

BUILDING THE CIVIC SQUARE FOR NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS AS SITES OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

While there is research on neighborhood councils and civic participation systems, there is less understanding of other types of neighborhood-representing organizations that do not have institutionalized roles in city government yet contribute to local governance. Neighborhood-representing organizations or neighborhood associations improve public participation, mobilize citizens, and increase civic responsiveness as a critical element of civil society. Thus, given the deepening crisis of democracy it is problematic that there is not more empirical attention to building the civic square for neighborhood associations as sites of local governance. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand neighborhood association perceptions of how to strengthen their roles in local governance. The following three thematic areas emerged from interviews with study participants from 34 neighborhood associations within a municipality that is part of Los Angeles County, California, United States: (a) develop neighborhood association networks, (b) pursue municipal investment and civic collaboration, and (c) institutionalize the civic role of neighborhood associations. This article contributes to scholarship that seeks to understand a wider range of neighborhood association types and strategies for strengthening civil society and advancing the democratization of local governance.

Keywords: neighborhood associations, local governance, civil society

Funding Details: This research was supported by a grant through the College of Health and Human Services at California State University, Long Beach

“I am inclined to believe that the heart and final guarantee of democracy is in free gatherings of neighbors on the street corner to discuss back and forth what is read in uncensored news of the day, and in gatherings of friends in the living rooms of houses and apartments to converse freely with one another.” (Dewey [1939] 2008, p. 342)

Early in the twentieth century, John Dewey offered a tool for building the civic square whereby democratic practice consists of citizens working together as the “embodiment of community itself” (Dewey [1927] 2016, p. 149). As Dewey ([1927] 2016, p. 148) explains: “Democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself.” Thus, the neighborhood is centered at the heart of civil society and democratic governance. While there is empirical research on neighborhood councils that are part of civic participation systems, there is less of an understanding of other types of neighborhood-representing organizations that do not have institutionalized roles with city government. Neighborhood-representing organizations or neighborhood associations represent geographically defined communities (Downs, 1981) and contribute to civil society by educating and mobilizing community members, fostering civic engagement and representing constituents, and advocating for improved policy outcomes (Hur & Bollinger, 2015; Mathews, 2021; Mesch & Schwirian, 1996). Given the deepening crisis of democracy, it is problematic that there is not more empirical attention to building the civic square through a broader range of neighborhood associations. The benefits of such attention would advance an understanding of how to build the civic square for neighborhood associations as “sites for the constitution of citizens” (Clemens 2006, p. 216) to advance the democratization of local governance.

Since Dewey's time, scholarly discussions have centered around several perspectives with regard to the role of neighborhood associations in local governance. Proponents of neighborhood associations argue for both the civic and democratic advantages of neighborhood governance (Pateman, 1970; Putnam, 2000) while critics point to evidence of parochialism and elite dominance within neighborhood associations (Dear, 1992; Purcell, 2006). Specifically, neighborhood associations are found to predominantly consist of older, non-Hispanic White, and relatively wealthy single-family homeowners (Guo & Musso, 2007; Weare et al., 2009), which exacerbates inequities of municipal resource allocation (Cnaan, 1991; Jun & Musso, 2013). Scholarship also highlights vulnerabilities in neighborhood governance regarding to what extent neighborhood associations resolve competing constituent interests and represent citizen preferences to municipalities (Cnaan, 1991). With competition for municipal resources and local fragmentation as a result of economic segregation, neighborhood associations are thus constrained as sites of local governance (Martin & Holloway, 2005).

Despite these inhibiting factors for neighborhood governance, research points to the success of political reforms to institutionalize the roles of neighborhood associations in city government and improve the democratization of local governance (Berry et al., 2002; Jun & Musso, 2013; Kathi & Cooper, 2005). More recently, Collins and Medrano (2022) contribute a perspective of neighborhood associations as sites of local governance whereby formalized civic participation systems are a locus for coalition-building, political influence, and policy advocacy. The purpose of this qualitative case study, therefore, was to understand neighborhood associations, which are not institutionalized as part of civic participation systems, and their perceptions of how to strengthen their

roles in local governance. The research findings contribute a qualitative perspective to community-engaged scholarship to advance a greater understanding of a broader range of neighborhood associations as sites of local governance. This article begins with a review of literature relevant to neighborhood association roles and specific organizational types are used throughout this review to accurately reflect scholarship on neighborhood governance. A description of the municipal context, study participants, and research methods is followed by the interview findings with participant quotes to illustrate the core themes. Lastly, a discussion of the findings includes recommendations to strengthen neighborhood associations and their civic roles.

NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION ROLES IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

A close examination of literature reveals that the majority of research is focused on neighborhood councils that are part of civic participation systems such as those located in Los Angeles (California), St. Paul (Minnesota), and Portland (Oregon). To date, there are only three studies focused on neighborhood associations that are not institutionalized as part of civic participation systems yet are neighborhood-representing organizations similar to neighborhood councils (Hur & Bollinger, 2015; Mathews, 2021; Mesch & Schwirian, 1996). The institutional and organizational fields of neighborhood councils are situated within specific municipal contexts, yet it is important to understand this scholarship to inform research on neighborhood associations. Literature on neighborhood councils can inform strategies to similarly strengthen the neighborhood associations that do not yet have institutionalized roles in local governance through civic participation systems.

Scholarship on neighborhood associations and local governance is primarily focused on constituent representation, civic engagement effectiveness, and their intermediary roles between citizens and cities. For example, neighborhood organizations mediate between community constituents and cities (Chaskin & Greenberg, 2015; Marwell, 2004; Musso et al., 2011) by facilitating civic engagement, disseminating municipal information, organizing public deliberation, and developing social connections and shared values (Harris & Milofsky, 2019; Musso et al., 2007). Neighborhood organizations also provide parallel or complementary services, establish alternative programs and activities, integrate with municipal processes through citizen participation systems, and advocate for and influence policy outcomes (Chaskin & Garg, 1997). Their strategies for mobilizing constituents serve as a mechanism for government control to enhance political accountability (Musso et al., 2006). However, neighborhood councils also display institutionally influenced consensus due to ongoing relationships with city administrators and elected officials (Dierwechter & Coffey, 2010; Hur & Bollinger, 2014; Matejczyk, 2001). Research finds that neighborhood councils within civic participation systems contribute to local governance to a greater extent compared to neighborhood associations that are not formally recognized and institutionalized as part of municipal processes (Lelieveldt et al., 2009).

Municipalities that institutionalize civic participation systems actualize greater citizen involvement in local governance (Musso, 1999; Mathews, 2019) and, overall, civic political support is critical to effectively increase public participation in city government (Bryer, 2009; Bryer & Cooper, 2007; Silverman, 2003). Yet, research finds that neighborhoods with less affluent residents are allocated fewer civic resources compared to more affluent communities, which results in greater public service

inequities (Musso, 1999). Neighborhood associations, therefore, are susceptible to political support and the establishment of civic participation systems can improve administrative responsiveness and political capital (Bryer, 2009; Bryer & Cooper, 2007). Neighborhood associations also mediate relationships between city administrators and community constituents (Custers & Engbersen, 2022) resulting in conflict, which is seen as inevitable and appropriate for improved governmental accountability (Dierwechter & Coffey, 2010; Paxton, 2002). By contrast, community residents delineate preferences for neighborhood associations to foster positive relations and defer to city administrators and elected officials (Dierwechter & Coffey, 2010; Hur & Bollinger, 2014; Matejczyk, 2001).

Studies also find that when elected officials, city administrators, and communities disagree about neighborhood associations and their roles in local governance, there is a wider range of evaluations regarding their effectiveness (Chaskin, 2003; Dierwechter & Coffey, 2010; Hur & Bollinger, 2014; Jun & Shiau, 2012). As a result, neighborhood associations are perceived as only marginally significant to local governance (Li et al., 2019). However, experienced neighborhood leaders can ameliorate these negative perceptions by securing civic resources and increasing political capital (Andrews et al., 2010). These circumstances are problematic given that wealthier communities receive greater political support and municipal resources which exacerbates economic and racial inequities (Mesch & Schwirian, 1996). This body of research overall points to the inherent value of establishing formal relationships between neighborhood organizations and municipalities to improve inequitable distribution of civic resources to neighborhoods and address divergent evaluations with regard to their effectiveness.

