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December 7, 2018

Honorable Members of the
Los Angeles City Council
c/o Office of the City Clerk
Room 395, City Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90012

SUBJECT: COUNCIL FILE 18-0467 - NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL SYSTEM REFORMS

Dear Honorable Members:

The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (Department) appreciates the opportunity to weigh in on the proposed Neighborhood Council system reforms.

Department Name Change

While the Department is open to ways in which Neighborhood Councils can have further increased visibility, changing the Department's name in the charter and thus all City documents is complex and unnecessary. The EmpowerLA brand was created by a marketing company retained by the previous General Manager in order to capture the spirit of the Neighborhood Council system based on the tagline: Empower Yourself, Empower Your Community, Empower LA. Significant resources, including obtaining the website EmpowerLA.org, have been invested during the past 7 years into the EmpowerLA brand, mainly in the form of the Department's outreach materials.

Rebranding to emphasize Neighborhood Councils does not require a charter change. The Department can explore other ways of bringing the term "Neighborhood Council" to the forefront as we have in the past several years when using the term "Neighborhood Councils Empower LA" in our outreach materials. The same argument applies to the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners. If the name or brand is changed, then the Department will need to do a full evaluation of costs to create and launch a new brand.

Community Interest Stakeholder

A more inclusive definition of stakeholder besides live, work and own property is part of the Neighborhood Council system since the Councils are supposed to engage everyone in the community. After several rounds of reconsideration by both the Neighborhood Council Review Commission and the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners' Plan Review Committees comprised of Neighborhood Council board members, an expanded stakeholder definition was considered important enough to keep within the system.

The main issue with the stakeholder definition has been how to verify the status if a Neighborhood Council required documentation. Using one or two receipts to verify a community interest stakeholder voter seems flimsy in comparison to the documents the other stakeholder types have to produce, e.g. deeds to houses, business licenses, etc. This situation can be resolved by requiring all Neighborhood Councils to use self-affirmation for verification or standardizing the acceptable documents and not accepting receipts at all. Receipts usually do not have the stakeholder name on them. During elections, receipts are often shared between stakeholders so using them for verification should not be allowed.

Selections

Based on the Department's experience with selections, selections can be just as open, transparent and robust as elections. Sometimes, however, Neighborhood Councils choose selections and conduct very little outreach so the board members are seated with just their own votes. If selections are to continue to be an option, the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners should create a policy that requires a Neighborhood Council's selection process and outreach to be as open, transparent and robust as elections. If they are not, then the Neighborhood Council should be required to return to the election process the following cycle.

Board Structure Equity

Because of the changing demographics in Los Angeles, the Department agrees that all board structures should be reviewed intermittently to ensure that the board seats are equitably allocated amongst stakeholder types. Neighborhood Councils are recognized every 5 years by the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners so that may be a good time for such a review. The Department can provide an analysis based on the current demographics at that time.

Uniform Age for Board Participation

In the past, the Department recommended lowering the voter age for Neighborhood Council elections to 16 years old if the age is set at 18 years old in the bylaws. Given the importance of getting youth involved in civics early, 18 years old misses the mark. The Department would also be supportive of lowering board member ages from 18 to 16 years old for that reason. If Neighborhood Councils choose to lower the age to younger than 16 years old, they should be able to do so based on their demographics.

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Here is a list of Neighborhood Councils with youth seats lower than 16 years old:

1. Arleta - 14 to vote or run for all seats
2. Central Alameda - 12 to vote or run for all seats
3. EC Southwest - 14 to vote or run for their Youth Seat; 16 for all other seats
4. Granada Hills North - 15-25 to vote/run for Student Rep; 18 for all other seats
5. Greater Cypress Park - 14 to vote/run for all seats
6. Historic Cultural - 15 to vote/run for all seats
7. Historic Cultural North - 15 to vote/run for all seats
8. Lake Balboa - 12 to vote for Youth Seat; 14 - 17 to run for Youth Seat
9. Lincoln Heights - 13 to vote/run for all seats
10. Los Feliz - 13 to vote/run for all seats
11. North Hills East - 14 to vote/run for all seats
12. Park Mesa Heights - 14 to vote/run for all seats
13. Reseda - 15 to run for Youth Seat; voting for this seat only open to RNC board members
14. South Central - 14 to run/vote for Youth Seat
15. South Robertson - 15 to vote/run for all seats
16. Studio City - 15 to vote/run for Youth Seat; 18 for all others
17. Sylmar - 14 to vote/run for all seats
18. United Neighborhoods - 14 to vote/run for all seats
19. Watts - 14 to vote/run for all seats

Required Planning and Land Use Training

Given the importance many Neighborhood Councils have in development projects within the community, the Department supports required planning and land use training not only for Chairs and Vice-Chairs of Neighborhood Council planning and land use committees, but for any Neighborhood Council board or committee member wanting to vote on such matters. The Department understands that Neighborhood Council board and committee members are volunteers with limited time, but that should not excuse them from necessary trainings if they are to vote on such important community matters. Stakeholders should expect Neighborhood Council board and committee members to have this knowledge before they cast their vote on a project.

Much like in funding matters, if board or committee members do not want to take such training, then they will be ineligible to vote on these matters.

The Department has collaborated with both the PlanCheckNC, the Neighborhood Council alliance that works on planning issues, and the Planning Department to offer planning trainings to Neighborhood Council and general community members. We are currently partnered with the Planning Department on their Planning 101 and 102 workshops that recently were offered citywide. If the such training is mandatory, then the Department would work with PlanCheckNC and the Planning Department to provide on demand training online so the training is readily

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accessible for all board and committee members. The Department would track the trainings on its website as we do for ethics and funding trainings.

Other Reform Instructions

The Department is in agreement with the other reform instructions for shared space and “how-to” guides, which we are already working on with other city departments and Neighborhood Councils. In regards to the department contact lists for Neighborhood Councils, we are also working on obtaining the information. The Department recommends, however, that rather than have Neighborhood Councils formally appoint a contact for each department, the contact lists should be given to the entire board of the Neighborhood Council. It will be difficult for the Department to track these individual points of contact, and multiple Neighborhood Council board and committee members may need to be in communication with the departments.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, please contact me at Grayce.Liu@lacity.org or via phone at (213) 978-1551.

Best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Grayce".

Grayce Liu
General Manager
Department of Neighborhood Empowerment