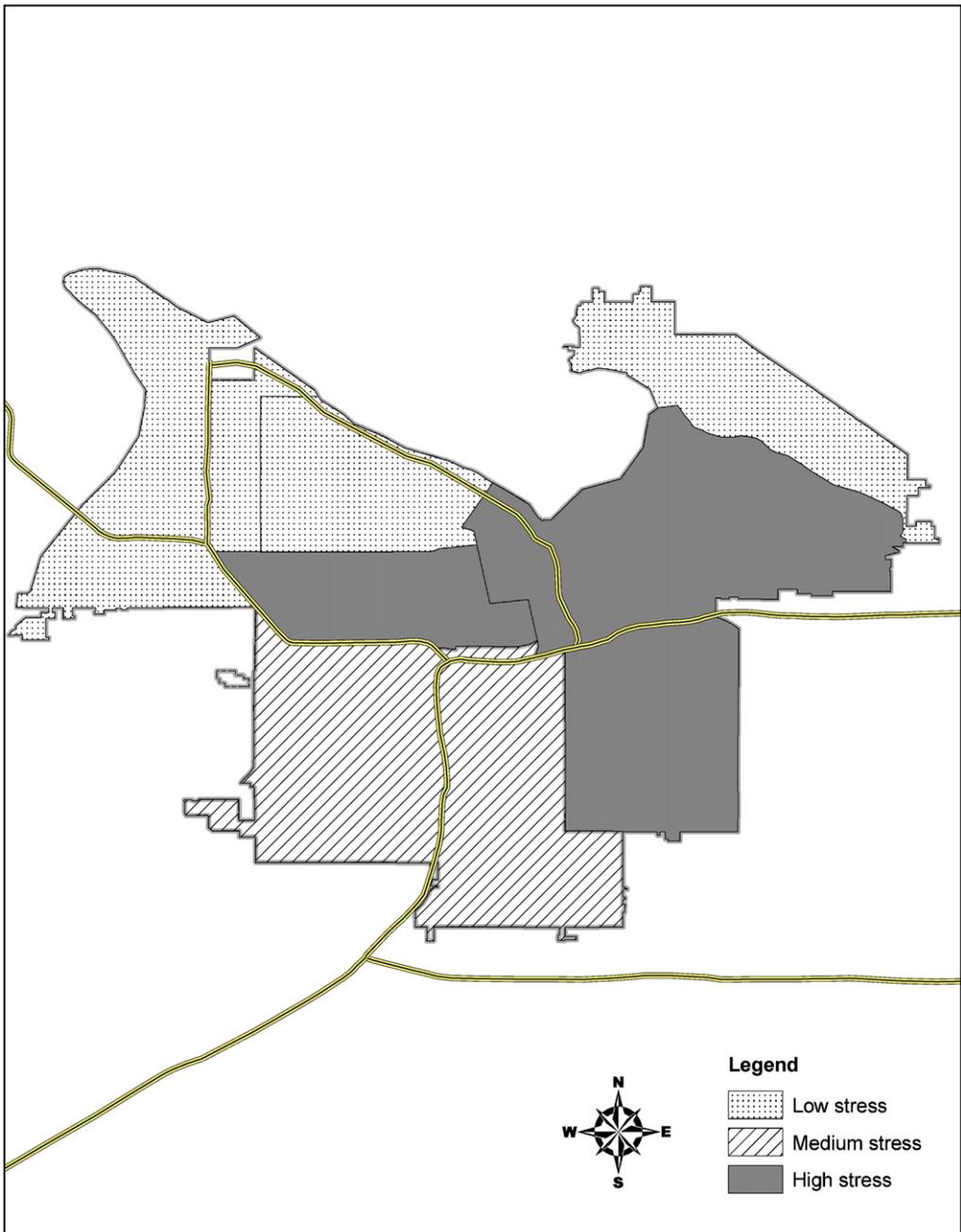


Fig. 2. TACOMA'S neighborhood councils.

A total of eight councils were established, each of which covers an area of the city that is roughly homogenous in socio-economic terms (Fig. 2). In addition, a larger Community Council was established. This is a 24-member body consisting of three representatives from each of the eight neighborhood councils. The Community Council was formed to address

neighborhood issues with citywide implications and lobby for the councils as a whole. In addition, it is meant to serve as a conduit for individual neighborhood councils to bring concerns before the City Council, although in many instances neighborhood councils take it upon themselves to bring issues before the city council.

