

APPOINTED COMMISSION SPEECH

The staffs of both the commissions continually beg me to have to speak to their commissions regarding NCs. They don't need a specific proposal. Staff feels that the commissioners have gotten themselves too involved in details, and in plans that have consequences they haven't thought out.

Staff feels that because you are so much recognized as the father of the NC idea, that everyone really needs to hear from you. Staff calls me so much for thoughts, ideas, and information that they kind of think of me as a guru on the subject. Consequently, they hold you in even higher regard.

The commissioners need to hear your vision, and an explanation of what you feel the major components of a successful program would be. Since the Charter may not include the details anyway, they don't have to know all the details right now. We don't need anything in writing.

We're going to ask them to codify a philosophy and the features of a successful system. I would like to stress that the details of an NC will be an experiment. It would be foolish to include such experiments in the Charter because it wouldn't be flexible. But the Charter should include those features that we know the system must have in order to be successful. For instance, the success of the plan isn't going to hinge on whether each NC board contains 5 or 30 people, so why prescribe it? But it may hinge on appointed vs. elected vs. self-selected, or boundaries.

Through countless conversations, all these points, arguments and examples have been tested successfully.

I read over what I wrote earlier, and I like it because it covers all the main points and arguments as I know them. If some points are missing, let me know, and I can quickly add them.

Consider the following:

CHARTER REFORM GOAL.

I am convinced that the key to passage of the charter reform proposal by the voters will be whether or not it radically changes city government and gives the public the sincere hope of a better quality of life through a more responsive government. In short, the reform package must be able to answer the question that will be posed by every voter: How does this affect my life?

EXPANDED CITY COUNCIL WON'T DO IT.

As badly as it may be needed, the public will not be driven to the polls to enact changes that are internal to City Hall, such as redivision of power among elected officials, or consolidating the functions of city agencies. And they will also not be excited by increasing the size of the City Council, which, I am afraid will be viewed as just creating more of the same. I've been a city councilman for 27 years. I've had constituents ask me for more police officers, firefighters, libraries, and parks, but never have they

asked for more council members.

My staff surveyed some of the cities with the smallest ratios of council members to population, and each city told us Ait isn=t the quantity; it=s the quality, stupid!@

THE ANSWER IS NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS.

The best way to achieve that quality is to establish a citywide system of neighborhoods councils, following the lessons learned from the nation=s most successful programs in Portland, St. Paul, Birmingham, and Dayton.

PURPOSE OF NCs.

The City should fund a citywide system of independent, grassroots neighborhood councils for the purpose promoting maximum public participation in city government through a solid commitment to maximum empowerment. 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.

GIVE THEM RESOURCES.

The neighborhood councils should be given a budget adequate enough for them to hire their own staff, maintain an office, and communicate with the stakeholders in their area, City Hall, and other neighborhood councils. With the ability to communicate comes power and strength. When was the last time community groups in Reseda, Boyle Heights, Wilmington, and Watts talked to each other about a common concern such as public safety or the city budget? And how would they do it if they wanted to?

MAKE THEM INTO LOBBYISTS.

It=s no secret that the squeaky wheel gets the grease at City Hall. I want to, as the model cities have done, give our neighborhoods their own squeaky wheel. Regardless of how many elected officials we have, we need to provide the neighborhoods with the resources to hold them all accountable and keep their feet to the fire.

Give example of sports arena., and lucrative contracts to less qualified bidders who happen to be friends of decision-makers. (If you use DWP buyout, don=t forget that the unions are represented in the room.)

They wouldn=t be advisory any more than Cerrell & Association, Rose & Kindel, or Latham & Watkins are advisory.

SELF-DETERMINATION.

A belief in community empowerment must begin with the belief that the neighborhoods should be given

the ability to define the boundaries of their neighborhoods, form their own structures, select their own leaders, set their agendas, spend their money, and express their opinions, regardless of how unpopular they may be, in whichever manner they choose.

DETAILS COMING.

