



Jun. 2003 Greg Nelson On L.A.'s Neighborhood Councils: An Evolving, Untested Experiment In Governance

Volume XVI No. 9 *TPR recently caught up with Greg Nelson, General Manager of the Los Angeles Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, responsible for creating, nurturing and supporting neighborhood councils throughout the city. In this interview, Nelson provides an update on the development of neighborhood councils and addresses the evolving structure within which neighborhood councils will participate in citywide decision making.*

In September, 2001 TPR interviewed Rosalyn Stewart, your predecessor, and she said she expected it would take 10-15 years to cover the city with neighborhood councils. Today there are 59 neighborhood councils already certified and many are expecting the city to be completely covered by 2004. What have you done to speed up and change the process in so short a time?

No one told me it was going to take that long. As soon as I got the job, we just started focusing all of our efforts towards processing the applications we had received in a timely way. As a result of this effort to certify people in a timely manner, we have been unable to get a whole lot of other work done. I remember Mayor Riordan's budget anticipated that by June 30th of last year we were supposed to have 10 to 15 neighborhood councils certified; we ended up with 36.

How will the departments and council districts be able to productively interact with such a large number of neighborhood councils? What concrete steps have they been able to take to work the neighborhood councils need to know into their decision making process?

In a participatory democracy, it cannot be spelled out on a piece of paper just how that's going to work. I explain to neighborhood councils that when they get certified that doesn't get them any automatic power or give them any credibility -- they have to earn it. The real power is not given, it's taken. I point to the fact that some of the people who are most influential in how governmental decisions are the lobbyists and city employee unions. No one gave them any power at all. Everything that they got

they took. That's real power -- and we advise the neighborhood councils to function the same way.

One of the keys to influencing decision making is to develop a working relationship with the elected officials. And, each council member has a different way of how they interact with the neighborhood councils. For instance, Councilman Zine tells developers first to take all of their projects to the neighborhood councils to get some feedback. Other council members just do that on a select basis.

At a recent Congress of Neighborhood Councils, there was a much talk about the councils wanting to band together to increase their power because, in the end, they are only advisory according to the city charter. What steps are you taking to meet their expectations? What is your department doing to mitigate their frustrated with the fact that they're not designed to replace the decision making of the City Council?

One of the terms I try to avoid using is to say that neighborhood councils are "just advisory" because, of course, the most powerful lobbyists in the city are just advisory. Some of them do have expectations that once they get certified everyone at City Hall or every elected official will pay attention to them. I have to manage their expectations by reminding them that they have to earn all of the credibility and all of the respect. You don't automatically get anything from being a neighborhood council member.

Aside from having good relationships with the elected officials, the councils need to do two other things. One, they have to ensure that they truly represent the diversity of your area. If you're only the property owners of the area or you're only the chamber of commerce, no elected official will take you very seriously because they will know that you aren't speaking for the entire neighborhood.

Second, the neighborhood councils need to communicate effectively with their stakeholders. The city charter requires that neighborhood councils communicate regularly with all stakeholders. The ability to print newsletters twice or three times a year and send them to all the stakeholders is extremely powerful. In those newsletters, they can talk about the elected officials, who was approached for help and who was responsive. And, since written material like that is what elected officials

send out at election time, you can see how powerful a report from people in the area about their elected officials can be.