

LOS ANGELES: A FAMILY OF NEIGHBORHOODS

SUMMARY

If there's one message from around the city that is clear, it's that people have something to say. They want to be heard. They want a chance to participate. They want to feel they can make a difference and make things better.

We need to unite Angelenos of every race and color and creed, and rebuild this city -- not from the top down, but from the bottom up.

And the best place to start is in our neighborhoods. If there's one thing we all have in common, it's a neighborhood. A place where we call home.

I envision turning Los Angeles into a Family of Neighborhoods, in which everyone participates and everyone takes pride.

It will start by empowering each of our city's neighborhoods to form their own neighborhood council, which select their own leaders, determine their own priorities, and reflect the broad diversity of their own community.

As they do in cities like Seattle, Portland, St. Paul, Birmingham, Dayton and San Antonio, which have already begun similar neighborhood councils, they will participate in a wide range of critical issues.

And they will all meet together quarterly on a citywide basis, as a Congress of Neighborhoods, to exchange concerns and form a consensus which creates unity out of our diversity.

HOW IT WILL BEGIN

The Mayor will issue an Executive Order through which neighborhood councils will be "empowered" throughout the city.

In each neighborhood, community, business, school and religious leaders will come together and begin the process of defining the boundaries of their neighborhoods, forming their own councils and selecting own their leaders in whichever manner they choose.

OPENING THE DOORS OF CITY HALL

The Executive Order will require all city departments to guarantee that each neighborhood council be given priority access to city records and staff, and the right to have a reasonable amount of time to review, debate and make recommendations on such matters as: community-based policing; crime prevention projects; job training programs; transportation; planning and zoning decisions; neighborhood revitalization projects; alcohol permits; conditional use permits; community clean-up projects; street closures and barricades; traffic controls; preferential parking zones; parking meter rates; acquiring and improving parks; variances to Building and Safety citations; speed limits; police permits for parades, pool halls, etc.; design of community buildings, libraries, parks and city facilities; historic designations; placement of bus benches; creation of assessment districts;

demolitions; neighborhood disputes; use of public lands for development; availability of tax forfeited and surplus properties; water and power rates; and most importantly, the determination of city budget and spending priorities. In some cities, this "early warning" procedure is codified by ordinance.

DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Each neighborhood council would: obtain a non-profit status if it plans to raise money or apply for public funds; organize open elections and provide free membership for anyone who lives, works or owns property in their community; develop a plan of goals and objectives, including a "Bill of Responsibilities" and together develop a neighborhood disaster preparedness plan; adopt a non-discrimination policy; and develop a plan for communicating with the people in their neighborhood on a regular basis.

The councils would adopt their own by-laws and procedures for selecting their representatives.

FUNDING

Funding for the councils, to pay for offices, staff, equipment and mailings could come from a combination of the city's General Fund, new or redirected state and federal grants, private foundations, and money which they raise on their own. To the extent that public funds are used, the Mayor and City Council will provide for financial accountability. The Mayor and Council could direct that the neighborhood councils be given first priority to surplus city equipment such as furniture and computers. And space in city facilities might be available in many areas.

To the extent that public funds are made available to the neighborhood councils, each would receive a base amount. Additional funds would be allocated based upon a formula which guarantees each neighborhood its "fair share," and rewards those neighborhoods which are most successful in getting "more bang for the buck" by providing labor, money and/or materials.

Through this process, neighborhoods will begin sharing concerns, creating a genuine understanding, discovering common goals, and creating unity through diversity.

COORDINATION

This effort will be coordinated by the Mayor's Office. His staff will assist the neighborhoods in organizing themselves, insure that city departments obey the letter and spirit of the Executive Order, and meet with the groups on a regular basis so they know what's going on at City Hall.

QUARTERLY NEIGHBORHOOD CONGRESS MEETINGS

Eventually, leaders from each of the neighborhood councils will convene quarterly as a Neighborhood Congress to discuss citywide matters like City Charter changes, ordinances, initiatives, citywide programs, and the general overall course of the city.

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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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

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

Right now 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 too late for them 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 commonly cause significant delays at the City Council or commission level while additional hearings are ordered, more information is 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 strong neighborhood councils.

WHO DO YOU EXPECT WILL OPPOSE THIS PLAN?

Elected officials, bureaucrats, and special interests who wield the strongest influence, and who have a desire to keep things the way they are. In other words, the resistance will come from those who will be forced to share some of their power with the public.

WHO WILL SUPPORT IT?

The strongest support will come from those who for too long have keep out of the political 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.

WHO WILL BE THE WINNERS?

