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# Neighborhood Livability in Northwest Portland: A Case Study of Portland's Northwest District Executive Summary

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NEIGHBORHOOD LIVABILITY  
IN  
NORTHWEST PORTLAND

A Case Study of Portland's Northwest District  
Executive Summary

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for the City of Portland  
Bureau of Licenses

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Portland's Northwest Neighborhood District ("the District") has a unique character, reflecting its special role in Portland's economic history and its geographical location relative to the downtown area, the Willamette River and the West Hills. Current tensions between the District's function as a close-in, high-density residential area and its commercial activities are the most recent iteration of tensions that have existed from the time the area was first settled.

The bulk of what is now called the Northwest District was part of Captain John Couch's 1845 land claim. Commercial development of this claim along the Willamette River was so rapid that early residential establishments were already being forced westward away from the river by the 1860s. The original Nob Hill area -- roughly between NW 17th and 22nd Avenues, from Davis to Kearney -- "was perhaps the most elegant and fashionable place to live in Portland" from the 1870s through the early part of the 1900s.<sup>1</sup> Residential construction in the hills at the western edge of the District began in the 1880s, and businesses began dominating the southern and western borders of Couch's claim, along NW 21st Avenue and Burnside Street.

From the beginning, this area had a mix of residential and commercial activities, which has nurtured evolution of an unusual "personality":

Due to the area's relative isolation from the rest of the city, and since the residences had the majority of their physical and social needs fulfilled within the neighborhood, a profound introspective attitude developed (PHLC/PBP 1978, 130).

Construction of a streetcar system that connected the area with downtown businesses led to expansion of multifamily housing in the neighborhood, which was simultaneously encouraged by the fact that rising property values made single-family homes too expensive for many people who wanted to live in the neighborhood. As other, more distant parts of the growing Portland area became more attractive to the wealthy, descendants of the several founding families who had lived for generations in the neighborhood began to move out, and their large homes were frequently divided into multifamily dwellings. This process was repeated when creation of an automobile-based infrastructure system opened up still other upper-class residential areas.

As the more well-to-do residents relocated and as commercial interests became more influential in determining the neighborhood's character during the middle decades of the century, the neighborhood fell into decay. According to the PHLC/PBP:

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<sup>1</sup> The Portland Historical Landmarks Commission and the Portland Bureau of Planning (1978, 129). The historical information in this Executive Summary is drawn from that report and from MacColl (1979).

The entire area took upon itself all the problems of inner city neighborhoods during the 1950's. Transiency, traffic problems, and deterioration of the area's once proud structures seemed inevitable. The neighborhood was becoming the province of the young and old, most of whom were visibly poor (1978, 132).

In the 1960s, neighborhood feelings about quality of life and the neighborhood's path of development coalesced. Residents became active in trying to direct the neighborhood's commercial activities and in preserving historic buildings. Now, "with a mix of the elderly, students, second generation immigrants, and younger professionals, it is Portland's most cosmopolitan neighborhood" (Abbott 1987, 82).

Both Portland's Livable City Program and Metro's Regional Urban Growth Goals and Objectives encourage the development of mixed-use urban centers similar to the Northwest Neighborhood District, where residential and nonresidential land uses are combined at higher densities than are typical for Portland neighborhoods. In anticipating this development, government officials are interested in evaluating the successes and problems experienced by residents and business owners in the District.

In particular, commercial and residential growth in the District in recent years has exacerbated some issues that are also affected by the use of alcohol in public places, such as late-night noise, loss of residential parking and increased traffic. A major impetus for this study was the desire to assess the extent, strength and particulars of residents' and business owners' feelings about these alcohol-related issues, and, as much as possible, to separate out that part of these problems that is tied to alcohol use. The City has devised a Liquor License Recommendation Process that is intended in part to "ensure . . . that all [liquor outlets] are conducted in a lawful manner that does not unreasonably disturb the peace and tranquillity of this City and its neighborhoods" (Bureau of Licenses 1994, 1). One feature of the recommendation process involves creation of Liquor Impact Areas where the Bureau of Licenses finds "clear evidence that excessive criminal acts, liquor law violations, alcohol related litter, or noise and disturbances are present and can be attributed to certain types of liquor outlets and/or liquor operations in a specific geographic area" (Bureau of Licenses 1994, 10). Development of the recommendation procedure and definition of liquor impact areas reflects the City's awareness that alcohol use may have a number of ramifications on a neighborhood beyond the more obvious behavioral annoyances.

The "Neighborhood Livability in Northwest Portland" survey and this report were initiated by local businesses, residents, and the Northwest District Association in a voluntary cooperative effort with the City of Portland and the Oregon Liquor Control Commission (OLCC). The survey

was funded by the City of Portland's Bureau of Licenses. Funding for a series of focus group discussions that led to development of the survey instrument was provided through voluntary contributions from a select group of bars and restaurants in the District.

