

5. Create an Office of Resident Engagement and Neighborhood Support (“ORENS”) to support BCC system staffing, training, and resident engagement.

The Task Force noted the critical need for the BCC system to improve resident engagement and participation. Accordingly, the Task Force recommends that the City create ORENS, a separate department within the City that would be responsible for, among other things, staffing, training, minutes/reporting for BCC meetings and for engaging residents on key issues coming before the City’s BCCs.

In considering such an office, the Task Force considered a more specific proposal that described the ORENS function. In discussing this option, the Task Force recognized that creating such a department would be a significant undertaking and require a considerable financial commitment. Nevertheless, the Task Force believes the importance of dedicating City staff and resources to resident engagement and participation justifies including this important recommendation in its Final Report.

This recommendation is rooted in a recurring theme that the City needs to improve representation on and engagement with the Common Council and the City’s BCCs. The Task Force identified many barriers to representation and engagement, including:

- Times and places of City meetings;
- Requirements for in-person participation;
- Lack of childcare and adequate transportation;
- Inadequate training and support for BCC members;
- Uneven level of staff support and resources for BCCs;
- Lack of a clear BCC purpose;
- Lack of general civic education;
- Heavy workload of alders; and
- Historical housing patterns and current landlord practices that result in high mobility of people earning low incomes, many of whom are people of color and single-parents.

ORENS seeks to address these and other concerns in a department that would be jointly supervised by the Mayor and Common Council Executive Committee. This new structure of shared responsibility would be an innovation in City government that would, among other things, assist in the recruitment of a more diverse BCC structure, train BCC members and staff, provide administrative support to BCCs, and organize and facilitate neighborhood meetings.

The Task Force recognizes that staff throughout the City perform some of these functions for individual departments. It would not be the Task Force’s intent to remove these individuals from their departments, but to supplement, in a major and significant way, the work that they do.

6. Immediately create an Administrative Services Team to support the BCC system and improve resident engagement.

While the City works toward establishing ORENS, the Task Force recommends immediately creating an Administrative Services Team consisting of staff from the offices of the Council, Mayor, Human Resources, and City Clerk who are already involved with BCC support. This Administrative Services Team should be housed in the Council Office and be charged with working on the issues listed above for which ORENS would ultimately be responsible. The Team should also be charged with developing systems for BCCs to use for resident participation in decision making and ensuring that prompt and direct feedback is given to issues about which residents have expressed interest.