

To: Commissioners Jerry Gaines and Doris Nelson
From: Greg Nelson
Date: September 28, 1998
Re: Neighborhood Councils

Thank you for your questions and concerns about the best way to organize the neighborhood councils. I=ve should have gone into this with you in more detail, but I was afraid of Ainformation overload.@ We weren=t sure how much detail some commissioners wanted to put in the Charter.

As you are aware, Councilman Wachs suggested that the Charter contain only those features of a neighborhood councils plan that would be critical to its success or failure. The rest should be left up to ordinance or the neighborhood councils themselves in order to provide for flexibility and evolution.

Although the plan calls for a newly-created Office of Neighborhood Empowerment to develop the detailed plan, we have given much thought to the best way to get started, which have included long discussions with other cities about how they would do it if they had to do it all over again, and how they would suggest we do it in Los Angeles. Certainly these cities aren=t Los Angeles. No city is. But we believed it was possible to understand the fundamental principles of neighborhood empowerment, and design a plan that would fit Los Angeles= unique situation.

Originally, we felt that we should start by recognizing and funding offices in each of the city=s 35 community planning districts. Here were the problems:

1. The planning districts ranged in size from about 273,000 residents to 40,000. Realizing that we would be dealing with relatively small budgets for each area, we couldn=t make up the difference with prorata budgets.
2. After adjusting some of the boundaries to reduce the size of the big districts and to blend together some of the small ones, we realized that there were some very distinct communities within many of the planning districts that would want to have their own identity.
3. We couldn=t figure out how the leaders of these communities could be initially selected or elected by all 90,000 or so stakeholders in an practical, equal, and fair way. Most neighborhoods across the nation contain 5,000 to 10,000 people. The largest is 26,000. Beyond this size communication with the stakeholders usually becomes impractical. It=s like a small city.
4. We couldn=t figure out how to ensure that the community leaders tackled the all-important job of organizing their communities into as many neighborhood councils as there are neighborhoods in their area. Ultimately, we knew that in order for the neighborhoods, the basic unit in a neighborhood councils system, would have to select their community leaders in order for them to have an ownership interest in the system. Without a Acarrot and stick@ it is very difficult to determine how long it will take, if ever, to get the city organized down to the neighborhood and individual level.

5. The neighborhoods deserved the right to pick their own boundaries, rather than have someone at City Hall tell them what they should be. We felt that any system that offered empowerment would be getting off to a bad start by not empowering the neighborhoods to make decisions about their structure from the start. Besides, many of the community districts no longer accurately reflected neighborhood boundaries.

So we decided to recommend a system that built a system from the bottom up.

In the beginning, the Office of Neighborhood Empowerment would have a very small staff and some number of temporary community organizers. They would help the neighborhood identify leadership, define their boundaries, prepare their by-laws, etc. Training would be provided to the new leaders in communication, organizing, leadership, cultural awareness, and dispute resolution. After some period of time, the neighborhoods would be asked to cluster themselves into communities so they could petition for city funding, open shared offices, hire staff, etc. Some neighborhoods would be asked to temporarily expand their boundaries to encompass areas that have been slow to form their own neighborhood councils. This would ensure that from Day One, everyone in the city is part of a neighborhood council. Timetables could be set for this, or it could be determined by the speed of the community organizing efforts. Some number of community organizers would remain longer to help the further organize neighborhoods.

The elected leaders of the neighborhood councils would select the people they want to operate the offices at the community level. The exact method of doing so would be detailed in their petition to the city for funding and recognition. The leaders at all levels would have to reflect the diverse interests in their areas.

The city's early warning ordinance would require the city to provide notification to the community offices about issues of importance to them. In turn, these offices would have the budget and equipment to transmit the information further down into the neighborhoods and to every stakeholder as often as possible.