

Appointment Questions: DON Interim Director, Jenifer Chao

Background and Vision

1. Interim Director Chao, you have a strong background in community engagement and a commitment to equity and opportunity for underserved communities. What is your vision for the Department of Neighborhoods (DON) and its pivotal role in building thriving, connected communities, and addressing the specific needs of these communities?

DON was initially created for civic engagement and access to government and that original intent is alive and well. My vision for DON is to empower all communities to thrive together. We do that by creating opportunities for neighborhoods to connect in their humanity and center relationship building. Communities do not have to thrive at each other's detriment. When communities can see each other as neighbors, it is possible to bridge across cultural differences and find shared solutions that meet the specific needs of each community.

For instance, we know there is concern about public safety in neighborhoods across the city. Working with small businesses in Ballard, we learned of the need for de-escalation training for small businesses. Working together with stakeholders revealed that the Ballard Alliance was willing to fund training for people in the Ballard Business Improvement Area AND in other neighborhoods, so all small businesses could benefit from the training. We leverage our relationships to connect people across the city so they can work in solidarity towards common goals.

DON achieves its vision of community empowerment and thriving by centering racial equity in decision-making and investing in communities to forge their own solutions. We lead with our core values of relationships, investments, and capacity building.

2. Since being appointed as Interim Director, what have you learned about our different community priorities? About City processes? About what's missing? What are the biggest opportunities and challenges for the department?

Since starting as Interim Director in March, I have attended 65 community gatherings across all neighborhoods in each of the seven Council Districts. I have listened to each community as they shared their cultural nuances and unique needs that will allow their communities to thrive. In the CID, they need a storefront in the neighborhood that is staffed with language support to help with wayfinding. Whereas in the Ballard neighborhood, they need an ambassador program for wayfinding. These are different approaches based on the cultural needs of the neighborhood, but both aim to create belonging, activation, and safety.

I have also learned that some City processes are outdated and need to be changed to promote racial equity and inclusion. For example, a 2018 Racial Equity Toolkit (RET) analysis revealed that many community gardeners relied on their P-Patch to reduce food costs and grow their own ethnic food. The data also showed that the program could better serve populations who have been historically

underrepresented in the gardens. This contributed to creating a procedural change that resulted in new Plot Assignment Guidelines that prioritize underrepresented populations. When potential gardeners sign up for the interest list, they are now asked to identify if they are part of one of these underrepresented groups: Black or African American, Indigenous/Native, and Latinx or Hispanic, households making 30% or below Seattle area median income, immigrants and refugees, people who need to garden in an accessible raised bed, and groups that serve seniors, children, and youth (up to age 24). If they are in one of these groups, they move up the interest list more rapidly than other potential gardeners. In 2020, the first year this policy was in place, 45% of new gardeners placed in gardens were from priority groups. In 2022, that number rose to 65%. In this case, a RET revealed an inequity, and a subtle policy adjustment addressed it successfully. We are very proud of this work, but also know there are much larger systemic changes needed where DON can promote racial equity.

One missing element is how to embed racial equity assessments as a standard part of the City's practice when developing processes and procedures. I know we have room to improve in this area and DON staff are actively creating and testing strategies that can be replicated.

The biggest opportunity for DON is to transform the way we holistically serve community. By leading with our core values of relationships, investments, and capacity building, we can create a healthy and whole ecosystem that results in the following outcomes – both internally and externally:

- DON teams are aware of and reliant upon each other and their programs. They are connected to the shared vision of the department and to its collective success.
- Community does not interact with only one program but builds power and capacity from the ecosystem.
- Community sees each other as neighbors. They are connected in humanity and centered in relationships.

The biggest challenge is that workplace cultural transformation takes time and consistent leadership. However, I am already noticing shifts to our internal culture in response to the collective work we are doing as a department.

3. What are your specific goals for DON over the next three years?

My goals over the next three years:

1. Build resilient relationships with my cabinet peers, the Mayor's office, and Councilmembers that are grounded in honest conversations and result in a shared understanding of how to move forward together. Good relationships are key to ensuring we can continue to serve the community with the backing of City leadership.
2. Create a healthy and whole ecosystem at DON where staff have a shared vision and an active role in moving the department towards building One Seattle.
3. Maintain trust between the community and the City through consistent responsiveness and honest conversations about the City's role.
4. Support communities as they strengthen and build relationships across neighborhoods and feel connected to each other's shared humanity.

Executive and Staff Management

4. The Department of Neighborhoods oversees a variety of programs and initiatives, such as the P-Patch Community Gardening Program, the Historic Preservation Program, etc. How will you manage

and coordinate these programs effectively to ensure they align with the department's mission and vision?