In the next couple of weeks, the details of just such a system will be completed because the council=s Government Efficiency Committee, at its June 3rd meeting, expects to have three different detailed plans before it for consideration.

MAJOR ISSUES:

NO EXAMPLES OF NCs WITH FORMAL DECISION-MAKING POWER.

No other city in the nation that has elected neighborhood councils with decision-making power.

Those neighborhood councils in the model cities do not want formal decision-making power.

They have found that they have more power being independent of City Hall, not being part of the system, but instead being like influential lobbyists. And they fight hard for their independence.

If a neighborhood council that is comprised of homeowners, business owners, renters, and other interests, agrees on an issue, the simple reality is that nobody in City Hall is going to oppose it. No one who wants to remain in office very long anyway. That=s power!

JUST CREATE MORE OF WHAT SOME MIGHT PERCEIVE AS COUNCILMEMBERS.

If they are given decision-making power, they will have to be formally elected or appointed, and thereby become part of the system they are supposed to be watching. So, on those occasions when they are exercising whichever powers are given to them, they=d be watchdogging themselves.

If you increase the size of the City Council to say 35, and create 35 elected NCs with decision-making power and staff, what you have done is to essentially just have created another City Council. The public ends up with just more of the same.

MUST BE INCLUSIVE TO HAVE A CHANCE OF BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER.

Would become more exclusive than inclusive because only registered voters of the area could run for the positions or cast votes.

Would continue to disenfranchise a large number of people, including the undocumented who could otherwise fully participate in a system that self-selected its leaders through methods they determined were best for their neighborhood.

The goal should not be to continue to try and force people into the representative side of the system who may have good reasons for not voting. Rather, the goal should be to create an active participatory system that gives them an alternative way to become more valuable members of society, and hopefully a reason to participate in the formal system.

MUST PRESERVE NEIGHBORHOODS.

If given decision-making powers, the boundaries of the districts would be subject to the Voting Rights Act, and we're all aware of the difficulty that would cause in trying to honor neighborhood boundaries. As much as I love Van Nuys, it isn't represented by five council members because four others love it equally as much.

It isn't enough to just write into the Charter that neighborhoods, or communities of interest, should be preserved. A lawsuit based on the Voting Rights Act will supercede that.

BUSINESS COMMUNITY SHOULD NOT FEAR DEMOCRACY.

Fears that economic progress in the city would be damaged are not substantiated by the experiences in the model cities.

A system of neighborhood councils such as the one I've described would speed and smoothen the city's decision-making process by providing a process, involving people trained in mediation and leadership, who can help achieve a consensus before a project or issue reaches the City Council.

Appointments are not community empowerment. They are a continuation of what we already have. And what if those making the appointments are people at City Hall who already have most of the power, and they aren't willing to share it?

The Coalition for Portland Progress, a consortium of businesses, reports no complaints during the more than 20 years that a network of neighborhood associations has existed in that city. It has made us act smarter, they said as we talked about how much time and money is saved when the problems of a development project are discussed and resolved at the front-end.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS PROVE THAT SELF-DETERMINATION IS ESSENTIAL.

The results of the focus groups confirmed what has been known by other cities for several decades. There are as many opinions of what neighborhood councils could be and should be as there are people who are asked for their opinion. This confirms my belief that the approach of model cities was correct -- City Hall shouldn't try and design a set of rules and restrictions that apply to all neighborhood

councils. If you believe in community empowerment, let the neighborhoods determine what's best for them.

LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION.

I have heard, and I'm sure you have heard, from many people who say that they wouldn't have the time or desire to participate in their neighborhood council, so what's the point in creating them?

Everyone in the city doesn't need to participate in order for the program to be successful. Studies found that Portland leads the nation with 7.5% of their residents actively participate in their neighborhood association system. So if 90% of the people in a focus group or on the streets of L.A. said they wouldn't devote any time to their neighborhood council, I'd be ecstatic because that would mean that 10% would. The impact would be enormous.

