

3/7/97

From: Greg

Re: Neighborhood Councils Plan

GOAL:

Create independent Empowerment Congresses (borrowing the CD8 term) and Neighborhood Councils (using the generic term that is used nationally) covering the entire city ASAP. Get them involved immediately in the charter reform process. Provide them with the means to make their own neighborhoods more self-sufficient and less reliant on government, and better able to communicate and involve every person who lives, works, or plays in their neighborhood, and to communicate with people from other neighborhoods.

METHOD:

Using the 20-year experiences of Portland, Birmingham, Dayton, and St. Paul, and the 3-year experience in CD8, commit to a 3-year "pilot" project that will find the best way to achieve these goals throughout the entire city.

The city would fund offices, staff, and equipment in each of the 35 community planning districts, and in CD8 which already has a system in place.

These Empowerment Congresses would choose their own leaders and adopt their own by-laws in order to maintain an independence from City Hall, the single most important feature in the cities where they have been successful. They would, however, be accountable to the City and the Controller for the proper use of any fund funds they get from the City.

Initially, most of workers would be in a central Office of Neighborhoods, which would created an independent office, headed by a city employee. New hires would be contract employees for at least the first 3 years. They would be skilled in community organizing. This would ensure that councils are created in all parts of city in a fair and expedient manner, and would not be reliant upon City Council staffs. As has been the experience in other cities, once the City adopts the program, the leadership in many communities will come forward rather quickly with requests to be recognized. The Office of Neighborhoods will spend much of its time initially helping community leadership to get officially recognized and funded. Experience dictates that the second phase will consist of communities, who upon seeing these successes, want to get organized, but they will need a greater amount of assistance. The final phase will be those communities in which leadership has not come forward on their own, and the organizers have to literally go out into the communities and make a more pro-active effort to find leadership.

As the Empowerment Congresses are created, staff would shift from the Office of Neighborhoods to the local offices. Eventually, the Office of Neighborhoods would have the primary duty of servicing the needs of the empowerment congresses, helping them with City Hall problems; arranging for leadership, cultural sensitivity, and dispute mediation training; arranging the quarterly Congress of Neighborhoods meetings which would be attended by representatives of all the empowerment congresses; helping to use the city's buying power for materials, equipment, and printing; and in general serving the needs of the empowerment congresses.

Somebody has to formally recognize the empowerment congresses. In other cities it is the Council, the Mayor, or office of neighborhoods, whether it's independent or part of a department.

The tough decision will be in those areas where more than one group wants to be recognized. The Office of Neighborhoods could provide an evaluation and recommendation for the decision maker.

In order to speed the process, the leadership that is selected for the empowerment congresses would be temporary. Their funding would be given with the understanding that their initial mission is to organize their district into as many neighborhood councils as there are neighborhoods in the district. Some neighborhoods will be small, like in the canyons. There should be no minimum size, but experience has dictated that anything over 20,000 people is too large. Part of the process of empowerment is to allow neighborhoods to define themselves. This is a job that government can't and shouldn't do.

Once ___% of the district is organized into neighborhood councils, the empowerment congress must hold an election in a manner prescribed by their neighborhoods, so that the neighborhoods can elect their empowerment congress. This is crucial. The first empowerment congress leaders are selected by City Hall. But if the neighborhoods are to be truly empowered, they need to have ownership of their empowerment congresses. This would then be government from the bottom up.

Ultimately, the system would look like:

1. Every neighborhood, no matter how small, would be represented by a neighborhood council whose representatives they elect in whatever manner they choose. The boundaries would be determined by the neighborhoods themselves. In other cities, boundary disputes have been ignored, and overlapping has been allowed to exist without any problem.

2. The neighborhoods would elect the leaders of the empowerment congresses, which would be composed of the 35 community planning districts, plus 2 additional to recognize the existing structure in CD8, for a total of 37 empowerment congresses funded by the City. The empowerment congresses would determine what additional funding, staffing, etc. they want to provide to their neighborhood councils based upon the base funding they get from the City, and other funds and resources they raise on their own.

3. Quarterly, the Office of Neighborhoods will help organize a meeting of Empowerment Congress leadership so, for the first time, people from all over the city can meet and discuss the issues that divide them and the issues that can bring them closer together.

WARNING: Democracy isn't pretty, and it isn't perfect. There is no system that works flawlessly. But we have been fortunate to learn from other cities that have been doing this for over 20 years. Each has stories of headaches, but none would trade in their system for anything else.