A critical finding throughout the literature on neighborhood associations identifies a lack of descriptive

representation among neighborhood association boards of directors compared to their community constituent demographics (Chaskin & Greenberg, 2015; Jun & Musso, 2007; Li et al., 2019; Martin & Holloway, 2005; Musso et al., 2007). Specifically, neighborhood association boards mostly consist of relatively wealthier, older, and non-Hispanic White single-family homeowners (Guo & Musso, 2007; Mathews, 2021; Weare et al., 2009). And, increased racial and ethnic diversity of neighborhoods does not result in greater board diversity (Martin & Holloway, 2005) highlighting the likelihood of board member selection biases (Jun & Musso, 2007; Li et al., 2019). Overall, wealthier communities and their neighborhood associations are more involved in local governance compared to lower income communities, which were found to prioritize crime prevention and neighborhood improvement (Jun & Musso, 2013). These findings underscore the influence of neighborhood association board member representation on their roles and contributions to local governance.

Research also finds increased conflict among neighborhood organizations when leaders attempt to establish representational authority and compete for municipal resources (Martin, 2003, 2004; Meyer & Hyde, 2004). These strategies result in increased accounts of conflict among residents, businesses, and city administrators (Chaskin, 2003; Jun 2012; Martin & Holloway, 2005; Meyer & Hyde, 2004). However, community development initiatives sponsored by city departments can strengthen relations between neighborhoods and cities and improve civic engagement (Berry et al., 2002; Chaskin & Garg, 1997). Research finds an increase in civic engagement when neighborhood associations are supported, empowered, and encouraged to participate in local governance (Bryer, 2009; Bryer & Cooper, 2007; Chaskin, 2003; Chaskin & Greenberg, 2015; Silverman, 2003). Overall, the most effective civic participation systems incentivize municipal

co-production, delegate substantive authority, and adopt civic participation policies (Berry et al., 2002).

In summary, the literature relevant to understanding neighborhood associations and their civic roles was primarily concentrated on their intermediary roles, effectiveness with regard to civic engagement, and the extent to which they represent neighborhood constituents as part of neighborhood governance. It is important to note again that almost all of the relevant literature is focused on neighborhood councils that are part of civic participation systems (e.g. Bryer & Cooper, 2007; Dierwechter & Coffey, 2010; Martin, 2003, 2004). There is a small body of research on neighborhood associations that are also considered neighborhood-representing organizations (Hur & Bollinger, 2015; Mathews, 2021; Mesch & Schwirian, 1996) such as the neighborhood associations in this study. This is a limitation for advancing an understanding of a broader range of neighborhood organizational types and their roles in civil society. Therefore, this article contributes a new dimension to scholarship that seeks to understand how neighborhood associations can be strengthened to better serve as sites of local governance. The next section describes the municipal context, study participants, and research methods of this qualitative case study.

MUNICIPAL CONTEXT, STUDY PARTICIPANTS, AND RESEARCH METHODS

An exploratory case study design was used to understand neighborhood association perceptions of how to strengthen their roles in local governance. This case study of 34 neighborhood associations was located within a municipality with an overall population of 477,742 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024), which is part of a Los Angeles County, California, United States. The city uses a council-manager form of governance and is considered a majority

renter city since 67% of the housing stock are renter-occupied units according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2024). Neighborhood boundaries were formally adopted by the City Council during 2021, and the city receives federal Community Development Block Grant funding to support a Neighborhood Resource Center (NRC). The NRC maintains a list of neighborhood associations and facilitates a free neighborhood leadership program for residents to gain civic skills. The neighborhood associations within this municipality do not have institutionalized roles with city government through a city charter or ordinance yet are recognized by city councilmembers to represent geographically defined neighborhood boundaries.

The study participants were leaders of their neighborhood associations and there were 18 females and 16 males who were between 55 and 70 years of age. Eight study participants were African American or Black, two participants were Hispanic or Latinx, one participant was White and Native American, and 23 participants were non-Hispanic White. The majority of study participants reported that they had bachelor or graduate degrees. Leaders of neighborhood associations reported that they had volunteered an average of 11 years, and there were approximately five board members on each association's board of directors. The majority of neighborhood associations had been in existence for 35 years, although there was a substantial range of organizational founding years beginning from 1935 to 2018. Lastly, almost half of the participants reported that their neighborhood associations had no organizational budget while the other half of neighborhood associations reported maximum annual budgets of approximately \$5,000.

