

Date: December 20, 2005

To: Neighborhood Council Leaders
From: Greg Nelson, General Manager
Subject: INNOVATION GROUPS

CREATING INNOVATION GROUPS

Our system of Neighborhood Councils was designed using a couple of important principles.

First, one size couldn't fit all. What works in one part of the city might not work in another part.

Second, the system of grass-roots, participatory democracy through the new Neighborhood Councils would best be designed by the people themselves. If City Hall could do a better job, they would have already done it. So the public, through its charter reform commissions, guaranteed that the system be established, and it left the details up to both City Hall and the public.

We are close to finishing the phase of our evolution that involves the building of the system. Time is short because starting in the middle of 2006, a new commission will begin looking at our system. It would be unfortunate if the evaluation took place before the building phase was completed. Our new, and hopefully final, phase is one in which the department will devote maximum resources toward helping Neighborhood Councils be the best that they can be. We call it the Empowerment Phase.

The system belongs to the Neighborhood Councils. It has produced and attracted to it many outstanding people who truly believe in the value of creating and nurturing a citywide system of independent Neighborhood Councils.

To speed us toward the end of the building process, and to help Neighborhood Councils prepare for the system's review in six months or so, I am asking for volunteers to serve on 13 blue ribbon innovation groups.

I will appoint the members of each group, and they will report their recommendations and findings to me. Therefore, the restrictions of the Brown Act will not apply. I will encourage each group to host public meetings, but they will be allowed to communicate between themselves and with others whenever, wherever, and however they wish. This should allow each group to complete its work more quickly and thoroughly. Don't worry, it won't be difficult for me to know whether or not each group has been thorough and inclusive in its work.

At the end, an "all-star" team of innovation group members will be selected to examine all of the recommendations and findings, and develop a profile of the ideal Neighborhood Council. It will be a profile that will not have been created by City Hall, but from those in the public who have participated in this grand experiment in participatory democracy.

It will be important that those who serve on the groups be ready, willing, and able to take a citywide perspective. Those with personal agendas or narrow perspectives will not be a good fit.

Volunteers may come from literally anywhere. They may be Neighborhood Council board members, former board members, students, teachers, members of other community organizations, employees of governmental agencies or elected officials, etc. The goal is good work product.

Our staff and staff from other governmental agencies will be available to assist the work of the groups.

I know what you're thinking "We can't possibly handle more projects. We're just volunteers." I encourage you to look at the glass as being half full. You should be able to interest more people in getting involved with your Neighborhood Council by giving them a specific project with which to get involved.

Below is a description of the innovation groups..

NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL INNOVATION GROUPS

COMMUNICATING WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Our regulations require that Neighborhood Councils develop a method through which they will regularly communicate with its stakeholders.

This group would collect the best practices of the Neighborhood Councils, and generate additional ideas through which Neighborhood Councils can more effectively and economically communicate with its stakeholders on a regular basis, such as through "communication trees", mass mailings, websites, e-mail systems, door-to-door distributions, and newspaper ads and inserts. The group may recommend ways in which the City can better assist the Neighborhood Councils in communicating with its stakeholders.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION, OUTREACH & DIVERSITY

The first words of the City Charter state that the purpose of our Neighborhood Council system is to promote public participation in government. The City Charter also expects that Neighborhood Council boards reflect the diversity of its areas.

This group will collect best practices, and make recommendations for better achieving the goal of increasing public participation in government through Neighborhood Councils, especially among traditionally disenfranchised groups; discuss the possibilities of a citywide public awareness effort; identify and discuss options that exist to ensure and/or encourage board diversity; and analyze studies of alternative voting systems, some of which purport to help guarantee that one side or one interest group couldn't dominate an election.

The work of this group will be extensive, complex, and critical.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

The Plan requires that each Neighborhood Council conduct a survey of its stakeholders and prepare an assessment of its self every two years. Now that the flurry of certifications is over, it's time to design the process through which each Neighborhood Council will complete this requirement.

This group will be presented with a draft of one possible way to achieve this goal. It will be asked to consider other options and make recommendations.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOVERNMENT

A key to the effectiveness of individual or collective Neighborhood Councils is the ability to establish effective working relationships with governments and their agencies.

This group will make recommendations for how develop effective relationships between the city and other governmental agencies and Neighborhood Councils.

This will include the use of Memorandums of Understanding, and system through which governmental agencies will be able to communicate effectively with Neighborhood Councils.

The city's Early Notification System (or "Early Warning System" as it is referred to as in the City Charter) is the means through which anyone can subscribe to, and have sent to them the agendas of the City Council, its committees, and city commissions via e-mail. The public can also have sent to them a list of all the new proposals that have entered into the City Council's system, and the results of each City Council meeting. It may seem basic, but there may not be a city in the nation that does this much.

About two years ago, a working group of Neighborhood Councils and city staff prepared a list of improvements to the way the city lets people know what they're doing so that the Neighborhood Councils can exercise their Charter guaranteed right to discuss and weigh in before a decision is made. Those recommendations have not made it to the City Council yet.

