



December 1, 2020

Mayor Wheeler  
Commissioner Eudaly  
Commissioner Fritz  
Commissioner Hardesty  
Commissioner Ryan  
Auditor Caballero

**RE:** Southwest Neighborhoods, Inc. (SWNI) Response to Marsh Minick Audit  
SWNI Equity & Inclusion Programs & Policies 2015-2020

**Dear Mayor Wheeler, Auditor Caballero, and Commissioners:**

The Office of Civic Life's audit of SWNI conducted by the Marsh Minick, P.C. firm includes a 7-page section on SWNI's "Equity Policy and Practices" that grossly misrepresents SWNI's demonstrated commitment to ensuring diversity, equity, and inclusion in its programs and policies over a five-year period beginning in 2015.

### **SWNI's Demonstrated Commitment to Ensuring Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

The Marsh Minick audit omits the critical content that SWNI's equity work was described in its Grant Agreements with the city of Portland Office of Civic Life and detailed in its regularly submitted program reports. Reports to Civic Life were also submitted for SWNI's Small Grant program, in which SWNI formed vital community partnerships and provided needed funding to community-based organizations in SW Portland. There is no record of the Office of Civic Life (formerly known as ONI) questioning any of SWNI's reports that detailed its work or partnerships to further equity and inclusion.

The audit condemns the SWNI Board of Directors for a "lack of integrity and ethical values" for a delay in implementing its Equity and Inclusion Policy, but this biased analysis is uninformed, and intentionally damaging. SWNI's equity commitment extends back to 2015.

The "delay in implementing its Equity Policy" mentioned extensively in the audit didn't hamper SWNI's equity practices. The audit wrongly labels the Grant Agreement amendments FY 18-19 as "compulsory inclusion goals" and commingles this with SWNI's Racial Equity Policy. Grant Agreements are based on contract performance and SWNI submits reports to the city of Portland detailing performance against contract. The city monitors and evaluates performance, factoring this information in future contract award decisions. The city's Grant Agreement terms can be changed each contracting cycle depending on the city's goals/purpose for the funding. This contract award process was separate from SWNI's organizational development of its internal Racial Equity Policy.

## **Equity & Inclusion (E & I) Committee Created in 2015**

SWNI staff and volunteers attended an Intertwine Alliance workshop series in 2015 to learn about how local government and nonprofit organizations could work together to create more inclusive park and nature experiences for under-represented communities. The work of the Coalition of Communities of Color was a centerpiece of the training and provided a framework for community organizations to achieve the goals of equality of opportunity, fairness in access, and resources for all. The SWNI staff and volunteers agreed that this work could be transformative in bringing a greater diversity of community voices and involvement to SWNI's community work.

SWNI's Board of Directors recognized that it would need a new committee to work within its existing committee structure – Parks, Transportation, Watershed, Public Safety, Land Use, Schools – to bring a strong organizational focus on equity and inclusion issues. So, SWNI formed the Equity & Inclusion Committee as a "Special Committee" per its bylaws in 2015. The new E & I Committee invited participation from SWNI's seventeen neighborhood associations, three business associations, and community advocates.

In addition to creating the E & I Committee, SWNI revised its hiring practices to place greater emphasis on recruitment of diverse candidates for employment who had demonstrated experience in working with under-represented populations.

## **Equity & Inclusion Committee Programs**

The E & I Committee began to meet monthly in 2015 and developed Action Plans in accordance with SWNI's bylaws' requirements for all committees. The committee's work was reported in SWNI's 6-month and Year-End reports to the Office of Neighborhoods/Office of Civic Life during the past four years. [See "*Grant Reports to Civic Life*" at [swni.org](http://swni.org)] The Equity & Inclusion Committee also began to develop partnerships with community-based organizations, including AYCO, NAYA's All Nations Canoe Family, and Portlanders United Against Hate.

The E & I Committee also initiated a series of educational programs on topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In 2018, Laura Foster, a local Portland author, was invited to conduct a workshop on storytelling to build a shared sense of community. The attendance included representatives of neighborhood associations and diverse community organizations in SW Portland. During 2019-20, SWNI sponsored educational events through the Oregon Humanities' Oregon Conversations Project. Six Oregon Conversations events were held that focused on issues of race, place, and civic life, which SWNI felt were most important in its work to build diverse community engagement with city of Portland programs and services. The conversations were open to all in the community and had an estimated attendance of over 150 participants.

## **Equity & Inclusion Committee Policy Development**

SWNI's policy and planning work has supported the city of Portland bureau planning initiatives as well. A SWNI staff member serves on the SW Corridor Equity Coalition. In July 2019, SWNI partnered with the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability to host a community screening and discussion forum on the film "Priced Out," which highlights gentrification issues in Portland.

The Equity & Inclusion Committee conducted work on the Equity & Inclusion Policy beginning in 2016. The E & I Committee's development of the policy brought forward a variety of views and perspectives, including whether to focus on all under-represented communities or focus on a particular, impacted group. The policy was developed with an emphasis on race and ethnicity reflecting Portland's long history of racial and ethnic discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations, which has unfairly impacted people of color for decades.

