

“The People Sound Off”

Host: Paul Napier

In-studio guests: Greg Nelson, General Manager, Department of Neighborhood Empowerment

Insert Guest: Unidentified Speakers (names not available)

Paul: Here at the Neighborhood Café you can find extensive information pertaining to all Neighborhood Councils. So why don't you grab a cup of coffee and come on in and join the discussion. Twice a year the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment organizes a Congress of Neighborhoods and our guest today is the man who makes sure that this Congress is a success. That's the General Manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, Greg Nelson. Greg, I'm not sure everybody fully understands about the Congress or the Neighborhood Councils. How long has the program been in effect?

Greg: We started the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment at the end of 1999. Soon after, we started the process of getting Neighborhood Councils created. Once we had enough of them at the end of 2001 we decided to start hosting these Congresses of Neighborhoods, so that the neighborhood leaders could all get together and meet each other.

Paul: These Neighborhood Councils are elected? Is that correct?

Greg: Yes, each of the 73 Neighborhood Councils are elected through an election. Each gets to choose to their own way of electing or selecting their leaders. Therefore, there are actually 73 different systems. It gets kind of crazy. This is what the “empowerment” part of Neighborhood Empowerment is all about.

Paul: How do the Neighborhood Councils work in relation to having a say with the City Council? How is that affecting the order of how things that are accomplished? In other words, do the Neighborhood Council opinions have any weight behind it?

Greg: That is one of those million dollar questions that I get asked all the time by the Neighborhood Councils. The answer is very simple and let me explain. When you get certified as a Neighborhood Council and you get your board elected, you really don't have any credibility at all. You have to earn every ounce of it. What I tell the Neighborhood Councils is that in order to be credible you should be representing the diversity of your neighborhood. You shouldn't all be homeowners and you all shouldn't be anything. You should be diverse, be able to communicate with all the people in your area, and you should establish good working relationships with your elected officials. Once you do that, the amount of power and the amount of influence the Neighborhood Council can have is limitless. They can be as powerful as the most powerful lobbyists in the city.

Paul: In effect, it is of some authority and significance. If there is a decision made by the Neighborhood Council and this decision is voiced to the City Council Member, then it is carried to a hearing at the City Council? Is that accurate?

Greg: I had one Neighborhood Council that said we're the best Neighborhood Council in the city. I asked, why do you think that? He replied we take positions on more issues than any other Neighborhood Council. I said, okay timeout. Anybody can take positions on anything.

You can fill your agenda with positions, but the real substance you're looking for is what do you do after you take that position. How do you make your influence known? Who do you talk to? Who do you send emails to? How many people come to the meetings? Are you actually being able to affect the decision-making process or are you just sitting in meetings taking positions, taking notes, and minutes?

Paul: It may not be measurable, but do you have any feedback from the City Council offices?

Greg: There are my observations, and then there are also the observations from the professors at USC who have been studying us for quite some time. USC conducted a study. They went around and talked to the different City Council offices and their staff and found that an amazing number of them paying attention to and respecting the opinions and the voice of the Neighborhood Councils. I am also seeing that too. Everyday, I am seeing more and more where the voice of the Neighborhood Council carries greater and greater weight. For instance, there are a number of City Council Members who tell the developers, the people who have planning and land-use projects, "Don't even come to us before you come to the Neighborhood Council!" That's amazing.

Paul: It is. Let me get back to the Congress of Neighborhoods. You said that it meets twice a year. Is that where all the representatives of the various Neighborhood Councils get together?

Greg: Yes, originally when we created it the idea was to provide additional training to them. When we were developing this idea we went around the nation and talked to other cities that had programs like this. I kept asking one main question, "If you had to do it all over again, what would you do differently?" They all said training. The reason is because they said that when we created our programs we were just established and people said to us, "go off and do something." We knew that we had to provide training. We started doing it at the Congress of Neighborhoods, and realized we now have to change.

Currently, we're now providing the training through what we call our "Empowerment Academy," which is where we go out on a constant basis all year round in locations that are in people's neighborhoods. We provide trainings on how to run meetings, how to organize yourself, how to push the buttons of the elected officials, and how to get things done.

