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POLICY ANALYSIS LABORATORY

City of Corvallis Planning Department Community Engagement Assessment

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Background:

The City of Corvallis seeks to work better with the underrepresented groups of people living in the community. Whether that is improving communication, feedback, or the equity of programs, work can be done to improve this relationship. There exists state legislation such as HB2001 that creates the opportunity to improve sustainable efforts for cities across Oregon. The City of Corvallis Planning Department asked OPAL (Oregon State University Policy Analysis Laboratory) for research assistance to evaluate one part of their outreach efforts. While the City has encouraged civic participation and feedback on the implementation of new laws and rules, the effectiveness of these efforts is still unknown. Some neighborhoods are well-represented to city government by their officially recognized neighborhood associations, others remain insufficiently included in the civic process. Some demographic groups appear more often than others at public meetings. In this report, OPAL researchers provide information from an analysis of a recent community survey and from stakeholder interviews to better quantify the level of non-participation of underrepresented groups and to understand what processes reduce participation and what methods could increase it. This project aims to assist in the expansion of civic participation of local residents in tandem with ongoing land use planning efforts.

Methodology:*Quantitative Survey Analysis*

First, we obtained the original data from the National Research Center's Corvallis Community Survey, and examined these raw data to determine how representative the sample of respondents was, in comparison to known demographic characteristics of the city. The original survey was conducted in 2021, and was completed by 551 persons from a random sample of 2,700 addresses – a response rate of around 20%, a rate widely considered acceptable among survey professionals. The sample size, applying appropriate sampling weights (based on various demographic characteristics of respondents), permits summary statistics about the concerns and ideas among the population and these are made available to the public ([Corvallis 2021](#)). The public report of these data does not include the actual percentage of respondents in various demographic and economic categories (e.g., persons of color, renters). With the original data we were able to calculate those percentages and report them here.

While the survey collected data that allowed for multi-racial, multi-ethnic identities, sample sizes were exceedingly small so we assessed broad singular demographic categories such as Black or Latino identities. An important strength of the survey is that it identifies respondents' area of residence, areas known as "wards." There are 9 wards in Corvallis, each represented by one city council member. This geographic specificity provides some opportunity to examine how parts of the city are more or less represented in the survey, recognizing that various demographic and economic groups may be more or less represented across wards.

Second, we identified the demographic makeup of Corvallis using the 2022 population estimates available from the US Census ([Census Corvallis](#)). This analysis allowed us to compare the known demographic and economic makeup of the city to the characteristics of the survey respondents.

Third, we sought to further identify neighborhoods within or across wards, to further explore their demographic and economic makeup. Because US Census Bureau tracts' boundaries do not align at all with the Corvallis ward boundaries, we had to turn to another form of publicly available data that might permit us to compare survey demographic makeup to these neighborhood demographics. Corvallis' School District 509J reports the catchment boundaries for local elementary schools. These areas are smaller than census tracts and they provide demographic data on the students in each elementary school ([Corvallis schools catchments](#)). While not every child who resides in a certain catchment attends that school, and indeed may attend another school in the city, we used the school level demographics as a proxy to characterize neighborhoods in a way different than just relying on wards.

With these three data sources we could then compare the known demographics of the city, the "neighborhood" racial/ethnic demographics, and the survey response demographics.

Next, using the City of Corvallis census data, we compared them to the City of Corvallis Community Survey data, filtered by race and ward. For example, we compared the overlapping areas of city wards and U.S. Census tracts data, to determine the areas which likely had the highest Hispanic population. By comparing wards and tracts with the elementary school catchment maps and their demographics (Map 3) we confirmed that Garfield Elementary School has the highest Hispanic population with 49% of students, mostly serving city wards 2, 4, 5, and 6. The Garfield elementary school catchment roughly aligns with the North Corvallis census tract 10.01, a tract which has the highest Hispanic population in Corvallis (21%). Lincoln Elementary School, in South Corvallis, has a Hispanic population of 30%. Both school catchment areas have a Hispanic population well over the city population of 8.2% Hispanic. Thus, our approach while unavoidably imprecise due to data limitations nonetheless roughly validates known geographic patterns in the city, while more precisely describing demographic patterns across neighborhoods to be compared with the survey participant demographics.