The SWNI Board of Directors adopted the Racial Equity Policy in September 2019. The SWNI Board Retreat planned for May 2020 was going to focus on implementation of the Equity & Inclusion policy, but the Board Retreat was cancelled because of the COVID-19 crisis.

## **Equity & Inclusion Committee Training Proposal**

After the SWNI Board of Directors adopted the Racial Equity Policy in September 2019, the Equity & Inclusion Committee discussed increasing SWNI Board members' understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion through education and training. An E & I subcommittee was approved to work on a training proposal. Unfortunately, what should have been an effort to build a draft training outline to be approved by the E & I Committee, expanded into an informal contracting process. This mis-guided, informal contracting process did not follow SWNI's established process for Finance or Executive Committee review/recommendation before there was an attempt to present it to the SWNI Board.

The "dysfunction" described in the Marsh Minick audit was largely due to two individual SWNI Board members who initiated the informal bid process and built their advocacy for the process on a foundation of bullying, lies, and verbal attacks on others. This effort skirted SWNI's formal fiscal policies and placed stress on the organization. A special meeting of the Board was conducted on October 15, 2019 to discuss and deliberate about the training proposal. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Chair of the Equity & Inclusion Committee withdraw the proposal to conduct further work on it at the committee level.

The SWNI Board has indicated an interest in training during the ensuing months, but the COVID-19 crisis has pushed other Board concerns to the forefront. There has been discussion about focusing on implementation of the Racial Equity Policy at the planned Spring 2021 Board Retreat.

## Statements in Support of SWNI and its Equity & Inclusion Initiatives

SWNI's Equity & Inclusion Committee has engaged many SW Portland community members in its five-year history. Personal statements in support of SWNI's initiatives on equity and inclusion follow:

**First Comment:** "One reason SWNI and Equity are so important to me is that I am a 68-year-old gay man. I have not always felt accepted in my life. However, this has absolutely never been the case at SWNI. My sexual orientation has never been an issue at any SWNI activity and I think I have put in thousands of hours of volunteer time with SWNI in the past 25-30 years. When my partner of 25 years died it was very rough for me. But I got tremendous support from SWNI and my Neighborhood Association. People from both organizations came to the memorial. It tremendously helped me in my grief to have a place of acceptance where I could spend meaningful volunteer time. "

**Second Comment:** "When I participated in Equity & Inclusion Committee meetings, I was encouraged by seeing a diverse group of individuals around the table each month. We each brought a different perspective, but kept a central focus on the work to improve community conditions in SW Portland, especially for under-represented populations. SWNI's E & I Committee works to bring more community voices to the issues that impact our neighborhoods."

**Third Comment:** "Southwest Portland is richly diverse. Families of all types and sizes gather here, find community and enrich each other's lives. When times of need show up, residents can look to the website SWNI maintains or call a staff member to find quality referrals. Current events are regularly reported on because all seventeen neighborhood associations submit articles to the SWNI monthly newsletter made available free of charge, both online and in print. Many neighborhood groups take advantage of SWNI's community calendaring tool to make Portland more livable, SWNI makes it easy for neighbors to initiate locally driven projects, such as setting up outdoor work parties or holding discussions that serve the public interest.

Let us not minimize how profound it is to gain a new perspective. For many of us who opened our ears at a neighborhood meeting, we had our hearts opened as well. With minimal staff and mostly volunteers, SWNI moves mountains to make those meetings happen. As a result, elected officials, community-based advocates, and subject matter experts have the privilege of hearing directly from the people they hope to serve. It is no secret that we are striving to create a Portland where you can walk with kings and still not lose your common touch.

After forty years of community collaboration, SW Portland residents know that SWNI can provide support when questions about livability or land use arise. We know that our neighborhood associations prioritize people above property values. We know that our neighborhood coalition upholds the values of people who feel love and attachment to the Westside.

The volunteer ranks of this coalition and the associations under its umbrella, are filled with passionate volunteers sharing their talents and time at a local level because we are being the change we want to see in this world. Naturally, we will have conflict because of our diversity and we choose to press in, not give in. Our community has invested blood, sweat and tears to create a cooperative, not competitive, environment. In that spirit, we reach out and help that neighbor in need even if it causes personal sacrifice. Our resilience as a community is worth the effort, the hassle, the cost.

We sincerely hope those in power will use their position to provide financial and technical help to SWNI during this difficult season. It is our hope that the decision makers will ultimately and unabashedly support neighbors helping neighbors. Every day funding is withheld from a neighborhood coalition, members of the community are doing less gathering, less engaging, and less growing to their full potential. We certainly need money to deliver services, but we also need words of encouragement to share with all the volunteers who have given of themselves asking nothing in return. It is because of them we are here, we are intentional and we are SWNI.”

We have submitted this letter as a counterpoint to the misinformation on SWNI’s equity and inclusion programs and policies contained in the Marsh Minick, P.C. forensic audit report. SWNI’s actual record on these matters deserves consideration. We request an opportunity to respond to the audit and elaborate on the content discussed above.

Sincerely,

SWNI Board of Directors Officers  
Leslie Hammond, President  
Steve Mullinax, First Vice President  
Sam Pearson, Second Vice President  
Janet Hawkins, Secretary  
Teddy Okonokhua, Treasurer  
Sylvia Bogert, Executive Director