This study was supported by a grant award that was seed money for a pilot project to inform subsequent research on strengthening neighborhood associations within the municipality. Data collection and analysis took place from

2023 through 2024. The full population of 56 neighborhood associations from the NRC list were invited to participate in this study and 34 association leaders responded to the invitation. The academic Institutional Review Board granted approval of this study and neighborhood leaders signed informed consent documents before research participation.

Interviews with study participants were conducted online via Zoom and each interview was approximately one hour in duration. The interviews were guided by the following questions: (a) describe your neighborhood association's activities relative to city government and (b) what might strengthen your neighborhood association's role in local governance. NVivo software was used to manage interview transcriptions and facilitate data analyses. Specific data analysis strategies included process and *in vivo* coding (Saldaña, 2013) followed by holistic and pattern coding processes to identify core themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A focus group session with study participants was organized after the interviews to solicit feedback on the three core themes to advance credibility and confirmability of the findings. However, readers should be mindful of municipal contexts and neighborhood association types that differ from this study when interpreting the themes in the following section.

THEMATIC FINDINGS FROM STUDY PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

To summarize, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand neighborhood association perceptions of how to strengthen their roles in local governance. Study participants identified the following three thematic areas of need, which were to: (a) *develop neighborhood association networks*, (b) *pursue municipal investment and civic collaboration*, and (c) *institutionalize the civic role of neighborhood associations*. Themes from

the interview data are in italic font and followed by a representative sample of quotes to illustrate the essence of each theme. Participant quotes have been assigned a new code identifier in this section to anonymize study data for publication and “NA” stands for neighborhood association.

Theme A: Develop Neighborhood Association Networks

First, study participants identified a need to *develop neighborhood association networks* through collaborative actions among neighborhood leaders and associations: “We need to be leveraging what people are doing right now. We have to stop being in these little silos. And that's why working with other neighborhood associations is so important” (NA25). Neighborhood leaders conceptualized collaboration among neighborhood association as “building a space” (NA3) for civic governance as one participant remarked: “We need to build community participation relative to this idea we're constructing something and there's a physical sense to it. It's not just cultural or socioeconomic. There's a physicality and you're building a space” (NA2). As another study participant pointed out, collaboration would also benefit the city as well: “If we're all working together that would be significantly helpful for all of us and the city” (NA20).

Leaders provided suggestions for how to *collaborate among neighborhood associations* by (a) hosting community clinics, (b) organizing panels or community conventions, and (c) creating a network of neighborhood associations. First, community clinics were suggested as a strategy to elevate the work of neighborhood associations within communities, and throughout the city: “Community clinics would be a starting point. The weekly pop-ups by the Health Department have altered the frame of how people think of our city. Those are the kinds of things that we need to build on” (NA2). As another participant explained, “Once we get these community clinic programs established is to go

on the road with a dog and pony show, and show what neighborhood associations can accomplish” (NA33).

Study participants also suggested a need for community panels or neighborhood conventions for educational, organizing, and advocacy purposes to *develop neighborhood association networks*. For example, one leader noted that “a quarterly meeting would be useful” (NA9) although the structure was identified as equally important by all participants: “I want panel discussions, led by a neutral party who's good at facilitating those kinds of meetings” (NA18). The majority of leaders also suggested that educational panels or neighborhood conventions would improve their visibility and strengthen their political influence: “I'd like a nonpartisan neighborhood association convention – a town hall meeting addressing panels on homelessness, public works, to have us all get together” (NA17). As one participant noted, “In the future we will be less like ‘I've got to call my councilperson, because that's where I start.’ No. I'm going to canvas organizations, get a lay of the land, and maybe there's a campaign I can hitch on” (NA2).

Third, almost all of the study participants commented that forming a network of neighborhood associations would enable “an opportunity for integration of neighborhoods working together, collaboratively” (NA3). As explained by several leaders, “an association of associations can really be effective” (NA4) and “it would be very helpful to have an interagency of neighborhoods” (NA12), which would consist of “a panel of leaders like a parliament where you have a group that's leading and not just one person” (NA8). Participants highlighted that the network should consist of “a coalition of the willing... independent of the city and inclusive enough to symbiotically work together” (NA34). Neighborhood leaders also cautioned that the network should foster independence within the group as well:

We know who we are, and we say who we are. Even in neighborhoods where we don't share the same mission, I applaud everyone standing up and saying, 'This is the space I'm in, and this is an important space.' Even though it can be heard as exclusionary, it still affects the electeds and city governance (NA2).

