

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

PRESENTED BY COUNCILMAN JOEL WACHS
TO THE
TASK FORCE ON STRUCTURES OF GOVERNMENT: COMMUNITY COUNCILS
OF THE
ELECTED LOS ANGELES CHARTER REFORM COMMISSION
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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, 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 and community councils have the ability to pick their own leaders, determine their own boundaries, control their own budgets, and set their own agendas.

Mandating the existence of such a network in the Charter guarantees its creation, and protects it from attack by future city councils or mayors.

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 and community council ("network councils") reflect the diverse interests within its area.

Before the City begins the initial funding the community councils, the neighborhood councils will be clustered into communities by the Department of Neighborhoods, and the leaders of the neighborhood councils will submit a petition to the City for funding which will include how they will select the leaders of the community councils to ensure that the diverse interests in the community will be represented.

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.

RECOGNITION OF COMMUNITY COUNCILS:

Each community council seeking official recognition from the City shall submit a plan and its by-laws to the Neighborhood Empowerment Commission showing, at a minimum: a system for the selection of community council leaders by the neighborhood councils; goals and objectives; a system through which the community council will communicate with each of its stakeholders and neighborhood councils on a regular basis; a system for financial accountability of its funds; a minimum and maximum size of neighborhoods within their community; 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 until the City has given the neighborhood and community councils 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, permits, local spending priorities and projects, and citywide issues such as ordinances, utility rates, the city budget, taxes and fees, and bond issues. However, the City shall ensure that the community councils receive or have made available to them notification of such matters as soon as the City learns about them.

BOUNDARIES:

The boundaries of each neighborhood, and clusters of neighborhoods ("communities"), must respect neighborhood boundaries.

MINIMUM NUMBER OF COMMUNITIES:

The City would be required to create and fund clusters of neighborhoods ("communities") of approximately 100,000 persons each so that there would be enough local offices to permit the system to be effective. A Neighborhood Empowerment Commission, created within the Department of Neighborhoods, would certify, and decertify if necessary, the neighborhood and community councils.

The commission would be comprised of ____ members of the current charter reform commissions.

GUARANTEED FUNDING:

As with the City Ethics Commission, the Charter should guarantee that the neighborhood councils network including the Department of Neighborhoods be adequately funded (see Charter Section 603).

CREATING THE 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.

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 support to the network councils.

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 network 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 network councils in securing same;
 10. acting as City Hall's neighborhood advocate on behalf of the network 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 community council staff if requested by the community councils;
 13. providing information to the network councils as requested;
 14. assisting the network councils with their elections or selection processes;
 15. securing volunteers;
 16. assisting the network 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;
 18. performing other duties and responsibilities directed by the City Council or Mayor.

The Mayor shall select the general manager from a list of three candidates submitted by the Neighborhood Empowerment Commission. Otherwise, the general manager would be appointed and removed 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.

BUDGET PRIORITIES:

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

RECONVENING:

The Charter should require that ___ years after the adoption of the new Charter, another charter reform commission be convened review, at a minimum, the neighborhood councils network, and recommend changes if necessary.

ADDITIONALLY:

Your task force may want to consider a recommendation by the appointed commission that the plan developed by the Department of Neighborhoods for creation on the neighborhood councils network be submitted to the City Council, but implementing ordinances would be adopted as presented if the City Council didn't make changes within a specified period.

CREATING A NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS NETWORK IN LOS ANGELES

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

WILL THIS CREATE CHAOS OR A MORE TIME-CONSUMING AND BURDENSOME PROCESS?

No. In fact it should speed and smooth the process.

Presently, we get bogged down because too often the neighborhoods aren't brought into the process until the end. Once the neighborhoods understand what's happening with a particular issue, it's often too late for them to influence the outcome.

The result is angry residents forced into an assortment of last minute efforts to have their voices heard, or simply giving up with a feeling of alienation towards City Hall. These confrontations often cause significant delays at the City Council or commission level while additional hearings are ordered, more studies are requested, legal battles are resolved, or compromises are sought.

