

Grass Roots Democracy in Vermont: The Birth of Burlington's Neighborhood Assemblies

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Featured image: Graphic: March 1981 City Council Campaign flyer

Burlington's Neighborhood Planning Assemblies are back in the local spotlight, and likely to be a contentious issue in the 2018 race for mayor of Vermont's largest city this March.

Last Fall, an “assembly of the assemblies” demanded a formal role in deciding the future of Memorial Auditorium, a major local venue for 90 years. Since then, Infinite Culcleasure, one of two Independents challenging Mayor Miro Weinberger, has announced that “more public investment should be made to strengthen existing neighborhood assemblies.” And Progressive-backed Independent Carina Driscoll says,

“We need to empower our Neighborhood Planning Assemblies so that they may again be actively involved with public engagement, city planning and prioritizing city resources.”

NPAs, as they have become known over the years, officially became part of Burlington city government in the summer of 1983. The idea had been percolating for a while and didn't become reality without some struggle, then and afterward. But during an “assembly of the assemblies” at City Hall in late June that year, about 100 people successfully discussed and largely agreed on basics like how often to meet, the rules for making decisions, and whether NPAs should operate exclusively on a ward level.

These volunteer founders had gathered, in ward groups, then as a committee of the whole, to hammer out long-delayed bylaws. It was a rare moment. People from competing political factions were sitting face-to-face, conversing civilly with neighbors. Surprisingly, there were few serious disputes, and more areas of agreement than expected.

Pressure to create neighborhood assemblies had been building for years. In 1976, while I was the city's Youth Coordinator, they were proposed as a way to coordinate social services. In 1981, neighborhood power was part of the Citizens Party platform and became an issue in the elections that gave Bernie Sanders his first victory. The top issue in my own City Council campaign was neighborhood participation in city planning, specifically “formal review of grants and the municipal development plan by neighborhood groups.”

Shortly after Bernie's election as mayor, a conference of independent local groups proposed that neighborhood assemblies be formally established within local government.



Decades after they became part of local government, NPAs continued to host forums for mayoral candidates, including the author, in 2015.

Bylaws were supposed to be drafted during planning sessions that began in early 1982. But debates over priorities for community development funds, not to mention political infighting and campaign fever, pushed the process back. Lack of coordinators or established procedures also didn't help, making it difficult for neighborhoods to call their own meetings. Meanwhile, both the Planning Commission and Mayor's Office convened selected NPAs to act as sounding boards for issues on their agendas.

Haggling between the Old Guard-dominated Planning Commission and newly created Community and Economic Development Office (CEDO) further complicated the process. In Spring 1983 the Planning Commission, still dominated by allies of the previous administration, put forward a structure proposal that would restrict NPAs to quarterly meetings and keep them under firm control. But CEDO, initially developed as a means to divert funds and power from the Commission, also succeeded in assuming responsibility for coordination of NPA activities. By then several had already begun to set their own agendas, pass motions, and provide advice on city projects. Now they would have \$15,000 each to use or invest in neighborhood improvement projects.

Just two years earlier, Vermont's largest city basically had a one-party political system controlled by a Democratic clan with a small group of developers and merchants. Now it was in the midst of a social and political realignment. An independent socialist mayor was in his second term and the City Council operated with a fragile three-party balance of power.

The new political environment had sparked a renaissance in public participation, which in turn was producing programs for youth, women and the elderly. About 50 percent more people had voted in the recent local elections than had turned out just two years earlier, and Mayor Sanders received 52 percent in a three-way race. Meanwhile, dozens of Town Meetings across Vermont adopted resolutions to freeze nuclear weapons, legislate peace conversion, cut off aid to El Salvador, and regulate nuclear waste shipments. To date, 184 of the state's 245 towns had gone on record to freeze nuclear proliferation.

In Burlington, independent neighborhood groups that focused on issues from road-building to crime and housing conditions had already changed the relationship between local citizens and their representatives. Now the question was whether these self-organized vehicles of popular power would or should become a formal part of the city planning process.

Some who attended the founding congress were suspicious about an apparent lack of publicity prior to the event. But two pro-Assembly City Councilors in the room — Maurice Mahoney, a Ward 1 Democrat, and Terry Bouricius, a Ward 2 Sanders ally and Citizens Party member of the City Council — offered assurances that the Council was eager to see these “mainly advisory” bodies operate “efficiently.” Anarchist thinker Murray Bookchin also attended. He was skeptical, but wrote a draft preamble for the bylaws that was adopted with few changes.

Working in Ward subgroups, participants in the assembly congress made preliminary decisions that day about who could participate (any voter registered in the ward), how often they would meet, and what constituted a quorum. Agreement also emerged that NPAs should set their own agendas, but remain responsive to mayoral or council requests, and that their purview could stretch from down-to-earth projects like tree planting to review of Master Plan revisions.

Many things remained undefined and unclear at this point. But the experience of working together for a day, determining how they would function, tended to convince most people who attended that NPAs would at least not be easy for any one faction to manipulate. In fact, when newly elected Assembly coordinators sat around the Council’s horseshoe table to deliver status reports at the end of the evening, some in the audience publicly speculated, hoped or feared that it might evolve into a second City Council.

The list of coordinators read like a roster of upcoming local leaders. Judy Stephany had been the Democrat’s candidate for mayor the previous March. Two other coordinators were recent City Council candidates. And Tim McKenzie, who had run for the state legislature, currently headed Sanders’ Progressive Coalition.

The plan was to have these coordinators meet to follow up on their wards’ proposals, then convene the assemblies again to ratify the final document. Once that was done, NPAs would operate with relative independence, guiding community developments and responding to official requests.

Despite the cooperative atmosphere in which NPAs were born, there were obvious lingering questions and reasonable concerns. In the long term, for instance, would they be representative, or become tools for outside interests to engineer consent? What would happen to attendance as time passed? And if they proved effective, would their powers expand?

Mayor Sanders certainly had doubts. Specifically, he was hesitant to empower groups that might not have a progressive character or could be overtaken by opponents. Others on the left, notably Bookchin, wondered instead whether they would evolve as proactive, popular organs or become institutionalized and reactive.

The Sanders administration ultimately decided to embrace the NPAs, offering money and a limited decision-making role. Basically, it gave them some room to grow. But their status, advisory bodies operating under the auspices of a city office, meant that much of their time and energy would be spent evaluating proposals from the administration and large local institutions.

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