We included owner/ renter statistics from the community survey to further analyze survey response bias in the survey, comparing survey respondents to Census-reported rates of homeownership in Corvallis. For example, we anticipated that there would be an above average percent of homeowners in the survey compared to the percentage reported by the Census. We also looked at White and Non-white rates of homeownership to see if that might account for an

underrepresentation of respondents of color, assuming that the well-known racial inequities in homeownership in the US would be evident in Corvallis as well.

Qualitative Interviewing:

First, our team identified leaders and stakeholders from groups of students and historically marginalized people in Corvallis. We contacted them and conducted 20-25 minute interviews via zoom, phone or in person at their convenience. We kept these interviews brief out of respect for interviewees' busy schedules. The advantage of the semi-structured format is that it allowed us to maintain focus on the most relevant topics, but also allowed interviewees to demonstrate their expertise, bringing up concerns or praise we may not have anticipated. While the impetus of this project was in part to better understand stakeholders' views on development projects, our questions focused on themes relevant to more City agencies than just the Planning Department, emphasizing communication between residents and the City. We asked interviewees to suggest to us additional stakeholders to interview and followed up on those suggestions.

We promised interviewees confidentiality in terms of how their comments would be incorporated in our report. Thus, material from the interviews is not fully attributed to one person, but presented more generally.

We conducted 8 interviews with people representing varying backgrounds, with most involved in organizations that help and try to represent oft-marginalized people. We secured interviews with Black and Latino leaders and/or stakeholders, as well as OSU student leaders. We had wanted to have more interviews with the Black and Latino communities, but were unable to reach them as easily. We believe this is partly related to issues outlined below in our findings. The interview questions appear in Appendix 2.

Findings

Quantitative Analysis of Community Survey

The National Research Center received 551 responses for the Corvallis Community Survey (Table 1, Table 2). The vast majority (88%) of respondents were White, 6% were Asian, 3% were Hispanic, 2% were American Indian, and 1% were Black.

Compared to the demographic makeup of Corvallis, gathered from the U.S. Census data, every minority race or ethnicity was underrepresented in the survey. The degree of underrepresentation was most evident for the Hispanic population, where only 3% (19/551) of survey respondents were Hispanic, while this group represents 8.2% of the population (See Tables 1 and

2).

The boundaries of the census tracts (Map 1 in Appendix 1) do not align with the nine wards of Corvallis (Map 2 in Appendix 1), so comparing the two is necessarily imprecise and limited by the data. The small numbers overall also make it impossible to make generalizable claims due to large margins of error, and so we do not strongly emphasize differences between small percentages, nor report them in the table. However, the numbers convey some patterns that should be further explored in future research. For example, Ward 9, which is covered in part by Census tracts 10.01 and 6 with 22% and 14% respectively identifying as Hispanic (see Table 3), only had 6% (4/69) of its survey respondents identifying as Hispanic. In other words, in a ward with relatively high numbers of Hispanic residents, participation in the survey among Hispanics was as low as any other ward (low single digits). An implication of this finding is that not only are Hispanic residents under-represented in this community survey overall, but this under-representation means some wards are more or less represented in the survey. We do not have population data for each ward to be able to precisely estimate the degree to which this may be the case.

Table 1: City of Corvallis Survey responses by Ward

Ward	Total Respondents	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Native American
1	68	60 (88%)	0	2	4	2
2	37	32 (86%)	0	3	2	1
3	65	57 (88%)	3	1	5	2
4	25	21 (84%)	0	0	2	0
5	45	43 (96%)	0	2	0	1
6	78	70 (90%)	2	3	1	2
7	88	79 (90%)	1	3	8	2
8	76	65 (86%)	0	1	9	0
9	69	59 (86%)	0	4	2	2
All	551	486 (88%)	6	19	33	12

Table 2: Corvallis Demographics -- U.S. Census, 2021

Total Population	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Native American
59,864	75.7%	1.4%	8.2%	10%	0.8%

Source: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/corvallisoregon>

Table 3 shows the demographic identities of residents in the 6 census tracts comprising Corvallis. White is still the majority in all areas, with Hispanic and Asian demographic groups the largest among persons of color.

