

Prepared for the  
LOS ANGELES NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS

Neighborhood councils have become quite adept at advocating for issues of local concern. Individually and collectively neighborhood councils can amass an almost unlimited amount of influence by properly pursuing citywide reforms that can fundamentally change the way government operates.

It's one thing to win scattered battles, and yet another to change, for example, the process that constantly puts the public on the defensive after city hall releases a poorly-designed idea.

GET HELP:

If neighborhood councils look only among their own board members to develop positions and move them forward, progress will move at a glacial pace.

There is help to be found among two groups of people:

- Former board members and community members who are interested in participating in civics by focusing only on a single issue of interest to them.
- Students who will either get credit from cooperative teachers, or who volunteer as a way of "padding their resumes" for application to graduate school.

Mark Elliot put a lot of effort into preparing a primer for neighborhood councils who wish to use "student power." Contact me for a copy.

1. Neighborhood councils should discuss with the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE) and the Office of the City Attorney the ability of NCs to provide students and volunteers with stipends. This will greatly expand the pool of assistants.
2. Neighborhood councils should ask DONE to assist them in finding help, whether it's to find a volunteer policy developer or a candidate to fill a board seat, by creating a place on its website where NCs can post "want ads." In this way, those who want to offer their help don't have to contact 90 individual NCs to find a match.
3. NCs might also be able to get research help from the Chief Legislative Analyst by having a City Council member make requests for them.

EARLY WARNING SYSTEM:

City Charter Section 907 guarantees that neighborhood councils are given "a reasonable opportunity to provide input before decisions are made."

In 2003, a task force of neighborhood council members and city officials recommended over a dozen policy and rule changes that would start adding some definition to the vague Early Warning provision in the City Charter that guarantees neighborhood councils enough time to weigh in on decisions before they are made, including actions by commissions.

Six of the recommendations were adopted by the Education and Neighborhoods Committee (CF 03-0157), but the file was sent to the Rules and Elections Committee where council president and committee chair Alex Padilla let it die by never placing it on an agenda.

There are many, including me, who feel that this was the most important provision in the new City Charter. But because enough specifics weren't added by ordinance, the City Council regularly violates at least the spirit of this guaranty.

4. Neighborhood councils should make recommendations to the City Council that would make the Early Warning/Notification System more effective.

#### CONTROLLING THE MAYOR'S RACE NARRATIVE:

The most common way that NCs get involved in mayoral races is to hold forums, let the candidates make opening statements, and then give each one questions to answer without any follow-up. Candidates like this structure because it's easy to avoid directly answering questions, and speak only to their carefully-crafted messages.

5. Neighborhood councils could perform a valuable public service by developing a platform that all candidates in the upcoming election would be invited to endorse.

The knowledge, experience, and spirit of neighborhood council members is staggering.

A draft platform could be completed in a day, and then circulated to all the councils for comments. Even if it's just three reforms that the NCs all agree upon, that can lead to more muscle-flexing than happens now.

During candidates' forums organized by the NCs, moderators should be selected who would ensure that the candidates answer the questions presented to them, and commit one way or the other to the positions of the NCs. To see a good example, look at one of the last episodes of last season's Newsroom.

#### CREATE A LOCAL SUNSHINE LAW:

The city cannot legally enforce Brown Act (responsibility of the District Attorney), or the Public Records Act and the Political Reform Act (responsibility of the state).

Yet, the District Attorney and State Fair Political Practices Commission decided from Day One that they didn't have the time or resources to investigate complaints regarding NCs. They have their hands full with law-breaking elected officials.

6. The Neighborhood Council Review Commission began drafting a local Sunshine Law before its two years expired. NCs could finish the job.

Given the current fiscal situation, it's a possibility that the state and county would want to get out from under the nuisances that the neighborhood councils create for them.

Creating a local law would allow it to be enforced without the threat of criminal penalties.

The city and NCs could then ask the state legislature to formally exempt NCs from these three state laws as long as an acceptable Sunshine Law was in effect in L.A.

The Sunshine Law would retain the best features of these three laws, and remove the parts that are unfair or burdensome to NCs.

## BROWN ACT:

The Brown Act was created in the '50s, and very little has been done to update it since the advent of the Internet and NCs.

For one, it creates an uneven playing field for the councils. NC members are prohibited from having private communications with a majority of the City Council while lobbyists have an unrestricted ability to do so. That makes it difficult for NCs to correct misinformation that is given to decision-makers at City Hall.

The Act allows overbearing city officials to hold the fear of the criminal penalties over the heads of NC board members.

Sadly, very conservative interpretations of the Act have made unclear the ability of NC board members to communicate with stakeholders using the Internet, such as through Facebook.