BOUNDARIES.

Since the goal is to design a system that embraces and draws its strength from neighborhoods, it only makes sense to have boundaries that are aligned solely around neighborhoods. There are major problems with using city council district boundaries.

First, the size makes organizing and serving the area too difficult. How in the world could you, for example, create a board that represents the diverse interests of a district that stretches from Wilshire Boulevard, through Hollywood, through the Hollywood Hills, and into the San Fernando Valley? If you could create it, what common neighborhood thread would connect them?

Second, the council district boundaries change at least every 10 years, and more often if the size of the city council changes, or if redistricting were required by litigation. That would mean having to tell many people that they don't live in the neighborhood they used to live in -- that their neighborhood park at which they have volunteered so much time, isn't their neighborhood park anymore. The boundaries must be designed to please the neighborhoods not the politicians.

NEED BETTER QUALITY.

As I said earlier, regardless of how many elected officials are added to the representative part of the governmental system, quality will only be improved when the participatory part of the system is strengthened.

WHAT THE COMMISSIONS SHOULD DO:

The exact details of an NC system will be an experiment. That's evidenced by the vast array of ideas we've heard expressed over the months. But the Charter should not be the place for such experiments. The one thing that isn't an experiment, in my mind, is the need for a system of NCs that would form the backbone of a participatory democracy part of city life, following the principles adopted

the nation=s most successful programs. The new Charter should include those principles.

#1. Guarantee, through the Charter, a citywide system of NCs by requiring the Council and Mayor to create and maintain them within a set of criteria that ensuring the future actions of the Council and Mayor could not abolish or weaken them.

#2. Guarantee, though the Charter, the creation of an independent Office of Neighborhoods that would help the neighborhoods organize themselves into a minimum number of neighborhood councils, and that would continue to support them after they are created.

#3. Following the most successful programs in the nation, allow the neighborhoods to select their own leaders, define their own boundaries, and spend their money as they wish.

#4. Understand that when the leaders of the neighborhood councils begin meeting as a citywide Congress of Neighborhoods -- I=ve suggested quarterly meetings -- they can discuss issues like whether or not they want a City Charter amendment to give them decision-making power. Let that decision come from the bottom up in the truest interests of grassroots democracy.

#5. Require the neighborhood leaders petitioning the City for recognition and funding to submit a plan through which they will ensure that the diverse interests of their neighborhood will be represented; that every person who lives or works in the area will have an equal interest; that there be a system of communication with all stakeholders of the area, and other neighborhood councils; and that there be a system of financial accountability. A system which allows the neighborhoods to develop their own plans goes the farthest toward community empowerment, and follows somewhat the successful experiences of the charter schools.

#6. Require that the City Council enact an [Early warning ordinance](#) which guarantees that the neighborhoods councils will receive 30 days notice, with certain exceptions, of neighborhood and citywide issues that will be broadly defined. The notice will give the neighborhood councils an opportunity to discuss and express their opinions, if they desire, on issues that affect them.

#7. If your commission feels that it would be beneficial to decentralize some decision-making power, my suggestion is to change the decision-making part of our system, and present it as a comprehensive package along with an independent participatory system. For instance, you might want to replace one level of the planning and land use decision-making system with many locally elected planning boards. I wouldn=t be surprised if some of the neighborhood council leaders might run for those seats and wear two hats, but at least it wouldn=t be during the same meeting.

#7. Lastly, I feel it would be a good idea for the charte reform package to include the requirement that the commissions reconvene in four years to consider further changes.

All of this may scare some people, but democracy has that effect on people. It scared some of our founding fathers. It=s still scary to some eastern bloc countries. Don=t let it scare you. Admittedly,

the model cities I've referred to are much smaller in size than Los Angeles, and they certainly don't have the degree of our ethnic diversity. But therein lies our special challenge, and the opportunity for Los Angeles to thrust itself into a national leadership role. If Los Angeles can do it, anyone can do it. Let's do it together. Not just a few of us. All of us.

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