Table 3: Demographics of Corvallis Census Tracts

Census Tract	Total Population	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Native American
6	5,215	72% 3,776	1% 67	14% 710	5% 236	<1% 31
9	5,997	75% 4,483	1% 60	7% 411	10% 576	<1% 20
10.01	4064	62% 2,534	2% 68	22% 875	7% 264	<1% 8
11.01	3,868	68% 2,613	1% 52	2% 376	13% 495	<1% 15
11.02	4,558	71% 3,254	1% 48	8% 358	11% 519	<1% 33
107.02	4,221	72% 3,019	2% 67	8% 358	12% 519	<1% 1

* Source: [US Census](#)

^ Note: Percentages do not sum to 100% due to multi-racial respondents making up the balance of Non-White respondents. White, Black, Asian, and Native American persons in this table also identified as non-Hispanic.

We further explored the role of homeownership in understanding underrepresentation in the survey (Table 4). The homeownership rate for respondents in the Corvallis survey was 68%, a homeownership rate slightly higher than the national average of owner-occupied homes. However, the rate of owner-occupied units in Corvallis, according to the 2020 Census is 41%. Thus, the 68% survey result in the Corvallis survey is not as representative of the population as it first appears. This discrepancy is likely due to the proliferation of rentals in Corvallis, many being rented to OSU students. Hence, the survey under-represents renters, and likely under-represents student residents of Corvallis as well. It is not immediately obvious if this under-

representation is due to local resident-homeowners being more aware of and motivated to participate in the survey, or if outreach efforts to solicit renter/student participation in the survey was lacking, or both.

This “over-participation” by resident home owners has connections to the race and ward analysis shown above.

Table 4: Home Ownership Rate by Race and Ward in Corvallis Community Survey

All Respondents	68%	
	White	Non-white
Ward 1	78%	7%
Ward 2	30%	3%
Ward 3	65%	6%
Ward 4	48%	4%
Ward 5	47%	4%
Ward 6	54%	3%
Ward 7	68%	9%
Ward 8	70%	11%
Ward 9	65%	7%
All wards	90%	9%
Sample size	338	35

[^] Note: Sample sizes by race within each ward are exceedingly small, often in single digits. We offer these for illustrative purposes.

The importance of addressing this topic is evident when we consider racial/ethnic differences in homeownership rates. For the city as a whole the homeownership rate for Non-white residents is about one-tenth that of White residents. This pattern persists across wards, with the exceptions of Ward 7 and 8 where Non-white homeownership rates are about one seventh of the White ownership rate. Admittedly, sample sizes in the Corvallis survey are exceedingly small when counting racial/ethnic minorities by ward, often in single digits, but we offer these for illustrative purposes and are struck by the consistency of the numbers across wards. We have observed that the survey under-includes renters, but this accentuates the point of, and perhaps cause of, under

participation by residents of color, most of whom are renters. Because homeowners and renters may have very different interests regarding future development of various neighborhoods, the City may do well to not only ask how it is doing at engaging racial and ethnic minority residents, but renters as well, and in so-doing address both problems of under-representation in civic participation related to planning.

Qualitative Interviews:

The overall throughline from our interviews is that Corvallis does a better job than most cities, but primarily this is true for people who seek to be informed and have the means to get informed. There remains a disconnect with historically marginalized communities, either in communication strategy or accessibility. This observation confirms the City's concern that important groups of people are missing from civic engagement opportunities. Some of the key themes in the interviews for improving relations are outlined here, re-affirming many ideas advocated by others about community engagement strategies and practices.

