

The Neighborhood Council System: Past, Present, & Future

Neighborhood Council Review Commission
City of Los Angeles



Final Report

September 25, 2007



The Neighborhood Council Review Commission



NCRC Staff, NCRC Consultants, and City Staff

September 19, 2007

The Honorable Eric Garcetti, President of the City Council and
The Honorable Members of the City Council
City of Los Angeles
200 N. Spring Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Dear Councilmembers:

The officers and members of the Neighborhood Council Review Commission are pleased to transmit to you our final report entitled, "The Neighborhood Council System: Past, Present, and Future" for your consideration.

More than a year ago, the Council sent us on an important mission: to carry out the Charter's mandate that an independent Commission explore the neighborhood council system established by the voters in 1999 and, where appropriate, to recommend changes to Charter or to ordinance that would improve the workings of the system.

We spent the allotted time researching, listening, and deliberating. We found that while there have been significant successes in the neighborhood council system, there is also a pressing need to refocus the resources and structures that define the system. Based on our findings, and extensive public input, we have adopted a series of recommendations that we believe will place the system on the path to welcoming every Angeleno to get involved in this model of neighborhood democracy and to find in it a place to pursue our common interests.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve the City and to make a positive contribution to the development of neighborhood democracy in Los Angeles.

 William Stein Chairman	 David S. Lee Member	 James Hahn Member	 Eric Garcetti President
 Paul Spitzer Member	 David Ryu Member	 Dennis M. Kelly Member	 Tom Bradley Member
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Executive Summary

The Neighborhood Council Review Commission was charged with reviewing the system of neighborhood councils that was created by Los Angeles voters in 1999, when a new City Charter sought to bring government and neighborhoods closer together.

Our findings and recommendations are based on 15 months of staff research, twice-a-month deliberation, as well as 14 public hearings in neighborhoods across the city. We reviewed the eight-year history of neighborhood councils in Los Angeles, as well as the experience of other cities across the country.

We found that:

- The system must be restructured to support the work of neighborhood councils, so that volunteer hours are spent in deliberation and community activity, rather than bureaucracy.
- The relationship between City Hall and neighborhood councils needs to be re-defined and renewed.
- It is important to build on the base of current participants and expand the reach of neighborhood councils deeper into the diverse populations of the city.
- The system would benefit from more consistent policies and procedures, so long as the autonomy of individual neighborhood councils remains substantially intact.

The neighborhood council system has many strengths upon which to build – and some core problems that must be addressed.

Highlights of Commission’s Findings:

- Most areas of the city now fall within the boundaries of a certified neighborhood council, with 89 councils currently in operation. More than 1,600 Angelenos now serve as board members, and tens of thousands of votes have been cast in neighborhood council elections.
- Neighborhood councils have played a significant role in some important issues at City Hall. Neighborhood councils helped roll back proposed DWP water rates and helped build a coalition regarding a proposed development in the Sunland-Tujunga area this year.
- Nearly half (47.5%) of city households have either

participated in, or are aware of, the neighborhood council system. This represents a strong base of recognition.

- Because the neighborhood council system grew in a largely *ad hoc* fashion, an overall guiding vision and consistent mission have been lacking. Some of the decisions made in the early days unintentionally hamstrung the very system they were intended to support.
- As a whole, the system has not yet attained the systematic influence charter reformers expected. To do so, “structures of influence” – the means and methods by which neighborhood input can be connected effectively to City Hall must be enhanced.
- The Board of Neighborhood Commissioners (BONC) has a poorly defined and limited role. Other agencies, including City Clerk and Human Relations Commission, have assisted the system but are not playing their ideal roles.
- The application of the Brown Act to neighborhood councils has made it difficult for some useful communications to be conducted within neighborhood councils.
- The burden of outreach has been inappropriately placed on individual neighborhood councils instead of being shared with City government.
- Neighborhood councils have not been called upon to participate in the handling of complaints and election challenges.
- NC board members are more likely to be white, homeowners, more affluent, and better educated than the population as a whole – but are more similar to those who vote in city elections.
- Running elections has been a burden for many neighborhood councils.
- The administration of the city funds directly given to neighborhood councils has occupied a significant amount of DONE staff time and has created mutual frustration between DONE and the neighborhood councils.
- A citywide survey of residents revealed that there is a constituency for further expansion of the neighborhood council system, and survey respondents are willing to present concrete suggestions that would make participation more likely. Language, however, represents a significant barrier to participation.

