

o: All Elected Los Angeles Charter Reform Commissioners
From: Greg Nelson, Councilman Wachs= Office
Re: Neighborhood Councils -- Monday=s Commission Meeting
Date: October 16, 1998

It was inevitable. The date selected for your commission to take up the issue of neighborhood/community councils is the same day that Councilman Wachs will be in Pittsburgh on a trip that was planned long ago. One day either way and he could have adjusted his plans. He apologizes.

His hope is that your commission will, regardless of how it votes on the proposals for a formally-elected system, support the proposal from the Task Force on Structures of Government for a citywide network of independent, grassroots, participatory neighborhoods councils.

Your staff report for this meeting makes very preliminary attempts to estimate costs for the different models that will be before you. Included is a summary of a CAO/CLA report that examined the costs of similar participatory programs in other cities, and expanded those costs for the size of Los Angeles.

Subsequently, we discovered one important factor that wasn=t noted at the time. A very large number of staff and expenses for those operations are comprised of people and funds transferred to their neighborhood councils system from other departments. One example is in Portland where half the expense of their system comes from their police department which decided that it was more efficient for the neighborhood councils to be provided with trained crime prevention specialists as opposed to running this program through the police department. If this cost were to be transferred to the police department, the cost of Portland=s neighborhood councils system would be reduced dramatically. Seattle=s system is comprised almost entirely of people who would otherwise be working in other departments. A more accurate analysis would have been to determine only those new costs attributed solely to the creation of a neighborhood councils system.

In summary, the participatory model can co-exist with any of the formally-elected models. We believe that true neighborhood empowerment requires going beyond the creation of additional formally-elected officials. The shortcomings of creating a new formally-elected system alone are:

1. Neighborhoods wouldn=t be truly empowered. Communities, or areas that wouldn=t be able to draw along neighborhood boundaries because of the Voting Rights Act, would just be represented by a single additional elected official.
2. That elected official would be unable, because of state ethics laws, to communicate with constituents without severe restrictions even if they had the funds to do so. As elected officials yourselves, you probably understand this difficulty.
3. That elected official, in reality, would have been elected by probably less than 5% of the residents in their area, and could therefore end up being someone who doesn=t represent all the diverse interests in the area or have any desire to do so. Regardless of how many elected officials there are within the city

system, we need a system of neighborhood lobbyists and community organizers to keep their feet to the fire and hold them accountable because we don't know who they will be. There is a risk that they could be people who would put their political interests ahead of the interests of the community. That has been the successful experience of the neighborhood councils in the other cities.

4. As part-time, unpaid elected officials, they probably wouldn't have the time to testify at City Council, Council committee, and commission meetings; speak privately with elected officials and their staffs; organize neighborhood activities; train neighborhood leaders; monitor all the important decision-making at City Hall; and do all the other work that the progressive cities know must be done in order to achieve maximum neighborhood empowerment.

5. The influence of formally-elected officials would be limited to only certain areas, such as planning and land use decisions. However, they would have no influence over decision-making at other levels of government or even within other city agencies. Those who are part of a participatory system would be able to wield their influence at all levels of government.

6. Those who have a strong influence with official bodies such as the City Council and the charter reform commissions, do not appear on any organizational chart, don't have a formal vote inside the system, and wouldn't trade their positions to have such a vote. They know how real power and influence is exercised. Neighborhoods should have that same power. That means being provided with the staff, resources, training, equipment, and freedom to get the job done.

The plan presented to you for participatory neighborhood councils is the product over six years of careful design. It has captured the best features of the most successful systems in the nation, learned from their mistakes, and made adjustments for Los Angeles' unique situation. If you approve it, you will place Los Angeles in the forefront of neighborhood empowerment for big cities. Those who have been championing neighborhood empowerment throughout the nation, and who have participated in the design of this plan, are anxious to have such a national model.

Annually, at the Neighborhoods USA conference, community leaders from all over the country gather to share their neighborhood councils experiences with each other. This year's event was so successful that they had to close it off at 1,000. The 1999 conference will be held in Madison, Wisconsin on the days preceding the Memorial Day weekend. The organizers have suggested that if Los Angeles appears to be committing itself to a true neighborhood councils system, that it might be helpful to have attendance, workshops, seminars, etc. from those in our city who could inspire other cities to do the same. Traditionally, these conferences have not been heavily attended by large cities. The organizers hope that we could give them a reason to attend.

See you on Monday. If you need me over the weekend, I'll be available on my cell phone at 213.840.5195. I'll be checking my Voice Mail at work at 213.473.5820.