Meeting people "where they are at"

Interviewees offered suggestions such as site visits or creating a mutually sharable and free cultural place. Site visits would constitute City employees going to non-profits or neighborhoods and with a culturally sensitive lens learn from and speak to the people present. Expanding upon that issue the most common suggestion was to use intermediary institutions to constituents' advantage. Stronger public/private partnerships could improve communications. Interviewees asserted that workers/volunteers would be happy to work with the City. They suggested using their non-profit organizations to diffuse information to a greater degree. Additionally, shareable places help engage, foster and repair relationships. Places that have fewer and lower barriers to entry allow for more and various people to be present. This space would need to allow for freedom of expression, honest communication, and take into account what people have to say about it, learning from them and mutually pursuing solutions.

Supplying the resources necessary to engage with local communities

Interviewees suggested that single meetings are not enough and that pragmatic issues like childcare keep people from participating in meetings. They therefore suggested providing childcare, reimbursement for attending meetings, holding multiple meetings at different times, and, of course, hybrid online/in-person meetings.

Improving accessibility

Interviewees indicated that some people are not able to access city information, meetings, or engage with outreach due to various limits and restrictions. Some of these are noted above, such as time constraints, lack of childcare, but also language and literacy barriers. Zoom

meetings are often not adequate. For example, some people need nonverbal communication (generally unavailable via Zoom) to build trust and get to know people.

Learning from the COVID experience

Interviewees thought that the City's response was good, specifically indicating that information rollout to different constituencies about policies and plans were done well. They perceived that the City's performance in this regard was better than other cities they knew of, with real improvements in communication. This raised the prospects that building off the COVID responses would be a good start to further improving civic participation.

Demonstrating sustained commitment

Interviewees highlighted the need for a sustained meaningful commitment to relevant projects and organizations. By this they meant long term relationships need to have respect afforded to them and trust built up through actions and sentiment. These non-governmental organizations that work for marginalized communities do not want to be tokenized. That also applies to individuals within the city. They opined that results may not be immediate, but City efforts must be sustained, anticipating that civic engagement may not rapidly increase. Meaningful connections and contributions to the civic process take time to foster. Similarly the learning process of a more collaborative governance takes time.

Conclusions:

While the Corvallis Community 2021 survey applied sampling weights to under-represented groups, to amplify their opinions, an analysis of the demographics of who participated illustrate ways that community outreach to discuss public issues can be uneven. Thus, the analysis of the survey is not a criticism of the survey itself but a chance to (a) illustrate how surveys can only accomplish so much, and indeed will badly underperform among some demographic groups, and (b) observe more precisely which groups likely need different and additional engagement efforts.

We found that residents of color were under-represented in the survey, and this was evident throughout the wards of the city. Information about the racial/ethnic demographics of each ward was not available but the racial makeup of the city can be broken down by location via the U.S. Census data and school catchment data. Certain census tracts in the north, central, and south parts of the city have higher rates of residents of color, particularly Hispanic residents. Unfortunately, the number of survey participants was too low to get an accurate measure of the racial/ethnic makeup of each ward, and so comparing the wards to U.S. Census tracts could not produce accurate estimates. Nonetheless, our modest evidence indicates that under-engaged groups are clustered in some areas more than others, a pattern of residential segregation not

uncommon in all cities. This observation may inform future efforts to reach, for example, renters who tend not to be organized or advocated for as do various racial/ethnic minority residents.

The conclusions of the interviews may be summed up as: “Corvallis is a great city to live in and your voice is heard if you are a person of means/resources.” Interviewees conveyed a sentiment that those with greater resources and more “voice” were heard in Corvallis, but that there is a lot of work to be done for less fortunate residents. While the COVID response from the City was helpful, and instructive, it is not enough in the long term. Thus, interviewees felt that the City was not building off what they had done right and were missing an opportunity to engage the broader public. Of course this concern is likely not unique to Corvallis, since engaging vulnerable populations is historically a daunting task. This research reaffirms some of what the City anticipated. Local organizations are full of ideas and a willingness to work alongside city government to improve the conditions of oft-silenced, or less-engaged, marginalized groups. However, relationships will need to be built over time to foster an active learning environment for both the City and local organizations.