FUNDING OPTIONS:

The amount of money that would need to be committed from the General Fund could be reduced by a number of options that could be pursued before, during, and after the formation of the empowerment congresses. They include:

1. New federal grants. Initial contacts with HUD have indicated an interest on their part in helping in some way. The new Secretary, Andrew Cuomo, is a strong advocate of neighborhood empowerment. Contact has been made through his local representative, and his Chief of Staff. Their interest lies in the understanding that such neighborhood councils currently only exist in smaller cities, and that if they can be made to work in Los Angeles, they can work anywhere. If we prove that it works, it is not impossible that Congress could agree to a grant package that would help fund such programs on a on-going basis. Presently, the concept has widespread appeal. Conservatives like it because it promotes self-reliance and responsibility. The liberals like it because it's grassroots democracy.

2. Existing block grants. Legally, there shouldn't be a problem in using CDBG funds to help support neighborhood councils in areas that qualify. CDD said they'd like to explore a possible method of using CDBG money to help fund a central Office of Neighborhoods.

3. Private foundations. There are several foundations whose entire or primary focus is neighborhoods. Initial contacts have been made, and there is interest. However, foundations don't directly fund governmental programs. It is possible that the foundations could directly fund a local council if they have non-profit status and special needs. They might also be able to fund a non-profit which would provide community leaders with training in leadership skills, cultural sensitivity, conflict resolution, etc.

4. Departmental personnel loans. Certain city departments might be willing to loan skilled employees to the program. For instance, the Housing Department has people experienced in local councils in the housing project areas; DWP knows customer service; Building and Safety and Planning know the kinds of problems that affect most local residents; Recreation and Parks has people who know how to organize youth activities, and keeping parks safe and clean; and son on.

5. Transferring programs. In Portland, half of the money used to fund the neighborhood councils comes from the Police Department. They decided that it was more efficient and effective to take the money that was being used for crime prevention programs, and give it to the neighborhood councils. That freed up more uniformed personnel for the streets. Contractually, the neighborhood councils used trained personnel to reach deeper into the neighborhoods than the police could. Need to examine which departmental functions could be better performed by the neighborhood councils. What is the effectiveness of DWP's advertising campaign? Or how successful is the effort by the wastewater system to discourage people from dumping pollutants into the storm drain system? How are fire prevention messages being delivered? Is mass media more effective than personal contact and peer pressure?

6. Volunteers. Due to the precedent-setting nature of this program, it is reasonable to expect that we could attract quite a few volunteers and students.

7. Contributions. Each district would be given the same basic budget. To the extent that each can save money by using governmental offices, getting donations of office space, equipment and materials, etc., they can use their saved money for other purposes. In order to save money in communicating with everyone in the community, one St. Paul neighborhood council hired a person part-time to print, produce, and selling advertising in their own community newspaper. The advertising

income paid for all the production and mailing expenses, so they developed a no-cost way of communicating with everybody who lived in the area. The money that others would need for printing and postage, could be used for something else.

The Office of Neighborhoods could seek deals and/or donations from computer companies, furniture stores, office suppliers, etc.

BUDGET:

First year. [Need help on this. Wouldn't need expenses for 37 offices in first year, because we won't have them all on line in first year. As they come on line, people would be transferred from the Office of Neighborhoods. The need for staff in the council offices wouldn't be as great in the formation years, as it would be after they were formed. I guess the solution is to pick an amount, and then you carry over savings if things don't move as fast as thought.]

37 District Offices:

Rental for 2,000 sq. ft. [Check with CAO]

General office expenses (utilities, supplies, custodial)

Staff [Use Pasadena's salaries?]

(1) Director

(1) General clerical

(2) Community organizers/ombudsmen/outreach

Equipment

Computer [Check with ITA] [Use city Internet for free?]

Fax

Phones and Voice Mail

Postage and printing for community newsletters/notices

Travel (to quarterly Congress meetings, Neighborhoods USA conference, special training, City Hall, etc.)

Office of Neighborhoods:

Staff

(1) Director

() Community Organizers/Potential area directors.

() Community Organizers II

() Clerical Support

Office Expenses

Quarterly Congress of Neighborhoods Meetings [Part of Office of Neighborhoods budget?]

Location/Set-up

Notices (Printing/Mailing)

Council Liaisons

15 additional. One in each Council office to maintain liaison with empowerment congresses.

Special Grants (After formed/2nd year?) As is done in Seattle, a certain amount of money is set aside each year to fund projects in each neighborhood. Applications are made to the Mayor's office. Match is required. Could be labor, materials, or money.

IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

One of the things that will distinguish these groups from others that exist is that there will be no membership dues. Everyone who lives, works, or owns property in the area is an equal participant. So communication becomes critical. The budget must include computers with E-mail and Internet capabilities, and enough money to produce and deliver newsletters on a regular basis and notices as needed.

With traditional community groups, only the dues paying members receive newsletters. But the idea here is that everyone is a member, and a potential participant.