### The study's methodology

For purposes of this study, the section of the District with the highest concentration of commercial businesses was defined as an "Impact Area." Problems caused by the mixture of retail and residential land uses were expected to be the most intense in this part of the District. In addition, commercial redevelopment in this area in the last first years is widely perceived as affecting the nature and extent of problems experienced by residents in various locations within the District. For instance, increasing the volume of retail business activity leads to more traffic congestion and more competition for limited parking, as more people drive to the commercial district to shop. More traffic leads to more noise overall, and more commercial activity at night from patronage of bars and restaurants causes noise at times that may conflict most with livability from residents' perspectives. Increased business is also accompanied by increased numbers of deliveries and garbage collections, which may similarly impact residential livability.

The Impact Area is an ad hoc concept. Although it is a major unit of analysis for this study, its borders were informally defined and should not be interpreted as marking clear boundaries between completely different or unrelated District areas. For this study's analysis, the Impact Area encompasses the area bounded by NW Flanders, NW Lovejoy, NW 20th and NW 24th.

Two similar questionnaires were developed to obtain information separately from District business owners and residents about their attitudes, interests, concerns and lifestyles. The issues to be addressed in the questionnaires were identified through a series of small group discussions facilitated by Dr. David Morgan and Dr. Kerth O'Brien of Portland State University. Each of the five focus group sessions was attended by representatives of a different targeted group within the District, including residents of the Impact Area, business owners and residents of the District in general. The focus group discussions elicited a detailed and wide-ranging view of the District's most positive and most problematic features, from the disparate perspectives of the several groups represented.

The specific questionnaire items were designed in collaboration with Portland's Bureau of Licenses (the agency responsible for city alcohol regulation and liquor licensing), the local neighborhood association (the Northwest District Association) and area residents attending its meetings,

business owners and the Oregon Liquor Control Commission. The survey version aimed at residents was mailed to 500 randomly selected residential addresses, with a sampling rate within the Impact Area of about double that of the remainder of the District's geographic area. The commercially oriented survey version was mailed to 100 businesses, most of which were located within the Impact Area. Because one specific aim of the study was to examine the effects of commercial enterprises that draw non-residential retail customers into the District, professional offices, banks, a hospital in the District and corporate offices were not included in the sampling frame from which business addresses were chosen.

### Weaknesses of the study

Respondents who completed and returned the surveys may have stronger opinions than those who did not; they may feel more comfortable with survey research techniques; they may have more time to fill out questionnaires; or they may in other ways differ from the general group that did not participate in the study. Thus, it cannot be assumed that the opinions expressed by the people who returned the surveys give an accurate picture of how residents and/or business owners in the District as a whole view these issues. The surveys gathered quite a bit of information from those who were sent surveys and who chose to complete them, but the results cannot be accurately generalized to the entire District.

Residents who responded to the survey differ from the typical District resident in several ways: they are more likely to be homeowners, are better educated, have higher incomes, and tend to be employed in managerial or professional occupations. While it is reasonable to conclude that the information in the surveys that were returned represents the opinions of people in the District who are socioeconomically similar to the respondents, it is not necessarily the case that these opinions represent those of all residents.

Some items on the survey used "semantic differential scales," such as one asking whether a particular issue is considered to be "a very big problem," "a big problem," "a problem," "an inconvenience," or "not a problem." This kind of scale is intended to capture a relatively fine level of subjective feeling -- respondents should be able to indicate at a fairly accurate level how strongly they feel about the issue. However, respondents will interpret the response categories in relation to their own general perceptions about how annoying environmental factors are. Two people faced with identical situations may feel very differently about how problematic they are. Information captured with these scales will reflect to some degree the strength of respondents' feelings, but it

cannot be assumed that each respondent defines "a problem" or "an inconvenience" in the same way.

### Strengths of the study

The questionnaire was developed as a result of focus group interviews that identified residents' and business owners' specific concerns about the District. As a result, the surveys incorporated a very comprehensive range of issues. Among the first items were two lists of District features that had been mentioned in the focus group discussions as being either good things about the District or District problems. Some of these features may be related to the three central topics of the survey (noise, traffic and parking, and alcohol use), but many go beyond these themes. General items that capture overall attitudes about life in the District were included, as well as many specific sets of questions about the focal topics.

Most of the questions were answered by selecting one response from a list, but open-ended questions were included for each of the three major topic areas. Respondents were provided with an opportunity to suggest policy changes that might ameliorate District problems. Many respondents took advantage of the chance to make comments either about specific issues or about their experiences in living in the District.

In addition to its comprehensiveness, this study may serve as an important tool for designing further studies to assess factors that define an impact area in terms of alcohol licensing concerns. Its function as a pilot study may also be extended to further research assessing neighborhood livability in general, particularly in light of the recent emphasis on mixed-use neighborhood development.

