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How Much Can Neighborhood Councils Really Do?

by Edward Rivera

The recent inability of the Lincoln Heights Neighborhood council to make a formal recommendation regarding the AIDS Wall-Las memorias project points out a troubling fact about neighborhood councils. For all their well-meaning good, they are only human and are stymied when it comes to making decisions that will cut across a wide swath of a given community. The irony of it all is that the bigger the issue, the less Neighborhood Councils may be able to do about it.

According to the Lincoln Heights Neighborhood Council Bylaws, the entire membership of the board needs to be taken into account when any vote is taken. If there are only 15 members present out of the 25 members on the board, then there had better be 13 people who agree on the issue at hand.

As noted in our cover story on the Wall, many members of the LHNC were so upset at Oscar Garcia that they began to demand his recall.

This can happen when an issue is polarizing, but it can also happen when an issue is only the concern of a few members.

The group dynamic is that a small group of member can hold the rest of any board hostage by simply gathering the minimum number of votes needed to halt a decision on an issue.

LHNC president Garcia is unfazed by the attack on himself, saying, "We have started some discussion regarding our bylaws and we should be creating a committee to look at ways of improving them. As you know the current bylaws were only a starting point and should continue to be improved as our neighborhood council gains more experience.

"In Lincoln Heights we have faced issues that have people with different view points and we worked through the issues and reached a decision. However, it may be ok to say "we are divided and this is why...." Sometimes not making a decision allows an opportunity to review the issue more closely or to see if there was an underlying issue that needs to be addressed. Either way it's an educational experience."

Education only gets you a diploma. It does not make decisions happen.

What is difficult about the neighborhood council process is that by and large the members of a neighborhood council are either well-meaning and inexperienced, or politically savvy with their own agenda to put across.

Rare is the board member of any council who is working for the public good, without a cause to put forth, or a political deal to make.

In the case of City Council, these are seasoned political professionals who understand the art of the deal, who understand when it is time to cut their losses and run, or other wise choose their battles.

Neighborhood councils could explode on the volatility of its member. For many members, the one cause they champion could be enough to sabotage the efforts of the entire group. As in "If we don't get our way, we are leaving."

Recalls are a difficult process for city politicians, but a much easier process for someone with the gumption and desire to push his own agenda within a neighborhood council.

The battlefield of neighborhood councils across the City is littered with the bodies of founding members who were voted out of office by newcomers or strangers.

Many elections have been decided by people who have never attended a Neighborhood Council meeting. We saw this occur in Hollywood and in Chinatown, and to a lesser degree in other Neighborhood Councils.

Get used to it.

Given the relatively small size of neighborhood council boards and memberships, it would be a snap for a developer or a campaign staffer to wreak havoc across

City Council districts with the aid of just a few "plants." In fact, you can expect more of this in years to come.

This in no way demeans the nature or intent or spirit of Neighborhood Councils. They are exactly as the Charter recommended they should be a place where local issues get brought right to the guy across the street.

One hopes that the guy across the street either has no agenda or is reasonable. With the recent flurry of accusations against the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment for either a: too much influence or b: not enough influence, Neighborhood Councils have a lot to learn about the art of structuring a deal. It's never too late.

In the meantime, watch your bylaws.