

Draft - Creating a Citywide Neighborhood Councils Network - Draft

The Plan

The City of Los Angeles should create and support a citywide network of independent neighborhoods councils which would give neighborhoods unprecedented power to influence decision-making at City Hall.

Every part of the city would be represented by a neighborhood council whose leaders would be chosen by the people who live, work, or own property in the area. People may select their own leaders in whichever manner they choose, so long as each neighborhood council would reflect the diverse interests in their area. The people in each neighborhood would define their own boundaries, and set their own priorities.

Although the Department of Neighborhoods would design and submit a detailed plan to the City Council, here=s one way that it could happen:

A small, independent Department of Neighborhoods (DON) would be created to provide support to the neighborhood councils network. Initially, it would involve helping the neighborhoods organize themselves, define their boundaries, select their leaders, and petition the City for official recognition and funding. The DON would hire temporary community organizers, probably under personal services contracts, to do the initial work. They, in turn, would seek assistance from students and neighborhood volunteers.

As the network grows and it becomes time to begin operation, the city=s many neighborhoods would be asked to cluster themselves into at least 38 communities of approximately equal population so they could share offices. The City would provide enough funding so that each cluster of neighborhoods could maintain an office, hire full-time staff, print newsletters, communicate through e-mail and the Internet using state-of-the-art equipment, and select and oversee certain neighborhood projects.

The neighborhood councils would choose those who would be the officers of the neighborhood clusters, and who would be accountable to the City for the proper use of City funds, and be responsible to the neighborhood councils for their work.

In this way, the people in each neighborhood will have the skills, resources, and political clout to advocate for their positions at all levels of the decision-making process with the same strength as the professional lobbyists who presently have an overwhelming influence over issues such as planning cases, subsidies for sports stadiums, water and power rates, sewer service charges, police and fire budgets, etc. As a result, neighborhoods would rarely be ignored, and could never be overridden. As has been the experience in the cities with similar networks, neighborhoods would have a powerful way to keep their elected officials= feet to the fire. More of City Hall=s decisions would have to be made in the open with the active involvement of the neighborhoods.

On Day One, every neighborhood in the city would not have been identified and organized.

The DON would ask some neighborhood councils to temporarily expand their boundaries to include adjacent areas. Some number of community organizers would have their contracts extended in order to continue organizing those remaining areas into their own neighborhood councils.

For the first time, there would be an easy and effective way for neighborhoods throughout the city to meet and communicate on common issues and build collective strength. There would be at least 38 permanent and properly funded "one-stop" centers to help residents with city services, and to organize grassroots public participation and neighborhood self-sufficiency efforts.

An "early warning ordinance" would guarantee that neighborhood and community councils would be notified of certain proposed projects, ordinances, issues, and actions far enough in advance so they can meet, discuss, and establish a position before the City makes a final decision.

Department of Neighborhoods

The DON would be an active proponent of community empowerment. Once the neighborhood councils network began, the main responsibility of the DON would be to support the needs of the councils in the network; help them learn the complexities of city government; arrange for leadership, cultural awareness, and dispute mediation training; arrange the quarterly Congress of Neighborhoods (representatives from all the neighborhood clusters) meetings if requested; help acquire city in-kind support such as using the city purchasing contracts, acquiring surplus equipment, and printing and mailing materials; assist in preparing applications for non-profit status; maintain an information and communication network using e-mail and the Internet; pursue grants and other funding sources; act as City Hall's neighborhood advocate on behalf of the community and neighborhood councils; and publish a citywide newsletter on a regular basis.

The DON would be an independent department in order to keep it free from political manipulation. Its general manager would be appointed in the same manner as other general managers. In order to keep the DON accountable to the neighborhoods, there would be no traditional commission which might provide conflicting directions and conflict with the direct connection to the neighborhoods. Since the purpose is to design a "from the bottom up" network, the neighborhood councils would, in essence, serve the purposes of the current system of commissions. Instead, a Neighborhood Empowerment Commission would be created to recognize, and withdraw recognition if necessary, of the neighborhood councils and their clusters.

The general manager and top aides should be exempt from civil service due to the highly specialized, politically sensitive, and possibly temporary nature of the jobs. They should have the skills to help organize and support the organization of neighborhood groups; be committed to grassroots empowerment; have no "conflict of interest" ties to the existing community and political groups that would damage their ability to earn the trust of the community; be able to deal effectively with conflicting community groups; understand the

cultural peculiarities of the groups with which they will be dealing; and thoroughly understand city government.

Clerical staff, management analysts, and systems specialists could be civil service employees.

The staff that would initially help the neighborhoods organize themselves should be carefully selected for skills in community organizing. These community organizers should be contract employees whose contracts with the DON would expire once the neighborhood councils and their clusters are formed, and they decide how they want to select their own staff. The DON would then be staffed by people whose responsibilities would be focused more on providing support to the neighborhood councils network.

Organizing Neighborhood Councils

Since neighborhoods would be empowered to define their own boundaries, the size of neighborhoods across the city will vary greatly, but at this level that's not a problem. It is more important the when people gather to discuss issues that they're discussing them with people who are concerned about the same issues. For instance, if city council districts were used, mansion dwellers from Hancock Park would be meeting with people from Hollywood, celebrities on Mulholland Drive, and non-English speaking renters in North Hollywood trying to discuss neighborhood issues.

Funding the Neighborhood Clusters Offices

Once the DON has completed a reasonable attempt to identify the city's neighborhoods, and helped them organize into neighborhood councils, the DON will adopt a plan and map that clusters the neighborhoods into at least 38 communities of approximately equal population in order to provide for a system of administration and communication.

Following public input, the boundaries may be changed to better reflect actual neighborhood and cluster boundaries, and to make other adjustments at the request of neighborhoods.

