

FYI. Councilman Wachs appeared before the appointed charter reform commission on 5-13-98. If I can read my notes, here are the points he made.

Creating an effective system of neighborhood councils is singularly the most important change that could be included in the Charter. It provides something important to the public. It deals with fundamental problems in our current system, such as the serious disconnect that exists between the public and their elected officials, and “this is not a shared view among my colleagues.”

The public needs a better way of having input on not just planning issues, and delivery of services, but on citywide issues that affect them, such as whether or not public money should be used to subsidize the building of a sports arena. Using that particular issue as an example, all the people and organizations with influence at City Hall favored the subsidy, but 2/3rds to 3/4ths of the public did not. We need to share common concerns.

After looking at the best examples, there are three fundamentals that the Charter should demand be part of an NC system.

1. The boundaries should honor neighborhoods and not political boundaries.
2. The leaders should be self-selected and not appointed. Their leaders must come from themselves, not from us.
3. There should be an “early warning ordinance” that would give neighborhoods an opportunity to know about, understand, and weigh-in on issues of importance to them.

There are no examples of NCs with formal decision-making powers. The most successful programs are advisory. An NC whose board represents the diverse interests of the area will be a powerful force that can't be ignored. The commissions will have to decide whether or not to give such powers. The City Council can't do it. But you should understand the effects. It will require the formal election of leaders on the city ballot. It will be hard to draw boundaries that honor neighborhoods because the Voting Rights Act will apply. Many people will be disenfranchised, such as those who can't vote. The system will not be as inclusive as it could be. It is possible to begin the Ncs without decision-making powers, and then reconvene the charter commissions, or let the NCs meet, and decide if the neighborhood want this change.