Thus, the information in this report may be used not only to inform current policy decision-making but also as a point of departure for future studies in other areas of the city.

## The respondents

Residents returned 205 surveys, reflecting a 41% return rate. Forty-three percent of the returned surveys were completed by people living in the Impact Area (bounded by NW Flanders, NW 24th, NW Lovejoy and NW 20th). Fifty-seven percent were completed by people living in the District but outside that central area.

Residents who responded to the survey differed from District residents described in the 1993 Neighborhood Profiles and 1990 Census in several respects, as noted above. Residents who responded to the survey also tend to be much better educated than the 1990 Census reported as reflective of Portland as a whole. Seventy-three percent terminated their education with a college degree or a graduate or professional degree, which only 25% of all Portland residents have done. Their income is skewed toward the high end -- percentages similar to those in the Census earn between \$10,000 and \$49,999, but fewer respondents earn less than \$10,000 a year and more earn \$50,000 or more than Portlanders overall do. The respondents are much less likely to be homeowners: 26% of the respondents are, compared to 50% of Portland residents as a whole.

Most resident respondents are employed or self-employed (78%), and 13% are retired. They are heavily concentrated in managerial and professional occupations compared to the general Portland workforce: 51% are in the "managerial and professional specialty" category, while 29% of Portland workers are. The respondents are employed in service occupations in slightly higher proportions than are Portland employees overall (20% of respondents, compared to 14% of Portland employees).

The respondents living in the Impact Area have lived in the District for an average of 7.6 years, and those living outside the Impact Area have been in the District an average of 9.5 years. Impact Area residents are less sure they will remain in the District than are other residents; 60% of respondents living outside the Impact Area plan to be in the District a couple of years from now, but only 36% of Impact Area respondents feel that sure they will remain in the District.

Fifty-six surveys were completed by District business owners, representing a 56% return rate from businesses. Sixty-one percent were from business owners in the Impact Area.

Respondents who are business owners in the District have somewhat stronger neighborhood ties in some respects than do residents. Nearly one-third of them are District

residents, and they have been involved in the District as businesspeople for an average of almost 10 years. Ninety percent expect to be in business in their current location next year.

Most business respondents are in the retail business (57%). Of these, 23% are food-retail businesses that may also sell alcohol products. An additional 22% own a bar, pub or restaurant, and 17% own a service-oriented business. Thirty-one percent have a liquor license (26% of Impact Area business respondents and 36% of others). That is, nine businesses within the 36-square-block Impact Area reported having a liquor license, while eight businesses in the entire area outside the Impact Area reported having one.

## Findings

### Attitudes and Lifestyles

Residents and business owners have remarkably similar views of the Northwest District. There is strong consensus among both groups that the District is a good place for them. The two groups identify the same features of District life as being particularly important -- four of the five highest-scored features for the two groups are the same (people can walk to different activities; people can live and work in the District; it's close to downtown; and it has a good mix of residents), and they both believe that the single most significant District amenity is its pedestrian-friendly geography. They generally agree about what features are not important in creating the environment they like in the District. For example, neither group rates affordable rents as a positive aspect of District life.

The mixed-use, walkable nature of the District is the primary reason given by both residents and businesses for wanting to stay in the District.

Turning to District problems, the two groups are again in agreement. Too little parking and auto theft were scored highest by both residents and business owners, and vandalism and the rising cost of living were two of the next four most noticeable problems for both groups. Too many bars, too much noise, difficulty finding basic goods, and the presence of too many people who do not live in the District all ranked near the bottom of the list of District problems.

The subject of greatest disagreement between residents and business owners is the impact of recent changes in the District's commercial and residential character. While 87% of business owners feel recent commercial redevelopment makes the District better, only 66% of residents

concur. Recent changes in the District's residents are considered to be making the District worse by 25% of residents, but by only 6% of business owners.

Responses to open-ended questions about things that could potentially cause the respondents to move out of the District revealed similar fears among residents and business owners. Rising real estate prices are seen as a factor that could make the District unaffordable, and increases in urban problems such as congestion, inadequate parking, crime and street people are worrisome to some members of both respondent groups. Some respondents fear that if current trends continue, the District will no longer be a pleasant place to live or work.

### Noise, Traffic and Parking, and Alcohol

Of the three major issues studied in this survey, the one that residents and business owners both inside and outside the Impact Area agree on most is traffic and parking, with parking being particularly problematic for all respondents. Business owners feel the lack of easily available parking is detrimental to their business operations, and residents feel it is a big problem for both them and their guests.

