

To: Elected Charter Reform Commissioners

From: Greg Nelson, Councilman Wachs= Office, 213.473.5820

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Your commission has tentatively indicated that if it is able to decide on a model for a formally-elected system of community or district councils with decision-making power, it would place it on the ballot as a separate measure, but restrict the voters to choosing it or the participatory model in the base charter amendment. At the request of one commissioner, I am going to try and explain the problem that would occur if the voters were not given the ability to choose the ability to decentralize the city=s formal voting system AND create a system of grassroots, participatory neighborhood councils. I decided to use a couple of examples.

THE INTRUSIVE PROJECT:

Formally-elected: 7 part-time, unpaid elected officials would meet and cast a vote at the front-end of the land use approval process. They might replace an existing agency like the Board of Zoning Appeals. They might be an additional layer. They probably wouldn=t have the staff or time to hold many meetings with either the developer or the residents. Their vote could be overridden by the City Council by a 2/3rds vote, the same as the process is now for overriding decisions of the Planning Commission or the BZA. Big developers wouldn=t really care about the vote by these local boards, because all they would have to do is use their lobbyists, political contributions, and other leverage to get two extra votes on the City Council. As usual, the communities wouldn=t have any more leverage than they have now, which is minimal. Maybe one of the local board members would take time off work and come to the City Council. More likely, they just send a letter. Even if they had the money, the state ethics laws prohibit elected officials from sending out more than 199 pieces of unsolicited mail per month, so their ability to communicate with the people and solicit their support is severely limited. But these are also elected officials, and they need money to run for re-election, and/or to run for higher office. Since the boundaries of their districts would be the same as city council districts, you=d automatically have 7 people whose main focus might be preparing themselves for the city council seat. In the end, the action of the local boards become more advisory than anything else, and final decisions continue to be made the same way they are being made now.

Participatory: Because the neighborhood councils (NCs) would be comprised of all the diverse interests in the area, it would be foolish for the council member to ignore their position. They would have full-time staff to research the issue, meet with the principles, and lobby the city council members and their staffs before the vote, just like the professional lobbyists do. They could print newsletters to poll the residents, and to tell the residents how their city council member is responding. They would have the budget and training to establish phone trees, fax trees, and to bus people to City Hall if needed. Through e-mail, they=d be able to contact all other NCs and neighborhood organizations, and form coalitions in order to influence the voting of other city council members. Unions do it so well, so the neighborhoods could too.

CITYWIDE ISSUES:

Residents have always been left out of the process of determining citywide issues like ordinances, positions on state ballot measures, tax increases, bond measures, contracts for services, etc.

Formally-elected: They could hold hearings and offer their advice. In reality, because these people probably have full-time jobs, they=d been spending most, if not all of their time on land use issues. Since they could only take positions on other matters, and not have the leverage to force their positions on the City Council, they=d probably not spend much time on such things. They=d get tired of being ignored.

Participatory: As described above, they would know how to lobby the City Council just like the professional lobbyists do. And that ability to communicate with all other NCs across the city and form coalitions becomes an especially strong tool when arguing for or against citywide issues. City Hall prides itself in its ability to conduct much of its business in the dark. Just look at the recent Proposition HH controversy, and the Times= reversal of its endorsement. With term limits, eventually the valuable institutional memory will only reside with the lobbyists, the bureaucrats, and hopefully the neighborhoods. There will be neighborhoods long after the politicians have gone.

NEIGHBORHOOD EMPOWERMENT:

Formally-elected: The only people being empowered are the 7 elected people from areas of 250,000 people each. Entire communities (forget neighborhoods) could be unrepresented. Being elected officials, there is a strong likelihood that they will concentrate only on those people who were responsible for getting them elected and keeping them in office. Non-voters would be ignored in the same way that all existing elected officials ignore them now.

Participatory: Everyone who lives, works, or owns property would have equal power. Trained community organizers would know how to keep them energized and productive. Through this positive experience it=s possible that more people could be encouraged to register to vote and turn out to vote.

SUMMARY:

Adopting the formally-elected model changing the way voting and formal decision-making is done. Adopting the participatory model changes the way this decision-making is influenced, and lets neighborhood play on a level playing level with the most powerful influences in the city.

Note: On Friday, Joel=s mom got rushed to intensive care for about the third or fourth time recently. On top of that, his back went out again, so he doesn=t know if he=ll be able to get to City Hall or anywhere else on Monday.