DON is fortunate to be the home of a set of programs that support communities in diverse ways. We believe deeply in inviting the public to partner with us through programs that make them feel empowered, seen, and heard. This looks different for everyone. Our programs may vary, but they are each grounded in relationships, investments, and capacity building:

- Our programs ask community members to develop long-standing relationships and trust with one another and with City staff through collective labor.
- Participants develop their own styles of leadership through community organizing, which in turn builds capacity within their communities.
- Participants leverage our investments of time, money, and people to improve the quality of life for their communities.

The alignment with our mission is also driven by our internal work of building a shared vision for the department. We are implementing strategies to make sure we are working with each other in similar ways to how we support the community and creating opportunities for DON staff to see how aligned their work is. Since I started leading DON, we have increased internal communication, prioritized opportunities for healing, and established expectations to ensure there is accountability across all levels within the department. We are creating better social and operational infrastructure that makes it possible for staff and leadership to work within a consistent framework and show up as a unified and thriving ecosystem for community.

5. In your role, how do you plan to support and empower DON staff to work collaboratively across different programs to achieve community-driven solutions and to respond to the needs of underserved communities with tangible actions?

Since becoming Interim Director, I have been leading efforts to break down programmatic silos and interconnect our programs. Leading with DON's core values centered in *relationships, investments, and capacity building*, we have been taking decisive actions to foster a thriving ecosystem in which all our teams are aware of and reliant upon each other and their programs and connected to our shared vision and collective success. This intersectionality and interdependence not only impact how we work internally, but also allows community to build power and capacity more effectively from the whole ecosystem, rather than just individual programs.

To move this way requires transparency, strategy, trust, and intentionality. Some of the ways we are moving in this direction include:

- Merging divisions and programs to create efficiencies and build connections that lead to better outcomes for communities with histories of harm.
- Creating a comprehensive roadmap for improving our workplace culture that will immerse all DON staff members in learnings and conversations centered in anti-racist and restorative leadership, conflict management, culturally inclusive communication, and more.
- Building bridges between programs with the goal of fostering innovative collaborations (e.g., Generational Wealth and Historic Preservation, P-Patch Community Gardening and Food Equity Fund) that lead to actionable outcomes for underrepresented communities.
- Providing consistent opportunities for staff members to learn from one another and community members at formal staff meetings and community gatherings.

- Investing in collaboration with BIPOC community members to envision and co-create new programming and neighborhood connections using the Generational Wealth Initiative as a model for engagement.

6. How do you see the role of the Department of Neighborhoods in advancing generational wealth and economic equity within Seattle’s diverse communities?

The Generational Wealth Initiative, gifted to DON by community, was a directive to inventory and examine the impacts of City resources and programs that are used by BIPOC communities to maintain and build generational wealth. Our two-year journey has focused on bringing the communities most impacted by the racial wealth divide together to research, learn, and work collectively to identify solutions. This resulted in two major outcomes. The first is a set of recommendations aimed at creating systemic change within City policies and practices. The second is that we are actively investing in community-driven ideas and strategies to work towards racially and culturally responsive economic opportunities and equity. These community-driven ideas are currently in the pilot stages, and we will continue to provide community-centered support throughout 2024.

The role of DON in advancing generational wealth and economic equity has been to:

- Build trust in communities most impacted so that they want to partner with us in working to close the racial wealth gap.
- Create time and space to research, learn, and ideate for solutions that address the specific needs of racial/cultural groups.
- Provide historically under-resourced communities with opportunities to connect with City departments for mentorship, learning, problem solving, and systems change.
- Provide opportunities for community members to connect and network to learn, leverage resources, and build advocacy for community-led recommendations and investments.

a. Over the next year, DON will be tasked with collaborating with the Office of Economic Development and the Generational Wealth Initiative Community Roundtable to develop a transition and implementation plan for the Generational Wealth Initiative. How do you plan to ensure the collaboration between DON, OED, and the roundtable is efficient, effective, and inclusive?

Our Generational Wealth Strategic Lead and Division Director have established weekly meetings with OED through the year until final transition in the next six months, as guided by the Council’s SLI. Investing in clear and consistent communication, mutually agreed upon values, and the prioritization of community voices in decision-making is our approach to having a supportive and inclusive transition plan.

DON and OED will co-engage with partnering departments, the Generational Wealth IDT, the BIPOC Generational Wealth Community Roundtable, and consultant teams, People’s Economy Lab, and Headwater People, on identifying priorities for 2025 and 2026 which will be reflected in the transition plan. I am already in constant conversation with OED Director McIntyre to plan for the forthcoming transition.

Race and Social Justice

7. Given the importance of equity and inclusion, especially for underrepresented communities, in your work, how do you plan to integrate and prioritize the Race and Social Justice Initiative into the daily operations and decision-making processes of the Department of Neighborhoods?