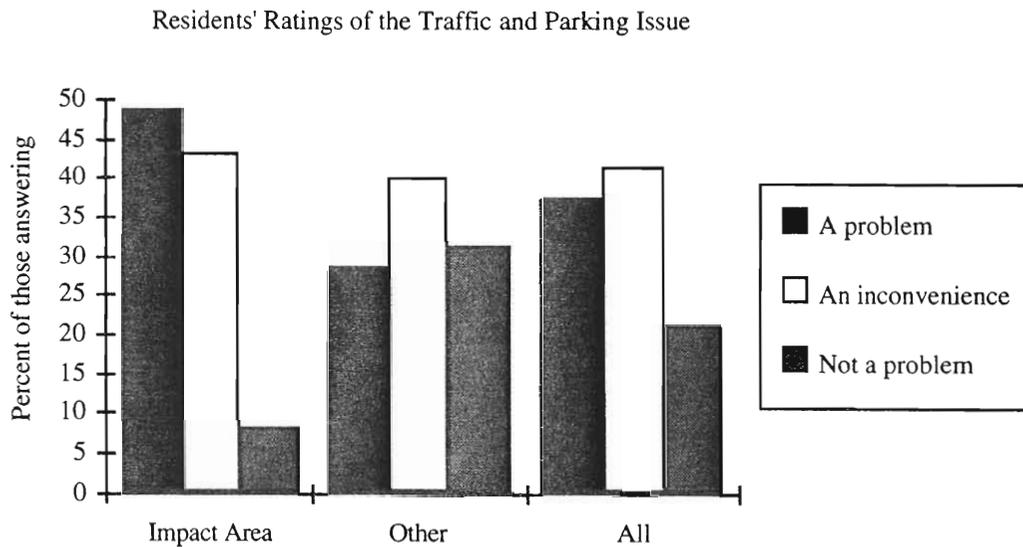


Figure A: How residents rate traffic and parking issues in the District: within the Impact Area, outside of the Impact Area, and throughout the entire District

Business Owners' Ratings of the Traffic and Parking Issue

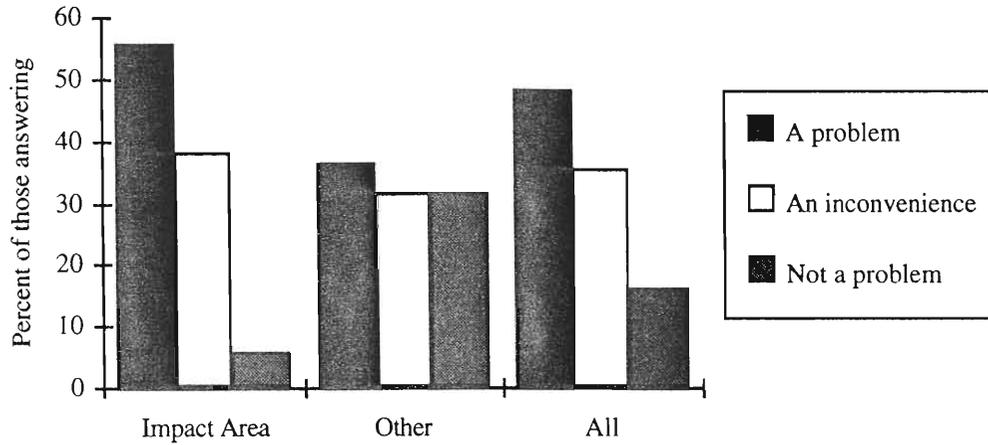


Figure B: How business owners rate traffic and parking issues in the District: within the Impact Area, outside of the Impact Area, and throughout the entire District

Noise and alcohol-related issues are of little functional significance to business owners, and their impact on residents is largely dependent on how close the resident lives to the commercial areas on NW 21st and NW 23rd Avenues. Noise issues are widely experienced throughout the District, although they are much more serious in the Impact Area. Problems with alcohol-related issues that relate to homeless people are felt by all residents, although they are felt more strongly by Impact Area residents. Problems associated with bars and restaurants are predominantly imposed on Impact Area residents.

