

MEMORANDUM

Office of Councilman Joel Wachs

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To: Ron Deaton
From: Greg Nelson (213/847-3643)
RE: Help with neighborhood councils plan.

December 7, 1995

Joel is ready to launch into the most complex and difficult project ever -- the development of the plan to be presented to the City Council which would establish a citywide system of neighborhood councils similar to what other cities have done. It's going to be his legacy to the city.

We've been working on this for three years, but the problem is that there is still much work to be done before it's introduced. And more work to be done until it's ready to come to the floor. And still more to be done if we get to the point that we are starting up the program.

There is enough to be done to consume one person's time everyday. I think I know what needs to be done. It's a matter of getting it done. We're going to make the best possible use of college interns, maybe even making it a class project for some public policy students.

We've never asked for much from the CLA in the last 24 years. You can check with Ken on that. Now we need help for "the big one."

Perhaps the first project could be to identify a private foundation(s) to help fund someone to perform this full-time coordinator function, thereby freeing up the CLA for other projects. I have a list of foundations that regularly fund community involvement projects. So maybe your staff person might find themselves writing some grants.

I have attached some information that explains how the NC concept is shaping up in our minds. Our recent trip to St. Paul was very helpful and enlightening. Our challenges will be many. It's never be done in a city of our size and diversity. And we're going to try and do it in a city with a full-time City Council. Fortunately, all the Councilmembers and the Mayor has talked about the need for community empowerment. Unfortunately, no one has ever put a plan on paper to do it. And when some elected officials are faced with the reality of grassroots democracy, they might have second thoughts. Democracy isn't pretty.

But the first step is to put together a plan, and then we'll have something to present and discuss.

Here are some of the things that I feel need to be done next:

- Explore possibility of private foundation grant money to replace or assist CLA staffer.
- Do a preliminary identification of the different neighborhoods. Would probably involve finding out how different agencies already define neighborhoods (Planning, Police, Post Office, weekly newspapers, CDD, etc.) Ultimately, the neighborhoods would be able to define their own boundaries before being recognized by the City Council, but we would like to provide a starting point.
- Identifying block grant money that could be used to provide NCs with their base amount of money.

- Since the proposal will call for the NCs to get first priority on city surplus equipment, I'd to identify equipment (especially computers and faxes) that hasn't been committed by city departments that we can store and save for the NCs. I already mentioned this to Jim Crain.
- Need to contact a non-profit group called Neighborhoods USA. They have an annual meeting (last in Pasadena), and they publish a newsletter. Reportedly, they attempt to be a clearing house of information for those involved with NCs.
- Need to contact some other cities that have full-blown NCs or some version of it, ask some "how to" questions, and get their ordinances, rules, etc.
- Although the NCs have to be as independent as possible from City Hall in order to give the people a sense of ownership and importance, we will probably need a way of dealing with a totally dysfunctional NC. One way, of course, is to cut off their funding. But I wonder if there is a way to deny them the ability to call themselves a Los Angeles NC? Must check with City Attorney.
- In order to promote discussions between NCs throughout the city on common citywide issues, we will be asking representatives of the NCs to meet on a regular basis. This has never happened before. We need to think out what the city's role should be in arranging and providing support for those meetings.
- Could the city help the NCs purchase equipment and supplies through its contracts? Print their newsletters? Provide office space in city facilities? Provide free telephone use? Internet access?
- Should probably continue to explore further intern possibilities.
- Might have to convene an interdepartmental task force to help determine how the system would work differently within the departments, and how the departments can help make the program a success.

Of course, there's much more that needs to be done. I will do lots of it. But these seemed to be more fact gathering tasks.

The bottom line is that we're trying to change the system. After continuing to see all the same problems in this city after we had gone through that social spending frenzy of the '70s (CETA, Model Cities, etc.), I began to realize that few programs made communities self-sufficient after their funding ran out. So obviously we can't rely upon government, in this day and age, to solve all of our problems. Government just doesn't have the money.

So the only solution seemed to be to tap the vast energy and resources of the people themselves. But so many people had become cynical about government. They felt that when they speak up, nobody wants to listen. For instance, look at all the community advisory groups that exist. How are the leaders selected? They're appointed by the elected officials. And therefore they can be "unappointed" if they say or do the wrong thing. That's hardly community empowerment. So we have to begin with allowing them to select their own leaders, and allowing them to discuss the issues they want to discuss.

Do you want to come along on this ride with us? It will cost you an E ticket.