

REPORT OF THE CHIEF LEGISLATIVE ANALYST

March 4, 1998

TO: Members of the Governmental Efficiency Committee

FROM: Ronald F. Deaton *RFD*
Chief Legislative Analyst

Office of Neighborhoods - Neighborhood Councils (CF's 96-1157, 96-1157-S-1, 97-0731)

Following your Committee's February 25, 1998 meeting, this Office has reviewed the motions attached to the above referenced files which propose:

- Establishment of independent neighborhood councils
- A citywide neighborhood congress as a pilot project
- Formation of a working group consisting of the Departments of Building and Safety, Housing, Community Development, Recreation and Parks, and the Community Redevelopment Agency to determine funding options for an Office of Neighborhoods
- With the assistance of City Departments, including Public Works, Environmental Affairs, Recreation and Parks, Community Development, the Mayor's Office and the Commission on Children, Youth and Families, create an Office of Neighborhoods to coordinate services and resources.

The proposals collectively propose what is essentially a new way of structuring City government in Los Angeles. While the neighborhoods concept, which is at the heart of these proposals, has been and is being implemented in other cities, it would require a significant restructuring of processes, systems and bureaucracies in Los Angeles. The body of this report lists some of the major issues which will have to be addressed in the process of implementing a neighborhoods approach and very briefly discusses some of the types of questions which are involved. We feel that the Committee's review of this area can benefit greatly by direct interaction and discussion with representatives from cities which have already implemented similar systems. In addition, we feel that it is appropriate to begin to solicit comments, suggestions and ideas from City departments and others with an interest in the matter.

Read in Committee 3/4

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee as part of its discussion of the proposals contained in these motions:

1. INSTRUCT the Chief Legislative Analyst to invite representatives of selected cities which have established neighborhood council-type programs to testify before this committee, and to make the necessary arrangements for their attendance.
2. REQUEST representatives of interested City Departments and offices, including those named in the subject motions, to provide their suggestions and comments to the Committee regarding the proposals contained in the motions.

Our next report to this Committee will include a comparison of neighborhood programs in place in other cities as well as a draft time line for the actions necessary to proceed with creating such a program for Los Angeles.

DISCUSSION

Our discussions regarding the various features which could be incorporated into an Office of Neighborhoods and a neighbor council system, as well as a review of actions taken by other cities in this regard, reflect the wide variety of options which could be considered in developing such a system. The following briefly discusses some of the more basic issues which will have to be addressed in structuring such a system.

For each there are several alternative ways to approach the issue. While we have mentioned a few under each of the issue heading, they are offered only as examples and are in no way intended to include every option. In addition, many of the issues listed below are inherently interrelated. The question of financial and other support which the neighborhoods will require in order to begin to function, for example, will be directly impacted by decisions made on the other aspects of the program.

Method of Establishing Neighborhood Council Boundaries

A basic question is whether existing boundaries established for some other purpose should be used to define neighborhoods or whether an entirely new set of boundaries should be created. Creating new boundaries has the advantage of allowing the City to use whatever basis it chooses to define the areas. This includes decisions like the number of neighborhoods; the size of each neighborhood in terms of geography and population; the relationship of these boundaries to other existing City boundaries (e.g. requiring that Council district lines not be crossed). However, this approach would require some process for drawing the boundaries which is likely to be time consuming and would delay the initial implementation of the program. In addition, the decision to keep neighborhoods equal in population or to respect Council district lines would require periodic adjustments of boundaries.

On the other hand, use of existing boundaries created for other purposes would avoid the

“starting from scratch” approach but would not allow the City the same degree of flexibility in crafting the district boundaries to satisfy criteria it might favor.

An alternative would be to use existing boundaries, e.g. library districts, as initial boundaries and create a separate process which would allow each neighborhood to propose adjustments in their boundaries after some specified waiting period.

Organization of Neighborhood Councils

The City will have to decide the degree to which each neighborhood will be able to determine its own organizational structure and procedures. For example, the City could specify such matters as the frequency with which the councils must meet and requiring that some be evening meetings and some day meetings in order to increase opportunities for attendance. Or it could leave the “nuts and bolts” of how a neighborhood organizes and functions to each council, and simply require that they adopt their own sets of by-laws.

Method of Selecting Neighborhood Council Members

While appointment is an option, a democratic method of selecting council members is inherent in the concept of the neighborhood councils. However, there are alternative ways in which the election can be conducted, e.g. at a “town hall” type meeting or by mail elections. A very basic question involves the requirement for voting. While voting in conventional elections requires a person to be a registered voter, that requirement relates more to a political process and would not promote the fullest participation of those who reside in each respective neighborhood area.

Some cities we have surveyed allow participation, i.e. voting, by anyone who is at least 16 years old and who lives or has a business in the neighborhood. While not an unreasonable provision, it does raise questions regarding how to effectively confirm voting eligibility.

Funding

The financial and other resources which the City provides each neighborhood will obviously be key to how effective they will be, particularly in their early organizational stage. Some degree of support in the form of advice, information, and some limited staffing can be provided by the City’s Office of Neighborhoods. However, each will need an ongoing and consistent level of financial and staff support in order to function as a viable and effective advocate for their community’s interests. Each council will need a permanent office location and at least some minimal staffing. Will the City secure the office space, recruit the staff and pay for them directly OR will each neighborhood council be allocated the funds and allowed to make these decisions themselves?

As noted above, many of the decisions on various aspects of this program have serious cost implications. For example, the cost of a by mail election for council members would be significantly higher than for election at a town hall type meeting.

Responsibilities of Neighborhood Councils

A basic question involves the role that neighborhood councils will play in City government. The answer to this question will determine the extent to which existing City processes in such areas as planning and the preparation of the annual budget will have to be changed. As with other issues, what is decided here will dictate decisions regarding other issues.

Even if these councils are given only advisory responsibilities, current City procedures will have to be adjusted in order to accommodate their opportunity for input. In some cases new time lines will have to be developed to ensure that neighborhoods are given an opportunity to offer input on matters. This includes what has been referred to in some cities as an “early warning” ordinance.

Initiation of Neighborhood Council

While the City will take the initial action to create the neighborhood council system, including the establishment of boundaries, the impetus for forming the council and electing its members should come from within each defined neighborhood. The program will have to include some basic requirements which must be followed in order to initiate the formation of a neighborhood council. Whatever method is chosen the initial actions in forming a council should ensure that there is a minimum level of support for the action and those involved reflect the diversity within the involved neighborhood.

One approach could involve appointment of a “neighborhood council organizing committee” by the council member(s) of the district(s) involved. This group would work with the City staff in taking the initial actions necessary to form a neighborhood council, including those necessary for the first election of council members.

Persons wishing to serve on such a committee could request appointments with selections made based on the experience and background of those applying. This method would make it easier to ensure some diversity among the group’s membership. Another alternative would be to create a process under which a group of neighborhood residents petition the City for selection as the organizing committee.

Role of Office of Neighborhoods

While the City’s Office of Neighborhoods will provide support and information for neighborhood councils, decisions must be made as to what form that support will take and what limitations, if any, should be imposed. The Office could assist the neighborhood in conducting its elections, or it could conduct them for the neighborhood. The extent to which staff support is to be provided to the neighborhoods vs. the extent to which the neighborhoods will take charge of their own affairs will also impact the relative distribution of funds between the City Office of Neighborhoods and the neighborhoods themselves.

This Office will also play a key role in receiving complaints and requests for City services from

citizens and neighborhoods, and in working with City departments to responding to them. It is imperative that sufficient resources are available to enable the Office to be effective in this role.

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