The process would go much smoother if concerns were raised and resolved at the front end of the process. This has been the experience in other cities which have model neighborhood councils, and within the City of Los Angeles in isolated cases, such as the expansion of the CBS Studios in Studio City, and the old Hughes property in West Hills.

The successful and influential councils will bring solutions to City Hall that represent a consensus among the diverse segments of their neighborhoods.

WHO DO YOU EXPECT WILL OPPOSE THIS PLAN?

Resistance will come from those elected officials, bureaucrats, and special interests who wield the strongest influence, and who have a desire to keep things the way they are. It will also come from those who don't want a system that reaches out and tries to involve all the diverse elements of a neighborhood to work together toward common goals. In other words, from those who do not wish to share some of their power with the public.

Their reluctance will be a reflection of their skepticism that the people really should be trusted with their own futures, and that "participatory democracy" and "neighborhood empowerment" are just words to be spoken when it sounds good. It's a distrust of the people. They are the ones who believe that government must

be "from the top down."

WHO WILL SUPPORT IT?

The strongest support will come from those who for too long have kept out of the decision-making system -- ordinary people. Many enlightened business interests will support the plan because they will see the benefits from the savings in time and money to be gained from developing a consensus for their plans in the early stages. Organizations will realize that they will be able to solicit support for their positions and projects through the neighborhood councils communications network.

WHO WILL BE THE WINNERS?

Neighborhoods will gain a stronger identity and control over their futures. And when people feel a sense of ownership and pride, they will contribute more of their time and energy to improving their city and neighborhood.

WHAT WOULD MAKE THE NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS NETWORK DIFFERENT FROM A HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION, COMMUNITY PLANNING COUNCIL, OR A CHAMBER OF COMMERCE?

The main difference is that membership would be open to anyone who lives, works, or owns property in the area (i.e., all the stakeholders). A neighborhood council, therefore, couldn't succeed if it represented a single narrow interest, or just focused its attention on a single concern.

Its strength would be in the ability to bring together all the various neighborhood interests, come to a consensus on the future of their neighborhood, and provide a powerful force that realistically could not be ignored. And unlike other city-sanctioned citizen groups, representatives would not be appointed by governmental officials, and their structure and agenda wouldn't be dictated by City Hall. Instead, their mandate would come directly from their neighbors.

By meeting and speaking as a unified voice, the neighborhood and community councils would have an unprecedented ability to affect governmental decisions. In some communities, homeowner groups, business organizations, religious groups, and unions already have significant power. Imagine their strength when they speak as a single unified voice through their community and neighborhood councils. By beginning with a few issues of mutual concern, and by building a consensus toward a solution, the councils would quickly learn how to build strength from success.

The City would ensure that they are given the training, resources, and independence to accomplish this.

HOW QUICKLY COULD THIS ALL HAPPEN?

This is a big project with enormous potential benefits. By providing financial and in-kind support, and official recognition, some neighborhoods will be motivated to organize themselves quickly by building on an existing infrastructure of neighborhood leadership. Others will follow soon after. Still other neighborhoods may require active organizing assistance from the Department of Neighborhoods, which will be available from the outset.

HOW WOULD EACH NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL'S OFFICERS BE ELECTED?

That's entirely up to each neighborhood council, just as our homeowner associations, chambers of commerce, and non-profit agencies determine how to select their officers.

For example, some may choose to divide their area into sections, with each section having a representative on the council. Others may create areas based upon natural boundaries, or by further subdividing their neighborhood. Some may hold their elections at meetings at which everyone in the neighborhood is invited to attend, nominate, and vote. Others may prepare slates of nominees in advance. Some may designate a certain number of seats for the business community, the elderly, the young, public service organizations, or others who contribute to their neighborhood in order to ensure strength through diversity. Some may provide for a system of proxies, absentee voting, staggered terms, and term limits.

This is democracy. It is not wise to try and design a single system that would be imposed on each neighborhood. The exact method of doing this will be included in the plan that each neighborhood will submit to the City when asking for official recognition. Each neighborhood will know the best way to involve its stakeholders.

