

Will Assemblies Bring Power to the People?

BURLINGTON

BOTH THE MAYOR'S OFFICE and the City Planning Commission are taking credit for the development of Neighborhood Planning Assemblies. But whoever is responsible, it is an ambitious attempt to build "a structure that allows more direct citizen decision making in the government," says an enthusiastic Michael Monte, a staff member in the Burlington Planning Department.

The assemblies will begin forming in each ward during the next four weeks. Initially, their task will be to decide how they want to divide up \$700,000 in Community Development Block Grant money. Assembly Representatives will then attend meetings of the Planning Commission's community development committee to present and explain ward recommendations.

In Wards 2 and 3 the process will go even further; assemblies there will also elect three board members to run a Housing Rehabilitation Loan Program, deciding how to distribute low interest loans. Monte says these board members will have "the final say and full power as awarded by the Planning Commission."

Although this is a first step toward the creation of an expanded role for citizens in policy making, assembly representatives will have no voting power at community development committee meetings, and as a result,

some people are wary. "It sounds like a waste of time then," said an embittered Theresa Ringuette, when she heard representatives would have no voting rights. Ringuette, a member of the Lakeside Neighborhood Group, added, "I've seen citizens groups do a lot of work on things like the Southern Connector and have the city turn around and totally disregard their recommendations."

Joann Beauchemin, another Lakeside activist, believes, "From the description it's a step forward. The fact that it's not voting is very limited. I would call my position cautiously positive."

Ann Isely, a member of One Voice in the North End, is more trusting. "I'd like to see people get involved and hopefully it will become easier to influence City Hall. Overall, I'm positive and don't see it interfering with our work at One Voice."

Although the Planning Commission expects to use the assemblies primarily to help allocate grant funds and administer the Housing Rehabilitation Loan Project, Alderman Terry Bouricius has a more ambitious vision. "Our hope is to see the neighborhood assemblies wanting to take on greater and greater responsibilities and being given that. I see them as becoming the equivalent to town meetings... where citizens talk face to face and have power over city plans, budgets, traffic, pollution. The potential is not limited."

- Gail Hudson