The establishment of Tacoma's neighborhood councils was contentious. The idea was initially proposed in the 1980s but was rejected by the mayor at that time. An insecure City Council worried that the neighborhoods would usurp their power and, hence, the concept was rejected. Even when the system was adopted in 1992 doubts remained. A number of City Council members and city officials were wary of the idea and actively worked against it. For example, one city official stated that the ordinance related to the establishment of neighborhood councils was "a presumptuous usurpation of powers and authority that more appropriately belong to the City Manager and/or to the Council." He furthered argued that the councils would "greatly dilute the powers. . .of the [City] Council and literally cripple the City Manager [and] department and agency directors." In the end, he concluded that "although well intentioned, the ordinance is ill advised." Although neighborhood councils were simply "recommending bodies" to the City Council, concerns about hidden agendas and usurpation of powers fostered a climate of mistrust and wariness between the neighborhood councils throughout much of the 1990s. Thus, it was difficult to establish a positive working relationship between City Council and city agencies and the neighborhood councils. Only in recent years have tensions eased and relations improved to the extent that the local councils and the city are at least able to work together.

Over most of their existence the Councils received \$7,500 per year to undertake projects in their areas, a figure cut back to \$5,000 in 2005. In addition, the Councils were given one-time funds of \$750,000 in the late 1990s. The neighborhood councils spend these monies in a variety of ways. Generally monies are allocated for relatively small projects specific to the neighborhood (e.g., beautification, crime prevention, street/sidewalk safety, etc.). In addition, the councils often give funds to neighborhood organizations or groups who present ideas for neighborhood improvement before the councils. Councils have also used funds as seed money to apply for larger grants from outside funding agencies. Further, with the one-time allocation of \$750,000 per council noted above, the councils have overseen some major projects impacting their neighborhoods, many still ongoing.

### **3. The geo-politics of resource allocation**

In considering resource allocation we examine the spending patterns of neighborhood councils from 1994 to 2005 of the monies the councils receive annually from the city (the analysis does not consider the one-time \$750,000 funding mentioned above). In all, we examine how neighborhood councils allocated \$1,675,575 for local projects. This spending is considered in relation to various socio-economic characteristics of the council areas and their total population.

The socio-economic characteristics of the populations served by Tacoma's neighborhood councils vary from one district to another. For example, poverty rates range from a high of 23% in the New Tacoma Council area to a low of less than five percent in the Northeast Council district, where the average household income of nearly \$67,000 is more than three times that

Table 1  
Socio-economic status of neighborhood councils.

Council	Poverty rate	White population	Median income	Female-headed households, <i>f</i>
Eastside	22%	53%	\$34,913.81	19%
New Tacoma	23%	73%	\$20,622.66	22%
North East	4.3%	77%	\$66,787.81	8%
North End	8.1%	91%	\$48,980.38	10%
West End	13.5%	81%	\$40,470.21	15%
South Tacoma	18.4%	63%	\$32,561.69	25%
South End	14.7%	71%	\$37,269.71	17%
Central	20.2%	60%	\$33,344.91	25%

of New Tacoma (Table 1). In socio-economic terms the councils can be evenly divided into two broad categories. Four councils (the North End, Northeast, West End, and Sound End) have relatively high median incomes, limited numbers of female-headed households, poverty rates below 15%, and few people of color. They are, in short, fairly homogeneous districts populated by white middle- and upper-class residents. As such, they experience low levels of social stress. The remaining four councils (Eastside, New Tacoma, South Tacoma and Central) are at the lower end of Tacoma's socio-economic spectrum. In these areas poverty rates range from 18% to 23%, median incomes are below \$35,000, 20% to 25% of all households with children less than 18 years are headed by women, and the areas are racially mixed with people of color making up about 30–50% of each council's population.

With higher levels of stress than the other four councils it is expected that these areas have different needs and, hence, will allocate resources in a manner significantly different than more well-to-do districts. This is to say that areas with disadvantaged populations are expected to focus on real or perceived "community needs" (e.g., human development, crime prevention, safety, etc.) while areas with higher-income residents will spend monies on "community amenities" (e.g., beautification projects, recreation facilities, environmental protection, etc.).

To determine the extent to which expenditures vary spatially with the socio-economic characteristics of council neighborhoods the monies spent by each council have been grouped according to nine categories. These include projects related to recreation, street/pedestrian safety, special needs, beautification, environmental improvement, blight removal, education, crime/security, and a final category designated as "other" (Table 2).