Highlights of Commission’s Recommendations:

- Neighborhood councils shall remain advisory (recommendation #1)
- The City shall facilitate the filing of Council files by neighborhood councils when submitted by three neighborhood councils. This shall be a two-year pilot project. (rec. # 3)
- A series of structural changes shall be made to ensure that City departments and offices work more closely with neighborhood councils; that neighborhood councils become more educated about key City processes; that neighborhood council input be recorded and presented to City decision makers; and that neighborhood councils be informed about what happens to the input they provide. (recs. #4 - #16)
- DONE shall have as its primary role one that is facilitative and supportive to neighborhood councils. (rec. #18) DONE shall be reorganized to highlight the community organizing and technical assistance aspects of its staff. (rec. #61)
- The role of BONC shall be clarified and expanded. The role of BONC is defined as a policy and rule making, regulatory and disciplinary body. (rec. #22)
- A new peer grievance process shall be established, with neighborhood councils as the place of first hearing, followed by a regional commission chosen by the neighborhood councils. BONC is to be the final arbiter, subject to City Council oversight. A similar process shall apply to election challenges. (recs. #37 & #55)
- There shall be a new Sunshine Law that incorporates provisions of the Brown Act and the California Public Records Act but is tailored specifically to the needs of the neighborhood council system. (rec. #38)
- Stakeholder status in neighborhood councils shall be open to those who live, work, or own property in the neighborhood and also to those who declare a stake in the neighborhood and affirm the factual basis for it. (rec. #42)
- The City Clerk shall organize and run neighborhood council elections. (rec. #45) Elections shall be held on a regional or citywide basis every two years. (rec. #53)
- The responsibility for outreach for the neighborhood council system shall be shared between the City government and the neighborhood councils. (rec. #58)
- Neighborhood councils shall attempt to reflect both the diversity of their geographic area and the range of community interests, ethnicity, race, gender, age, class, religion, homeowner and renter status and sexual orientation. (rec. #65)

- Each neighborhood council shall continue to receive equal, annual funding. (rec. #66) Unspent funds shall be transferred to a citywide fund for outreach to be directed by DONE, rather than to the City’s general fund. (rec. #67)
- The City shall provide translation services to neighborhood councils at no cost to individual neighborhood councils. (rec. #72)
- The City shall within seven years appoint a commission to examine the progress of the neighborhood council system in light of the recommendations of the NCRC. (rec. #73)

Beyond its specific and detailed recommendations, the Commission has also presented a vision for the future of the system based on eight culture changes that could make a difference.

Eight Culture Changes:

- A stakeholder-centered system more than a board-centered system: recognizing that board members are stewards for the community.
- Elections as mobilizing tools, not as ways to win power: connecting elections with outreach, with the goal of greater participation.
- A time for tools and a time for rules: doing away with bureaucratic requirements – but keeping accountability.
- A win-win between neighborhood councils and City Hall: working together to solve problems in the system.
- Neighborhood councils and community organizations giving each other a second look and a second chance: ensuring that neighborhood councils speak for a wide range of interests.
- From decision to deliberation: widening the number of ways in which people can participate.
- Making meetings meaningful: holding short, polite meetings on issues that matter to participants.
- Embracing diversity as a goal: drawing in those who have not yet participated – and viewing diversity as a way to make neighborhood councils more effective and as a benchmark and goal.

All NCRC documents, including transcripts of Commission meetings and reports of NCRC surveys, can be found at www.ncrcia.org.

NCRC RECOMMENDATIONS

■ Powers and Roles

Recommendation #1: Neighborhood councils shall remain advisory.

Recommendation #2: Neighborhood councils shall continue to be considered as City entities. Consistent with the recommendations of the NCRC in such areas as elections and fiscal administration, the City shall make every effort to implement the structure of the neighborhood council system so that unnecessary bureaucratic requirements are not placed on neighborhood councils, recognizing that neighborhood councils are not traditional City agencies.

Recommendation #3: The City shall facilitate the filing of Council files by neighborhood councils when submitted by three neighborhood councils. This shall be a two-year pilot project and it shall be evaluated.

Recommendation #4: The methods of providing formal information to neighborhood councils shall be upgraded, simplified, and made as user-friendly as possible.

Recommendation #5:

The Mayor shall direct chief administrative officers of each City department, office and commission to submit, within 90 days of enactment of an ordinance including this recommendation, to the City Administrative Officer (CAO), the Mayor and DONE, procedures to enable neighborhood councils to influence decisions made by that department, especially decisions affecting programs, activities and spending. At a minimum, these procedures shall include:

- A) A list identifying the decisions, or types of decisions, made by that department in which any community or neighborhood has a stake. At a minimum, this list shall include any decision involving the expenditure of public funds for a project or program that has a specific location (e.g., capital improvements to streets, sidewalks, parks, libraries; youth programs; cable television franchise renewals/modifications, etc.), and those deemed likely to affect the quality of life of a community's stakeholders (positively or negatively).
- B) General timelines for that department's decision-making processes;

C) For each decision-making process, procedures for providing early notification to neighborhood councils that are designed to enable neighborhood councils to influence decisions made by that department, especially decisions affecting programs, activities and spending. Such procedures may include:

- 1) For long-term programmatic decision-making processes, a semiannual or periodic report detailing upcoming decisions in which a community or neighborhood has a stake, including the timeline for such decisions; or
- 2) For decisions that are more immediate, *ad hoc* or short-term (for which a periodic report would not provide sufficient notice), procedures for notification on an issue-by-issue or case-by-case basis.

D) Procedures for incorporating input from neighborhood councils into decision-making.

E) To the maximum extent practicable, these procedures shall be developed with the participation of neighborhood councils. Among the tools that general managers shall be encouraged to utilize are Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs).

