

Dear Councilman Farokhi,

I am writing to express the strong opposition of the Inman Park Neighborhood Association to proposed ordinance 20-O-1003, which was introduced by Councilman Antonio Brown to reform the Neighborhood Planning Unit (NPU) system. Far from a reform, this ordinance would eviscerate the NPU system, with particularly devastating impact on those NPU, such as our NPU-N, that have adopted a representative board format. Our more detailed, section-by-section critique follows:

COMMENTS ON PROPOSED ORDINANCE 20-O-1003

The introductory “Whereas” paragraphs presuppose a city-wide problem with dysfunctional NPUs. There are, no doubt, dysfunctional NPUs, particularly in areas lacking in organized stable community groups; such NPUs, having taken upon themselves the role of a community organization, may be operating in a manner deemed inappropriate by the planning department.

This ordinance attempts to solve this problem of dysfunctional NPUs by imposing constraints and restrictions which, while possibly solving the problem, will undermine the operation of the majority of NPUs, threatening the very system created to assist neighborhoods in having input in city matters.

The effectiveness of an NPU cannot be judged by the number of people who, in person, attend any given NPU meeting. For many NPUs, representatives attend the NPU meetings on behalf of constituencies, such as neighborhood organizations. The goal should not be to increase “membership” in an NPU (as if it were itself a neighborhood organization); the goal should be to insure that the voice of organizations and individuals within a community are funneled, through the NPU mechanism, into the appropriate departments of the City of Atlanta.

NPUs do not replace neighborhood organizations but should be the conduits by which neighborhoods are heard. That is why they are called Neighborhood Planning Units.

Sec. 6-3012. – Definitions

This entire section (generally unchanged by the ordinance) needs review as some provisions are confusing and others appear to defeat the purpose of having NPUs. The definition of “Resident” for example, includes individuals who live in the geographic area and “any corporation, organization, institution or agency which owns property or has a place of business or profession within the NPU.” Under this definition, any individual or business can be considered a resident of the NPU but a neighborhood organization of any kind cannot be considered a resident unless they own property or operate a business. This may affect neighborhoods voting rights at NPU meeting [see Sec. 6-3018(b)].

Sec. 6-3016. – Bylaws

Major amendments to this Section will tend to eliminate all local autonomy in determining how any given NPU will operate. Each NPU will have to conform to a single planning department dictated template for bylaws. As to variations from the dictated form, the planning department “shall review, revise, and approve bylaws . . .” (emphasis added). There is a risk that bylaws will no longer be the product of the community, developed at the local level or according to neighborhood or community wishes.

Sec. 6-3017. – Elections

The amendments to this Section turn neighborhood volunteers into unpaid elected officials of the City of Atlanta. The planning department is authorized to conduct elections and, as with other city elections, “NPU officer elections must be administered and certified by the municipal clerk.”

Election contests will be investigated by the planning department and any party may appeal results to the Superior Court of Fulton County.

Sec. 6-3018. – Voting procedures

The establishment of voting procedures is taken away from Neighborhood Planning Units; they will be determined by the planning department as part of the bylaws approval process.

Existing subsection (b) provides that: “Each resident as defined in section 6-3012(3) shall represent one vote and may hold office in only one NPU.” Since “resident” may exclude many neighborhood organizations, this could exclude a neighborhood from voting in a Neighborhood Planning Unit.

Sec. 6-3019. – NPU boards and membership

This is an entirely new section and dictates that all NPUs should have “boards” consisting of certain named officers “and one designee from each registered neighborhood association (with monthly public meetings) within the NPU boundaries.” While it may be good to require that organized neighborhoods be part of the leadership of NPUs, there is no definition of “registered neighborhood association” and it is unclear under this section whether the neighborhood designees could serve as officers.

Subsection (b) limits “residents” from serving on an NPU board for more than three years and from serving in any one position for more than two years. Annual conflict resolution training and training on parliamentary procedure are required for those who serve; the planning department can remove from office any board member who does not comply.

Sec. 6-3020. – NPU operations

This is a new section that makes NPUs part of city operations. NPUs will have access to city facilities to hold meetings. The city shall designate an NPU coordinator and staff to

attend all monthly NPU meetings. All NPU information (including meeting notices, agendas, and minutes) will be on city website.

Sec. 6-3021. – Prohibitions

This section replaces old Section 6-3019 (which prohibited using the NPU for political forums or campaigning) and adds a prohibition “from establishing accounts with financial institutions.”