Paul: As a matter of fact we have some moments of tape from this year's congress. Why don't we take a look?

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Unidentified Male Speaker: One of the major things I liked about the Congresses is this resource room where all the City Departments have a display. It gives us an opportunity for those of us that work all day to talk to different departments and get the information that we need. We are definitely taking back the resources that we have gotten today to our community. We have also gotten a lot of questions answered. I really enjoyed this resource room.

Unidentified Male Speaker: I like the energy. All the activists, all the people coming together, it's revitalizing.

Unidentified Female Speaker: I really like the opportunity to interface with some of the movers and shakers of the City and get a lot of information.

Unidentified Male Speaker: What I like about the Congress is that you get to interact with so many people from the City and listen to how they are addressing different issues that are going on in your neighborhood.

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Paul: I am really impressed the Congress of Neighborhoods takes place in its own building?

Greg: I would be remiss if I didn't thank our host. We regularly use the Los Angeles Convention Center. They are really nice and they also save the taxpayers a lot of money, because we get free parking, free room, and free setup. We have to pay for the food though, because it is through a concessionaire. They do save a whole lot of money. That was 600 people you saw there at that event, all talking, learning, expressing their opinions, meeting other people, and dealing with the departments.

Paul: This is a weekend meeting isn't it?

Greg: No it is not. We try to limit it to just Saturday mornings. In the past we had some that went all day, but we found a big drop-off after lunch and people would mysteriously wander off. So, we try to keep it going from 8:30 a.m. to 2 p.m., and try to cram as much activity and information.

Paul: How is the agenda established for what's going to take place at the Congress?

Greg: No one has ever asked that before and we don't develop that in our department ourselves. We meet several times with volunteers from the Neighborhood Councils who want to help us plan the next Congress. We meet with them several hours at a time, and we talk about what went good or bad at the previous Congress. Then we develop the new one. Who do you want to speak? What do you want to be trained at? What do you want to have done at this event? It's a fantastic process, but again that's the empowerment part of Neighborhood Empowerment.

Paul: Los Angeles is diverse, but perhaps not an awful lot more diverse than other communities that have tried this. Can you generalize and say what you think is a result of these Congresses? Do the councils find that they have more in common with the neighborhoods or is there less in common?

Greg: When we were developing the idea one of the things the critics said was that this is just going to balkanize the city. My argument was that it is already balkanized. People in Reseda don't know a thing about the needs and problems of the people in Boyle Heights or the people in Wilmington. Through these Congresses of Neighborhoods we have been bringing people together.

Let me give you an example. Just recently we invited Neighborhood Councils to get involved with the Mayor in developing the big priorities for the city budget and what we found was that everyone agreed public safety was number one. The streets and sidewalks were number two. You can see how they are coming together to be able to share the same concerns, which is something that has never happened before.

Paul: I would presume a natural commonality would be that the residents of the East San Fernando Valley have problems with airport noise for example, as with the people in Inglewood even though they are several miles apart. Are there problems that are more common than that?

Greg: The most common thread that runs through all the neighborhoods is public safety. Everyone wants to be safe. They want to be safe in their own homes. They want their neighborhoods to be safe, so their children can go to school. They want to feel good about the neighborhood. This is why this year, which was like last year, was a really tough budget year for the city. The city was getting beaten from pillar to post by the state. Every department last year had to cut back, but the Mayor said "I am not going to cut back on the public safety departments." I think that was in large part, because of the Neighborhood Councils. Safety is really above and beyond all else our top priority.

Paul: Good, because safety was such an issue of prominence with the council representatives. How is this coordinated through the Police Department? Is it directly or is through the Mayor's office? How does it work?

Greg: The Mayor's office started something new that began when the city hired Chief William Bratton to come here from New York and Boston. He brought with him a concept called "LA Stat." With this they actually keep statistics now on the crimes in the different police divisions and the Chief holds division captains responsible for what happens. He gives them the leave-way, the power, and ability to solve these problems, but also holds them accountable for the results. I think it is every month that the Deputy Mayor meets with all these different departments. It isn't just the Police Department that is involved in public safety. It could be the department that installs the lighting, the department that blocks off the alley, or the department that performs other services.

