

Success and Growing Pains

by Chris Coates

When city officials certified the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council (DLANC) in 2002, it marked not only the continuation of an experiment in civic democracy, but a unique opportunity for a nascent community to have a say in its development and its future. With the Downtown residential explosion coinciding with the installation of neighborhood councils, DLANC's board of directors saw the potential to impact a burgeoning neighborhood from the very beginning.

Three years later, the results are decidedly mixed. The unpaid and all-volunteer DLANC has notched some impressive achievements, most notably the creation of the Gallery Row arts scene. However, it has also been beset by politicking and policy issues. The monthly board meetings - with an often unwieldy 27 members - are plagued by delays and confusion sparked from the merry-go-round of sending issues to the board, to a committee for further study, and back to the board again. Like many of the approximately 90 neighborhood councils that have arrived in Los Angeles since 2001, decisions often move at the speed of molasses.

"I see this neighborhood council as doing a great deal of work," said Greg Nelson, the general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE), the city entity that oversees neighborhood councils. "If the worst of the problems is that they are sluggish right now, that's a good thing.... In the Downtown neighborhood council, they've got a lot of great tools. All the skills are there."

The problem, say some, is that those on the DLANC board have not yet figured out how to best wield those tools and skills. Even DLANC has taken the tactic of shifting some of its most promising developments out of its own hands, hoping to avoid bureaucracy. DLANC, like many neighborhood councils, is experiencing unanticipated growing pains.

Delays and Committees

DLANC's December board meeting was typical. Fifteen minutes after it was scheduled to start, board president Brady Westwater was still waiting for a quorum of 14 members. "They all said they were coming," remarked Westwater as he paced about the Department of Water and Power's cafeteria, where meetings are held the second Tuesday of every month (the next one takes place Jan. 11). The meeting finally began 30 minutes late.

In the realm of local politics, that type of delay is no big deal. Thrice-weekly Los Angeles City Council meetings have started late for years, if not decades, as they wait for a quorum of 10 members. The DLANC board, a cross-section of Downtown denizens with representatives from the business, arts, residential and even homeless communities, can't begin until people have finished their day jobs and negotiated through post-work Downtown traffic.

Los Angeles Downtown News has attended DLANC board sessions for nearly half a year. After committee meetings, board discussions and votes, it is not unusual for items to be in transit for four months, only to be sent back to one of the 11 committees for discussion (another frequent occurrence with City Council and its committees). While the proceedings are slow, board members say the long process is crucial.

"DLANC is a quasi government," said Susan Shaw, the board's treasurer. "Any amount of time is worth it to ensure things get done properly."

"I don't see a more effective way for Downtown... to have a good voice," said Jason Waters, co-chair of the Arts, Aesthetics, Culture and Education Committee.

Others are not as charitable.

"It's the worst kind of bureaucracy," complained Jamie Green, 71, a Downtown artist who is one of the few non-board members to regularly attend DLANC meetings. "It stifles creativity and kills participation. People just don't want to go to the meetings."

While other neighborhood councils point to their funding of wall murals, repairing playground equipment and community cleanups, DLANC's most recent accomplishments include a new website that took more than a year to get online. Sessions are hampered by a lack of efficient record keeping: Westwater could not produce voting statistics from any of the 2004 meetings. The minutes from the past six DLANC sessions, which Westwater provided, do not indicate how directors voted on specific motions.

"We don't vote on too many things," Westwater said. The board passes many items unanimously.

The obvious solution is to put someone in charge of tracking motions and events, and at the October session, DLANC did vote to hire someone to take transcripts of the meetings. The measure was approved and the board moved to interview candidates.

As of December, no one had been selected.

Advisory Body

Neighborhood councils in Los Angeles came about as part of the 1999 City Charter overhaul. They were designed to improve the relationship between neighborhoods and government, and to give stakeholders a greater say in the happenings in their community. However, they have always been intended to serve in an advisory, rather than a decision-making capacity. As the system was being set up, some feared that allowing neighborhood councils to make decisions on planning issues would lead to progress-crushing NIMBYism (not in my backyard).

As members, and politicians, have learned to work with councils, they have scored some notable achievements. Neighborhood councils sounded off loudly over the Department of

Water and Power's proposal to increase water rates. Mayor Jim Hahn asked the councils to submit a list of issues they consider priorities.

The councils each receive \$50,000 in taxpayer funds annually, to spend on local projects or issues. Along with the funds come requirements: Because the councils are technically a government body, they have to follow a laundry list of protocols. Unlike the homeowners' associations or neighborhood groups that predated them, neighborhood councils must post agendas in five public places at least 72 hours before a meeting. Sessions must comply with the Brown Act, California's open meeting statute.

But what really slows things down, say observers and participants, are Robert's Rules of Order, a process that maps out how governmental bodies vote on and discuss items. For example, motions approved by a committee must see a discussion and receive a vote in front of the full board of directors. With only one session a month, it routinely takes four or more meetings for the DLANC board to vote on an item, and longer if goes back to committee for revisions.

Nelson said the system gets bogged down when members aren't familiar with agenda items. DLANC has 27 directors, seven more than the average council, he said.

"I think what happens in too many cases is that people want to discuss [an agenda item] in front of a full board meeting," he said.