Recommendation #6: Chief administrative officers shall be required to report to the Mayor and City Council on an annual basis on the extent of cooperative efforts with neighborhood councils.

Recommendation #7:

A) The Mayor shall require each City department to provide DONE with a list of contact people for neighborhood councils.

B) Departments may provide lists of contact persons identified by function and/or geographic area, depending on how that department operates. For example, the Planning Department should provide contact information for planners assigned to each community, specific or other plan, and the zoning administrator(s) assigned to each area; the Department of Transportation should provide information for transportation engineers, neighborhood traffic planners, etc.

C) DONE shall keep departmental contact information updated, and provide such information to each neighborhood council.

Recommendation #8:

(A) The City shall continue to upgrade and modernize the online Council File Index, including making agenda items searchable by topic, area, keyword and term, and capable of being followed online.

(B) The City shall establish a system to automatically

send electronic notices to persons who have requested such notice whenever there is activity on a Council File, keyword, or term.

(C) City agenda items shall list the affected neighborhood council(s).

(D) The City shall establish a recommended standard for early notification as a minimum of 60 days from introduction of any motion/case/file to final decision. It is understood that such a requirement will serve as a guideline and not a mandate, as many conditions will require more rapid action. Conversely, for longer decision-making processes such as capital spending programs, utility rate increases, etc., 60 days might be unreasonably short.

(E) The City shall define “a reasonable opportunity to provide input” as a minimum of seven calendar days from the date of first broad public notification (e.g., the announcement of a new council file in the Council File Referral, or a similar notification sent to the DONE database).

(F) Notwithstanding the above, Council Rules #16 and #23 will continue to allow the City Council to handle matters on an emergency or expedited basis. The NCRC recommends revising Council Rules #16 and #23 to include the following: “When such items are introduced before the Council, the Clerk will note for the record that the Early Warning requirements of Charter Section 907 have been waived.”

(G) The City Council is requested to review its policies and procedures and revise as necessary to lessen the likelihood of major policy issues being heard without previous opportunity for public input.

(H) DONE shall, within six months of the implementation of this recommendation, ensure that it has complied with the provision of the Plan which states, “Subject to all other provisions of this Plan, all Certified Neighborhood Councils shall be provided access to a computer and to the Internet. DONE shall provide technical training on the use of a computer to each Certified Neighborhood Council.”

Recommendation #9: All neighborhood councils shall, to the greatest extent possible, monitor the regular business of the city and inform themselves of issues of importance to their neighborhood council and the city as a whole.

Recommendation #10: The NCRC recommends the following additions and revisions to the “Plan for Including Community Impact Statements on Agendas” (Council File #02-1482)

A) Formal communications to the City Council

(Community Impact Statements) shall be logged by the City Clerk. Neighborhood councils are encouraged to submit community impact statements via the City Clerk’s electronic input system, but they may also be submitted via fax, mail or hand-delivery (with proper signature).

B) The progress of Community Impact Statements through the City system shall be easy to track.

C) If not submitted online, Community Impact Statements should include a clearly-identified 100-word summary statement.

D) Because the primary value of the Community Impact Statement is its transparency and clarity, the CIS Plan shall be amended to require the City Clerk to include, on all City agendas, the first 100 words of each summary Community Impact Statement received with the relevant agenda item.

E) City boards and commissions shall process Community Impact Statements in accordance with the processes established for the City Council. Administrative staff for all City boards and commissions shall be trained in proper handling of community impact statements, including how to process revised or updated statements.

F) DONE shall provide training to neighborhood councils on how to submit Community Impact Statements.

Recommendation #11: The City’s website shall be modified so that individuals can send the same message to all members of the City Council at the same time with a single command.

Recommendation #12: To enhance public comment from stakeholders, the City shall identify funding for remote public comment at full Council meetings and City Council committee meetings, if possible, in more areas around the City. If it is not found to be financially feasible, another live method such as phone or Internet may be used.

Recommendation #13:

A) DONE, in cooperation with City Departments, shall continue and expand its voluntary training sessions on (1) substantive City policies and programs; and (2) how City Hall works, how to access City Hall, and how to influence City decisions. Such training shall be available in a variety of formats, including live workshops, on-demand sessions online, and printed materials.

B) The City shall provide training for City employees on communicating with neighborhood councils. These sessions shall also include “cross-cultural communications” training between neighborhood council members and City employees.

Recommendation #14: The opinions and input of neighborhood councils to City agencies shall be formally noted by the appropriate decision maker in the decision.

Recommendation #15: DONE, Los Angeles Housing Department (LAHD) and the Department of City Planning shall make presentations to neighborhood councils to educate about the land use process and the various housing needs in the city.

Recommendation #16: City Council offices shall be encouraged to respond in a timely manner on matters submitted to them by neighborhood councils in their district.

Recommendation #17:

A) The City shall formally encourage developers to be in contact with neighborhood councils at the earliest possible time. If a project is subject to major change after initial neighborhood council review, the review shall begin again.