Paul: Such as the Fire Department?

Greg: Yes, so the Deputy meets with those departments all the time and holds them accountable for the things they said they were going to do a month before. It is really producing some amazing results.

Paul: Right now is this a block or impediment in the relationship with a resident and direct contact with the Police Department? Is the Police Department the problem? Are they destined to hear you or do you have to go through your Neighborhood Council?

Greg: Actually things took a big change when Mayor Hahn got elected. One of the promises he made was that he would restore the Senior Lead Officer Program. That was a wonderfully successful program that people in all neighborhoods loved because it was "the cop on the beat." It was someone who knew the neighborhood and knew the problem. It was also someone that everyone could trust within that department. The program had been dismissed and then Mayor Hahn got a new Police Chief. Chief Bratton brought back that program with "gusto," as they say in Spanish. Every neighborhood that I go to says, "please don't ever touch our Senior Lead Officers again. We need them. We want them." It's someone who cares and someone who gets things done. That has created a much closer link between the neighborhoods, and the police departments.

Paul: That does not impede a person who wants an immediate response from not going through the Neighborhood Council, but going directly through the Police Department?

Greg: If there's a life and death emergency you dial 9-1-1. The city installed another program and you'll see it flashed up during this program, 3-1-1. This is the number you call when you have a routine question, routine problems about city services, whether it concerns city police or any other kind of services you dial 3-1-1. There is a whole cadre of specially trained operators who know the different functions of the city, and they know how to connect you with someone to take care of your non-emergency needs.

Paul: I don't think a lot of viewers realize the simplicity of this 3-1-1. How long have you been involved with various departments of Los Angeles City government?

Greg: I have been doing this for 32 years, since even before Council Member Joel Wachs got elected. My first real first job was when I started working as a student worker for Mayor Sam Yorty. He was the Mayor when Coolidge was President.

Paul: We sent out our official Neighborhood Café crew to the Congress and asked stakeholders what they would like their Neighborhood Councils to do in the future. Let's take a look.

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Unidentified Female Speaker: What do you see the Neighborhood Councils doing in the future or what would you like to see them doing in the future?

Unidentified Male Speaker: I actually see them doing more community technology in the areas of outreach and communication. I see that some of the need is internal in terms of safety and actually having individuals participating in the Neighborhood Councils. The outreach part is important for the Neighborhood Council's ability to use the Early Notification System to have timely communication with the City and with each other. I see the overall commons concept as being a place where there is full participation in community projects, community awareness, community safety, and education.

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Paul: What was said highlights a point that was made before. The gentlemen mentioned the word safety twice in the interview. There seems to be a commonality about safety, but also about other things, such as enhancement of the neighborhoods. Even though that might not be a priority we had an earlier discussion with some of our guests. We were talking about how neighborhoods can be enhanced through the cultivation of trees, for example. Apparently the reach of the Neighborhood Council is pretty inclusive.

Greg: That came from the Boyle Height's Neighborhood Council. It is interesting, because he said the same thing that probably everyone else said. If you asked him what his top priority is, it is public safety, but he is also our computer guru. He understands the importance of setting up communication systems electronically. This is the backbone of our system. We make sure that each Neighborhood Council is given a free computer, so they can receive email, connect to the Internet, and we set up the system. Ken has been a part of helping us design it. We, the department, send our messages to all the Neighborhood Councils electronically. Then the Neighborhood Councils develop their own systems for getting the messages further down into the community. This is how you get out messages and how we are trained in emergency

preparedness or when you're going to have a chance to meet your Senior Lead Officer. You can even learn about tree planting projects. It's been a thrill working with Ken. He's just terrific.

Paul: These dispatches that go out by email, are the City Council offices also informed as to that what is taking place so that they keep up with the current events?

Greg: Of course they are. We make sure that all the City Council offices, the Mayor's office, other elected officials, like the Board of Education Members, the County Board of Supervisors are all on the mailing lists. It's important that they know what is going on. They need to know what is important to the Neighborhood Councils and how they can help the Neighborhood Councils. They need to know what to say when the Neighborhood Councils come knocking on their door.