Examination of the data indicates that some councils do emphasize certain projects. Overall, however, allocations do not follow specific patterns that can be linked to socio-economic characteristics. For example, projects related to crime prevention or security received scant attention from most of the councils. The lone exception is the Central Council which allotted 11% of its funds for crime prevention/security enhancement. For all other councils these percentages ranged from 0% to 4%. Similarly, education-related expenditures made up just three to seven percent of all funds available to the councils. Beyond these similarities there is little that allows one to tie low-income or upper-income councils to specific spending patterns. Environmental projects, for example, are just as likely (or unlikely) to be funded by low-income areas as higher-income districts. The same can be said for blight removal. Further, while the wealthiest council devoted 42% of its monies to recreation, no clear emphasis on or preference for recreation can be seen for higher/lower-income areas. In fact, only with the case

Table 2  
Funding priorities by Neighborhood Council.

Project type	Northeast	South End	South Tacoma	West End	Central	Eastside	North End	New Tacoma
Recreation	42%	33%	22%	13%	8%	17%	12%	8%
Street/ped saf	16%	14%	15%	16%	18%	17%	23%	4%
Spec. needs	16%	13%	7%	28%	7%	7%	1%	4%
Beautification	9%	10%	23%	15%	30%	20%	18%	24%
Environmental	6%	9%	14%	0%	3%	6%	11%	9%
Blight removal	5%	11%	7%	10%	11%	14%	19%	33%
Education	4%	4%	3%	6%	3%	7%	8%	8%
Other	2%	3%	8%	13%	11%	8%	7%	4%
Crime/sec	0%	3%	1%	0%	11%	3%	1%	4%
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	98%

of beautification projects does any sort of pattern emerge. Here it appears that beautification is somewhat more likely to be funded in poorer areas (23–30% of available monies) than in higher-income council districts where only 9–17% of funds were devoted to beautification.

While the data on beautification seem commonsensical, other statistics do not. Blight, crime, recreational and educational opportunities, and environmental concerns surely have spatial dimensions that will result in greater or lesser concern at the neighborhood level and, hence, differences in priorities. Thus, the purposes for which funds are allocated raise questions about the degree to which councils serve the overall interests of their communities or the special interests of local associations and activist groups which may be more vocal in calling for funds or more skilled in making their cases for the funding of their specific proposals. To some degree the data call into question the decision-making process at the “grassroots level.” Is it fair and reasonable given the needs of each council’s residents? To what extent are residents aware of funding opportunities, who is truly being served by the process, and what accountability procedures are in place to insure that the greatest number of citizens can participate in and benefit from this form of neighborhood governance?

Related to this is the even broader question of equity of overall resource allocation by the city. Under the current system each district receives the same annual allocation despite the fact that areas differ significantly in population and socio-economic need. For example, the Northeast Council serves the city’s wealthiest population. This Council’s 11,000 residents make up eight percent of Tacoma’s population. However, they benefited from 12% of the monies spent for a total of \$13.41 per resident (Table 3). On the other hand, the Eastside Council and the South Tacoma Council spent \$7.65 and \$8.64 per resident respectively. Both these councils serve low-income populations whose needs are sharply different than those of the Northeast Council’s residents.

#### 4. Geo-political perspectives on council activity

In-depth interviews with neighborhood council members, city officials, and city council members yielded a variety of views about the council systems and unearthed a number of

Table 3  
Dollars/capita distribution of project resources.

Council	Total pop	% pop	% funds	\$/capita
New Tacoma	11,386	6%	14%	20.50
Northeast	15,029	8%	12%	13.41
North End	25,344	13%	14%	9.19
Central	20,789	11%	11%	8.94
South Tacoma	22,095	11%	11%	8.64
Eastside	27,868	14%	13%	7.65
West End	29,544	15%	10%	5.82
South End	45,794	23%	15%	5.37
Total	197,849	100%	100%	

issues that merit consideration. For the most part the comments and concerns expressed by interviewees related to such issues as: the role of neighborhood councils, the effectiveness of the council system, the neighborhood council structure and the spatial dimensions of council areas, tensions in the city–neighborhood council relationship, and concerns about neighborhood council tenure.

For the most part, city council members and neighborhood council members held strikingly divergent views about the role and effectiveness of the neighborhood council system (although this is not to say that there were no areas of general agreement). Further, both sides admit to tensions between the neighborhood groups and city government. However, a number of neighborhood council members felt that such tensions are inevitable and even appropriate in the neighborhood–city relationship.