B) Neighborhood councils shall adopt set procedures for reaching decisions on land use matters that are time-limited and consistent. Notification of all parties shall be consistent and usable.

C) To maximize their effectiveness, neighborhood councils should seek education in land use issues and processes coordinated by DONE and provided by land use experts.

Governance

Recommendation #18: DONE shall have as its primary role one that is facilitative and supportive to neighborhood councils.

Recommendation #19: As long as its primary role remains assistance to neighborhood councils, the Department shall have primary responsibility for the oversight of and implementation of services to the neighborhood council system. As part of this role, DONE shall receive notice of grievances under the system proposed by the NCRC. Oversight and services shall include but not be limited to: education programs, counseling, mediation, promotion of best practices, and voluntary training. DONE shall also provide focused assistance to neighborhood councils experiencing operational and/or functional difficulties. DONE shall also make recommendations for adjudication to BONC.

Recommendation #20: Whether or not DONE is

able to retain its exempt positions, DONE shall devise job descriptions that accurately reflect the unusual nature of DONE staff roles, including but not limited to, hours of work, and type of skills required. The City shall assist in this process by recognizing the unique nature of the DONE mission, and its need for a lean, flexible approach.

Recommendation #21: City officials shall consider the budget implications of DONE providing technical assistance to neighborhood councils in such areas as outreach, office space location, accounting, clerical services, and other items, as well as the technical upgrades needed to reach a large constituency of neighborhood councils.

Recommendation #22: The role of BONC shall be clarified and expanded. The role of BONC is defined as a policy and rule making, regulatory and disciplinary body.

Recommendation #23: BONC shall continue as a City commission, subject to the Charter provisions on City commissions, and shall remain advisory with respect to the day-to-day operations at DONE. In the exercise of its powers, BONC shall be subject to the City Council's authority under Charter Section 245 to review and remand decisions of City commissions.

Recommendation #24: BONC shall be responsible for policy making and oversight, approval of contracts and leases, and the promulgation of rules and regulations, subject to the Charter and the ordinance authority of the City Council.

Recommendation #25: BONC shall play a role as a final appeal for the grievance system.

Recommendation #26: BONC shall have the central role in approving broad policies for the neighborhood council system, with such policy making role based upon recommendations from the DONE General Manager and input from the neighborhood councils and the public. In areas of policy that have not been preempted by the Charter or by ordinance, BONC shall have the authority to make policies for the neighborhood council system.

Recommendation #27: The General Manager of DONE shall be the head of the Department and shall have full control and authority over the operations of the Department. BONC's policy making authority shall in no way impinge upon the General Manager's role as the chief administrative officer of the department, nor the General Manager's direct role in working with neighborhood

councils on implementing policies embodied in the neighborhood council bylaws and in citywide rules and regulations.

Recommendation #28: As long as they are consistent with the Charter, Ordinance, or policies adopted by BONC, the General Manager of DONE shall have the authority to set rules and procedures for the management of DONE. The absence of a policy shall not preclude the General Manager from taking action.

Recommendation #29: In addition to making policies for the neighborhood council system, BONC shall conduct periodic public hearings and open deliberations on the policy direction of the neighborhood council system and formulate recommendations to DONE, the City Council, and the neighborhood councils.

Recommendation #30: As the only city agency both directly involved with neighborhood councils and subject to the Brown Act, the BONC shall make policies, rules, and regulations only through a process that sets the highest standard for open, participatory governance, engaging in outreach that is wide-ranging and technologically advanced. Through this process, neighborhood council stakeholders will be able to learn the best practices for outreach and notification and be fully aware of actions taken by BONC that can impact their activities.

Recommendation #31: Unless clearly inapplicable, BONC shall be subject to the policies, rules, and regulations it establishes for neighborhood councils.

Recommendation #32: The Mayor shall continue to appoint and remove members of BONC, subject to Council confirmation. The Mayor shall remove commissioners at will. At least four of the commissioners must be current or former members of a neighborhood council board. The Mayor shall seek input from neighborhood councils during the process of nominating commissioners. The list may include stakeholders who are and are not associated with neighborhood councils.

Recommendation #33: The Board shall be comprised of seven members, each of whom shall represent the interests of the City in its entirety.

Recommendation #34: BONC's appointment structure shall be revamped to fit within a regionalized structure, by ensuring that the seven members are selected with one from each of the seven Area Planning Commission regions.

Recommendation #35: The members shall reflect the diverse geographic areas of the City and the diversity of communities of interest, neighborhoods, ethnicity, race, gender, age, class, homeowner/renter status and sexual orientation.

Recommendation #36: The BONC shall meet annually with the City Council and representatives of neighborhood councils to offer a report and self-evaluation of its activities for the previous year.

Recommendation #37: Subject to uniform procedures, neighborhood councils shall have 60 days to consider all grievances. A regional commission shall be established in each planning area. The commissioners are to be chosen by the neighborhood councils. In the first step after the neighborhood council level, a grievance or complaint is taken to the regional commission for the appropriate area. The decision can be appealed to the BONC, but 1) only if BONC agrees to take appeal and 2) the appeal must be based on a violation of bylaws or other stated rules and affect all neighborhood councils, and 3) BONC can render a final decision. City Council can overturn BONC's decision in accordance with Charter Section 245.