Policy Recommendations:

Based on what we heard from stakeholders we offer these suggestions, some of which are likely already underway:

Expand policies/ programs like the transit forum to other sections of city government

Purpose: Helps increase transparency and hopefully establishes a more consistent working relationship between the community and local government. As well it can focus on what smaller communities within the city are facing, rather than only on large scope issues that impact everyone.

Growing commitment to meeting/information accessibility

Purpose: Increases attendance of the local population as well as information diffusion. Consider specific policies such as hybrid meetings (if meetings are done over video, then participants’ faces should be visible so that communication is not only verbal), supply of childcare on site, or reimbursement for childcare to low income/disadvantaged people who attend (time is money for poorer residents). Another example is reducing the reading difficulty of any announcements for all languages to somewhere around a 3rd grade reading level. To broaden the scope of inclusivity and accessibility of local people more languages should be present beyond just English/Spanish.

Creating a culturally significant area/event that is either low or no cost, and expanding extra curricular activities

Purpose: To help foster community connections and trust for all types of peoples. A reduced or costless event makes it accessible for everyone. This would be an event that would need to

happen consistently because trust and connection take time to build. Any cultural events should provide necessary accommodations for people of all religions, cultural backgrounds etc.

Expanding extra curricular activities for children of all ages could also help foster down-the-line relationships. Creating connections at that level can increase community engagement. Importantly these activities should follow the guidelines above such as accommodating for religious and cultural differences as well as being low or no cost

Meeting people where they are

Purpose: To take the first step in collaborating in local governance. This step allows for honest communication and an understanding of societal power dynamics including social class differences as well as racial/ethnic cultural differences. The City of Corvallis and other nearby institutions are in positions of relative power, more able to publicly engage in deliberation over important decisions and policies. If the City wants local government to accurately represent the people of their City then the City must “get their hands dirty” (a phrase offered by an interviewee) and go out of their way to make those connections. Efforts to continue expanding neighborhood associations (either expanding them in geographic coverage or number) could contribute to this goal. Existing associations with Hispanic populations may need to address cultural and linguistic barriers to participation in their work.