This group would also review and possibly update those suggestions, and recommend an action plan.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Ensuring that more people are CERT-trained as first responders, and that each neighborhood has plan that it will follow in the event of a major disaster is something that a Neighborhood Council can do that truly involves life and death.

Seeing what happened in New Orleans, where police officers deserted their jobs when the hurricane hit, demonstrates the gruesome results of not being prepared. Do you know where you're supposed to go for medical aid, food, water, and information if the disaster has made your home uninhabitable?

The Emergency Preparedness Department and our department have started a special Ambassador program that graduated its first 15 emergency preparedness ambassadors last June. After three Saturdays of training, they learned what it takes to get each neighborhood prepared, and how the city will help them do it. The next class is being planned for the spring.

This work group will have the important task of providing advice about how our department, the city, other levels of government, nonprofits, and other community associations can help Neighborhood Councils develop such plans for each of its neighborhoods and ensure that persons are adequately trained and prepared.

FUNDING SYSTEM

When the city decided that it would provide each Neighborhood Council with \$50,000 a year, the department designed the Neighborhood Council Funding Program through which the city's system for getting money to the Neighborhood Councils and holding them accountable was streamlined.

This group will examine the system and possibly make recommendations for improvements.

SUNSHINE LAW

The City Charter requires that each Neighborhood Council do its business in an open and fair manner. After the City Attorney determined that the state's Brown Act applied to Neighborhood Councils, it became the law that would be used to ensure openness and fairness.

The City doesn't enforce state laws such as the Brown Act. The District Attorney does, and they've got serious workload issues. Another problem is that the Brown Act works well when applied to City Councils around the state, but some feel that it's flawed when applied to Neighborhood Councils and its goal of promoting public participation.

This group will draft a local "sunshine" law. The advantages of having our own local regulations would be (1) the penalties would not have to be criminal, and could be whatever makes better sense to our situation, (2) the requirements could be tailored to the needs and goals of Neighborhood Councils, and (3) we'd have a stronger argument for exempting Neighborhood Councils from the Brown Act because we'd have a better replacement.

Included in this effort would be the development of a local version of the state's Public Records Act that would ensure that the public's right to know is protected, and that the realistic ability of a Neighborhood Council to save and produce essential records is addressed.

ETHICS

The state's Political Reform Act prohibits financial conflicts of interest. It is a highly complex law, and the city created an entire department to deal with it and the city's own ethics laws. The state Fair Political Practices Commission, which enforces the law, just announced that it was abandoning over 200 cases without investigating them because of its enormous workload.

If a local ethics law were created, it would have the same potential benefits as those mentioned for the local “sunshine” law.

At a minimum, this group will design a local financial conflict of interest regulation. Then the group will have to decide if it wants to venture into the uncharted territory of addressing non-financial conflicts of interest.

TRAINING & EDUCATION

We are confident that we have the best neighborhood empowerment training program in the nation. It started with the classes that were provided at the Congress of Neighborhoods events, and was expanded through our Empowerment Academy. Hundreds of training sessions have been provided. This group will review our training and education efforts.

CONDUCTING MEETINGS

The Human Relations Commission and our department created a Code of Civility and offered it to Neighborhood Councils. Some have adopted it or a form of it. The code was designed to establish a standard for the actions of Neighborhood Council board members.

This group will collect best practices and make recommendations regarding the way in which board members conduct themselves during meetings; how to run meetings; and how to deal with disruptive board members and stakeholders.

DEPARTMENT OF NEIGHBORHOOD EMPOWERMENT AND THE BOARD OF NEIGHBORHOOD COMMISSIONERS (DONE AND BONC)

This group would have the run of the house to make recommendations as to how the department and commission can have a better relationship with Neighborhood Councils.

GETTING AND USING POLITICAL POWER

The ability of a Neighborhood Council to affect the decision-making process is based heavily on its ability to establish credibility, and get and use political power.

This group of political gurus will discuss and make recommendations about how Neighborhood Councils could have a greater effect over how decisions are made at all levels of government.

COMPLAINTS AND GRIEVANCES

The Plan gives the department broad latitude in trying to get Neighborhood Councils to resolve the complaints that have been filed against them. But if the Neighborhood Council fails, the only remedy is decertification.

This group would recommend ways that Neighborhood Councils could better resolve their own problems, and it may recommend changes to the way the department handles these formal complaints.

A draft set of new procedures will be provided.

DESIGNING THE IDEAL NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL

When the groups have completed their work, a blue ribbon group will be formed from those who served on the innovation groups, and they will examine the information that has been collected, the recommendations that were made, and they will build a profile of the ideal Neighborhood Council.

Those who are interested, or who have questions, should contact Greg Nelson at greg.nelson@lacity.org or 334-B East Second Street, Los Angeles, CA 90012, or reply to this message.

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