Recommendation #38:

A) There shall be a new Sunshine Law that incorporates the Brown Act and the California Public Records Act provisions that shall continue to apply to neighborhood councils but that is tailored specifically to the needs of the neighborhood council system and that ensures transparent, fair and accessible rules for neighborhood council meetings.

B) At a minimum, a new Sunshine Law in regard to neighborhood councils shall not prevent neighborhood councils from lobbying a majority of members of the City Council on an issue of concern to the neighborhood council.

The full draft Sunshine Law appears as an attachment.

Recommendation #39: DONE shall undertake a two-year project with the neighborhood councils to develop more consistent bylaws in form and structure. The purpose of this project would be to develop bylaws that leave room for creative decisions about governance, while developing recognizable, comparable terms, structures, and definitions. At the end of the project, DONE shall identify ways for sections of bylaws that should be uniform to be made uniform.

A) Neighborhood councils shall be encouraged to identify a “bylaws volunteer” to work with DONE on bylaws development so that minimal Board time is spent on bylaws revisions.

B) DONE shall create a glossary of common terms and ask neighborhood councils to adopt them as part of their bylaws and to update their bylaws to be in compliance with them, in those places where their terms were defined differently.

C) DONE shall create and distribute a template that is more standardized, while allowing some flexibility.

D) DONE shall help educate neighborhood councils that in those situations in which neighborhood council bylaws do not accord with City policies, that the City’s definition will prevail. The applicability of such City policies does not have to await revisions of bylaws.

Recommendation #40: BONC shall propose a policy on neighborhood council subdivisions to the City Council after taking input from neighborhood councils and stakeholders.

A) A subdivision policy shall give priority to subdivisions of neighborhood councils with a resident base in the top 25th percentile of all neighborhood councils.

B) The burden of proof for a subdivision should be on the applying neighborhood council to ensure that neighborhoods are not abandoned by neighborhood councils.

C) If a neighborhood council applies for subdivision, each new portion of the neighborhood council shall apply for certification as a new neighborhood council. The processes of subdivision and certification of the new neighborhood councils shall occur concurrently so as not to disenfranchise the existing stakeholders.

Recommendation #41: The Plan shall be amended to recognize the right of neighborhood councils to join together in regional and citywide alliances.

■ Outreach and Participation

Recommendation #42:

A) Plan to be amended to state that stakeholder status in neighborhood councils shall be open to those who live, work, or own property in the neighborhood and also to those who declare a stake in the neighborhood and affirm the factual basis for it.

B) Neighborhood councils shall be empowered to allocate board seats, voting rights, and other procedures,

consistent with the Charter, Plan, and Ordinance, and may allocate different voting roles to different categories of stakeholders.

C) The City Attorney shall advise neighborhood councils on the allowable parameters of such structures and shall ensure that board structures do not limit broad participation.

Recommendation #43:

A) Neighborhood councils shall continue to have authority, through their bylaws, to design the structures of their boards consistent with the Charter, ordinances, and policies adopted by BONC. Changes to board structures must be approved by BONC.

B) DONE shall inform neighborhood councils about the findings of research on the advantages and disadvantages of different types of board structures. This shall be in a “best practices” format.

C) DONE shall develop and publicize models of board structure that can be adopted wholesale by neighborhood councils.

D) BONC shall adopt procedures to allow for appointments to, or removals from, a neighborhood council board and in other ways make exceptions to the bylaws where necessary to enable boards to achieve quorum and conduct business.

Recommendation #44: The neighborhood council election process shall be simplified and standardized, with common sense requirements that are easy to enforce and likely to promote the greatest participation.

Recommendation #45: The City Clerk shall organize and run neighborhood council elections. The City shall provide the additional City resources to accomplish this task.

Recommendation #46: The City Clerk shall explore devoting space in the voter pamphlet to encourage people to participate in their neighborhood council.

Recommendation #47: There shall be a package of common election rules that are adhered to by all neighborhood councils, built on the ordinance passed by the City Council in 2005.

Recommendation #48: The City shall share responsibility with neighborhood councils for organizing elections.

Recommendation #49: Neighborhood council

elections shall occur on regional or citywide election dates, but not concurrent with City elections.

Recommendation #50: All election rules shall be finalized and in place at a set time before the election.

Recommendation #51: Responsibility for the City's portion of the outreach effort necessary to mobilize stakeholders to vote in neighborhood council elections shall be concentrated in DONE.

Recommendation #52: Neighborhood councils may choose to participate in the conduct of the election in collaboration with the City Clerk. If neighborhood councils do not wish to participate in the running of the election, they would not be required to establish an elections committee.

Recommendation #53: Elections shall be held on a regional or citywide basis, with individual neighborhood council elections grouped by region on the same day or within the same week. Each neighborhood council election would still be a stand-alone event based on its own bylaws. The City Clerk shall guide the 3-4 month election process from candidate verification through training sessions, candidate forums and debates, and community outreach up until election day.