Members contend the deliberate routine is necessary, especially for its first-time civic members. Lynn Myers, a DLANC member who co-chairs the Transportation and Public Works Committee, said the large group prevents a "rubber-stamp process."

Melvin Canas, the DONE project coordinator for DLANC, said the Downtown council's accomplishments over the past two years are in line with other neighborhood councils. So is its long process of voting on items. "Things don't necessarily happen in one night," Canas said.

Conflicts of Interest

The issues in front of DLANC mirror Downtown itself. With rapid changes occurring in the community, board members have positions or developments they hope to advance, or squelch. The 27 directors have distinct and varying ideas of what Downtown should or should not become.

"I think they represent a lot of interests," said Ninth District Councilwoman Jan Perry, who represents portions of DLANC's coverage area. "They have homeless and business people at the table. That's democracy."

Such disparate representatives have caused DLANC to grapple with an issue affecting many neighborhood councils: conflicts of interest. At the past four meetings, DLANC

discussed forming a code of ethics addressing whether individual members should be able to vote on items in which they have a financial interest.

The issue is heightened by the fact that at least four DLANC directors work with or are affiliated with lobbying groups (members of the board who are lobbyists must identify themselves). For example, Ed Marzec, DLANC's vice president, is a former registered lobbyist who has represented Mayor Hahn and Eighth District Councilman Bernard Parks. Hal Bastian, who co-chairs a DLANC committee, works for the Downtown Center Business Improvement District (DCBID). The DCBID is a staunch advocate for Downtown renewal, and takes positions on such items as inclusionary zoning; the stances often overlap with DLANC.

Initial moves have called for DLANC board members who are invested in a project to abstain from voting on it. During discussion at the December meeting, Bastian called that idea fundamentally illogical, especially since DLANC itself is a lobbying board for Downtown interests and causes.

Nelson said DONE is not overly worried about lobbyists influencing neighborhood councils. In fact, Nelson said he encourages councils to learn from techniques lobbyists use in getting things done.

"Neighborhood councils are like small towns - it's impossible to not know what everyone else is doing," he said. "Where we see neighborhood councils getting bogged down is distrust between board members."

When it comes to successes, DLANC members are quick to point to Gallery Row. The 16-block arts district was borne out of a DLANC meeting nearly three years ago. A DLANC committee originally governed the organization, then spun it into an independent nonprofit. It has grown from a handful of galleries to nearly 20, and hundreds of people now show up for a monthly Gallery Row art walk.

Yet in a strange way, Gallery Row's success also reveals the extent to which procedures can stymie the process and the techniques that councils have employed to circumnavigate the regulations. Gallery Row organizers said they spun it off partly to avoid the gauntlet of procedures inherent in neighborhood councils.

A troubling precedent may have been set: At the last meeting, the DLANC board voted to hand over its newest creation - an arts festival called L'art - to a nonprofit operator. They spun it off before it was officially formed with the caveat that DLANC will be a sponsor once the festival starts.

Westwater said the handing off is partly intended to skirt some of the regulations governing DLANC, especially those regarding soliciting funds. "Otherwise it's impossible," said Westwater. "We can't accept donations whatsoever."

Other DLANC goals in 2005 include helping to clean up the Los Angeles River and redevelop the Broadway theater district. The group also hopes to entice Downtown businesses to open more locations throughout the area.

While some Downtowners - both DLANC members and observers - say they want the bureaucracy to be lessened and the pace accelerated, the organization accepts the benefits of moving at a turtle rather than a hare's pace.

"For DLANC to be this swift moving [group], it seems unrealistic and unfair," said board member Waters. "We're not being paid to do this. It's mostly an exercise in patience and accessing your personal management skills. Our common goal is getting things done."

DLANC's Not Alone With Its Struggles

The Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council (DLANC) is not the only group to struggle since its formation. Members of numerous neighborhood councils have learned that while they receive \$50,000 a year to spend on area projects, they also have to wrestle with power plays and politics.

The Historic Cultural Neighborhood Council, based in northeast Downtown, in 2003 endured a controversy over that body's election bylaws; the discrepancy resulted in some members being elected to the board even though they were not eligible to run for a seat.

The Van Nuys Neighborhood Council has often struggled to secure a quorum at its meetings. The council has seen allegations of vote rigging after a February 2003 election in which a mostly Hispanic board was elected, the *Los Angeles Daily News* reported last month. The allegations of an "ethnic slate" triggered a failed bid by the League of Women Voters to stage a new election.

On the Westside, the neighborhood council of Westchester/Playa del Rey approved the divisive Playa Vista development, even though three neighborhood council members have financial stakes in the project.

The Hollywood United Neighborhood Council was recently embroiled in a similar argument when it approved a proposal to build a city fire station on the site of a nightclub. The board's president is a spokesman for a competing nightclub in the neighborhood. The alleged conflict of interest was cited in a Dec. 14 recommendation by the city Ethics Commission to exempt neighborhood council members from disclosing their personal finances.

Such a political environment has perhaps bred more traditional, paid civic aspirations in neighborhood council members: 10 of the 79 candidates running for seats in the March city election (where eight Council slots and the mayor's job are up for grabs) hail from neighborhood councils.

Greg Nelson, general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, said such candidates can only improve their communities.

"As a voter, I would rather have people running for office that have a track record," he said, "as opposed to someone who comes out of the woodwork."