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

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

The main difference is that membership would be free and open to anyone lives, works or owns property in the area. The council, therefore, wouldn't represent a single narrow interest, nor would it focus its attention on a single concern.

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

By meeting and speaking as a unified voice, the neighborhood 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 neighborhood council. By beginning with some issues of mutual concern, and by building a consensus towards a solution, the neighborhood councils would quickly learn from their successes.

HOW QUICKLY COULD THIS ALL HAPPEN?

This is a big project with enormous potential benefits. The neighborhood councils themselves will determine their own timetables because it's their program. The city will empower them and open up City Hall. Some communities will organize themselves quickly, and others may never be represented by a council.

HOW COULD NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS HELP REDUCE CRIME?

Realistically, we will never have enough money to put a cop on every corner, but we can have hundreds of thousands of trained eyes and ears ready to keep their neighborhoods free of crime. Every law enforcement officer will tell you the value of neighborhood watch programs. The neighborhood councils can organize them in every part of their community, and create the meaningful partnership with the Police Department that is needed to make community-based policing work.

And with some training, the councils can also provide neighborhood dispute resolution services, as has been done successfully in other cities. Astonishingly, 20-30% of all 911 calls are for domestic and neighborhood disputes. If this can be reduced, we'd have more police officers available for the other critical priorities.

The councils can also help determine crime related spending priorities -- additional street lighting, more police foot patrols, anti-graffiti programs, and so on.

HOW WOULD EACH COUNCIL'S REPRESENTATIVES BE ELECTED?

That's entirely up to each council. Some may choose to divide their area into grids, with each grid having a representative on the council. Others may create areas based upon natural boundaries, or by further refining their definition of neighborhoods. Some may hold their elections at meetings to which everyone district is invited to come, 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, or whomever in order to insure strength through diversity. This is democracy. The people of each community will choose what's best for them. City Hall will stay out of it.

WHAT IS A "BILL OF RESPONSIBILITIES?"

One of the requirements for the neighborhood councils would be to develop their own Bill of Responsibilities for their neighborhoods. It wouldn't be legally binding, but rather a list of what they expect from their people if they are going to take responsibility for their actions and community. Sort of a statement of purpose, or pledge from the community to itself.

ISN'T THE PUBLIC INVOLVED IN THE CITY'S BUDGETARY PROCESS RIGHT NOW?

Only technically. In reality, the budget is prepared in closed-door meetings with the departments. And the City Council prides itself more on how quickly it can adopt the budget, than how much of an effort is made to involve the community in the process.

The neighborhood councils should be deeply involved in the budgetary process. The people have a right to have a say in determining how their tax dollars are used. As it stands now, the taxpayers understand where their money goes about as well as they understand an Albanian opera.

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

The neighborhood councils concept will probably get started more quickly and more successfully in the inner-city by building on the existing network of block clubs, churches and community organizations.

Lack of money is not as much of a problem as some people think. Japan, which suffered incredible destruction during World War II, built itself up to become a major economic power through dedication, hard work and shared values. The greater successes will occur where the will is the greatest.

The plan can only work if all parts of the city are guaranteed their fair share of the resources. The poorer communities have the ability to flourish, but government alone cannot engineer it.

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 10-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% Hispanic.

We will make it work here by tailoring it to our needs.

WON'T THIS "BALKANIZE" THE CITY?

We're already balkanized. There is almost no communication between certain parts of the city, and there are no meaningful plans on the table to rectify the problem.

The first step is to use the neighborhood councils to bring together each community and give them a meaningful voice in their future. The second step will be to bring together leaders from each neighborhood on a regular basis to discuss common problems and agree on common solutions. It's never been done before. What do we have to lose?

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

One of the purposes for the neighborhood councils meeting regularly as a Neighborhood Congress is to give them the opportunity to recommend amendments to the City Charter, such as those which would 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.

IN CONCLUSION

Next to family, the basic building block of community should be responsible mutual reinforcement among people.

As Margaret Mead told us, change will come when the people discover it's possible.

WHAT ELSE?

In St. Paul, they started the Block Nurse Program because the County's program only provided in-home nursing care for the elderly, and not the type of assistance which would keep some elderly from being institutionalized.

The neighborhood councils obtained private foundation funding to supplement the County's program so that nurses could be used to help the elderly with their other needs. The nurses are hired from the neighborhoods. The program won a Ford Foundation award, and is being replicated in other cities like Miami, Atlanta and Birmingham.

Again in St. Paul, the North End Area Revitalization project was initiated not by government, but by the neighborhood councils in the area. Workers are recruited from the neighborhood.