Each neighborhood leader also identified a need for greater collaboration among neighborhood associations within their city council districts: "If there's a way that we could connect neighborhood organizations together even by district" (NA24). The potential for collective impact was encapsulated by several leaders: "A network of neighborhood associations that scares the crap out of the city manager, in a good way" (NA11) and "Neighborhood associations are vital to this city, and we need to flex our muscles together" (NA32).

Theme B: Pursue Municipal Investment and Civic Collaboration

Study participants also identified a need to *pursue municipal investment and civic collaboration*, which was the second thematic finding from interviews. In particular, comments included: "Our neighborhood could do more if there was funding for neighborhood groups" (NA29) through "financial support like grants" (NA12) and that "grant money should be distributed among people that are doing the work of the neighborhood" (NA9). Participants commented that there should be "a way to funnel funds that neighborhoods can use them without restriction; so, the city has a pot of money for your neighborhood, and you get to decide how to use it" (NA30) and that "if our city were [financially] committed to neighborhoods, then there would be a really big return on investment" (NA23). Neighborhood leaders also noted: "Associations would be better if they have staff and more support" (NA19), which included "a

paid staff person” (NA15) and “interns that we can engage in the community” (NA25). Additionally, several neighborhood leaders requested the reinstatement of Community Development Block Grant program funding support to be directly allocated to neighborhood associations: “There used to be Community Development Block Grants that went away so that’s been a loss” (NA18) and “How come we can’t get grant money? They’re federal grants. So, what’s the problem here?” (NA23).

As summarized by one leader, study participants overall identified a need for the city *to collaborate with neighborhood associations*: “We want the city to partner with us” (NA23). Neighborhood leaders said that this would entail timely and proactive notification through “an open channel of communication so we get informed about repairs, traffic mitigation, zoning” (NA28) and to “notify the neighborhood associations when something is changing in their neighborhood” (NA5). As one participant stated: “It’s better for the city to notify people in advance than after they get protesters out on the street” (NA5). Further, participants asked for a more consultative partnership between neighborhood associations and city council offices: “I would like to see that they take what we say into consideration, because we provide information that they wouldn’t know otherwise” (NA10), which entailed “more cooperation, actual, ‘Let’s meet with neighborhood constituents, hear them, and implement’” (NA25). Additionally, neighborhood leaders reflected that “I’d like councilmembers to give us a real heads-up on development and have an open dialogue” (NA17) and “I would like to see more engagement of the city reaching out to neighborhood associations” (NA12).

However, study participants also noted that there were barriers to civic participation due to the political nature of elected officials who represent city council districts: “It’s so important for the city to reach out to a neighborhood association. I know our council person is supposed to do that,

but, frankly, they have a political agenda” (NA7). Study participants stated that “right now, it’s the opposite of a relationship where they ask us for ideas and advice” (NA6) and that “the council and neighborhood associations should work better together and educate residents about how we are a resource” (NA25). Overall, neighborhood leaders indicated that “their council office should work with neighborhood associations directly” (NA15) as summarized by one participant: “Do you read a book on motherhood or ask a mother how she raised perfect children? We know firsthand what’s really going on so they should come to us” (NA6).

Theme C: Institutionalize the Civic Role of Neighborhood Associations

The third major theme that participants identified entailed the need to *institutionalize the civic role of neighborhood associations* and address weaknesses in municipal processes:

One of the problems is the governance model of being a districted city and an elected but having no real power mayor-city manager form of government. It’s unfortunate that we have someone who is an employee of the city dictating policy. That removes the governance of the city from the people. (NA3)

Another leader similarly reflected that “Because we’re a districted city, our districts are communities. The problem with governance is that communities have little or no direct impact or influence on the city, nor do they have a collective influence on the governance of the city” (NA23). When asked to provide specific strategies to strengthen their civic roles, neighborhood leaders suggested that “more formalization would allow for better communications between the neighborhood associations, the city, and other organizations” (NA5) and that neighborhood associations should “be more integrated into the local activities of the

council office” (NA15). As one participant explained, “In a city that doesn't have neighborhood councils, I see a void of a preferred model of governance” (NA9).