In order to begin receiving city funding assistance, the neighborhood council leaders within the 38 or more communities will be asked to petition the DON for official recognition individually as neighborhood councils and collectively as a neighborhood cluster.

The official recognition shall be granted by the Neighborhood Empowerment Commission whose purpose shall be to certify and, if necessary, decertify neighborhood and community councils that violate the plan they submitted to the City, such as a failure to comply with their plan to ensure that their officers represent the diversity of interests in their area. The commission would be appointed in the same way commissions are currently appointed.

DON staff would be available to help the neighborhood councils prepare their petitions.

Should there be significant differences in population between the communities, the DON may choose to provide the communities with a proportionate share of the basic funding assistance to reflect the population differences.

The City would make mediation services available to resolve disputes between neighborhoods. The support could come from the City Attorney's Office, non-profit groups such as the Bar Association, and/or other trained mediators provided by the DON, including its Neighborhood Empowerment commissioners.

The neighborhood clusters would have the option of using their funds to hire their own staff, or to pay the City for city employees to work in their offices. They could provide funds directly to their neighborhood councils.

The DON would locate and offer to provide office space for each neighborhood cluster, such as free space in governmental facilities, donated space, or lease payments.

The officers of the neighborhood councils would select the officers of the clusters in order to guarantee an ownership interest from the neighborhoods.

Each neighborhood council seeking official recognition from the Neighborhood Empowerment Commission shall submit a plan and by-laws showing, at a minimum:

a. A guarantee that any neighborhood election or selection of leaders will be equal, free, and non-discriminatory to anyone who lives, works, or owns property in the area (i.e., the stakeholders).

b. Goals and objectives, including a Bill of Responsibilities which describes a statement of purpose, or a pledge from the neighborhood to itself.

c. A system through which the neighborhood council will communicate with each stakeholder on a regular basis.

d. Assurances that the leadership of the neighborhood council members will represent the diversity of interests within their area.

e. A system for financial accountability for its funds.

f. A plan to implement a neighborhood disaster preparedness plan, which would become part of a citywide "Prepare L.A." plan.

g. Guarantees that all meetings will be open, public, and that all stakeholders would be guaranteed an equal vote at general meetings.

Each neighborhood cluster seeking official recognition from the Neighborhood Empowerment Commission shall submit a plan and by-laws showing, at a minimum:

- a. A system for the selection of their officers by the neighborhood council officers.
- b. Goals and objectives.
- c. A system through which the neighborhood clusters will communicate with each of its stakeholders and neighborhood councils on a regular basis.
- d. Assurances that the officers of the clusters will represent the diversity of interests within their area.
- e. A system for financial accountability for its funds.
- f. Minimum and maximum size of neighborhoods within their community.

Once recognized by City Council resolution, each group will be allowed to refer to itself as an official neighborhood council or neighborhood cluster, and would be eligible to receive financial and in-kind support from the City and connect into the City=s Internet and e-mail system.

Together, the neighborhood council and neighborhood cluster officers and staff would have the ability to be trained in leadership skills, dispute mediation, multi-culturalism, communication, and whichever other skills they request and which can be provided. This will give them the skills and resources to affect decision-making at the highest levels where traditionally neighborhoods have had little or no influence. They would select their own issues, which could range from local planning and land use issues to citywide matters such as sewer service charges, water and power rates, library hours, police deployment, and bond sales.

The City=s support could include direct allocation of funds; discretionary grants; matching grants; equipment; supplies; furniture; materials; and contributions such as staff support, training in dispute resolution, cultural diversity, and leadership, use of city facilities, printing, mailing, Internet and Intranet access, Apiggybacking@ on city contracts, etc.

Congress of Neighborhoods

Representatives of all the neighborhood council clusters will be invited to meet together on a regular basis, as a Congress of Neighborhoods, to exchange concerns and form consensus on citywide issues such as City Charter amendments, ordinances, initiatives, programs, multi-cultural dialogue, and the general overall course of the city.

The DON will help organize these meetings, and their budget will contain funds to allow them to do so.

AEarly Warning@ Ordinance

The City Council shall adopt an ordinance giving each neighborhood 30 days to review, debate, and make recommendations on a wide range of matters that would be interest to each neighborhood such as: community-based policing; crime prevention projects; job training programs; transportation; planning and zoning decisions; neighborhood revitalization projects; alcohol permits; conditional use permits; community clean-up projects; street closures and barricades; traffic controls; preferential parking zones; parking meter rates; lighting; acquiring and improving parks and recreation facilities; variances to Building and Safety requirements; speed limits; police permits for parades, pool halls, etc.; design of community buildings, libraries, parks, and city facilities; historic designations; placement of bus benches; creation of assessment districts; demolitions; use of public lands for development; availability of tax-forfeited and surplus properties; and citywide issues that effect every neighborhood such as water and power rates, sewer service charges, transit plans, ordinances, bond sales, and the city=s budget and spending priorities.

The notices shall be sent to the neighborhood cluster offices using whichever method the each cluster prescribes.

Funding

Funds will be made available to the neighborhood clusters starting with a basic amount needed to help pay office expenses, staff salaries, consulting expenses, hold elections, conduct fundraising, and communicate with the stakeholders on a regular basis.

Additional funding for the councils could come from a combination of city general funds; new or redirected state and federal grant funds; private foundation grants; transfers from other city agencies; special grants and discretionary money provided by the City; and money raised by the councils on their own.

The City may elect to also provide funding directly to some or all neighborhood councils.

Those receiving City funds will be required to provide financial accountability to the City.

Prepare L.A. Plan

The City will design a plan for helping each neighborhood implement a disaster preparedness plan. Each neighborhood council will design a plan for implementing a plan within their area.

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