

**MANDATING A CITYWIDE NETWORK OF  
NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS  
AND A  
DEPARTMENT OF NEIGHBORHOODS**

PRESENTED BY  
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The new City Charter should require the establishment of a citywide network of neighborhood councils in order to promote, encourage, and nurture maximum participatory democracy in Los Angeles, and give the city's neighborhoods an unprecedented ability to affect the decision-making process.

Such a network is essential whether or not the city's system of formally-elected representatives is changed. The City should provide neighborhoods with the staff, skills, training, equipment, and resources they need to share power, affect decision-making at all levels, hold elected officials accountable, communicate with each other, better understand each other's differences, organize neighborhood improvement projects, and make their neighborhoods and their city better places in which to live.

Much of their strength would come from being comprised of the diverse interests that make up their area. Their continued diversity would be guaranteed in the plan they present to the City for formal recognition and funding support.

To promote grassroots neighborhood empowerment, the Charter should guarantee that neighborhood councils have the ability to elect their own leaders, determine their own boundaries, control their own budgets, set their own agendas, and cluster together in order to receive city funding for shared offices, staff, equipment, and expenses.

Mandating the existence of such a network in the Charter guarantees its creation, and protects it from attack by future city councils or mayors. This action declares that Los Angeles is committed to neighborhood grassroots empowerment, and it presents Los Angeles as a progressive national model for other large municipalities.

The Charter should contain only those fundamental provisions that would determine whether the neighborhoods councils network succeeds or fails. The remainder of the rules and laws should exist outside the Charter in order to provide empowerment to the neighborhoods and flexibility for the system to evolve. The intent is to emphasize governance from the bottom up by encouraging as much neighborhood self-determination and empowerment as possible.

Those fundamental provisions are:

#### GUARANTEED DIVERSITY:

The Charter should require that each neighborhood council and those chosen to represent the clusters of neighborhoods reflect the diverse interests within their areas.

#### RECOGNITION OF NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS:

Each neighborhood council seeking official recognition from the City shall submit a plan and their by-laws to the Neighborhood Empowerment Commission showing, at a minimum: a guarantee that any neighborhood election of leaders will be open and non-discriminatory to everyone who lives, works, or owns property in the area ("stakeholders"); assurances that the officers of the neighborhood council will reflect the diverse interests within their area; goals and objectives; a system through which the neighborhood council will communicate with each stakeholder on a regular basis; a system for financial accountability of its funds; and guarantees that all meetings will be open and public.

#### FUNDING THE NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS:

Before the City begins the initial funding, the neighborhood councils will be requested by the Department of Neighborhoods to cluster themselves into groups of not more than 150,000 residents.

The leaders of the neighborhood councils will submit a petition to the Neighborhood Empowerment Commission, that will include its by-laws, which will include: how they will select the officers of the neighborhood clusters, who will be responsible for the handling of funds and maintaining the office, how they will ensure that the diverse interests within their neighborhood cluster will be represented; goals and objectives; a system through which the neighborhood cluster will communicate with each of its neighborhood councils on a regular basis; a system for financial accountability of its funds; and guarantees that all meetings will be open and public.

#### EARLY WARNING ORDINANCE:

The Charter should require the City to enact an "early warning ordinance" that would require that before the City takes final action on issues of concern to the stakeholders and the neighborhoods the City must provide affected neighborhood council offices a reasonable amount of time to know about, understand, establish a position, and express their opinions on issues that include planning and land use matters, discretionary permits, local spending priorities and projects, and citywide issues such as ordinances, utility rates, the city budget, taxes and fees, and bond issues. The City shall ensure that the neighborhood council offices receive or have made available to them notification of such matters as soon as possible after the City is aware of them.

(Subsequently, the task force developed more specific recommendations.)

## BOUNDARIES:

The boundaries of the areas represented by each neighborhood council must respect neighborhood boundaries.

## DEPARTMENT OF NEIGHBORHOODS:

The Charter should require the creation of a Department of Neighborhoods (DON) that would assist the neighborhoods in organizing themselves into neighborhood councils, clustering themselves into communities, and thereafter continuing to provide them with support. Therefore, it would be unlike any other city department.

The DON will prepare a detailed plan for the creation of a citywide network of neighborhood councils for the purposes of promoting maximum public participation and civic engagement, promoting maximum neighborhood empowerment, and providing the neighborhoods with the support they need to become as self-sufficient as possible.

The duties of the DON shall include:

1. assisting the neighborhood leaders in preparing their petitions for recognition, identifying their boundaries, and organizing themselves;
2. assisting the neighborhood councils in learning the complexities of city government and assisting neighborhoods and neighborhood councils toward self-sufficiency;
3. arranging leadership, cultural awareness, dispute mediation, communications, and equipment training for network councils leaders;
4. arranging community empowerment training for city officials and employees;
5. arranging quarterly Congress of Neighborhoods meetings if requested to do so by the neighborhoods;
6. securing city in-kind support such as using the city purchasing contracts, acquiring surplus equipment, and printing and mailing materials;
7. assisting in preparing applications for non-profit status if requested;
8. creating and maintaining an internal and external information and communication network, including a citywide database of neighborhood organizations that would be available for public use;
9. identifying and receiving grants, gifts, and appropriations subject to the approval of the City Council, and assisting the neighborhood councils in securing same;
10. acting as City Hall's neighborhood advocate on behalf of the neighborhood councils;
11. publishing a newsletter that is distributed to every stakeholder in the city at least three times a year;
12. hiring and/or administering neighborhood council staff if requested by the neighborhood clusters;
13. providing information to the neighborhood councils as requested;
14. assisting the neighborhood councils with their elections or selection processes;

15. securing volunteers;
16. assisting the neighborhood councils design and implement a "Prepare L.A. Plan" for disaster preparedness;
17. having full charge and control of its department, being responsible for its proper administration, submitting annually a budget and expending the funds of the department, all as otherwise prescribed by law; and
18. performing other duties and responsibilities directed by the City Council or Mayor.

The Mayor shall select, and be able to remove, the general manager in the same manner as other general managers. The general manager and assistant general manager would be city employees who are exempt from civil service.

The plan developed by the DON for creation on the neighborhood councils network shall be submitted to the City Council, but implementing ordinances would be adopted as presented if the City Council didn't adopt a plan within a specified period.

#### NEIGHBORHOOD EMPOWERMENT COMMISSION:

A Neighborhood Empowerment Commission (NEC), would be created within the DON for the purpose of recognizing, and withdrawing recognition if necessary, of the neighborhood councils and their clusters. The commission would be selected in the same manner as other city commissions.

#### GUARANTEED FUNDING:

As with the City Ethics Commission, the Charter should guarantee that the neighborhood councils network including the DON be adequately funded (see Charter Section 603). The duties and responsibilities of the DON would help provide a benchmark for determining "adequate funding."

#### BUDGET PRIORITIES:

If the neighborhood clusters choose to present an annual list of priorities for the city budget, the Mayor shall be required to include those suggestions as part of the annual budget documents that are transmitted to the City Council.

#### RECONVENING:

The Charter should require that five years after the implementation of the new Charter, another charter reform commission be convened to review the neighborhood councils network, and recommend changes if necessary.

(Subsequently, the task force developed more a specific recommendation.)

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