

Like neighborhoods, business groups seek influence with city

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Networking — making beneficial social contacts — is a term familiar to business groups. Yet when it comes to being heard by city government, neighborhood associations have an inside track.

About 30 business associations and districts dot the Portland map. Although many have existed longer than their respective neighborhood groups, the feeling is that the neighborhood groups may have more clout.

"There hasn't been a direct voice into the city for business in a long time," said Grover Sparkman, president of the Foster Area Business Association. "We as a group want to try to have an impact."

The Foster Area Business Association is a rejuvenation of the Foster Boosters, which began before neighborhood associations existed, Sparkman explained.

"We like to work with" neighborhood groups, "but I think in many ways they're diametrically opposed when it comes to expansion of business," he added.

One example was the attempt of Geo. A. Morlan Plumbing Co. to build a warehouse on land it had purchased over the years behind its retail shop at 5529 S.E. Foster Road.

The building construction required a zone change, and the neighborhood association was not supportive, Sparkman said. Morlan ended up building the new facility, employing 35 persons, in Tigard.

Typically, neighborhood associations are not for business development, Sparkman said. "They either see more traffic, more noise or a threat to livability," he said. "In many cases it may be well founded. They're looking at it from a different angle than businesses."

John M. DePasquale, president of the St. Johns Boosters, agreed with Sparkman that business districts and neighborhood groups may not always agree on issues, and it seems that the neighborhood associations have a better communication system with city government.

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"I think the neighborhood associations have a formal network of representation with the city," DePasquale said. "I don't think we'd actively take on an issue that was totally opposed by the neighborhood association."

The neighborhood groups, in fact, do have a direct link with city government through the Portland Office of Neighborhood Associations. If a group wants to form a neighborhood association or find out how to get a grant to improve an area, it can contact the office and get help. Such help currently does not exist for business groups.

The Office of Neighborhood Associations also sends out notices of land-use decisions and provides other information, technical assistance and support for group activities. The business districts also receive notification about land-use actions through the same office, but there is no place for them to go for technical assistance and support.

"For years and years, the PDC (Portland Development Commission) and city have recognized the value of business districts ... but there never has been a consistent Program," said Ann Gardner, business assistance manager in the commission's economic development department.

Most business districts got started as a way to promote themselves and improve their areas. But through the years, the districts also have taken on an advocacy role to increase business development and bring prosperity to otherwise struggling areas.

The Hollywood Boosters as a

business organization over the years has brought new businesses into the area, gained an off-ramp from Interstate 84 and got a Housing Authority of Portland building located in the area, said Paul Clark, a past president and current business district liaison officer.

Business districts have expressed a desire for city assistance, but continuing funding for such a program has been a problem, Gardner said.

Several years ago, the development commission had money to help businesses get organized and develop, she noted. But after two years, she added, budget cuts ended the program, and now business districts must fend for themselves; many exist on donations and dues.

Sparkman and DePasquale say business districts currently are missing a liaison with city government, and they are only as effective as a bunch of individuals banded together.

There is no central information bank for the groups, so when they want to do a project they're on their own.

For instance, St. Johns used a community development block grant to redesign the central business area to include park benches, flowering cherry trees to create a boulevard effect on North Lombard, DePasquale said.

However, now that the trees have been growing for 10 or 12 years, their roots are cracking sidewalks and clogging drainage systems, he added.

If the city had some type of information system or central guidelines for business districts planning such renovations, these problems may not have occurred, DePasquale said.

"I have to agree that it certainly was a program that had a lot of value," Gardner said of the development commission's business program. "We still talk about it here internally as something we miss."

The question is will such a program appear again in the near future?

"If that was something that City Council wanted to see happen, and if funding was available, then we would do it," Gardner said.