

To: Joel
From: Greg
Re: Neighborhood Councils

August 7, 1998

Spent last night (Thursday night) at the first real meeting of the Weinberger task force on neighborhood councils. The idea was to make it a round table discussion among interested stakeholders.

Participants included: Dave Fleming, Bob Scott, Carol Schatz, Matt Klink (Cerrell/LABA), Burt Pines (L.A. Chamber), Bill Powers (CD 12), Barbara Fine, Tony Lucente, Diana Plotkin, Mondasette (Harbor area), Romerol Malveaux (incredibly sharp lady from CD8 empowerment congress and Housing Dept), Tony Chavez (MALDEF).

Commissioners were: Weinberger, Glushon, Kayser, Boland. Hahn was absent. Pacheco showed up for part of the meeting. Boland left early and didn't hear me speak, but she asked me to call her at home.

I was good, but I'll take things in order.

Fleming explained his plan, and Scott added a couple of points. There were several questions and comments from the commissioners. Everyone was polite.

LABA reiterated their opposition to putting elected with decision-making in the Charter. Their tone, once again, irritated the commissioners. Several times after he read the statement from LABA, Klink kept challenging everyone to explain where the \$5-50M was going to come from to fund everything.

Schatz echoed Klink. She suggested that each Council office be responsible for notifying groups in their district about important issues that are coming up. We don't need some new organization to do it. Pines said the same as Klink, but wasn't nasty about it.

Glushon pointed out that as the result of their hearings, he felt that the public had made three important statements: (1) Don't want the status quo. Need greater local control, (2) neighborhoods should have greater resources to act as stronger advocates, and (3) need to increase citizen participation. So he felt that the Charter should provide for (1) greater local control over land use matters, (2) greater control over tax dollars for services, and (3) more resources for neighborhoods to greater influence over citywide issues like ordinances.

He cited the example that I had given him a few weeks earlier about the low flush toilets and how the business community was able to get themselves exempted at the last minute, but the neighborhoods couldn't work the system as well.

I had notes, organized my thoughts beforehand, and just did it. I gave them the same handout we gave to the appointed commission in which we told them fundamental principles we felt should be in the Charter.

I told them that I was going to start out by suggesting that the task force define their overall goal. I said

I was going to suggest that it be something like: Require the city to enact and actively support a citywide system that promotes maximum neighborhood empowerment and participation. But I told them that Glushon seems to have already gone further than that. I said that once they agreed on a goal, staff could develop a plan, then they could discuss options and changes, but relate each on to the goal. Does it encourage or discourage community empowerment?

I urged them to keep in mind that they are being asked to develop two different proposals. One would change who makes decisions. It could be the Fleming Plan, Bennett=s plan, or something else. But whichever way it is changed, we still need to consider separately a participatory democracy plan to keep the elected officials= feet to the fire. (Fleming seemed to be nodding in agreement.)

I pointed out the shortcomings of just having a elected with decision-making body alone. I said that if I was a developer, and I was facing a community board of unsympathic homeowners, I=d just take my lumps and fight the battle on appeal to the City Council where the homeowners would have anymore leverage than they have now. People understood that.

I urged the task force, once they develop some models, to think them through using a real hot button issues, such as the opening of an AM-PM mini-mart, expansion of a school, liquor permits, landfills, etc. I wanted them to include some matters over which the city does not have total authority in order to show that our NCs could affect decision-making at other levels of government too.

I said that although the City could enact such a system on its own, it probably won=t for the very reasons that most other cities have not. And that a large part of that reason is that many elected officials don=t want the public to know what they=re doing. I gave the example of how over \$1 billion in bonds and taxes were rushed into Council so fast that some council members complained that they didn=t know enough about the items. (Fleming nodded in agreement.)

I couldn=t help but respond to LABA=s questions about cost. I said that there would be costs, but that if the NCs were able to stop one wasteful spending plan, they=d easily pay for themselves. I gave the examples of the sports arena, the DWP buyout, cutting spending in the wastewater system, and the sidewalk tax. Other speakers latched onto the waste argument in their comments.

I told the commission that the greatest gift they could give to the people of this city would be a system that gave meaningful empowerment to the neighborhoods.

Mondasette was called upon next, and he said, AWow! How can I follow that? He was really prepared and he knew his facts.@ Essentially, he just talked about the Harbor area, and complained that everything is dominated by the Harbor Dept.

Powers presented some confusing proposed for elected boards. Nobody was paying attention.

Romerol was low-key and great. Weinberger asked her where their funding came from, and she said he=d have to ask MRT. They provided the staff support, copying, mailing, etc. I think that got some commissioners realizing how much that operation still revolves around MRT. Barbara Fine got on her case about some pile of postcards that somebody got on some recent issue. She asked if they really came from the public, or if it was orchestrated by MRT.

Bennett spoke, represented his idea for a decision-making system, but added that we should have a Dept of Neighborhoods to develop our plan.

The whole meeting was taken up with the presentations, and questions and comments that people made along the way. Nobody asked me anything, but subsequent speakers referred back to things I had said.

After the meeting I decided to ask Plotkin if we could have both systems. She was pessimistic about our system, feeling that the lobbyists will always have the money to throw around, and that it wouldn't be possible to find good people work for the community councils. I used the Shirley Solomon example. She felt that communities of 100,000 were too big to be effective. She didn't know about our 2-tier system, and our plan to reach into neighborhoods. I said that there isn't a big difference between a neighborhood of 5,000 in Portland, and one of the same size in L.A. Finally, I said that systems like this have been at work in other cities for decades, and I asked her, "What is it then that makes us in L.A. more dysfunctional than the people in those other cities?" That stumped her, and she admitted that she didn't know about the other cities. She asked if I could give her more information.

Steve Presberg, senior staff, said something to me like, "Boy! Looks like you got your point across!"

Next I spoke to Romerol. She said that the problem with having meetings like this is that too many people are combative. She was concerned that there weren't more people talking about collaboration. I asked her two questions. One had to do with boundaries because I know that's the big problem with MRT. She understood why boundaries have to be designed around neighborhoods and not political districts. She gave me the example of Boyle Heights, which has changed from a Jewish community to a Latino community, but whose boundaries have remained the same. She understands what empowerment is about better than just about anyone. Her final concern was how to get the commission away from considering a decision-making council. I shared with her the possibility of two charter amendments, one being the formally elected one.

I feared that I had lost the chance to talk to Tony Chavez from MALDEF, but I ran across him and Marshall Diaz (community activist) in the parking lot talking to Glushon.

Our plan, which nobody seems to oppose, goes into Charter Amendment 1. Charter Amendment 2 become the decision-making body. All those commissioners who felt a need to propose such a thing will be satisfied. None of the discussions have to be over a participatory plan OR a decision-making plan. And then LABA and homeowners can slug it out over #2.

Since most of the discussion, therefore, will be over the details of a decision-making plan, we'll need to finish and release the details of the participatory plan so we can hand it over to the commission and staff. Otherwise, our plan might not get the attention it needs.

So I think we need to take a final look at our recommendations for what should be in the Charter, and a final look at our specific proposal in the event that the commission wants to know the details of this new plan.