All study participants indicated that community planner positions or dedicated neighborhood liaisons would reinforce neighborhood association and city relationships. For example, leaders commented: “I would love to have a liaison between the neighborhoods and the city” (NA12) and that “at one time, we had community planners and their responsibility was to go to neighborhood groups” (NA18). One study participant envisioned: “Each neighborhood is a small town connected to the bigger town. How much would it cost the city to have one liaison in each district? Treat each neighborhood as its own little city with its own needs” (NA7). Neighborhood leaders, overall, identified that “neighborhoods would have more power if they were more formally involved in the city” (NA14) and projected “a reality where our city really does turn it around and start accepting neighborhood associations” (NA7). As one participant pointed out, “Legitimacy is multi-level in [city name] because we have neighborhood associations that are recognized through Neighborhood Resources. So, engaging a more active populous is really important” (NA8).

Study participants also identified actions with regard to how the city could *acknowledge the civic role of neighborhood associations*, which included hosting a citywide volunteer recognition event: “They used to have a ceremony to acknowledge that you’re trying to make the city better” (NA10) and there should be “recognition of volunteers coming from somebody besides ourselves” (NA19). Two neighborhood leaders said: “The city could uplift neighborhood associations. We volunteer and provide support and resources” (NA25) and “It would be nice if the council member recognized that the city is made up of neighborhoods with active volunteers” (NA15). In summary, participants overwhelmingly commented that

“We need commitment from the city to be in our best interests” (NA1) and “To have us as something the city must recognize” (NA13). As one leader reflected: “The neighborhood association is citizen power in action. It works. And what we want to work even better is making our cities safer and creating more livable communities” (NA33).

DISCUSSION OF THEMATIC FINDINGS FROM STUDY PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

This discussion is organized by the core themes that emerged from interviews with study participants. First, neighborhood leaders identified a need to *develop neighborhood association networks* within city council district areas and throughout the municipality. Study participants explained that collaboration among neighborhood associations is fundamental to developing community, improving civic health, and strengthening political influence. When asked to provide examples of collaborative activities, participants recommended the following actions: (a) hosting community clinics, (b) organizing community panels or conventions, and (c) creating an association of neighborhood associations. Sustained collaborations among neighborhood associations can serve to develop leader skills, organizational capacities, and address inequitable public service provision (Musso, 1999).

Neighborhood leaders and community organizers that are able to leverage city resources through neighborhood networks increase overall associational effectiveness of civic engagement (Andrews et al., 2010). Therefore, while studies point to parochialism as a weakness of neighborhood governance (Purcell, 2006), participants in this study identified the need to *develop neighborhood association networks* to strengthen their collective impact. This thematic area points to social capital development from increased

collaboration and co-production as a means to democratize local governance (Paxton, 2002). Thus, while neighborhood associations are situated as intermediaries between communities and cities (Chaskin & Greenberg, 2015; Marwell, 2004; Musso et al., 2011; Harris & Milofsky, 2019), without increased collaboration neighborhood-representing organizations will remain peripheral to local governance due to resource constraints (Mathews, 2021).

However, institutional arrangements for collaborative initiatives to elevate citizen participation improve co-production and civic engagement (Ostrom, 1996; Percy, 1984; Sharp, 1980). Co-production theories point to the institutionalization of citizen participation as a means to enhance local governance (Ostrom, 1996; Sharp, 1980). This is particularly relevant to neighborhood-representing organizations that are more loosely affiliated with city government (Chaskin, 2003). Therefore, as study participants explained, capacity-building initiatives such as neighborhood association panels and skills workshops would be fundamental to improving civic engagement and strengthening their roles in local governance.

The second core theme that emerged from interviews with study participants entailed the need to *pursue municipal investment and civic collaboration*. Study participants said that this would consist of (a) allocating municipal financial support directly to neighborhood associations through grants, and (b) partnering with neighborhood associations at the city council district level. Leaders characterized their neighborhood associations as a focal point for civic engagement thus identifying needs for greater municipal investment and collaboration. This study finding extends previous research that identifies a similar strategy of capacity-building and municipal investment to strengthen neighborhood governance (Chaskin & Greenberg, 2015; Harris & Milofsky, 2019; Musso et al., 2011). Specifically, civic collaboration with neighborhood associations

improves municipal responsiveness and a shared understanding of local conditions (Berry et al., 2002; Box, 1998). Additionally, municipal investment in neighborhood capacity-building increases public participation (Bryer, 2009; Bryer & Cooper, 2007; Silverman, 2003; Chaskin & Garg, 1997; Lelieveldt et al., 2009). A practical implication of this second thematic finding suggests that, as a starting point, small grants for neighborhood associations and institutionalizing a neighborhood liaison for each city council district would strengthen civic collaboration. Since collaboration is fundamental to effective co-production (Berry et al., 2002; Box, 1998; Marshall, 2004) and public service provision and civic responsiveness is dependent on municipal processes (Ostrom, 1996), these strategies would be a starting point to strengthen the civic roles of neighborhood associations.

