

Sunday, February 13, 2000

Rosalind Stewart

Beyond the Block Party: A Big Idea in Civic Renewal Gets Real

By MOLLY SELVIN, Los Angeles Times

After a decade of mediating nasty neighborhood squabbles, Rosalind Stewart would have been forgiven if she vowed never to attend another community meeting. Instead, Stewart, 50, has signed on for a future of community meetings without end.

Last September, Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan named the former field deputy to Councilmembers Marvin Braude and Cindy Miscikowski as general manager of the city's new Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

Stewart's mission is at the core of the city charter that voters approved last June: to nurture the citywide network of community councils the new charter authorizes. The goal is to turn residents into advocates for their neighborhoods and, in the process, to make the city's clunky bureaucracy more responsive and efficient.

The charter is intentionally vague on specifics, including what exactly the councils will do, how members will be chosen and how council boundaries will be drawn. The clock has already started ticking: Stewart must present a plan to the City Council by December with answers to those questions. Her work begins in earnest next month with the first in a weekly series of workshops held across the city over four months to hear what residents want in the plan. Stewart can count on many more evenings away from the Acton home she shares with her husband and their Labrador retriever.

A third-generation Californian and one of eight children, Stewart grew up in the San Fernando and Santa Clarita valleys. At Cal State Northridge, she explored Jewish studies. "I was intrigued" by Jewish culture and moral and ethical questions, she explains, and graduated "a Gentile who knows more about Judaism than most Jews."

No cheerleader, Stewart has a calm, almost reserved demeanor – punctuated by a deep, rolling laugh--that belies the monumental task she has before her. Her optimism should help, though. During a recent conversation in her temporary office in City Hall, Stewart offers, "I'm a glass-half-full person."

Question: Some have charged that the whole neighborhood-council plan is another silly, "feel-good" idea. What can residents realistically expect from these councils?

Answer: It's really infinite. My department will offer training, negotiation techniques, dispute resolution. We will assist communities to communicate with their stakeholders, anything we can possibly do to support them in their dreams. But, at the end of the day, if they don't step forward and sit at the table and devise their future, we can't do that for them. This is the opportunity to create the kind of community we've been hearing from Angelenos that they want.

Q: Can you be more specific?

A: I envision the councils really devising their vision for their neighborhood. Do they want more trees? Do they have a desire to organize regular block parties? Do they need more business development in the area? Do they want certain kinds of businesses to come in? Do they want development at all? Do they have streets that need to be repaved? Do they want more stop signs or traffic lights in the area? Do they want to partner with their schools and create different kinds of programs? Really, it's an infinite list.

Q: Well, if a neighborhood decides it wants more trees or more stops signs or different kinds of businesses, how will that happen?

A: The primary difference between this department and its mission as opposed to the way things have worked before is we will help you devise the plans you want to implement and assist in finding those dollars. It's a different way to educate, train and allow people to empower themselves. It's not government doing for you, it's you doing for yourself in collaboration with [government]. . . .

The purpose of this department is outlined in the ordinance, to create greater access for residents and conversely to make government more responsive.

Q: Who will serve on these councils?

A: Representatives from every possible community in a neighborhood: from trade organizations to business organizations, homeowners, schools, nonprofits, individual groups. Diversity in the broadest sense of the term. . . . The neighborhood-council meetings have to be open. Stakeholders are not just people who live in a neighborhood, they are also people who work there or own property there.

Q: How large an area will these councils cover?

A: I don't know. That's part of what we want to hear from the community: What do you think is too large, too small? Do you have an opinion? . . . Those decisions will be embodied in the plan.

Q: When will this plan come together?

A: Next month. We're beginning a series of 16 citywide public workshops, one a week for four months, to help us write the rules for neighborhood councils. We want to hear from residents what they want in that plan. Our plan has to be delivered to the City Council by December. Then the City Council has six months to review that, to add, delete or do whatever they'll do. But, at the end of six months, if there's no action, whatever we submitted will become law.

Q: So these neighborhood councils won't get going before summer of 2001?

A: That's right. We're 18 months out.

Q: What difference will neighborhood councils make to local residents? To the operation of city government? What can these councils achieve?