Residents' Ratings of the Noise Issue

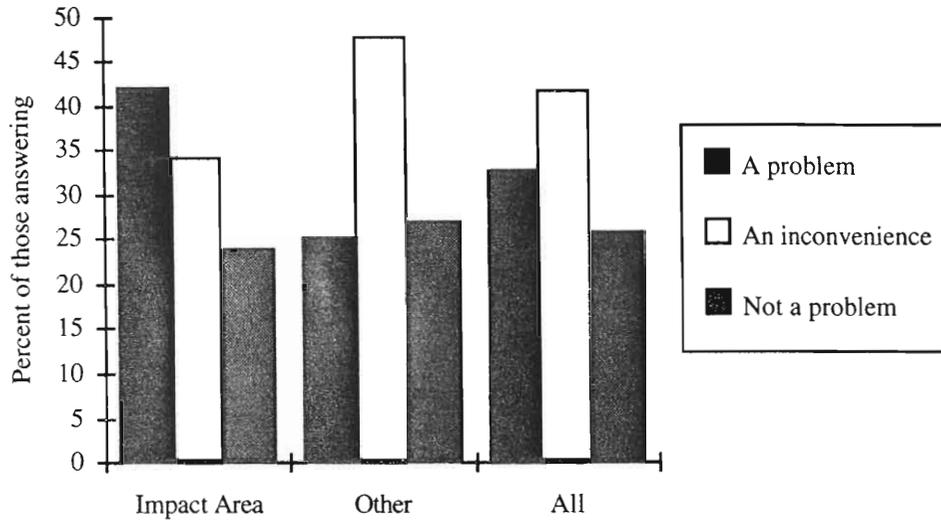


Figure C: How residents rate noise issues in the District: within the Impact Area, outside of the Impact Area, and throughout the entire District

Business Owners' Ratings of the Noise Issue

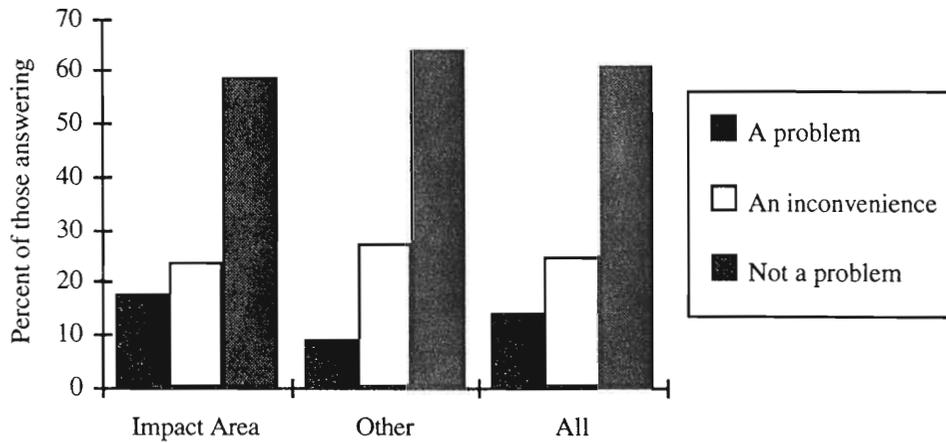


Figure D: How business owners rate noise issues in the District: within the Impact Area, outside of the Impact Area, and throughout the entire District

Residents' Ratings of Alcohol-Related Issues

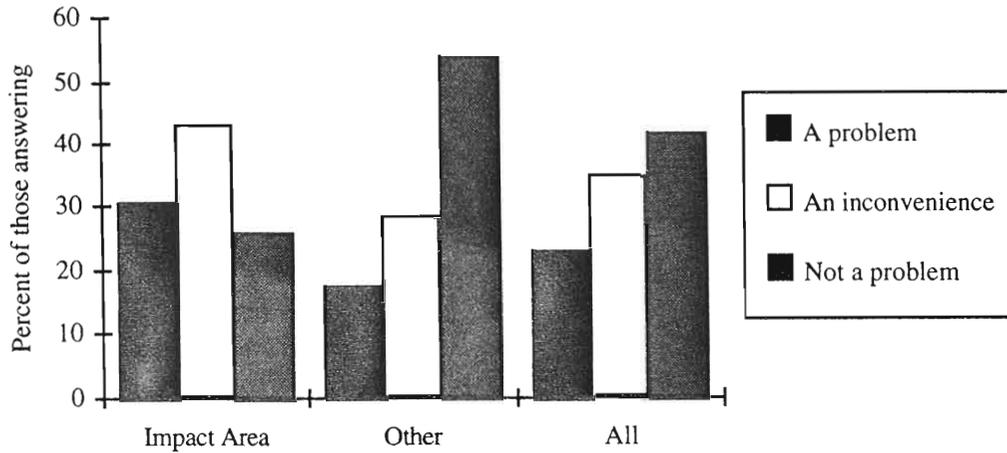


Figure E: How residents rate alcohol-related issues in the District: within the Impact Area, outside of the Impact Area, and throughout the entire District