Recommendation #54: The City shall provide assistance in outreach and voter mobilization. Volunteers may assist in the operation of the election.

Recommendation #55: Election challenges shall be resolved via the regional grievance process proposed by the NCRC.

- A) Decisions in the pre-election period made by election monitors may be appealed to a panel drawn from a pool of stakeholders as noted below.
- B) Poll workers, trained by and accountable to the City Clerk, will be the first line of monitoring of the election.
- C) Poll workers who witness a violation of election rules shall, consistent with City Clerk procedures, order the violator to cease and desist.
- D) If the violation continues, the poll worker shall, consistent with City Clerk procedures, call the election monitor team, which shall go to the polling place, receive the poll worker's report, and take appropriate action. If a violator persists, the election team may call law enforcement.
- E) Votes shall be counted by City Clerk staff in a manner

that is accessible and open while consistent with City Clerk election procedures.

- F) A post-election challenge must be filed in writing, consistent with the citywide election procedures. It must specify the basis for the challenge and include documentation. The challenge will be processed according to the grievance procedure recommended by the NCRC.
- G) The panel may immediately dismiss the appeal or may consider it further. It may ask for written comments from those involved in the election, and then make a decision. The election monitor team must cooperate in this review. If the challenge is found to have no merit, it will be dismissed. If the challenge has merit, the panel shall have the power to impose sanctions. Contrary to the current practice, challenges to the factual accuracy of self-affirmed stakeholder status may be considered by the appeals panel.
- H) The dismissal of a challenge may be appealed to the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners, which will not be required to hear the appeal except under specified circumstances.
- I) Volunteers may assist in the operation of the election. Volunteers may not be candidates in the elections they are assisting.

Recommendation #56: The Human Relations Commission (HRC) shall no longer serve as Final Decision Maker regarding challenges to neighborhood council elections, except in a transitional and training role for a revised system. The HRC shall focus its efforts on assisting neighborhood councils in the areas of diversity and intergroup relations. DONE shall inform neighborhood councils of the resources of the HRC.

Recommendation #57: Term limits for neighborhood council board members should be eliminated.

Recommendation #58: The responsibility for outreach for the neighborhood council system shall be shared between the City government and the neighborhood councils.

- A) The City government shall research and apply methods of outreach on a regional and citywide basis in order to encourage people to participate in neighborhood councils. A "best practices" model shall draw on what has already been working well.
- B) The City shall provide direct outreach services to neighborhood councils, organized on a regional basis.
- C) When outreach services are made available to neighborhood councils, every effort shall be made to reduce bureaucratic red tape. A separate track shall be

established for neighborhood council outreach services provided by the City, e.g., printing.

D) While the City government ought to have broad responsibility for improved outreach and participation, neighborhood councils have a major responsibility to be inclusive and engaging. DONE shall assist neighborhood councils to help make sure that these goals are being actively pursued.

Recommendation #59: The number of activities of neighborhood councils that obstruct participation (e.g., budget work, Brown Act, elections administration, searching for meeting space, clerical support, meeting notification) shall be drastically reduced. With the help of DONE, neighborhood councils shall explore ways to conduct engaging, effective meetings.

Recommendation #60: Legal implications of “town hall” models of neighborhood council meetings shall be explored with the City Attorney.

Recommendation #61: DONE shall be reorganized to highlight the community organizing and technical assistance aspects of its staff, rather than elections administration. DONE staff shall help neighborhood councils to create lean, engaging agendas.

Recommendation #62: DONE shall help neighborhood councils to gather data regarding the neighborhood council area, including “asset mapping” of neighborhood organizations and other vital community assets. DONE shall reach out to neighborhood interests, especially if they are not reached by the neighborhood council.

Recommendation #63: DONE shall revamp its website, and improve its electronic communication, while also finding new ways to reach neighborhood councils that have much less electronic usage. DONE shall post neighborhood council meeting minutes and agendas, regardless of whether the council has its own website. Neighborhood councils should submit on an annual basis, a list of names and contact information for their neighborhood council, which they would like added to the DONE database. Such list may include stakeholders such as alternates, committee chairs, committee members, and non-voting stakeholders. There should also be a subscribe/unsubscribe function.

Recommendation #64: DONE shall challenge and encourage neighborhood councils to be more inclusive and

to become aware of ways in which participation by new people or groups is actively or passively discouraged.

Recommendation #65: Realistic standards for participation in neighborhood councils shall include the interests or groups that comprise the area represented by the neighborhood council to the greatest degree possible. Voter turnout and meeting attendance are desirable but are not the main indications of neighborhood council participation.

A) Neighborhood councils shall attempt to reflect the diverse geographic area of the neighborhood council and the diversity of community interests, ethnicity, race, gender, age, class, religion, homeowner and renter status and sexual orientation.

B) It is suggested that neighborhood councils create plans to guide the achievement of such diversity within their boards.

■ City Assistance to Neighborhood Councils

Recommendation #66: Each neighborhood council should continue to receive equal, annual funding.