Paul: Earlier you referred to the Neighborhood Council system as being somewhat of an innovative program for a city of this size. Are their cities of other sizes that have preceded Los Angeles with the Neighborhood Council concept?

Greg: It was back in the mid 1970's when a few cities like, Portland, Oregon, St. Paul Minnesota, Birmingham, Alabama, and Dayton, Ohio began starting their programs. I went back and started looking at their different programs and noticed that St. Paul was really amazing. St. Paul is 1/15 the size of Los Angeles. When I started talking to them about starting a program in Los Angeles it was like I was talking about something impossible. They really did not have a concept of what it really is to create their kind of system in a city the size of Los Angeles.

The diversity is another thing. There are, I believe, 85 different languages we speak in our schools alone. Initially they were dumbfounded, but they provided a lot of help up still. Now, Los Angeles is on our own and it's an unknown frontier that we're traveling on.

Paul: I know this is a tough one, but as the guy who is overseeing this, how has the progress been? Are you satisfied? Would you grade yourself? Would you grade the whole system? Is there anything not accomplished that should have been or is there something with time that will be accomplished?

Greg: At the last two Congresses of Neighborhoods we asked the people who came to give us a letter grade, just like in school. Both times we ended up with a "B-." This grade is excellent considering the fact that we haven't yet built out the whole program. There are still pieces that were working out together with the Neighborhood Councils.

The other thing is that it's hard to evaluate ourselves because we are so close to it. We had a visit from a professor from Tufts University who was the co-author of what we call the "Bible of Neighborhood Councils." He came out and was talking to the Neighborhood Council Members and said, "I sense that some of you are little anxious at the speed at which things are happening and not happening. I want you to know that other cities took 6 to 8 years to get to the point you are at." This made me feel good.

Paul: Let's listen to what some of the participants at the Congress of Neighborhoods had to say in the video.

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Unidentified Female Speaker: I would actually like the Neighborhood Councils to become more involved in the education abilities or the quality of education in our communities, especially

in Boyle Heights because that's where I am from. We're looking at a problem right now in the education system where we have close to 60% of the youth dropping out before they even reach their senior year. I think this becomes a major force in whether a community survives because Boyle Heights is one of the most historic places in Los Angeles. The quality of education becomes one of the main factors that families are looking as to whether or not to move out of the community. I am hoping that the Neighborhood Councils will join forces with other organizations within Boyle Heights to strengthen the quality of education, to get the City of Los Angeles to recognize that there is a severe problem there and to use their resources and influences to change things that are going on within the city.

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Paul: This woman's hope reminds me of that inscription that is over the library in my hometown, "Education is not merely preparation for life, but it's life itself." We are always being educated about a significant problem. Perhaps more so in some communities than others, but education is always at the forefront.

Greg: Yes. There were two points in her message. Number one, of course, is the importance of education, and perhaps after public safety is education. It's the things that for year's people have put very high on their agendas. We all know why it is important, but the other thing is that a lot of people believe that Neighborhood Councils are only suppose to be exerting their influence over what happens at City Hall. Of course in the City of Los Angeles there is the separate Board of Education that is a part of city government that all separate bureaucracies and elected officials are in.

The Neighborhood Councils are now beginning to figure out that they can take their skill in trying to affect the decisions of elected officials. They can take it to the Board of Education. They have started going to the Board, working, and expressing their opinions as far as the building, the design, and site of new schools that are being built. She's taking us into a whole other area, which is why I am going to love to see it when it happens. Neighborhood Councils know how to get there, but it's affecting the decisions that are being made in the Board of Education in terms of the quality of education, the safety of the schools, the cleanliness of the schools and how our students learn that are important.

Paul: We are just about out of time. I want to thank our guest Greg Nelson who is the General Manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. If you have any questions or topics that you would like to see in future shows you can email your comments to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment at www.lacityneighborhoods.com or call 1-866-LAHELPS. The number is toll-free. If you need information on any city service simply call 3-1-1. You're one call to City Hall. For everyone here at the Neighborhood Café, I'm Paul Napier.