HOW WOULD EACH COMMUNITY COUNCIL'S REPRESENTATIVES BE ELECTED?

The neighborhood councils would decide how they will select or represent themselves on their community council. This will ensure that the neighborhoods councils have a direct ownership interest in those who receive and direct the use the resources provided by the City. The exact method of the selecting the representatives is up to the neighborhood councils within their community cluster. It will be detailed in the plan they submit to the City when requesting recognition and funding. A belief in neighborhood empowerment must include a belief that the neighborhoods know which system is best for them. City Hall will stay out of it.

HOW WELL WILL THIS WORK IN THE LOWER INCOME COMMUNITIES WHERE MONETARY RESOURCES ARE SCARCE?

It's possible that the neighborhood councils concept will mature more quickly in the lower-income areas by building on the extensive network of block clubs, churches, and community organizations. Block Grant funds are also more accessible for the lower income areas. Many private foundations target lower-income areas for their grants.

Lack of money has not been the real problem in other cities. The greater successes tend to occur where the will to succeed is the greatest.

JUST BECAUSE IT'S WORKING IN OTHER CITIES, DOES THAT MEAN IT WILL WORK HERE?

It means that it can work here if we want it to.

The cities in which the program has been successful vary one from the other. It's working in Birmingham which has a population that is 55% African-American, and which has suffered severe economic problems from the decline in the steel industry. Portland has a high senior citizen population, and has been suffering from a 12-year slump in the lumber industry. They are constantly improving their program. Despite the fact that Dayton's key manufacturer has seen it's employment drop from 10,000 to 4,000, their program has kept them from disaster. And in a somewhat different way, the program is working in San Antonio which is 55% Latino.

A 5,000-person neighborhood in the other cities isn't a great deal different than a 5,000-person neighborhood here. Naturally, Los Angeles' size, ethnic diversity, and system of governance presents an historic challenge, especially in regard to citywide issues. It would be unfair to conclude from the outset that the people of Los Angeles are so dysfunctional that they can't succeed as the people of other cities have succeeded. The goal should be to understand the critical fundamentals of the programs in the model cities, and tailor the specifics to our unique situation.

WON'T THIS "BALKANIZE" THE CITY?

No, just the opposite. At present, there is almost no communication between residents in different parts of the city, and there are no meaningful plans on the table to rectify the problem. Following the Rodney King beating, the civil unrest, and the Simpson verdict, there was a clear vital need for people within neighborhoods and between neighborhoods to talk about issues such as racism, but we simply didn't have an infrastructure to allow us to easily do it. We need an infrastructure that would allow everyday to be a Day of Dialogue.

A neighborhood councils network can bring together each neighborhood and give them a meaningful voice in their future and the city's future. For the first time in our history, they can provide a means through which people from each

neighborhood can meet on a regular basis to discuss common problems and formulate common solutions. A state-of-the-art system of communication and information would allow electronic discussions, and regular meetings of the neighborhood and community council leaders throughout the city would provide unprecedented personal contact. It's never been done before. What do we have to lose?

WOULDN'T IT BE BETTER TO AMEND THE CITY CHARTER AND JUST GIVE THE NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS FORMAL POWER OVER CERTAIN DECISION-MAKING?

Neighborhood councils are needed regardless of how the system of governance may change. There needs to be a system that keeps all the elected officials, full-time and part-time, responsive and accountable.

For instance, even if the Charter were amended to provide for local planning boards of elected officials to make decisions on land use issues, we would still need to develop an active system grassroots participatory democracy to allow every resident and stakeholder an opportunity to have a more powerful influence over all their elected officials at City Hall and at other levels of government as well. In a typical municipal election, local officials are elected by about 5% of the area's residents. That doesn't provide enough hope that the winners will represent the interests of a majority of the residents.

In the cities with the model programs, there is one council member for each 35,000 residents, but they still saw a need to create a system of participatory democracy.

Local planning board members would not be constituted to discuss all the other important neighborhoods and citywide issues with their neighbors, especially the ones that don't deal with land use.