Recommendation #67: Funds unspent and unencumbered at the end of 3 years shall revert to a fund administered by DONE to support a neighborhood council program for outreach, education and communication for which neighborhood councils may apply based on demonstrated need.

Recommendation #68: Support from DONE in the funding program for individual neighborhood councils shall be streamlined.

A) DONE and the Information Technology Agency (ITA) should be directed to create an electronic system for fiscal management for neighborhood councils, specifically creating financial accountability forms and all other fiscal approval procedures that can be done and approved online.

B) DONE should continue to implement the City Council’s policies on funding neighborhood councils. DONE shall continue to inform neighborhood councils of guidelines for the use of funds, and to inform neighborhood councils about the avoidance of such conflicts of interest as self-dealing by Board members.

Recommendation #69: DONE shall prepare a menu of frequently needed clerical, office, and other administrative tasks and identify vendors who can provide them.

A) Neighborhood councils shall be offered the opportunity to purchase a “package” of clerical, administrative, and related services through the City, using their City funds.

B) DONE shall also assist neighborhood councils in pooling their resources to locate providers of clerical, administrative, and related services.

Recommendation #70: The City Attorney and DONE shall work together to develop guidelines outlining the benefits, liabilities, and methods for creating freestanding non-profit entities.

Recommendation #71: The City Council should also explore additional funds that neighborhood councils with a large resident base can apply for, which will supplement the operation of their neighborhood council.

Recommendation #72: The City shall provide translation services to neighborhood councils at no cost to individual neighborhood councils. The cost should be a collective cost of the neighborhood council system. DONE shall provide a cost estimate of this service. DONE shall establish guidelines for the provision of translation services.

Recommendation #73: The City shall, within seven years, appoint a commission to examine the progress of the neighborhood council system in light of the recommendations of the NCRC.

Introduction

The Mayor and Council shall appoint a commission as prescribed by ordinance to evaluate the provisions of this Article, the Regulations adopted pursuant to this Article, and the efficacy of the system of neighborhood councils no later than seven years after the adoption of the Charter. The commission shall make recommendations to the Council regarding changes to the Charter or the Regulations, as it deems appropriate .

-- Los Angeles City Charter, Article IX, Section 912

Neighborhood Councils: An Exercise in Grassroots Democracy

When Los Angeles voters adopted a new city charter in 1999, they created an entirely new system of neighborhood councils. The framers of the Charter realized that the neighborhood council system they proposed would be an exercise in democracy. This presented a groundbreaking opportunity and an equally daunting challenge: how to cultivate grassroots democracy in one of the country's most populous, most geographically vast, and culturally diverse urban metropolitan centers, with a historically low level of civic participation. Because it was uncertain whether and how this bold project would work, they built a review of that system into the Charter itself. Section 912 mandated that, after seven years, the Mayor and City Council must create a commission to evaluate the system and make recommendations to guide its further development.

Creation & Mandate of the Commission

The Neighborhood Council Review Commission ("NCRC" or "Commission") was created when the Council adopted, and the Mayor approved, Ordinance No. 177535, in Spring 2006. Each member of the Council appointed one representative to the Commission, and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa selected fourteen, for a total of 29 commissioners. Seven of the Mayor's appointments came from a list of nominations put forward by neighborhood councils in each of the City's seven Area Planning Commission (APC) regions. The new NCRC was given 15 months (extended from the original time of 12) and a budget of \$500,000 to conduct research, deliberate, hold hearings and produce a report with its recommendations.

Pursuant to the Charter and the Ordinance, the Commission was directed to review and comment on the original goals and objectives for the citywide system of neighborhood councils, and also to review the works and documents of both the Elected and Appointed Charter Commissions. It was also directed to evaluate the legal status of neighborhood councils and their function, power and role within City government. The Ordinance also suggested that the Commission discuss, evaluate and make recommendations regarding but not limited to:

1. The definition of "stakeholder";
2. Outreach conducted in and around the Neighborhood Council community to evaluate: whether all people who want to participate in a Neighborhood Council may do so; whether the Neighborhood Councils are truly reflective of the demographic composition in their areas; and whether outreach efforts are made to all segments of the community, including non-profit organizations and renters;
3. The effectiveness and enhancement of the Early Notification System as established in the Los Angeles Administrative Code Section 22.810(f);
4. The orientation and training process for the Neighborhood Council board members and officers and methods to enhance training requirements and goals;
5. The current funding structure and amount of funding for each certified Neighborhood Council and other budgetary issues affecting Neighborhood Councils;
6. The manner in which Neighborhood Councils can, do, and should work together;
7. The manner in which Neighborhood Councils can, do and should work with their respective City Councilmembers and their staff;
8. The performance, success and accomplishments of

- Neighborhood Councils;
9. The challenges of Neighborhood Councils, in particular Neighborhood Council elections;
 10. The accountability of Neighborhood Councils, governmental officials and City officers;
 11. The role, relationship, and effectiveness of the following, as relating to Neighborhood Councils: the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners, City Council offices, Office of the Mayor, all City boards and commissions; and
 12. The role and effectiveness of establishing Memoranda of Understanding with specific, or all, City departments.

