

The Full Nelson

By Kathryn Maese, Downtown News, February 2, 2002

City Hall Veteran Gives the Power Back to L.A. Neighborhoods

The applications stacked waist-high on Greg Nelson's desk have been steadily piling up since October. In a couple of weeks, he'll be neck-high in the dense documents.

That doesn't phase the 26-year City Hall veteran, who was tapped by Mayor Jim Hahn to head the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE), which oversees the citywide neighborhood council process and certification.

At 55, Nelson is just getting his second wind, often working 14-hour days and barely stopping to eat, shower and sleep at his Chinatown apartment. He makes time to run on the weekends, but his house is littered with even more Neighborhood Council applications for him to read.

The grassroots movement has gained momentum in recent weeks, with more than 40 groups seeking official recognition for their councils. In mid December, the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council put in its bid, and so far four have been certified. But with 96 neighborhood groups in various stages of formation, and only a twice-monthly commission meeting, Nelson has his work cut out for him.

City Hall leaders anticipated only 10 to 20 neighborhood council certifications this fiscal year, but Nelson has set a much more aggressive pace. "We're only halfway through this fiscal year and we have 40 applications," he notes. "I think it's easy to say we're going to see more than 10 get certified by June 30."

But wading through dozens of documents hasn't been the problem.

"The toughest part of my job has been the fact that there simply aren't enough hours in the day," he says. "But I discovered that I could work long hours with less stress. That's the difference when you are your own boss. I don't have a councilman I need to get an answer to. The buck stops here now and I really love it."

For nearly three decades, the San Fernando Valley native worked for City Councilman Joel Wachs, climbing the ranks from a low-level environmental specialist to chief deputy. During his tenure, Nelson crafted plans on everything from rent stabilization to public art to a campaign against using a public subsidy for the Staples Center arena (the latter effort helped vastly reduce the amount the city contributed to the deal).

Nelson's quirky personality and populist approach has found a perfect fit with the spirit of the quasi-governmental neighborhood council system. Attending nearly 200 charter reform commission sessions, he helped draft the original proposal to create the network of self-governed and independent councils made possible by the new City Charter. When implemented, Angelenos will be able to provide input on everything from potholes to policymaking as part of an effort to close the communication gap between City Hall and its constituents.

"When the idea came about, there were two basic problems in the way the city was run," Nelson notes. "Decisions were basically influenced by professional lobbyists, who have the most

influence while the public gets left out in the cold.

"Our idea was to create this system to give people the resources and training they needed to have influence at that same level," he continues. "The other problem was that there really was no way for groups to communicate or discuss something that was of interest to them all. They had no way of joining forces and were almost in a de facto way made separate."

Seal of Approval

Nelson received an urban affairs degree from Cal State Northridge, where he specialized in geography and developed an interest in the city. After returning from Vietnam, he joined former Mayor Sam Yorty's office as a student worker, and later worked on Wachs' runoff campaign. While most of Wachs' contingent came from his alma mater UCLA, it was Nelson's brief but valuable City Hall experience that got him noticed and hired by the newly elected councilman.

Many consider Nelson to be the father of the neighborhood council in Los Angeles. In fact, the idea for local councils came about when Nelson stumbled across a book written by three Tufts University professors, who had studied several cities that had successfully implemented neighborhood councils. Nelson, who had been mulling over the idea since 1993, had struck gold. Then, Wachs announced his decision to run for mayor.

"When I told (Wachs) about this idea he made it the centerpiece of his whole mayoral campaign," Nelson says, recalling the 1993 election. "He believed in this idea of involving people and holding elected officials accountable."

In a telephone interview from New York, Wachs said Nelson is "absolutely perfect" to lead the neighborhood council effort. "I was always given credit for the idea, but it was Greg who really brought it to my attention and argued that it was the one vehicle which could make the city come together," Wachs said. "He's there for the right reasons and has his head in the right place. And, if he can work with me he can work with anyone."

Although Wachs lost his mayoral bid, the idea of the councils caught fire, sparking the interest of a largely apathetic electorate. When Wachs left the City Council last September to head the Andy Warhol Foundation in New York, Nelson submitted his resume to Hahn, who promptly gave him the job. It was Hahn's first appointment to a major city agency.

Nelson came to the year-old department after former general manager Rosalind Stewart resigned following criticism over her lack of progress and outreach. DONE's sparse guidelines for the formation of the councils had left many organizers struggling to make sense of the complicated process.

Nelson's first priority was to change the focus of the department. "When I came on board, I saw that the department had left a lot of these groups to develop on their own without any best practices," he says. "The department had not done a good job of communicating, and in the time I was working for Councilman Wachs, I couldn't remember a single email or newsletter. Nobody knew what was going on."

Nelson's job description evolves daily. He mediates often bitter boundary disputes between rival councils, and painstakingly pores over thousands of names and numbers to compile an Internet

database.

"Almost every day now we're coming up with a new problem, a new issue, a new predicament," he says. "But that's really the exciting part because we're building something that has never been done before and we're trying to do it in a time frame that everyone said was impossible."

Messy Process

Nelson knows that because L.A. is such a diverse, sprawling city, the formation process will be much messier and more disorganized than other municipal efforts.

"When I talked to other councils across the country they all said if they had anything to do over it would be better training for council leaders--such as mediation, running a meeting and knowing how to reach council members," he notes. "It's all part of building the house. The roof isn't quite on the house yet, but we're working on it."

Nelson is quick to state that recognition as a neighborhood council does not ensure influence or power. Instead, he sees the process as a "meritocracy" where influence and power has to be earned.

"DONE provides the training and resources, but not the will," he says. "What makes the process special and unique is that it requires groups to meet the spirit of the city charter in making sure they represent the diversity of the area. With that I think you'll see decisions being made that are very responsible and balanced."

Nelson says he's been surprised by the reception that the councils have received from city leadership. "We thought that when we designed the system, a lot of people who had power wouldn't be willing to share power," he recalls. "I had a feeling a lot of the problems would come from City Council, but actually the newly elected council members seem to be embracing this whole idea very actively with open arms."

Being able to see the concept through the eyes of a council member has also been a definite advantage for Nelson, who uses his Council experience to teach newly forming neighborhood councils "how to get and use power" to influence decision making. Still, Nelson shuns the moniker of City Hall insider.

"Working with Councilman Wachs, we weren't what you would consider inside or part of the club," he says. "We mainly did most of what we did operating outside of the City Hall system because we would go to the public for our support, like with the Staples arena."

Despite his years working in City Hall, Nelson says he never envisioned a public-stage career for himself. "I saw what a fish bowl existence it was," he notes. "I wanted to have a little bit of a private life and time to myself. I just had fun working behind the scenes developing ideas and planning them out."

When asked by Hahn why he wanted to take on the challenge, Nelson replied: "I've always wanted to have the toughest job, the one that no one else wants, the one that has the impossible task, and because I don't like the weather in Afghanistan this time of year."

