

Greg Nelson
gregn213@cox.net
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Members of the Health, Education, and Neighborhood Councils Committee
Re: CF 18-0467

I would like to provide some long overdue comments regarding the motion entitled "Neighborhood Council System Reforms."

I write to you as the former general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (2001-2006), a former resident of the Historic Cultural Neighborhood Council, and the former chief of staff to Councilman Joel Wachs during the time that the neighborhood councils concept was conceived in 1992, and through its formation in the Governmental Efficiency Committee, the two charter reform commissions, and then as an interested individual during the work of the Neighborhood Council Review Commission.

1. NAME CHANGE.

In my first drafts of an ordinance and then a charter amendment to create the new system I recommended calling the department the Department of Neighborhoods. Some time later, perhaps during the charter commission hearings, it became apparent to all that it was important to include the word "empowerment" because that, in fact, would be the primary purpose of the system, and government and the public should be constantly reminded of that goal.

The primary function of the department has always been to help the neighborhood councils empower themselves. True power isn't given, it's taken.

That there should be a commission was a last-minute thought by the charter commissioners, so not a lot of effort went into the name.

2. COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDER.

My draft to the charter commission included the words "live, work, or own" property. I stole them from the neighborhood council ordinance in St. Paul, Minnesota, and I thought it was inclusive.

The City Council very wisely realized that it should be more inclusive, and it inserted broader language as suggestions in its ordinances following passage of the charter amendment. For example, the council realized that in some parts of the city life

revolves around the non-profit organizations and churches. To omit leaders in those organizations would be foolish.

As expected, once some neighborhood councils held their first elections, attempts were made by some to restrict voting participation. It is difficult for councils to fulfill their charter mandate "To promote more citizen participation in government ..." by limiting participation.

3. SELECTION.

From the days of the first drafts, neighborhood councils were specifically enabled to elect or select their leaders. There were two reasons for this. First, it was felt that elections alone could not always produce leaders that reflected the diversity of their area, but adding the option to select some leaders could help ensure that diversity.

Second, the regulations help define "empowerment" by guaranteeing that neighborhood councils can choose their own boundaries and methods of selecting their leaders. Every proposal to create uniform rules should be carefully weighed against how it erodes empowerment. Decision-makers should always take a moment to step back and ask themselves what it is that the neighborhood councils should be empowered to do.

4. UNIFORM VOTING AGE.

Empowerment vs. uniformity.

5. PLANNING AND LAND USE TRAINING.

Why set the bar higher for volunteer neighborhood council members? Require neighborhood presidents vice-presidents to have the same training as city council members.

6. ELECTION DAY.

Some neighborhood councils have achieved large turnouts, in part, because they were able to tailor their election days to their constituents. The Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council began with two days of elections -- one during the week for those who worked downtown (the vast majority), and another during the weekend for the residents. We should never forget that the goal is to promote public participation.

7. BEST PRACTICES.

At one time, the DONE website included a place for best practices, and points of contact in the departments. It was deleted, along with other valuable information when the website was redesigned by a contractor hired by one of my successors. Returning this information would be an excellent idea.

8. COMMUNITY IMPACT STATEMENTS.

This wasn't mentioned in the motion. When the system of Community Impact Statements was created, the first statement submitted by a neighborhood council was printed on the agendas of the city council, its committees, and commissions for all to see. A list was included of other councils that had submitted statements. The city clerk told the city council that this wouldn't create additional expense for him.

After I retired, this practice was ended without explanation. I believe that the Neighborhood Council Reform Commission recommended that all statements be printed on the agendas.

The city should at least return to the original plan in order to give more weight to the statements.

Thank you,

Greg Nelson