Increasing collaboration and integration with local organizations

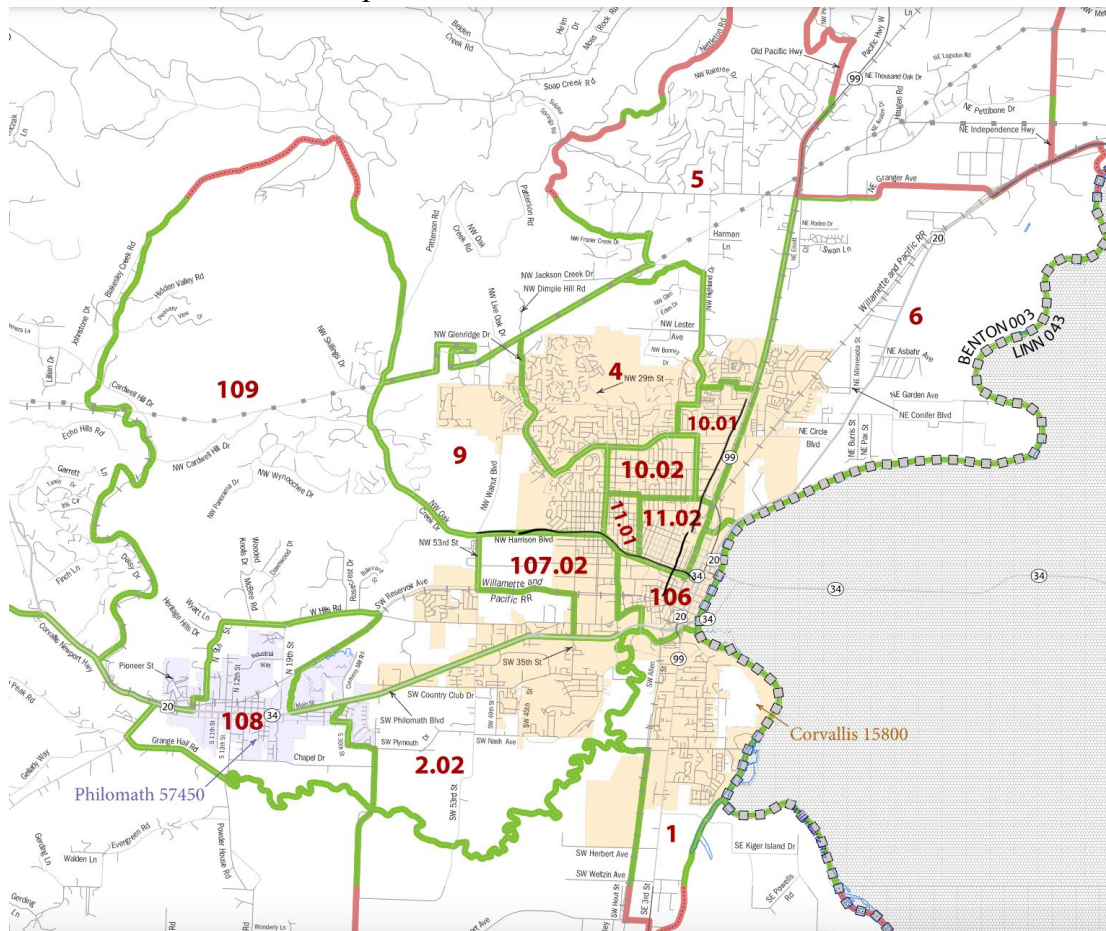
Purpose: To take advantage of resources that already exist, thus limiting costs, but additionally using more effectively the communications channels of non-profits. Many organizations are willing and ready to work more with the City of Corvallis. Policy examples could be on-site visits to neighborhoods, The Vina Moses Center, etc. A strong long term commitment to helping people through collaborative efforts and “not just checking another box” (a phrase used by an interviewee). Paying organizations that do work in the social system would help enhance their overall program health, potentially increasing feedback for the City.

Engaging with community groups to promote future community surveys

Purpose: To gather representative feedback from residents of color and renters in Corvallis. To accomplish this, the City can focus outreach to areas with higher rates of Non-white residents. Given that the groups we spoke to enjoy working with the City and would like to engage more with the city government, promoting a community survey within neighborhood groups as well as groups of minority community members and political and advocacy groups, will help the survey reach a broader demographic. Renters especially can be engaged in community surveys but perhaps not at their residence. Again, this could be helped by reaching out to community groups that may offer deeper networks and be the best solutions for reaching renters.