Further, having decision-making authority means that the representatives would have to be formally elected. That brings with it certain limitations. For example, boundaries might not be able to be drawn strictly along neighborhood lines because the Voting Rights Act would apply. Further, by its nature, the electoral process is one that is designed to produce winners and losers, and it excludes many people from having an equal opportunity to run for the office or vote for those who do, such as those who are not registered or able to register to vote, business and some property owners, and those working for non-profit service providers. Some part of our system needs to reach out to all people and find new ways to involve them in their neighborhood, and eventually in the electoral system.

Further, state ethics laws limit the ability of elected officials to mass-communicate with their constituents. Since they wouldn't be formally elected, neighborhood councils could print newsletters, flyers, questionnaires, and notices without restriction.

Additionally, one of the purposes for representatives of the neighborhood councils to meet regularly as a citywide Congress of Neighborhoods is to give them the opportunity to recommend amendments to the City Charter, including those which could change the relationship between the neighborhood councils and city government. Any permanent far-reaching proposals to change the structure of city government should come from the people themselves through their neighborhood councils.

WHY HAVE NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS IN OTHER CITIES OPPOSED BEING GIVEN DIRECT DECISION-MAKING POWERS, SUCH AS THE ABILITY TO DECIDE LAND USE ISSUES?

Because they know that having formal powers would make them part of the governmental system, subject to the rules, regulations, restrictions, and responsibilities of elected representatives, including, perhaps, the need to run for their offices in formal elections and in districts that meet the requirements of the Voting Rights Act. As the model cities have stressed, they want empowerment through their independence, and by being provided with the resources to affect decision-making in the same way that lobbyists and special interest now do.

There are no cities with neighborhood councils that have formal decision-making powers.

WHY CREATE A TWO-TIER SYSTEM OF COMMUNITY AND NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS?

The two-tier system is used successfully in Portland, and given the size of Los Angeles, it would appear that it would be effective here.

No one knows how many neighborhoods there are in Los Angeles. That makes it nearly impossible to estimate a budget, and to ensure that the entire city is represented. During the initial organization phase, the Department of Neighborhoods, using its community organizers, would begin identifying the city's numerous neighborhoods, helping them organize themselves, and define their boundaries.

The next step would be to cluster the neighborhoods into communities of not more than 100,000 people, depending upon how many offices with staff and resources are funded. These community clusters would provide a near-by center for the staff and equipment that would support the neighborhood councils.

HOW MANY NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS WOULD THERE BE IN EACH COMMUNITY CLUSTER?

That will vary in each community. Some will be comprised of many very small neighborhoods (e.g., in the hillside areas), and others will have fewer larger neighborhoods. In the interest of equity, an attempt will be made to create community clusters of approximately equal population regardless of the number of neighborhoods. Each neighborhood would define itself.

WON'T SOME ELECTED OFFICIALS FEAR THAT THE COUNCILS WILL BE "BREEDING GROUNDS" FOR POLITICAL OPPONENTS?

One of benefits of local councils is that, in fact, they would be a training ground for our next elected representatives. Given the reality of term limits, politicians shouldn't fear this system. They should take the positive view that the neighborhood councils would be political allies if they do a good job. The community/neighborhood councils also provide a place for future elected officials to prove their abilities and desire to be leaders.

WOULD IT BE A PROBLEM IF A COMMUNITY OR NEIGHBORHOOD WERE REPRESENTED BY MORE THAN ONE COUNCIL MEMBER?

The experience in other cities has been that this isn't a problem. Much worse is to have the neighborhood itself divided because of council district boundaries.

WHAT PREVENTS A COMMUNITY OR NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL FROM BEING DOMINATED BY ONE PARTICULAR INTEREST GROUP, AND FAILING TO REPRESENT ALL THE INTERESTS IN THE AREA?

When the neighborhoods and community councils petition the City for recognition, they will be required to design a leadership structure in their by-laws that reflects the diversity of the community. This becomes a type of contract with the City, and would affect their funding and status.