Organization of the Commission

The NCRC met for the first time on July 13, 2006 and elected Reverend Altagracia Perez (appointed by Council President Eric Garcetti) as Chairperson and Jacquelyn Dupont-Walker (a direct appointment of the Mayor) and Jason Lyon (a neighborhood council-nominated appointment by the Mayor) as Vice-Chairs. The three Chairs acted as a leadership team throughout the process.

The Commission decided that, in the interests of building consensus, all of its decisions would be made only by a majority vote of the full Commission. To emphasize deliberation, all votes were considered preliminary until the Commission's final meeting on September 18, 2007, when the commissioners adopted this report.

The Commission selected as Executive Director Dr. Raphael Sonenshein, a noted political science professor at California State University, Fullerton, who had served as Executive Director of the Appointed Charter Reform Commission in the 1990s. Dr. Sonenshein and the Commission were assisted by a research team including Richard Dickinson, Jason Greenwald, Adam Sonenshein, Stephanie Zhong, and Melina Abdullah. Walter Ruigu was the Commission's webmaster.

The Commission also received invaluable support from the offices of the City Clerk and the City Attorney. Patrice Lattimore of the Clerk's Office served as the principal City staff member for the Commission. Valerie Flores, along with Gregory Orland and Tom Griego, represented the City Attorney at all Commission meetings. Gwen Poindexter, head of the Neighborhood Council Advice Section in the City Attorney's office, assisted the

Commission regarding her office's legal opinions. Pat Kramer of Apple One transcribed the Commission's deliberations.

The NCRC retained two contractors to gather input from the public. The Commission employed the Social Science Research Center (SSRC) at California State University, Fullerton, directed by Dr. Gregory Robinson, to conduct a survey of current and former neighborhood council board members and a citywide survey of the general public. The NCRC also retained Katherine Padilla and Associates to facilitate a series of interactive public hearings on the Commission's preliminary recommendations. The Commission also contracted the services of Adwire, for development of the NCRC website.

Work of the Commission

The NCRC undertook a wide-ranging process of research, deliberation, and public input to reach its final recommendations.

The Commission examined:

- Published works on participatory democracy and on the history of the neighborhood council system in Los Angeles
- Presentations by the City Attorney's office on the Charter, ordinances and City Attorney opinions regarding the neighborhood council system
- The City Controller's audit of the operations of the neighborhood council system, released in November 2006
- The reports and publications produced by the University of Southern California's Civic Engagement Initiative, as well as a survey conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) in association with the University of Southern California (USC)
- A poll conducted by the Center for the Study of Los Angeles at Loyola Marymount University
- Issues regarding neighborhood councils that had been brought before the City Council and its committees
- Input received from neighborhood councils, individual board members and stakeholders

Commission research included:

- Article IX of the Charter, and the history of its creation by the Charter Commissions, as well as Chapter 28 of the Los Angeles Administrative Code, Articles 1 and 2
- Bylaws of all neighborhood councils to identify models

- of board structure
- Neighborhood participation systems in other cities and how they dealt with the issues faced in Los Angeles
- Voter turnout in neighborhood council elections
- An SSRC survey of former and current neighborhood council board members
- An SSRC citywide survey of Los Angeles residents
- A name-by-name census analysis of all current board members, examining racial and ethnic representation on boards
- Visits to neighborhood council meetings and to land use committee meetings
- Analysis of neighborhood council spending patterns
- Analysis of fiscal support of city to the system of neighborhood councils
- Organizational analysis of key positions at DONE
- Analysis, summary and compilation of laws and legal opinions relevant to neighborhood councils
- Analysis of neighborhood council outreach methods
- Analysis of sources of neighborhood council Community Impact Statement (CIS) reports filed with the City

The Commission also formed committees that completed the following tasks:

- Designing a peer grievance review process for complaints
- Designing a peer grievance process for election challenges
- Drafting a proposed Sunshine Law for neighborhood councils

From November 2006 through September 2007 the Commission conducted public deliberation meetings twice each month. Transcripts of these deliberations can be found at the Commission's website, www.ncrcla.org. NCRC meetings were conducted in public, and were broadcast live via CityPhone and on tape by CityView, Channel 35.

The commissioners divided their work into five areas:

- Vision and Values
- Powers and Roles
- Governance
- Outreach and Participation
- City Assistance to Neighborhood Councils

The Commission conducted 14 public hearings, with meetings during both rounds in all of the City's seven regions. The first round of hearings was conducted between October 16, 2006 and February 15, 2007, and

was interspersed with deliberations. The second round, conducted in June and July 2007, gave the community a chance to weigh in on the Commission's preliminary recommendations that were approved on June 19, 2007. These hearings were conducted in an interactive workshop format that encouraged discussion and provided several channels of feedback. After the interactive sessions were completed, the Commission resumed deliberations to respond to public input. This report includes relevant comments from the public hearings.

The Commission's final report summarizes the findings and recommendations of the NCRC and concludes with a vision for the future of the neighborhood council system in Los Angeles.