

PRESENTED BY COUNCILMAN JOEL WACHS
TO THE
COMMITTEE ON A MORE RESPONSIVE CITY GOVERNMENT
WITH AN INVOLVED CITIZENRY
OF THE
ELECTED LOS ANGELES CHARTER REFORM COMMISSION
May 27, 1998

Amend the City Charter to require the establishment of a Department of Neighborhoods (DON) that would help design, help organize, and support a citywide network of neighborhood councils for the purpose of promoting, encouraging, and nurturing participatory democracy in every neighborhood.

The neighborhood councils network would not have any formal decision-making powers, and therefore not be a part of the representative side of the government that they would be overseeing. Their strength would come from being comprised of the diverse interests of their area, and having the skills, staff, communication systems, and other resources to be strong advocates for local, citywide, and regional issues that they determine to be important.

In the interest of grassroots community empowerment, they would have the ability to pick their own leaders, determine their own boundaries, control their own budgets, and set their own agendas.

FLEXIBILITY: 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 be written 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.

DEPARTMENT OF NEIGHBORHOODS: The Department of Neighborhoods shall be available to assist the neighborhoods in organizing themselves into neighborhood councils, clustering themselves into at least 15 community council areas of approximately equal population, and thereafter continuing to support them.

The DON will be an active proponent of community empowerment, and support the community and neighborhood councils, including, helping them to learn the complexities of city government and become more self-sufficient; arranging leadership, cultural awareness, and dispute mediation training; arranging quarterly Congress of Neighborhoods meetings if requested by the neighborhoods; helping acquire city in-kind support such as using the city purchasing contracts, acquiring surplus equipment, and

printing and mailing materials; assisting in preparing applications for non-profit status; maintaining an information and communication network using e-mail, the Internet, and other technology; identifying and pursuing grants and other funding sources; acting as City Hall's neighborhood advocate on behalf of the community and neighborhood councils; and publishing a newsletter that is distributed to every stakeholder in the city at least three times a year. The intent is to ensure that they always have the resources to do a successful job.

Its general manager should be appointed and removed in the same manner as other general managers. The general manager and other management staff should be city employees who are exempt from civil service. The intent is to find the best qualified people to handle the highly specialized, politically sensitive, and possibly temporary nature of the jobs.

BOUNDARIES: The boundaries of each neighborhood, and resulting clusters of neighborhoods, such as community councils, must always respect neighborhood boundaries, and not political boundaries which too often split neighborhoods and communities. The intent is to center the network around neighborhoods, not around elected officials.

NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL LEADERS: The leaders of the neighborhood councils would be informally self-selected by anyone who lives, works, or owns property in the neighborhood (the stakeholders), and who chooses to participate. In their petition for recognition to the City, the petitioners would detail how plan to select their leaders. The intent is to be inclusionary and to encourage participation, not to allow only certain people to participate.

ESTABLISHING COMMUNITIES: The City shall recognize by resolution, fund, and support at least 15 clusters of neighborhoods called "communities." The intent is to ensure that the city provides the resources necessary to maintain neighborhood councils network offices in enough areas to permit the system to be effective.

COMMUNITY COUNCIL LEADERS: The leaders of the neighborhood councils shall select or elect the members of the community council boards, and prescribe their method of doing so in the plan they submit to the City for recognition. The intent is to provide as much empowerment as possible so that they can design a plan to best meet their needs.

RECOGNITION OF COMMUNITY COUNCILS: Each community council shall "petition" the City Council, through the Department of Neighborhoods, for official recognition and support. A mayoral veto could be overridden by 10 votes of the City Council. Ten votes of the City Council could recind the recognition, and a mayoral veto could be overridden by 12 votes of the City Council. The intent is to give each community

the ability to design a system tailored to their needs.

FUNDING SUPPORT OF COMMUNITY COUNCILS: The community councils must be given the resources to adequately to maintain an office that meets the needs of their neighborhoods, and communicate with everyone in their area, and with other neighborhood councils and governments. The intent is that power, strength, unity, and understanding come from the ability to communicate.

"EARLY WARNING ORDINANCE": Neighborhoods and communities must be guaranteed that they will be notified of certain proposed projects, ordinances, and actions far enough in advance so that they can meet, discuss, and establish a position, if they wish, before a final decision is made. This will be accomplished through enactment of an "early warning ordinance." The intent is that city agencies shall proactively notify neighborhoods of neighborhood issues, and the community councils of community and citywide issues.

RECOGNITION OF NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS:

Each neighborhood council seeking official recognition from the City shall submit a plan showing, at a minimum:

- a. A guarantee that any neighborhood selection of leaders will be equal, free, and non-discriminatory to anyone who lives, works, or owns property in the area (i.e., the stakeholders).
- b. A plan of goals and objectives.
- c. A system through which the neighborhood council will communicate with each stakeholder on a regular basis.
- d. Assurances that the leadership of the neighborhood council will reflect the diverse interests within their area.
- e. A system for financial accountability of its funds.
- f. Guarantees that all meetings will be open and public.

The intent is prescribe only those fundamental elements that are critical to a citywide system, while empowering the neighborhoods to decide the specifics.

RECOGNITION OF COMMUNITY COUNCILS:

Each community council seeking official recognition from the City shall submit a plan showing, at a minimum:

- a. A system for the selection of community council leaders by the neighborhood council leaders.
- b. A plan of goals and objectives.
- c. A system through which the community council will communicate with each of its stakeholders and neighborhood councils on a regular basis.
- d. Assurances that the leadership of the community council leaders will represent the diverse interests within their area.
- e. A system for financial accountability of its funds.
- f. Set a minimum and maximum size of neighborhoods within their community.
- g.. Guarantees that all meetings will be open and public.

PRIORITY ACCESS:

All city departments and agencies shall provide each community and neighborhood council with priority access to all information, records, staff support, etc. needed to conduct their deliberations. City agencies shall establish policies that establish friendly and cooperative relationships with the community and neighborhood councils. The intent is to create a "culture" within City Hall of partnership with the neighborhoods.