

NCA

PRESENTED TO THE  
*ELECTED* LOS ANGELES CHARTER REFORM COMMISSION  
OCTOBER 19, 1998  
BY  
GREG NELSON  
OFFICE OF COUNCILMAN JOEL WACHS

Your commission has two important, but separate, decisions to make today.

One of the decisions will be whether or not to change the city's formal decision-making system -- the representative part of our democracy -- those who are entrusted to push the yes or no buttons as an official part of city government. The choices are many -- and no one needs tell you that your task is a difficult one.

The other decision is whether or not to create a system that doesn't presently exist in our city -- a citywide network of independent, grassroots, informally elected or self-selected neighborhood councils -- the participatory part of our democracy.

Councilman Wachs urges you to support the proposal brought to you by your task force, which would create just such a system. He feels that regardless of how we may change the representative part, we need to empower the neighborhoods so that they can always be a major force in determining how those elected officials make their decisions.

If you share this vision, and you choose to support the participatory model before you, you will be creating a mechanism through which Los Angeles can begin:

1. Replacing a decision-making system that is based largely on confrontation, with one that revolves around collaboration;
2. Ending the balkanization of our city's neighborhoods through a system that allows and encourages neighborhoods all over the city to begin sharing their common concerns, forming coalitions to implement shared solutions, and understanding each other's cultures and differences. Every day could be a Day of Dialogue;
3. Making neighborhoods more self-sufficient, ending their long-standing reliance on government to do everything for them;
4. Giving neighborhoods the training, staff, and resources they need to have an unprecedented strength to influence decision-making at all levels of city government, and at other levels of government as well, such as at the state and county;

5. Involving all the stakeholders in a neighborhood, not just registered voters, as equal participants in the exercising of neighborhood power; and

6. Becoming THE national leader among big cities for neighborhood empowerment.

This isn't anything new. Progressive cities like San Antonio, Birmingham, and Portland discovered the secret over 20 years ago. Now the people in those cities have shared with us their knowledge of why real neighborhood power involves much more than having a preliminary vote inside the city system.

The plan before you captures the critical fundamentals of a neighborhood councils network, and it is ready to be included in your new Charter, including providing flexibility for the neighborhoods themselves to direct the system's evolution as Los Angeles enters the new millennium.

Creating this system of participatory democracy would be the greatest gift that you could give to people of Los Angeles. And given the political realities of this city, you may be their only hope.