A: They will change the way the city works. They will certainly open doors to access, creating opportunities for people to participate in the budget process: How does the city spend its money? Why does it spend its money that way? All the mechanics and the intricacies--that's part of the education. For people to really be empowered, they need the information. My department is certainly committed

to opening those doors. . . . We're talking about delivery of services, and if the city departments are not now planning, and thinking about and anticipating neighborhood councils, it could be very difficult down the road. I am starting to talk with other department heads about what could happen, how they will react.

Q: You mean, for example, the Street Tree Division might be getting a lot more calls?

A: Yes, they and other city offices might be impacted differently, and we're talking about how they might staff to deal with a much more active and participatory and involved community. The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment is not going to be a middle person, we're not going to be an ombudsman. We are going to educate and direct and inform residents on how to connect

directly. So my colleagues [in other departments] have to be working on their plans and anticipating a higher level of service.

Q: Are they?

A: Yes, they are. There is . . . acknowledgment that things are changing for the better, and it is going to create a different paradigm for how the government works in this city.

Q: To most people, their "neighborhood" means the few blocks around their home. Because Los Angeles is so vast, these councils could include many communities. In a city of close to 4 million, what does "neighborhood" or "community" mean?

A: Ultimately, my belief is that community is a one-on-one connection to another individual that multiplies into a shared belief and commitment to action. It's going to have to start with one person or one block. But the challenge is then to create that sense, that feeling, that image, for yourself. I think we all know that one of the most wonderful things about Los Angeles is the fact that it is so unique in so many different areas. We're not interested in devising a cookie-cutter plan or program that's going to stifle or limit how people define themselves. We want to do exactly the opposite. People have to be given the opportunity to walk a path that they choose.

Q: How do you respond to residents who wonder why the city needs another department, with a \$780,000 budget, to help organize groups that will have no real decision-making authority?

A: I might be one of those people asking that same question. Voters approved the charter change that said we would like to see some leadership in this area of neighborhood empowerment. So I really see this as a mandate from the people. Those who ask me the question perhaps aren't as committed or involved in creating a sense of community in their area.

Q: What do you worry about the most? That these new neighborhood councils could be captured by NIMBY-ish homeowner associations? That too few residents will decide it's worth their time to participate?

A: I worry most about apathy and the pessimism, the comfort of the status quo and people really having given up.

Q: How do you change or prevent that?

A: Having this department is the beginning. At the end of the day, it's a one-on-one relationship, it's a connectedness to an individual, and it has to grow from there. I'm putting together a team of people committed to the belief that this can work, that people can come together, agree to disagree, form a consensus, achieve results on whatever it is they set about to do. I've lived that.

I've done that. I've seen that happen. I've done that in this city, and that gives me great hope.

Q: There is no requirement that every part of the city has a neighborhood council. So if some parts of the city don't get together, or people are apathetic or pessimistic, there simply won't be a neighborhood council there, is that right?

A: That's true. The ordinance language says that every part of the city be allowed to form a neighborhood council, but I have also acknowledged that there will be parts of the city that will choose to opt out. There are existing organizations that will choose not to become involved. In a city this size, there are going to be organizations that don't want to play, that are satisfied with the way they run things and think they can accomplish what they need to do without. Hopefully that will change over time, but it's going to take a while. We're talking 18 months before we see the first one knock at our door, and a number of years before long-term results start to appear.

Q: The handful of cities that have tried neighborhood councils are smaller than Los Angeles and generally less diverse. What are the lessons for Los Angeles?

A: Start small, in the sense of look for projects that you can achieve and accomplish; make suggestions and encourage neighborhoods to choose a first project that can touch them quickly and in a tangible way. Close off a street, have a block party, do some special plantings around a school. There are all sorts of options for each community. . . . The first neighborhood councils are going to be difficult just because they're the first ones. Getting the individuals in an area to sit around a table and come to consensus, that's going to be difficult, because on issues involving their community people have strong opinions.

Q: Voters who supported the new charter argued it would spark a renewal of city government. What does that mean to you?

A: It means people actually taking an interest in that part of their life; it means residents dropping the pessimism and accepting the age-old adage, "If you don't get involved, you can't complain." I would hope that people can see that. You know: We went through charter reform, you voted for it, so now we're going to do it. Let's do it together.

Q: How will you measure success?

A: If the day after the City Council approves the plan, I have 21 voicemails and 10 people lined up at my door to form neighborhood councils, I would consider that the first measure of success.

Q: And a year or two after that?

A: There are 20 or 30 councils formed around the city. And a year or two after that, they're talking to each other.