As a woman of color of Mien ethnicity, racial equity and inclusion are deeply personal to me, integral to my identity, and fundamental to my values. My family's journey to this country as refugees from Southeast Asia gave me a firsthand understanding of the disparities faced by individuals from underrepresented communities. The challenges and triumphs of my lived experience strongly influence my approach to work and a commitment to always center humanity while bringing people together. My life's work has been to consistently prioritize and amplify the voices of underrepresented communities, so they are included.

At the Department of Neighborhoods (DON), our mission is guided by two guiding principles, often referred to as our North Stars:

- Put race and equity at the center of every decision and action.
- Invest in the power of communities to forge their own solutions.

In my role as the Director, these guiding principles serve as the compass directing all decision-making processes. I recognize the diversity within each community, even among ethnic groups, understanding that no community is a monolith. I advocate for the active involvement of communities to contribute to the development of their own solutions. It is my firm belief that when communities are engaged, they not only survive but thrive.

8. Can you elaborate on your approach to addressing systemic racism and repairing the damage it has caused in the lives of communities of color in Seattle? How will you work to ensure that all communities can thrive?

Racism is conditioned in our systems and impacts the health and financial wellbeing of Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities the most. I believe that internal systems change is key to addressing systemic racism and that we can only achieve racial equity in community if we are also achieving it within our department. DON's workforce demographics over the past decade have been one of the most reflective of the diversity of our city. Many of our staff that show up every day to be public servants are also the people most impacted by systemic racism. In our department, we work hard to support each other, understand how we can learn from lived experiences, and implement systemic changes in addressing and redressing harm.

I truly feel the Department of Neighborhoods is the heart of the city. Together, we center relationships both internally and externally and focus on building long-term and authentic partnerships. We work hard to develop trust and broaden access, to connect people to our programs and services, as well as to each other. We will invest in both qualitative and quantitative data to better assess the impacts of our programs and services to ensure they are having the intended impact and to identify community concerns and needs. We will work to ensure other City departments and leadership are brought in and brought along as we collectively work with communities to advocate for and invest in community-driven

solutions that address those needs. We strive to ensure that communities have the time and space to live in safe and thriving neighborhoods.

Community engagement

9. Community engagement is a core element of the Department of Neighborhoods' work. What strategies do you intend to implement to foster stronger community partnerships that are grounded in trust, connected to humanity, and centered in relationships?

Cultivating, building, and sustaining resilient relationships is embedded in everything we do. It's what allows us to build trust and connections and ensure that all communities have voice, inclusion, and influence in City programs and projects. This work has been one of the main priorities of my first year in this role. I started this job with a commitment to visit every neighborhood within Seattle by the end of the year, to reintroduce the Department of Neighborhoods, and begin learning from and building connections with community members. I have invested in this same approach internally, understanding that we cannot show up for community if we don't show up for each other. We are transforming our workplace culture to center on our shared humanity and relationships - leading with transparency, accountability, and inclusion.

Moving forward, I will be investing in this approach across our programming. I'll be guiding my team to:

- Use the models of the Generational Wealth Initiative and CID Vision Group to advance community-led strategies that uplift the collective self-determination of BIPOC communities and connect those strategies to DON programs and City departments for development and implementation;
- Refocus the work of our Civic Engagement team to prioritize building community connections, particularly within Seattle's Indigenous and urban Native communities. This team will create and promote activation events aimed at fostering community connection and belonging, organize community service events, uplift and support the priorities identified by the Indigenous Advisory Council and the Tribal Nations Summit, create accessible civic education pop-ups that empower community members, and weave in DON programs through hybrid engagement opportunities; and,
- Continue to invest in community storytelling efforts that amplify the experiences of the people we serve to bridge across cultural differences. These story collaborations uplift the perspectives of community, center relationship building, and create unique entry points for community members to engage with local government.

10. When the Community Involvement Commission (CIC) was established, one of its tasks was to advise on how the Neighborhood Matching Fund program could better involve community voices. How do you plan to ensure that CIC fulfills this role effectively, and what changes or improvements might be considered?

In 2024, we will be assessing the Neighborhood Matching Fund program through a Racial Equity Toolkit (RET) analysis. This analysis will be led by the newly hired Community Grants Manager and a long-time DON employee with extensive knowledge of the program. Integral to the RET process will be community-engagement for analysis and decision-making on how we move forward with a reimagined program

centered on racial equity. There is an opportunity for close partnership with the Community Involvement Commission in this process.

In addition, DON staff will be partnering with the Community Involvement Commission to review the legislation that established the commission and look for recommendations to strengthen its role and responsibilities. We will also be working on resources and training for DON commissions to support Results-Based Facilitation as they work to identify priorities and actions for their work in 2024 and beyond.