The relationship between the neighborhood councils and the city generated universally strong feelings. Neighborhood councilors seemed to readily accept (and at times even embrace) the notion that tension between them and the city was appropriate. As one neighborhood council member noted, “Neighborhood Councils. . . *want* to be adversarial, they ‘watch’ the city.” Another said that neighborhood councils “keep the city from falling asleep at the wheel on neighborhood issues.” The adversarial relationship seemed to be a source of some pride among neighborhood council groups.

For example, one neighborhood member noted that “the city embraced neighborhood councils to get them to validate what the city wanted them to do – but it backfired. Councils don’t rubberstamp things like the city thought they would do.” Another person said, “in the early days the councils were soft spoken but that didn’t get [us] anywhere. Now the gloves are off when dealing with city agencies and politicians.” The degree to which this relationship was viewed as contentious varies. Interestingly, such sentiments were often more forcefully expressed by councilors representing poorer areas where socio-economic problems are greater and where it is likely that council members felt that greater city intervention was needed given the magnitude of their problems.

But even here significant tensions exist about the nature and purpose of intervention. This can be seen in the urban planning system. Ostensibly, the city’s planning bureaucracy has been opened to help balance overall city priorities with the more local concerns of each council – an institutional development designed not only to coordinate urban investments across the city but also to contain and productively channel potential discontent with such investments.

Specifically, the city's planning staff works with neighborhood councilors to develop, revise and implement Neighborhood Action Strategies (NASs). These are fairly sophisticated documents, providing histories, demographics, and socio-economic analyses for Tacoma's various neighborhoods as well as relatively coherent visions for future change (City of Tacoma, 2005).

From the bureaucracy's point of view, NASs help to identify and prioritize specific projects, regulatory changes, and comprehensive plan policies. However, they are not official elements of the city's comprehensive plan. They are advisory. Accordingly, the city has only synthesized the various NASs into a common "neighborhood element" within the comprehensive plan (which also includes the city's rationale for change in each neighborhood). In theory, then, the comprehensive plan's neighborhood element is designed to meld neighborhood-scale visions of neighborhood identity and change with urban-scale visions of neighborhood identity and change. In practice, this has not been easy to accomplish. One example is a recent controversy over the following policy:

The further development of this [neighborhood council] area should include building market-rate infill housing generally affordable to area residents, buffering neighborhood areas from heavily trafficked commercial areas and major transportation corridors, and pursuing appropriate infill and redevelopment opportunities of vacant properties in re-emerging older business districts. New commercial development should be directed to the existing mixed-use centers that enrich local business and protect residential areas from incompatible commercial development (City of Tacoma, 2005, p. N2).

Such land-use intensification fits comfortably into the city's smart growth agenda — and indeed the broader agenda of pro-growth politics, albeit now subsumed within sustainability and livability discourses. But one developer who proposed such a mixed-use project encountered stiff resistance from the relevant neighborhood council. This prompted a city councilor to conclude with exasperation: "There was a *great* project that would bring ten new families into the city! It passed 9-0 in the City Council — but the [neighborhood council] didn't like the process. They felt the community wasn't represented. But most people in the community wanted it." Whether or not most people in the neighborhood actually wanted this project, the tensions in melding different rationalities of urban spatial change are clear. "There is an organizational culture that differs especially on land-use issues," one neighborhood councilor commented when asked about this conflict, "[the city planners] have their job. It's a professional attitude, but they don't always know what's going on. We are somewhat interfering [in the land-use code]. We've had fights about R-2 and R-4 issues. And spot zoning issues."

Running "interference" represents a discernable shift in the mediation of land-use change. In particular, it elevates the political rather than simply administrative role of neighborhood councils in the city. "Developers *have* to come to us now," one neighborhood councilor proudly remarked: "Our existence is crucial because [otherwise] developers would run rough-shod [over us]." The most important inference here is that, absent neighborhood councils, city officials would naturally ally themselves with developers interested in land-use intensification, as indeed the 9-0 vote suggests, even where other issues (such as democratic process, unintended gentrification, site congestion, design and aesthetics) may be at stake.

