

The NPA Challenge

BURLINGTON

MAYOR BERNARD SANDERS called it "democracy in action" when Neighborhood Planning Assembly (NPA) representatives met in City Hall to discuss proposals for ground rules, quorums, and representation - and so it was.

"It was a little scary sometimes," said meeting moderator and former City Planner Michael Monte, of the initial heated debate between Republicans, Democrats, Sanders supporters, and

ideological opponents of the neighborhood assemblies.

Even among those working together to establish ground rules for the neighborhood assemblies, it turns out, there are almost as many schools of thought as there are thinkers.

The Ward II delegation to the NPA meeting on June 30 in City Hall was a case in point. Aldermanic representatives Terry Bouricius and Zoe Breiner, both Sanders supporters, sat down with Old Guard Democrats Esther Sorrell and Lorraine Gra-

ham to discuss the makeup of the ward's NPA, advertisement of meetings, and other nuts and bolts.

"There was a lot of suspicion, and there may still be a lot of suspicion," said Bouricius. "But we all sort of got sucked into the excitement in how to get grassroots democracy to work."

"This is potentially very hazardous," reported Sorrell, the former State Senator. "Your power as a citizen is greatly affected by your ability to go to a lot of

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extra meetings...and we have a lot of shut-ins and senior citizens." Absentee ballots enable virtually everyone to vote in aldermanic elections, Sorrell noted, but not in NPA meetings.

Sorrell's fundamental objections to NPAs led, in part, to a Ward II NPA commitment to publicly advertise the meetings with full agendas, and to work closely with Bouricius and Breiner.

The role of Mayor Sanders in the NPAs also came into question.

At the organizational meeting, formally called by Sanders, few in attendance believed the mayor should retain the power to call meetings or set agenda items, as he has done up to now.

"There is no process for the mayor to call an NPA meeting," said Maurice Mahoney, Ward I Democratic Alderman who, joined by Democrats and Sanders supporters on the Board, voted in favor of establishing official NPAs last September.

But the purpose of the assemblies then was purely advisory. Now, thanks to Sanders, each of the city's NPAs has \$15,000 in Community Development money to spend this year - subject to aldermanic approval. Sanders' initial suggestion that the funds might be used for block parties went over like a lead balloon. Giving the NPAs cash has upped the ante for those who would like to see Sanders step back from his role in fostering and organizing the NPAs.

Sanders supporters and longtime community organizers Monte, Joanne Beauchemin, and Bouricius all believe the NPAs can provide a valuable conduit

of citizen participation in directly affecting city government. But each is skeptical of Sanders' position, and think the NPAs should call their own meetings as soon as it proves organizationally feasible.

"I think that the fear of the assemblies becoming political bodies is probably healthy," said Monte.

The NPA representatives will meet in City Hall again July 13, when ground rules for quorums, representation, meeting advertisement and other issues will again be discussed - and perhaps formally acted upon. The question of the relationships between each NPA and its counterparts in other wards should also be on the agenda.

Then there will be the question, for each ward's assembly, of what to do with Sanders' largesse.

"There are a lot of people who laugh" at the \$15,000 per ward allocation, said longtime Lakeside neighborhood organizer Beauchemin; "I'm skeptical." Adequate guarantees must ensure that "somebody doesn't come dancing through the town like the Music Man, take our money, and leave us with nothing."

Beauchemin said after five years working to get neighborhood groups involved in community development projects, and winning citizen control over Community Development monies, the critical issue now is getting broad-based citizen involvement.

"The thing we have to be very careful of is not to get polarized, to reflect the 'real people' of the ward...not the Joanne Beauchemins."