Business Owners' Ratings of Alcohol-Related Issues

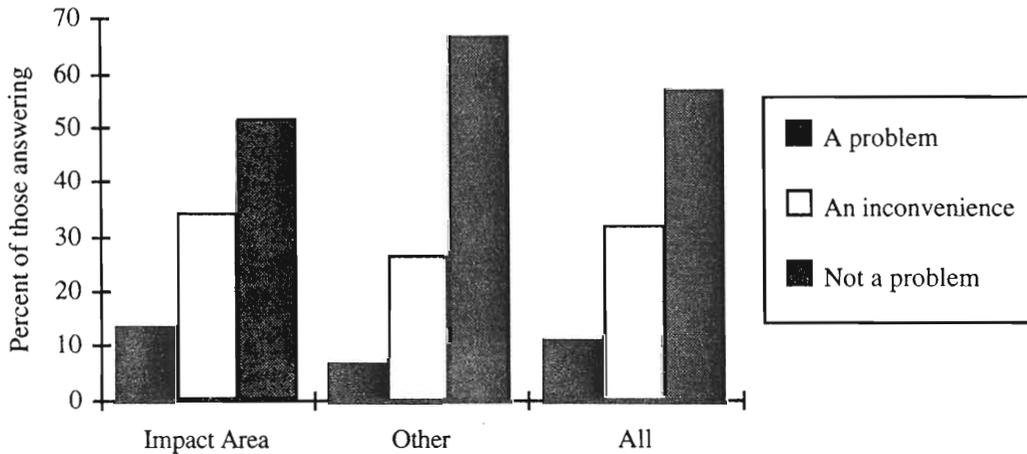


Figure F: How business owners rate alcohol-related issues in the District: within the Impact Area, outside of the Impact Area, and throughout the entire District

Respondents' policy suggestions

The most frequent policy suggestion from residents is to manage garbage collection in such a way that it is not so noisy so early in the morning. Restricting the presence of trucks and buses in the neighborhood or trying to use quieter vehicles is another idea. Many residents seem quite accepting of the noise level they experience, however, and believe it is an inherent feature of life in

an urban neighborhood, which many feel is more than compensated for by other attractive aspects of the Northwest Neighborhood District.

Business owners as a group appear to be unaffected by noise issues and had few suggestions for changes.

Parking suggestions from residents were concentrated on the idea of a resident parking permit system that would give District residents priority in access to on-street parking. Several refer to the system in Goose Hollow as one that could be duplicated in the District. Allowing parking in businesses' parking lots during off-hours was also mentioned frequently. Changing traffic flow (e.g., through the implementation of one-way streets) to reduce congestion was the most common suggestion to reduce traffic problems.

Business owners, however, were more likely to suggest construction of parking garages than to suggest a residential parking permit system. A few also supported the idea of changing some two-way streets to one-way, although others mentioned the importance of continued exposure to two-way street traffic for their business success.

Residents had numerous suggestions about changing ordinances regulating liquor licensees, such as reducing the hours during which alcohol may be served, limiting the number of liquor licenses, and requiring the owners of alcohol-dispensing establishments to be responsible for their patrons' behavior. Making the police presence more visible was also presented as an option for getting bar and restaurant patrons to exhibit more orderly behavior.

Business owners mirrored these same suggestions, although at a greatly reduced level of frequency, reflecting the fact that alcohol-related behaviors are relatively unproblematic for them.

## Conclusions

The Northwest Neighborhood District has been characterized by mixed land uses for most of its history. As a consequence, residents and commerce have coexisted in a fairly high-density location. Historically, the District has experienced many of the potential problems associated with high density and mixed land uses: crowded conditions, noise and air pollution, traffic congestion, unlawful behavior. In the past, more affluent residents have responded to such conditions by moving out of the District; at one time, upper income flight left the District as the enclave of the poor and elderly.

As social and employment patterns have changed, however, residents are returning to neighborhoods like the Northwest because of the many benefits they see available to them. These include mixed land uses and close proximity to both District and downtown business and cultural activities. The District, however, is more than just home to its residents. Its businesses serve people from all parts of the city. In this regard, many of the commercial uses of the District attract nonresidents as well as residents, greatly exacerbating issues related to traffic and congestion, such as noise and lack of parking.

Many of these businesses are concentrated within a 36-square-block area. The density of type of businesses should be kept in mind in considering the various issues raised by this study. For instance, there appears to be a concentration of establishments with liquor licenses in the Impact Area (nine reported within the 36-square-block area). This is more than the number reported for the entire remaining Northwest District. The same holds for other types of businesses: there are 16 nonfood retail businesses within the 36-square-block Impact Area and only eight throughout the rest of the District.

The mix of activities in the District, combined with the fact that the District serves both residents and nonresidents, makes it difficult to analyze the full impact of any one activity. It also makes it difficult to separate impacts and analyze them individually. For instance, it is clear that problems related to traffic and transportation are ranked as primary concerns among both residents and business owners. It is not, however, clear to what extent increased traffic increases the level to which noise is perceived as a problem. Nor is it clear the extent to which either noise or traffic is impacted by increased business activity, including the consumption of alcohol in public places.

