

City Limits
by Marc B. Haefele, L.A. Weekly
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Pre-empting the Pre-emptors

I wasn't there. So I am inclined not to say anything about it. But so many people who were there have since said a lot. So what really did happen at the neighborhood councils' charter-workshop gathering on the evening of March 21 in Echo Park?

Some witnesses contend that the meeting got somewhat out of control as a dozen or more outspoken outsiders took it over. According to this version, these outsiders obstructed the gathering by objecting to a pre-established plan to divide the group of more than 100 into 14 small workshops. And the hindering of these breakout groups prevented the meeting from accomplishing what it set out to do.

Or is the alternative interpretation more valid? That an ossified, overstructured methodology -- designed to get in the way of popular input -- was successfully overwhelmed by concerned activists?

Take your pick.

But first, let us back up and look at where this thing is coming from. The final moments of last year's Great Charter Fight gave us the ideal of neighborhood councils, without much detailing as to how they were to come about. This was partly because there was no agreement in all the charter officialdom as to how neighborhood councils were to occur or in what form.

For this reason, it seemed like a good idea to leave the final shape up to the various city neighborhoods themselves. So the City Council and the Mayor's Office came forth with something called the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (snappy acronym: DONE). Since early this year, this busy little bureaucracy has been out there holding meetings throughout the city's regions, trying to get some kind of consensus on what is wanted among most of the city's residents. Or at least, among those who go to evening meetings such as the ones that DONE hosts. Which can be more than 200 locals. Translators and "facilitators" are on hand. The meetings are usually divided into smaller "workshops."

What happened at Logan Street Elementary School was different. More than a dozen people unfamiliar to the usual workshop crowd showed up and started speaking loudly on various issues. The newcomers refused to let the meeting be broken up into workshops. They called for a wider outreach, and -- according to some present -- blamed DONE for not doing enough. Most of the new people there reportedly had some connection with the office of local City Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg. Sharon Delugach, her chief of staff, said that the insurgents consisted of local people who were concerned that DONE hadn't done enough outreach. That there wasn't enough child care or concern with language barriers.

But if language barriers were a concern, why object to taking the discussion into small groups, with translators?

Delugach also claimed that she herself had heard of the meeting only “two hours before it happened.”

I reminded Delugach that the official notice of the meeting had gone around City Hall at least five days before it happened. The DONE folks claim to have put out about 20,000 fliers on the event by that time. So why feign surprise? When I reminded her of the City Hall notification, Delugach said she had a hard time keeping up with city paperwork.

Some of those at the meeting say interest intensified once Goldberg’s Stakhanovites started working the room; others mark that juncture as the point when people started walking out. “I was disappointed,” said Bennett Kayser, a longtime community activist in Echo Park, who’d worked on the charter and has run for Goldberg’s seat. Kayser added, “Had the meeting gone on in its prior format, 160 people might have spoken.” The official attendance figure was around 200. “As it was,” said Kayser, “only 16 people did most of the talking.”