Additionally, most or all of the direct support from the City will go to the community councils whose officials would be selected by the neighborhood councils. This arrangement has the dual benefit of giving an ownership interest to the smallest organized unit in the system (the neighborhood), and making it more difficult for a single interest group to control the selection of the community council officers.

If the City or other private and governmental agencies provide other funding support, such as neighborhood matching grants, leadership training, etc., each could require that the council continue to represent the diverse interests of their

community as promised and detailed in their by-laws. I.e., there would be a continuous check on their promises.

CAN'T A SYSTEM LIKE THIS EXIST WITHOUT A CHARTER PROVISION?

Yes it could, but it hasn't, and the reality is that if it is up to the City Council, it may never. In the mid-1970's, the Department of Housing and Urban Development required that there be a public participation effort before they would give block grant money to cities. Some cities like Los Angeles did the minimum. They sent some notices, held some meetings, and called it public participation. Others cities used this as an opportunity to promote maximum public participation. They created real neighborhood councils.

The fact is that Los Angeles doesn't have a citywide system that connects neighborhoods and gives them the skills and resources to participate in the decision-making system as other cities have. It may never happen without being required by the Charter. And being included in the Charter protects them from future city councils and mayors who believe that government should be run from the top down.

SHOULD THE CHARTER REQUIRE HOW MANY OFFICERS SHOULD COMPRISE EACH NEIGHBORHOOD AND COMMUNITY COUNCIL BOARD?

No. The Charter should prescribe the fundamental features of a neighborhood councils network so that a future City Council or Mayor could not eliminate the network. Yet it should not contain the kinds of details that should be remain flexible in order to permit the system to evolve. The size and composition of each board is not critical to the existence of the citywide system, so it shouldn't be in the Charter. The selection of leaders, design of boundaries, the number of community councils, and funding are critical features.

For example, in Portland's Northeast District, they are considering changing their board structure. Realizing that many of the board members prefer spending their time discussing issues rather than dealing with the mundane issues of operating a non-profit organization, they are now considering creating two separate boards. Thankfully they have the flexibility to evolve and improve.

WHAT WOULD THE COMMUNITY/NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS DO?

They would have trained and skilled full-time staff, offices, computers, an electronic communication system, and money for newsletters in order choose their own issues; understand those issues; and have two-way communication with everyone in their area, City Hall, and other councils throughout the city. They would understand how the decision-making system works at the highest levels at City Hall, and for the first time, neighborhoods would be able to influence

decisions as an equal with the other powerful forces that influence decisions at City Hall.

They would organize neighborhood and community events such as area clean-ups, and other local projects; educate and engage people in government and neighborhood self-sufficiency; determine local spending priorities; and be a resource for volunteer help such as serving on permanent (e.g., Neighborhood Watch) and one-time advisory committees (e.g., overseeing bond measure projects), and city commissions.

WOULDN'T THESE NEIGHBORHOOD AND COMMUNITY COUNCILS JUST BE ADVISORY AND THEREFORE POWERLESS?

No, just the opposite. "Advisory" is what we have now. Someone in City Hall creates an advisory committee, appoints and removes those who will advise him or her, decides which issues they want advice on, and gives their committees no independent funding or staff. We need to go far beyond that.

Professional lobbyists and special interest groups wield an extraordinary amount of influence at City Hall. They certainly aren't described by anyone as "advisory," and they aren't granted any voting powers. Yet they achieve remarkable success through leverage and the knowledge of how to influence decision-making.

As we have learned from the model cities, neighborhoods can have that same level of power and influence over the decision-making process if they are given staff, training, the ability to communicate, and independence.

COULDN'T WE BEGIN WITH A PILOT PROJECT?

Not if that means limiting it geographically. You can't test a citywide network of neighborhood councils by creating it only in certain parts of the city. You couldn't test its ability to bring people together and allowing them to communicate with each.

But by beginning with a small Department of Neighborhoods to support the neighborhood councils; by engaging the neighborhood councils in discussions over their future powers, structure, and support; by planning periodic reviews of their progress; and by limiting the amount of inflexible details in the Charter; the system remains capable of evolving and improving.

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