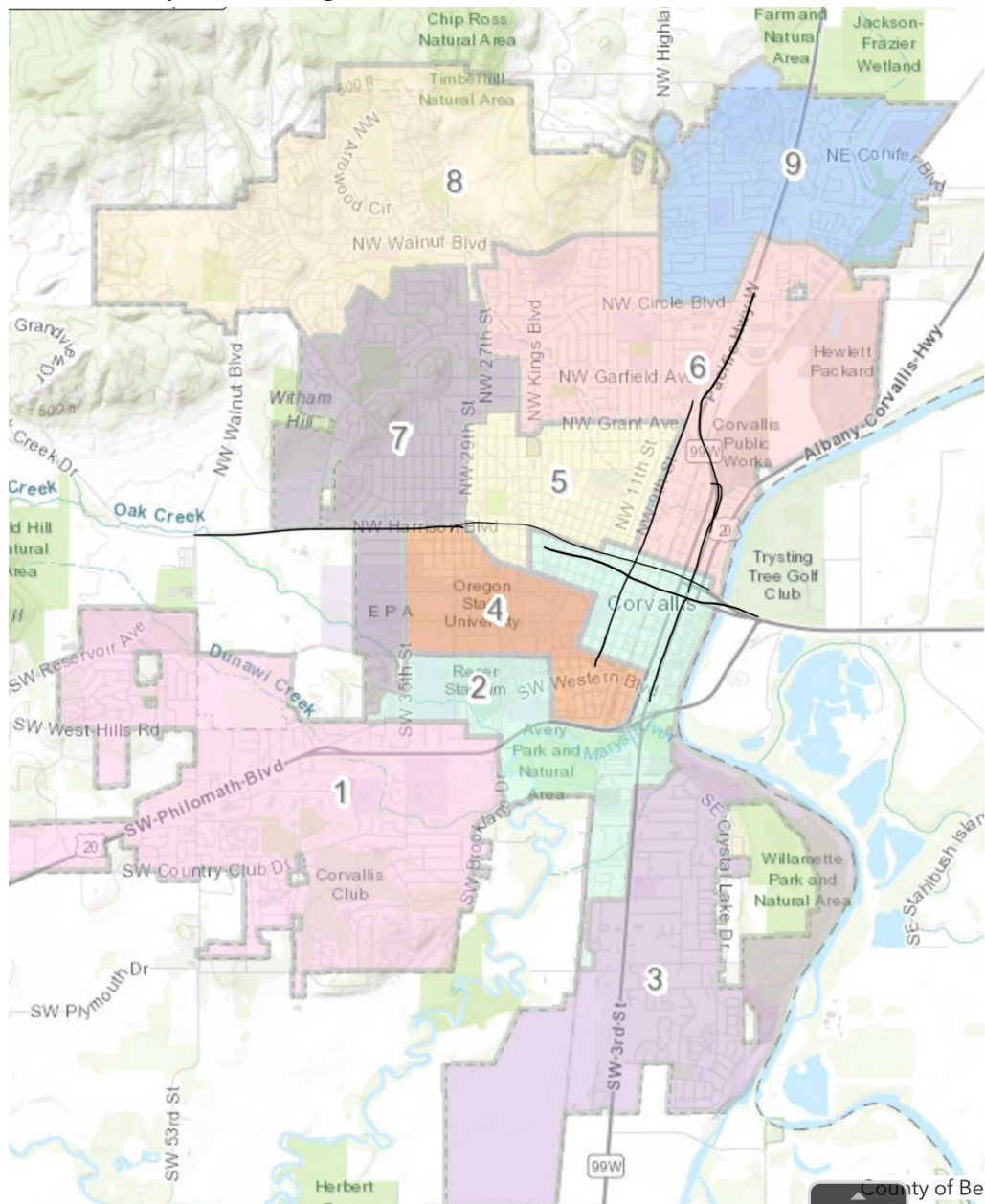
Appendix 1: Maps

Corvallis Census tracts, Map 1



Map 1: This map shows the boundaries of each census tract in Corvallis. For the sake of orientation, the black lines show the intersection of Harrison (east/west) and 9th Street (north/west) The two intersect within Census tract 11.02.

Corvallis City Wards, Map 2



Map 2: This image shows the boundaries of the city wards 1 through 9. These boundaries of these wards do not align with the boundaries of the U.S. Census tracts. The black lines show Harrison Blvd and Van Buren (east/west), and 9th St and 3rd St (north/south). 9th St and Harrison Blvd intersect within ward 2.

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

The interview questions are intentionally simple and open ended to eliminate barriers to communicating ideas.

1) How do you feel/ think about how the city of Corvallis informs you of new developments or asks for your input currently?

- Do you know how your constituents feel about this? What is the common sentiment?

2) If you were in charge of improving the city of Corvallis outreach, who are the people you would talk to to gain an understanding of what's going well and what isn't? What initiatives or policies would you suggest?

3) What are the best ways to reach the people you organize/advocate for?

- How much do you interact with the city to enhance communication if at all?

4) In the context of your position have you seen civic participation spike?

-What caused this?

-What're your suggestions for keeping people engaged?