11. With the elimination of the “Your Voice, Your Choice” program, there have been concerns about community input in grant programs. How do you plan to address this issue and ensure that community voices are heard in the decision-making process, especially for grants that support various communities?

Maintaining long-term, resilient relationships with the communities of Seattle is central to our mission at DON. This allows us to work closely with neighborhood partners to invest in their visions for the future and stay in partnership with communities. The Food Equity Fund has created a decision-making model for their general grant that includes a panel of community members. Since I started, we have been learning from this model so we can build more community decision-making into our other granting programs. In 2024, the Neighborhood Matching Fund will move toward a community review model for their Community Partnership Fund grant cycles. In addition, all our granting programs maintain an open feedback loop between City staff and the public. This is not new. DON has a legacy of incorporating community feedback into our work and making tangible process and policy changes in response to that feedback.

Community voices are essential to shaping all our programs. We continue to evolve our programs to meet community needs and grow new generations of leadership who are making change within the City and our community. We are leveraging our relationships and using our investments to build capacity in community to create sustainable systems for equitable civic participation.

Policy Climate and Enforcement

12. The Department of Neighborhoods plays a vital role in connecting residents with government services and providing resources for community improvement. How will you approach policymaking and enforcement to ensure that it aligns with the department's mission of building diverse, thriving communities?

The Department of Neighborhoods is uniquely positioned as a connector between the community and many civic processes and programs. We are often invited to the policy making table to offer community perspectives. Our long-standing, trusting relationships with communities make it possible for us to bring perspectives that contribute to the creation of policies that meet community needs and is more likely to be accepted and adopted by the community.

We see ourselves as partners to our stakeholders in that work and our approach is to actively provide support to applicants and other residents so that they can successfully navigate our complex government systems. It is our experience that the more we involve the community in the process of developing plans and systems, the focus can shift to education and compliance rather than enforcement.

13. Are there specific policies or initiatives you plan to introduce or enhance to promote neighborhood well-being and community-driven solutions in Seattle?

In 2024, DON will be investing in a department-wide data and evaluation program that analyzes our programs and assesses the impact of our investments on community priorities.

- We will research quantitative and qualitative data from DON's existing community programs, coordinate a process to solidify a theory of change that unifies and directs program design choices and priorities, develop a system for measurement, and create corresponding policies and procedures. The goal of this work is to create common metrics to communicate the degree to which our programs and investments are building community capacity and increasing community access to and trust in City government.

In 2024, DON's Historic Preservation Program will embark on a research project to compose a historic context statement documenting disability history and activism in the City.

- The project will help realize DON's mission of centering equity and underrepresented communities in historic preservation by documenting the history of a large population not currently represented in the City's Landmarks or historic resources inventory. This project will be the first of its kind in the country and is intended to provide a model for future community-led historical research projects by DON.

In 2024, DON will also be investing in the transformation of our Civic Engagement team to prioritize building community connections through activation events and community service events aimed at fostering community well-being and building on the shared vision of One Seattle.

- This team, which houses the Indigenous Advisory Council, will also prioritize integrating recommendations from the inaugural Tribal Nations Summit into DON programming.

14. How will you be responsive to Council requests, in particular regarding priorities that may differ from those of the Executive Branch?

My approach in all things is to understand the common goal and figure out how we can get to the outcome together. Everything we do is in service to community, and there are multiple paths to achieve that service. When it comes to areas of disagreement, I strive to be honest and open about the limitations and look for opportunities to find common ground for everyone's benefit.

15. What specific and measurable outcomes should DON look to when measuring success?

DON is constantly evaluating our engagement approaches, methods, and ways in which we measure success. What works in one community or neighborhood may not work in another. Some of our current measures involve the number of program participants, such as the demographic data for new applicants to the Neighborhood Matching Fund (NMF) and Food Equity Fund, the number of underrepresented community members assigned plots in the P-Patch Community Gardening program, and the number of community members and City departments served by the Community Liaisons program. DON also measures the volunteer hours committed by community members in our programs. These are simple, yet relevant metrics that allow us to see the results of our program policies so that we can continually adapt to the changing needs of the people we serve.

We are also interested in narrative and anecdotal data. This aspect of analysis is much more difficult to track but provides a necessary balance to quantitative data. Stories from our participants, the ability of our commissions and community roundtables to achieve their goals, and the retention rate of folks involved in our programs are other types of feedback that we are tracking closely. While they do not fit neatly into a spreadsheet, we have practices for checking in with our communities, listening to them and following up with them to let them know that we are taking in their feedback and using it to inform and direct our work.

As noted earlier, DON will also be investing in a department-wide data and evaluation program in 2024 that will provide a framework for how we gather, measure, and respond to data to ensure we are meeting the needs of the community.