Many of the questions in this study asked respondents to rank the degree to which certain issues were perceived as problems. Traffic and transportation issues are generally ranked as the most significant issues by residents of any neighborhood, not just the Northwest. Once traffic and transportation issues are taken into consideration, other concerns begin to emerge: auto theft and vandalism, high rents, noise, alcohol-related problems. It is important to note that those problems that seem minor now may be minor *only in comparison to traffic concerns*. It also should be kept in mind that problems that are ranked as minor now *may become* more significant in the future if not addressed proactively through present policy decisions.

Policy responses that address traffic and transportation issues will necessarily have an effect on many of the other problems in the District. Noise, in particular, would likely be lessened. But addressing traffic and transportation through direct controls such as implementing parking

permits or one-way streets is not the only means of ameliorating those problems. Stricter licensing of businesses, for example, can have the effect of limiting traffic and, consequently, noise.

On the other hand, it must be remembered that easy automobile access and generous licensing standards help stimulate business. If traffic and businesses are regulated too heavily, the commercial segments of the District may suffer and may consequently relocate. If this occurred on a wide scale, the mixed-use nature of the District would be eliminated and the area would lose some of its most attractive features. By the same token, if the District is to survive as a thriving residential area, residents' interests should not be eclipsed by those of the businesses. The interdependency among the parts of the District makes policy formulation especially difficult.

The nature of the problems in Northwest is multifaceted; there are complex interrelationships among the various elements highlighted in this study -- traffic, noise, and alcohol use. Policy responses to these problems should be equally multifaceted and interrelated. For instance, a policy response seeking to alleviate traffic problems should be formulated with the other problem areas in mind. By the same token, it should be remembered that the District is an urban ecosystem whose various parts are interdependent. Policy responses should be formulated with ideas of balance and compromise in mind, because a policy aimed at one aspect of the District will affect all others.

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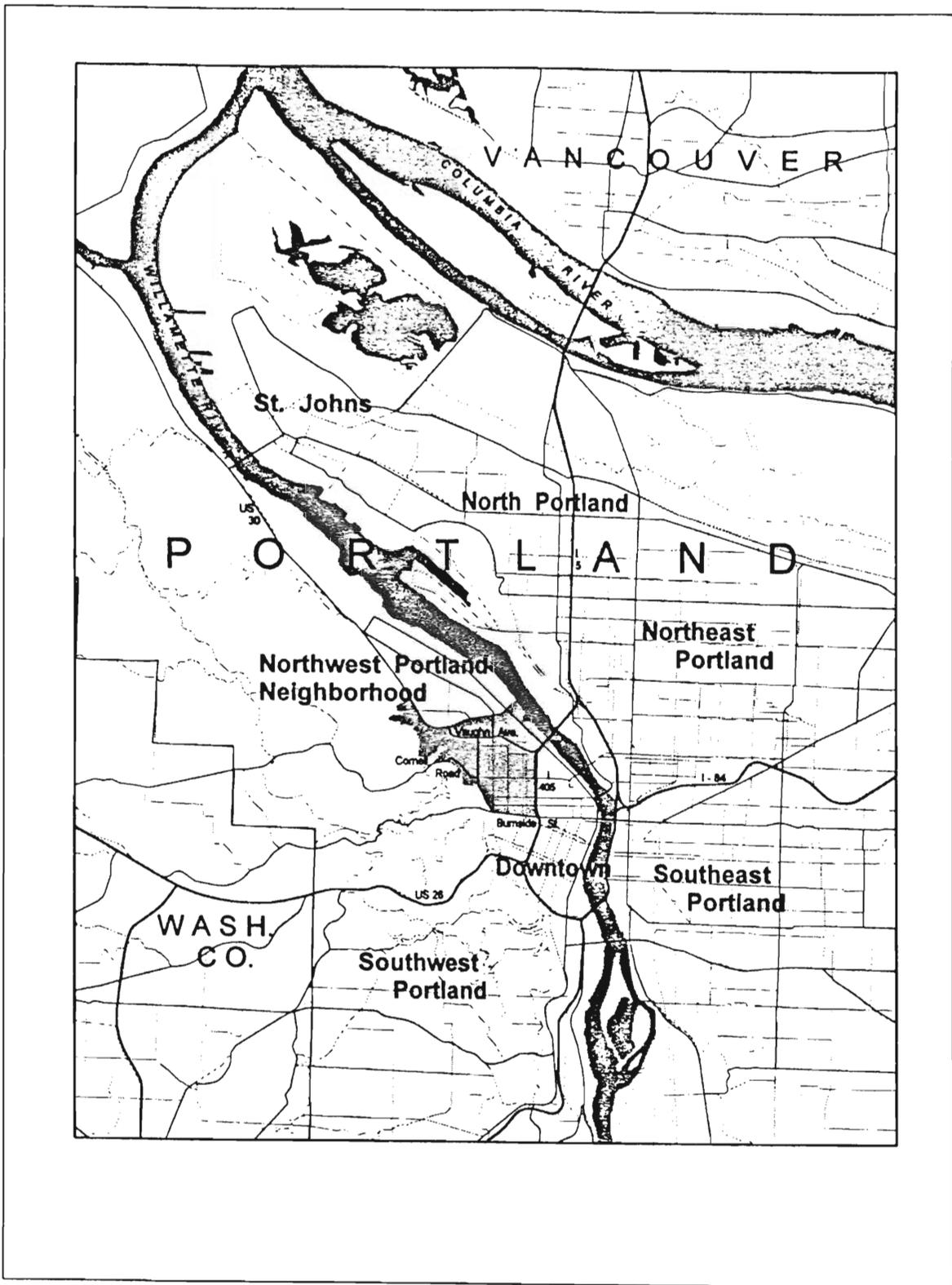


