

To: Elected Charter Commissioners

From: Greg Nelson, Councilman Joel Wachs = Office, 213.473.5820

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As you approach next Monday=s meeting of your commission, and continued consideration of the neighborhood councils issue, I was hoping you would allow me the opportunity, in this e-mail, to BRIEFLY respond to some of the questions and concerns that were raised at the last meeting. It may make your decision-making a little bit easier.

WHY DOES THE DEPARTMENT OF NEIGHBORHOODS NEED TO HAVE A COMMISSION? IF WE HAVE THE PARTICIPATORY/GRASSROOTS MODEL AREN=T THE NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS, IN ESSENCE, THE COMMISSION?

Yes. The purpose of the commission was simply to have a body whose purpose it would be to recognize the neighborhood councils who have petitioned the city for recognition, funding, and support. This department would be unlike any other department in that it would exist to support the neighborhood councils. Therefore, the Neighborhood Empowerment Commission would also be unlike any other.

I=M CONCERNED ABOUT NIMBYISM AND OTHER SPECIAL INTERESTS DOMINATING THESE GROUPS.

If the leaders are appointed or formally-elected, there is a chance that one interest group could dominate the leadership. With the participatory model, the neighborhood councils, in their petition to the city for funding support, must show how they will guarantee that their leadership will continuously reflect the diverse interests in their area. It would become a type of contract to which they will be held accountable.

I=M CONCERNED THAT NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS AND OTHER VITAL CONTRIBUTORS IN A NEIGHBORHOOD WOULD BE LEFT OUT.

That=s a problem with the formally-elected models. Those who could run for office or vote for those who do would have to be registered voters in the area. That excludes business owners, non-profit agencies, and those who are not registered for vote for any reason, such as those awaiting their citizenship to be finalized. Because there would be no formal powers granted to those in the participatory model, this is not a problem. Anyone who wants to attend a meeting, speak their mind, pick up a shovel and plant a tree, distribute a neighborhood newsletter, escort children home from school, or stuff envelopes, can do so as equals with everyone else who cares about their neighborhood.

In Portland=s Old Town/Chinatown area, they decided to elect their board members in a way that was customized to their needs. They have three members each from business, the Chinese community, the non-profits (mainly those which feed and house the homeless), the subsidized tenants, and the market

rate residents. In a formally-elected system, many of these people wouldn't be able to run for the offices and serve their neighborhood equally with the others. It has worked for them because everyone works together as one.

I=M CONCERNED THAT HOMEOWNERS HAVE BEEN IGNORED TOO OFTEN BY CITY HALL.

The participatory model would give neighborhoods, for the first time, the full-time staff, communications equipment, money for newsletters, and organizational and leadership skills to influence decision-making at all levels of government. This goes beyond having a preliminary vote in a small part of the decision-making system that could be easily overridden by the City Council. And it goes far beyond being Ajust advisory.@

I=M CONCERNED ABOUT COST.

There have been no third party cost analyses of the formally-elected models, except for the costs of the elections themselves. So cost guestimates by proponents and opponents have varied greatly. The CAO/CLA made a preliminary estimate of the cost of the participatory model. Including a small Department of Neighborhoods (DON) of about 5 people, and staff and offices for about 34 neighborhood council offices, the cost was about \$2.3M per year. The proposal calls for the DON to develop a specific plan and present it to the City Council and Mayor. That plan would be the product of extensive input from the newly-forming neighborhood councils. If your commission wanted to put more specifics into the Charter, it would be easier to more accurately estimate the costs.

HOW WOULD ANY OF THESE MODELS IMPROVE THE DELIVERY OF SERVICES?

Getting departments to change the way they deliver services is a difficult task. You need leverage. City council members know how to use this leverage. It comes through their ability to control the city budget, and in conducting merit evaluations of the general managers upon which their salaries are determined. None of the formally-elected models transmit this leverage to the local level. When residents have complaints about services, they will most likely still prefer to call their city council members and demand results.

Part of the participatory model is the ability of the neighborhood councils to present to the mayor a list of city budget priorities, and to require the mayor to include those recommendations as part of official budget document. Your commission may not have realized this at time they discussed this matter, but it would create a reason for the departmental general managers to proactively lobby the neighborhood councils for what they want from the mayor. In turn, the neighborhood councils would lobby the general managers for what they want.

Since the boundaries of the neighborhoods would be determined by the neighborhoods themselves in the participatory model, they could do so taking into account service delivery areas, and use their leverage to press for uniformity among the departments. The Governmental Efficiency Committee has

been considering whether or not the Department of Neighborhoods could also perform additional service delivery functions such as in Baltimore and Seattle. This, we expect, would be part of the specific plan developed by the Department of Neighborhoods.

SHOULD FORMALLY-ELECTED COMMUNITY COUNCILS BE GIVEN AUTHORITY OVER SOME LOCAL SPENDING AND PRIORITY MATTERS?

Until someone is more specific about which matters we're talking about, this becomes difficult to answer. It may boil down to who is better able to make local spending decisions: (1) a part-time, unpaid official from a small area who probably wouldn't have any staff or funds for communication with the residents, or (2) a city council member with 10+ staff members who are constantly in the field meeting with and talking to local residents and organizations. If the answer is #1, and they would not have land use authority, you would have to decide if the new local elected officials could make these local spending decisions so much better than the city council member, that the additional cost is justified.

IS THERE A CONFLICT BETWEEN HAVING A FORMALLY-ELECTED NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL AND A PARTICIPATORY ONE?

There's only a conflict if you insist upon calling them both neighborhood councils. In reality, one is a system that changes the number of elected officials (politicians), and the other creates a system that exists outside City Hall and empowers residents to have greater influence over the decisions that those people make. In every city that has the participatory system, they of course have a separate system of elected officials who push the buttons. None of the formally-elected models propose to reach down into neighborhoods with any kind of councils. They would elect one person from an area smaller than a city council district and give them some limited voting powers along with others from a community. That falls far short of what neighborhood empowerment is all about.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN THAT FUNDING FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF NEIGHBORHOODS WOULD BE GUARANTEED LIKE FUNDING FOR THE ETHICS COMMISSION?

The current Charter requires the city to fund the Ethics Commission, and it spells out the duties and responsibilities of the commission. The proposal before you recommends that same process. It would prevent a future city council or mayor from essentially abolishing either agency without going back to the ballot.

WE CAN'T WAIT FIVE YEARS TO HAVE THE SYSTEM REVIEWED.

As mentioned during the last commission meeting, the city and the Department of Neighborhoods could review the system as often as they wanted. Additionally, the city's process for merit reviews of general managers provides another continuing opportunity for accountability.

WHO WOULD OVERSEE THESE NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL OFFICIALS WHO WOULD BE SELF-SELECTED OR INFORMALLY ELECTED?

In return for official recognition and city support, they would be held accountable to the city for compliance with the plan and petition they submitted to the city. They could have their funding and recognition withdrawn by the Neighborhood Empowerment Commission. The City Controller would prescribe methods of accountability for their funds. Beyond that, they would be accountable to those who elected them -- their neighbors. And therein lies the real advantage of the participatory system -- accountability down to the neighborhood level.