Still, while many neighborhood council members felt that the city was difficult to work with, others felt that a once poor relationship had nonetheless improved in recent years. In

looking back to the early years of the councils one activist noted that the city once viewed the councils “as forums for radicals or entities for NIMBYs.” One council member noted, “At first some of the city officials saw us as a threat. But it’s gotten somewhat better in the past few years.” Another echoed that notion in saying, “Three to four years ago there was a lot less involvement with the city. It’s better now.” A third individual said that “early on we had some pretty aggressive confrontations with the city staff. . .but we’ve. . .changed the nature of the bureaucracy.” Another council member agreed that things had evolved for the better, saying that while the councils and the city did not always agree, there is “a good working relationship overall.” Still another felt that City Council members “view neighborhood councils as useful” although at least one councilor felt that “success in working with the city is personality dependent” (referring in this case to the personalities of city council members and city staff rather than the personalities of neighborhood council members).

Beyond the issue of city–neighborhood tensions, neighborhood council members tended to view their roles and activities in a positive light. Nearly all felt they contributed to a sense of cohesion and identity on the part of neighborhood residents. Further, they felt that the projects they support are well defined and in the best interest of the neighborhood and that they have had a positive impact on the city. They generally agreed that the areas they serve are too large to be considered cohesive socio-economic units but also argued that decreasing the area each council served (i.e., increasing the number of councils) would be an expensive change that would dilute the power and resources of the system as now structured. Council members felt that they helped the city define issues and problems; as one person said, “We jumpstart things.” They also feel that the councils play an important role in grooming community leaders in the sense that city politicians who once served on neighborhood councils “remember where [they] came from,” which translates into a greater awareness of neighborhood concerns.

One other issue frequently raised by informants was the official status of neighborhood councils with the urban governmental structure. At present the councils are not-for-profit organizations that operate outside of city government, though as mentioned early formal policy linkages to the city planning staff provide administrative integration. Yet no neighborhood council members expressed interest in being a part of the city in a formal political sense. There is a general feeling that to be given codified power would result in the councils being less effective. One activist noted that, “neighborhood councils do not want to be a part of the city — they *can’t* be a part of the city.” This person went on to make the point that to become part of the city was to become part of the problem since it would eliminate their ability to be adversarial.

Finally, on the question of tenure the majority of councilors conceded that in most councils the same individuals hold office year after year resulting in entrenched power structures which tended to limit participation of local residents and which concentrated power and decision-making in the hands of a few for the long term. However, they tended to blame the situation on apathy or a lack of awareness among neighborhood residents rather than any purposeful consolidation of power by a select group of individuals.

Interviews with City Council members produced a different view of neighborhood councils. In talking with these individuals we found that there was less focus on tensions between the city and neighborhood councils (although that did come through); instead we found greater

skepticism about the structure, workings, and tangible accomplishments of the neighborhood groups.

With respect to the city–neighborhood relationship city councilors were often cynical about or dismissive of the neighborhood councils. For example, one councilor acidly noted, “policy makers use the councils to manufacture consent. You can credit yourself with having done outreach. It’s symbolic and nothing else.” Similarly, another City Council member said, “I work with them on how to work with the city. And I basically just go out and fetch when they throw something to me.” Others tended to view them in a strongly political context. For example, one individual noted that neighborhood councils had become “stepping stones for people who want to get into politics. They’re the place to be in order to run for [higher] office.” However, others were more positive. One councilor found them to be “good forums for discussion.” One other person found himself to be pleasantly surprised with the good working relationship between the city and the councils, noting, “I was skeptical originally. I thought they would be basically negative.” However, another councilor suggested that the relationship was adversarial because of less-than-democratic origins: “There is a dark theory for why they were set up – and that relates to controlling and channeling criticism of the city and I think even today it’s still true.”

City councilors also had strong opinions about the structure of the neighborhood councils and their methods of operation. With respect to the organizational structure City Council members tended to view neighborhood councils as “very hierarchical.” Further, they often saw them operating as “local power structures” open to a limited number of people. For example, in suggesting term limits for neighborhood council officers one City Councilor said, “You get fiefdoms – and it’s not welcoming to new people. Sometimes [the structure] has a chilling effect on new people.” Another person noted that the neighborhood councils “attract a certain kind of person – the same sort of person for longer than I’d care to think. But the danger is that they are just little bureaucracies. . . It’s the same people all the time.” This individual furthermore added that this results in local residents avoiding involvement in council activities simply because of the closed system of operation.

City councilors were equally blunt in their assessment of neighborhood council operations. For example, in talking about the various projects undertaken by the neighborhoods one councilor noted:

I’m not sure all these projects are well thought out – or relate to broader urban [development] issues in the most efficient way. It varies from area to area and regime to regime. Sometimes you get projects for the sake of projects and maybe sometimes they’re used just to build political capital.