Figure 1: The Northwest Portland Neighborhood

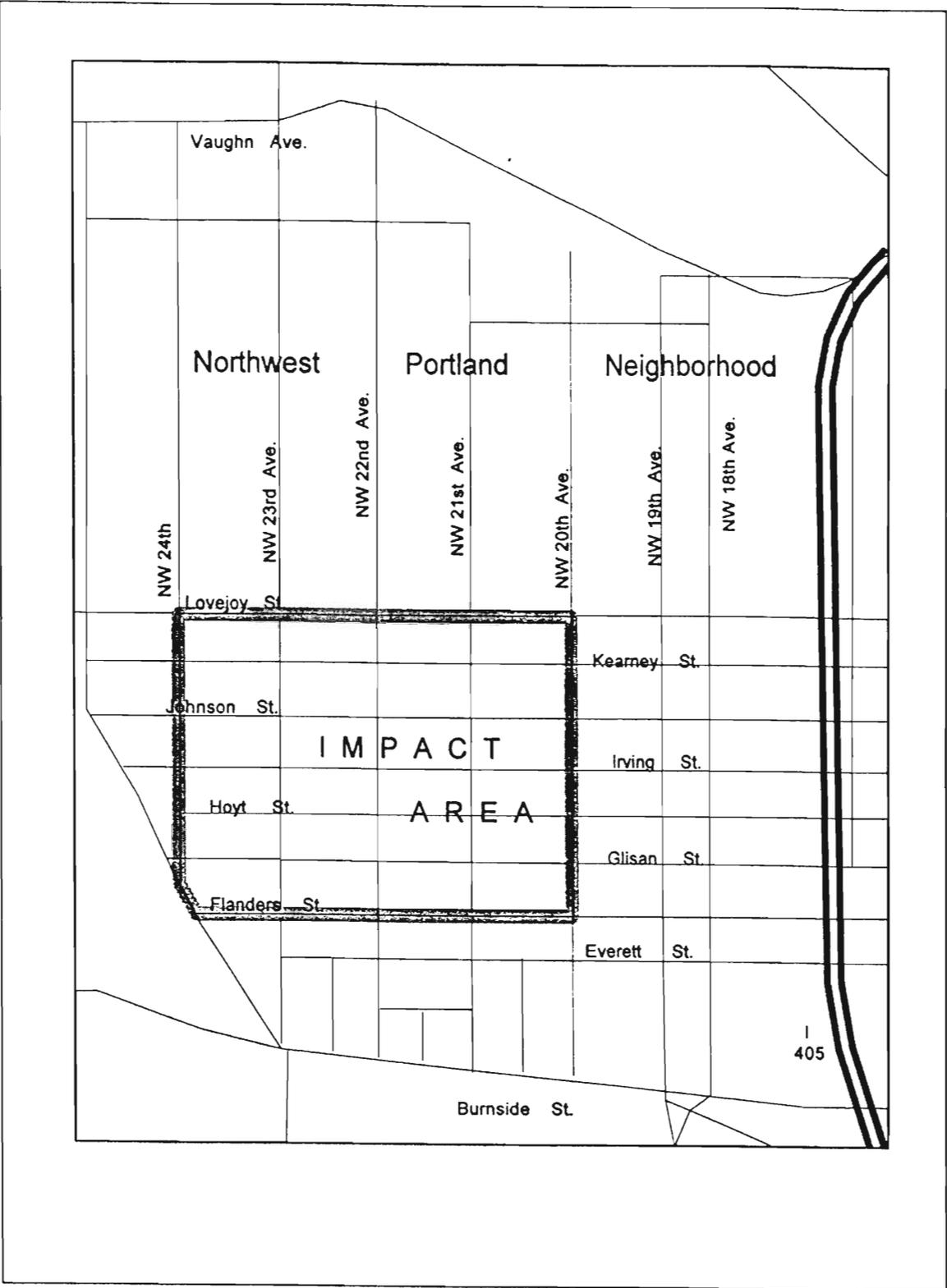


Figure 2: The Impact Area