As part of the third thematic area, study participants identified a need to *institutionalize the civic role of neighborhood associations*. However, effective civic participation systems formally delegate authority to neighborhood associations, incentivize civic co-production, and adopt citizen participation ordinances, which results in increased civic engagement (Berry et al., 2002; Bryer, 2009; Bryer & Cooper, 2007; Chaskin & Garg, 1997; Silverman, 2003). Paxton (2002) advanced a conceptualization of social capital to include the production of goods at the community level and greater democratization of participatory governance. Study participants similarly described the need to develop neighborhood association networks so that neighborhood associations could better contribute to local governance. Thus, social capital theories relevant to neighborhood governance (Pateman, 1970; Putnam, 2000) illustrate how neighborhood-representing organizations such as the types in this study foster civil society and are sites of local governance.

City government can be an important protagonist of neighborhood associations when elected officials recognize their roles with regard to civic engagement (Logan & Rabrenovic, 1990). Therefore, this study contributes a new perspective through strategies that were delineated by study participants including the development of neighborhood association networks and greater municipal investment to strengthen their roles in local governance. Normative perspectives on neighborhood governance suggest that the institutionalization of a civic participation system would be the next step given the demographic diversity, population size, and geographic location of this study's municipality. Indeed, research finds that neighborhood councils contribute to local governance to a greater extent compared to neighborhood associations that are not formally recognized and institutionalized as part of civic participation systems (Lelieveldt et al., 2009). However, any attempts to institutionalize the roles of these neighborhood associations in local governance will certainly highlight the limits of participatory governance. It remains to be clearly understood whether institutionalization is an appropriate strategy to strengthen neighborhood associations as sites of local governance.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, study participants pointed to strategies to strengthen the roles of neighborhood associations in local governance, which were to: (a) *develop neighborhood association networks*, (b) *pursue municipal investment and civic collaboration*, and (c) *institutionalize the civic role of neighborhood associations*. The study findings, however, must be considered within context of the limitations of qualitative case study research design. First, a limitation of case study research design pertains to the sample population, which was neighborhood associations to

the exclusion of other community-based groups that also contribute to local governance. However, to enhance the rigor of this study and foster a more accurate interpretation of the research findings, it was necessary to focus on one type of neighborhood association. The exclusion criteria do provide us with directions for future research. Future scholarship should examine to what extent there are shared or divergent perceptions among other civic organizations and neighborhood-based groups. Also, it is important to examine whether and to what extent neighborhood associations' roles in local governance change from a longitudinal research approach. Overall, research on neighborhood associations should continue to incorporate diverse research approaches to realize more robust lines of inquiry and advance scholarship engaged in practice.

If one characteristic of civil society is to strengthen democratic governance, then neighborhood associations serve a significant role by engaging a more active populace. Thus, by understanding strategies to strengthen neighborhood associations as sites of local governance, cities may engender participatory democracy. This study contributes a new understanding of neighborhood associations that are not part of institutionalized civic participation systems. The findings are also relevant to global perspectives concerning the evolving nature of civil society and democratic governance. It remains to be clearly understood, however, whether the strategies delineated by the study's participants will strengthen these neighborhood associations as sites of local governance.

Central to John Dewey's philosophy was his concern about the deterioration of democracy, which has continued apace in our own time. John Dewey's scholarship, therefore, remains relevant to show us how to build the civic square and advance participatory democracy. Neighborhood associations are well-situated to improve public participation, mobilize citizens, and increase governmental

responsiveness as a function of civil society. Therefore, it is hoped that this study contributes an understanding of how to build the civic square for neighborhood associations as sites of local governance. For as Dewey ([1927] 2016, p. 213) advised, “democracy begins at home, and its home is the neighborly community”.

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