Another councilor offered a similar view. “Too often you just sit around for hours and hours – all just procedure. [In reality] a lot of the best projects happen because they have nothing to do with the neighborhood councils. I’ve actually had more success working with project-based groups than with neighborhood councils.”

Other concerns that emerged in interviews included questions/concerns about equity in spending patterns, how to measure the effectiveness of councils, and the need to create greater public awareness of the councils themselves. In addition, a number of City Council members noted that the relationship between city staff members and neighborhood councils needed

improvement. For example, one city councilor noted that the neighborhood councils “are seen as thorns in the side of the staff.” Along with integration with city planning capacities, council–city staff concerns are addressed by a policy that each neighborhood council has a city department head as a liaison. However the degree to which this has improved council–city staff relations remains a question. Some staff members appear to work harder at establishing good relationships with their affiliated councils than others.

Although City Council members had a number of concerns about the neighborhood councils, none suggested that the system should be eliminated. Overall it is viewed as a positive aspect of municipal involvement and civic engagement which would be enhanced with changes to the system. One city councilor seemed to sum up his colleagues views about neighborhood councils by noting, “I don’t want to see them eliminated but I want to shake them up a little.” However, both City Council members and neighborhood councilors expressed negative attitudes toward the Community Council (the 24-member citywide board made up of representatives from each neighborhood council). It is viewed as an ineffective organization that accomplishes little. As one neighborhood councilor noted, “The Community Council is weak. . .they need to be more decisive. As a result, neighborhood councils bypass the Community Council.” Another noted that “the Community Council doesn’t understand its role, it doesn’t make decisions” and a third simply viewed it as “a waste of time.” City Council members echoed these sentiments. For example, one Council member noted that “it is not effective at all” and another simply dismissed it by saying, “I don’t like it.”

## 5. Discussion

Conversations with stakeholders in Tacoma’s neighborhood council system and examination of resource allocation vis-à-vis socio-economic characteristics of council areas suggest that the councils’ ability to effect change or impact policy is still limited. Further, the allocation of resources at the neighborhood level shows little correlation with the needs of council area residents. These policies are what one would expect from the councils as conventional institutions that are by and large segmented from the core of urban politics and bureaucracy. In addition, citizen participation is somewhat stifled given the participatory structure in place and, while they do press municipal authorities in an effort to improve services, there is not an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect which might result in greater cooperation and, hence, an increased ability to effect change.

Further, there is little evidence councils create social capital or that they challenge elite-regime governance to any great degree. Indeed, in some cases the councils foster elite-regime governance by dint of the tenure system that seems endemic to some of the councils. Also, there are no obvious calls to equalize resource allocation by either the councils or the city. If the system is to more fully embrace the politics of more transformative and thus progressive governance systematic changes need to be considered. We identify four institutional features of the present system that occlude movement in this more transformative direction.

- *Tenure of council members.* One issue that was raised repeatedly by city council members and by some neighborhood councilors is the fact that some councils are run by the same

people year after year. Here the concern is that there are limited opportunities for interested residents to participate in the councils in some official capacity (e.g., as elected officers). This results in the perception that the councils themselves are entrenched bureaucracies that have become elite-regimes in their own right. If viewed as “closed systems” with little interest in “inclusionary governance” councils run the risk of being perceived as self-interest groups rather than public-interest groups. This might then affect two important relationships that councils need to maintain. The first of these is their relationship with their constituents. If residents feel that they are not listened to or not truly seen as a part of the system there is the danger that they will tend to view the council system with cynicism and frustration, fostering a culture of non-participation or avoidance and hindering the development of “local” social capital.

The second relationship affected by this is that which exists between the city and the neighborhood councils. If city officials tend to view councils as little more than local fiefdoms there is greater likelihood that they will be dismissive of the councils. To a degree this attitude emerged in the interviews with city councilors whereby they openly used such phrases as “fiefdoms,” “not welcoming,” and “little bureaucracies.” Even with a sometimes adversarial relationship, if there is limited respect for and confidence in the local councils on the part of the city then the impact and influence of neighborhood councils will be limited. To remedy this situation, we argue, the councils should adopt uniform guidelines for the election of officers and broad governance procedures. Term limits (staggered by office to provide continuity) followed by outreach efforts to attract greater citizen participation are two things that would set the stage for the political reconstruction of the system. This would then allow for additional changes with perhaps the most desirable outcome being a common constitution for the system that would smooth over the variations in procedure that exist and provide context for neighborhood/city interactions.

- *Resource allocation by local councils.* As indicated, examination of resource allocation on the part of neighborhood councils reveals no clear patterns, especially as related to the socio-economic characteristics of council districts do not impact spending decisions to any great degree. For example, crime prevention is a low priority regardless of district and well-to-do areas are as likely to undertake blight removal projects as are poorer districts. While this does not necessarily reflect poor decision-making on the part of councils it does raise questions about how decisions are made. Discussions with local councils indicate that, for the most part, resource allocation decisions are reactive rather than proactive. By this we mean that various groups, associations, and organizations typically come hat-in-hand to councils and request funding for one project or another. Individual requests are then acted on. However, there are few policies to guide the decision-making process. Spending plans are not in place, priorities are not identified, and there is no accountability beyond the fact that the city verifies that the spending is for a legitimate purpose. Instead, councils might establish sets of goals and objectives which would allow priorities to be established on an annual basis. Similarly, councils might establish “spending themes” each year. Objectives or themes should evolve from citizen input. Such input might be obtained in a variety of ways. For example, it could be culled from a well-publicized annual meeting/public hearing held by each council at which neighborhood resident’s voice concerns and interests. Another, considerably more radical, model in regard to

this specific issue is the “participatory budgeting” experience pioneered in Porto Alegre, Brazil (Avritzer, 2006).

- *Size of council areas.* The issue of council area size is also complicated. Two factors merit consideration. The first relates to the spatial dimensions of council areas and the second relates to the population in each area. Both are problematic. With respect to both area and population it is easy to argue that the term “neighborhood council” is a misnomer. There are eight councils covering a city of approximately 200,000 people. Thus, each “neighborhood” averages about 25,000 residents and covers a sizable area. In reality, each council encompasses multiple neighborhoods which often share little in common with other neighborhoods in the same district. Thus, the spatial impacts of resource allocation might very well not impact or affect a sizeable portion of the population within a council district. Similarly, the population of each council creates a similar problem in that “neighborhood” numbers range from slightly more than 11,000 residents to nearly 46,000 residents. As previously noted, the economic impacts on a per capita basis are negligible, ranging from \$5.00 per capita to \$20 per capita for the entire 10-year period examined. Again, by this measure most people will not experience the impacts of resource allocations. Thus, the concept of neighborhood and its significance (e.g., cohesion, grassroots, identity, etc.) are lost.

One solution is to reduce the size of councils to something which becomes representative of individual neighborhoods or, more realistically, smaller clusters of neighborhoods. Aside from theoretical arguments about “the local trap,” the practical problem with this, of course, is that funds available on a per-council basis will shrink significantly and the bureaucracy associated with recognition of and communication with councils will expand considerably. However, it might still be possible to insure that council officers represent various sub-districts of each council.

- *Resource allocation by the city.* The issue of equity in resource allocation remains the most serious impediment to moving toward redistributive political space. Equal amounts are given to each council regardless of the socio-economic characteristics or the actual size of the populations served. Equity in this sense generates inequities in other ways. As noted, districts receive widely varying amounts on a per capita basis (Table 3) and low-income, high stress areas tend to fall at the lower end of the funding spectrum. At a minimum, progressive policies would call for equity on a per capita basis. However, we argue for an even more radical approach that allows for redistribution to one degree or another of resources from areas that “have” to areas that “have not.” Under this scenario lower-income districts would receive a greater share of the pie to allow them to better serve the city’s disadvantaged population. Such a redistribution of resource has traditionally been a part of the social-welfare system at various levels in the US. Thus, a reformulation of resource allocation to recognize *socio-economic disparities* would not be a significant departure from procedures practiced at the local, state, and national levels. This might, however, cause discontent in some quarters and perhaps some fracturing of the system currently in place. Clearly the adoption of such an approach carries political risk and would need to be handled delicately. One possible approach would be to *gradually* move toward a redistributive system such that it is achieved through stages or steps over a period of a few years. Coupling this with an increase in funding so that no council sees

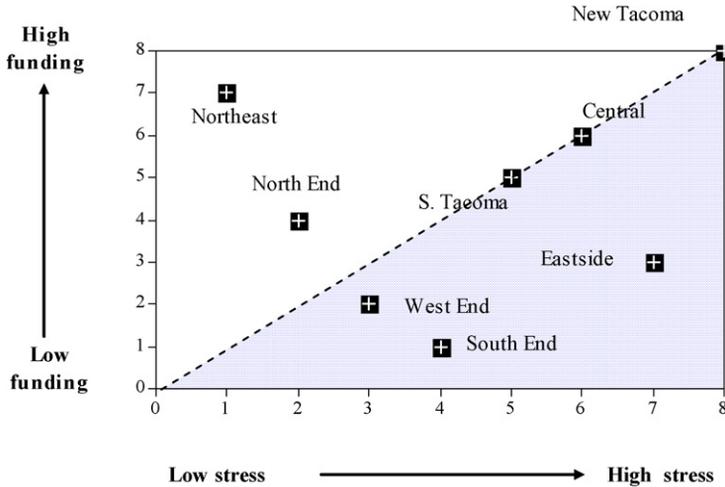


Fig. 3. Normative mapping of councils: funding vs. stress.

current resources diminished would also make the move more palatable to higher-income districts.

## 6. Conclusions

Dominant interpretations of urban politics and service administration in US central cities, in particular those associated with developmental or growth regimes, suggest that most neighborhood councils, however constituted, will likely struggle to escape their “segmented” role in the governance architecture of the city. At the same time, some researchers have identified the institutional possibility of such entities to contribute to a more transformative kind of urban politics, particularly around social equity and place-development issues. In theory, that is, neighborhood councils in US cities could well perform any number of governance roles, from those that simply activate local participation in already decided urban development priorities to those that fundamentally challenge elite-regime policy formulation and implementation.

Our empirical analysis of Tacoma’s neighborhood councils suggests that the system is mostly “segmented”: *it does not fully exhibit the redistributive (equity) policies and place-contingent projects* that one might expect (and for some normatively prefer) from councils performing more transformative functions in the urban polity. Indeed, councils are arguably walled off from core power flows in the city, kept busy with “material side-payments” (Dowding, 2001), and too often dominated by “a knot of local prominent” (Knox, 1984), amongst other problems documented elsewhere in the world. They are not officially part of the city structure; they do not appear to build extensive social capital; projects are not especially place-reflective; and they are serious issues of social representativeness and political tenure. Ultimately, though, the core issue of fiscal equality (everybody gets the same) versus social equity (those with few choices are given more) is perhaps the most concerning feature of the various councils (Fig. 3) and, hence, it may well be the deciding factor in whether or not the council system as a whole

moves steadily toward the transformative policies we associate with a more progressive urban politics.

Can Tacoma move in this direction? Following Fig. 1, the various tensions we also documented, such as those associated with “push back” to what some see as the original “rubberstamp role” for these councils do suggest, in our view, at least latent possibilities for a more progressive politics. In this sense, we wish to engage in a more nuanced reading of these political spaces. At least on some occasions, and particularly in poorer and more disadvantaged areas, the “gloves come off” — and, for example, entirely logical 9-0 votes for traditional growth planning at the municipal level morph into more contentious conversations when they cascade down into the more detailed terrain of neighborhood space. In addition, project-loving city councilors sometimes prefer to “go around” the neighborhood councils, avoiding their “process” culture and often denigrating their institutional (i.e., ironically under-funded) capacity to effect meaningful or “well-thought out” change in urban space.

Single case studies, of course, have many methodological limitations, notwithstanding our effort here to include both quantitative and qualitative data. In conclusion, then, we recognize that the various empirical issues raised in this particular analysis may not be theoretically applicable to neighborhood council systems elsewhere, particularly in the non-American context. We also recognize that other issues not seen in Tacoma may rise to the fore with additional research in other communities. Nevertheless, both the analytical approach and the research findings generate a series of generic questions about the developmental possibilities of “opportunity structures” in urban America vis-à-vis the politico-structural constraints that often limit local political agency.

Chief amongst these more global questions is whether or not — and to what extent — formal political institutions *can* matter in shaping the present and future socio-economic priorities of the central city, particularly in terms of neighborhood growth and change that is more reflective of place-identity and highly uneven socio-economic realities. A generation ago, the US urban political scientists, Fainstein and Fainstein (1982), argued that “while political and economic forces establish a determinism over which planners [and other urban administrators] have relatively limited control, progressive planners [and other professionals] can play important roles in broadening the agenda of local politics so as to facilitate political mobilization of lower income communities.” We agree, and also note as a final point that such an agenda might be served in part by struggling for some of the institutional reforms elaborated in this paper.

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