Whenever an elected official is approached and asked to submit a motion or bill, the official often asks, "Do you have the votes?" This is because there just aren't that many elected officials who will introduce a reform just because it's the right thing to do. They want to know they can win, as if anyone is keeping score. Lobbyists know this, and will get commitments from a majority of elected officials before approaching their author of choice. But the Brown Act prevents NCs from doing the same thing.

7. Discourage any attempt to require that all NC board members be trained and familiar with the requirements of the Brown Act. Encouraging them to know about the Act by reading it, viewing the DVD, reading the city attorney's information, or attending training sessions is fine, but there is no reason to impose this requirement on NC board members when it isn't required of City Council members or commissioners.

8. For the same reason, discourage any attempt to require NCs to make copies of the Brown Act pamphlet available to the public at board meetings unless the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners (BONC), the City Council, and other governmental bodies do the same.

## NC AGENDA POSTING LOCATIONS:

It's time to revisit how much higher the bar should be raised for NCs.

9. Recommend that BONC either relax its requirement that neighborhood councils post their agendas for every board and committee meeting in at least five physical locations, or that BONC abide by the same requirement and post its agendas in five physical locations and list those locations on the DONE website.

The Neighborhood Council Review Commission (NCRC) recommended that BONC apply to itself the same rules it applies to NCs.

Some NCs have two dozen or more committees. They are "just" volunteers. The Brown Act only requires one physical posting location.

10. DONE should consider conducting a survey at NC elections or meetings, or directly to NC stakeholders to find out how many people learn about events from the physically posted agendas.

11. Discourage any attempt to require NCs to submit a copy of an agenda for a regular or special meeting to DONE before posting it. The Plan for a Citywide System of Neighborhood Councils requires that NCs be as independent as possible from city hall. Proposals like this cross the line.

#### CITY COUNCIL AGENDAS POSTING LOCATIONS:

12. Recommend that the Council Rules be amended to include the requirement that agendas for meetings of the City Council and its committees also be posted on the Internet within the time limits imposed by the Brown Act.

It would be nearly impossible to find a single person who accesses agendas at the physical posting locations. In fact, it would be difficult to find anyone outside the Office of the City Clerk who knows where the agendas are posted. The reality is that everyone accesses the agendas electronically.

#### IMPROVE NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL OUTREACH:

13. Recommend that DONE return to the practice of posting best practices on its website so NCs can learn how to meet the City Charter requirement that they communicate regularly with their stakeholders.

For example, the Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council and the Tarzana Neighborhood Council have excellent procedures for communicating with stakeholders by mail that have been replicated by some NCs, but it's impossible to go to DONE's website and learn about them.

14. Discourage any attempt to require NCs to document all of the outreach procedures used to publicize board meetings until the BONC, the City Council, and commissions do the same, and NCs have been given a reasonable amount of time to comply voluntarily.

15. Discourage any attempt to require NC volunteer boards to attempt to identify and quantify the stakeholders that are reached through each of its outreach methods until the BONC, the City Council, and commissions do the same, and NCs have been given a reasonable amount of time to comply voluntarily.

16. During their bids for certification, many organizers of future NCs excelled at outreach, and their efforts were included in the applications. That information could be excerpted and included on the DONE website.

17. For years, BONC has been asking neighborhood councils to visit their community-based meetings and brag about their achievements, but nowhere on the DONE website or in the commission's minutes can those accomplishments be found. NCs could recommend that those best practices be shared with all.

NC meetings should be a welcoming place where stakeholders can bring their problems and suggestions, and get action. Do this and people will attend. However, if every meeting becomes a battle between two sides each trying to "win," and using Robert's Rules of Order and the Brown Act as weapons, people will choose to stay home and mope, or worse yet, watch Jersey Shore.

18. If each council would survey a random number of stakeholders and ask why they don't participate, it would take minutes, cost nothing, and provide lots of clues about possible

improvements. An interesting starting place would be with former BONC commissioners who have just disappeared.

19. Discourage any attempt to require NCs to create communication content that is relevant, providing stakeholders with facts about issues of concern and possible action by city government. Instead, city hall should lead by example. Look at the websites and newsletters of elected officials and tell me if the information is relevant and includes facts. You will rarely find a mention of any issue that you read about in the newspapers. It's almost all puffery.

#### IMPROVING CITY HALL OUTREACH & TRANSPARENCY:

20. City Charter Section 900 explains that the purpose of the neighborhood council system is "To promote more citizen participation in government ...." That too should be the goal of the City Council.

#### Make a plan:

21. Recommend that BONC, the City Council, and each commission establish procedures for communicating with NCs on a regular basis, and in a manner that ensures information is disseminated throughout in a timely matter.

#### Distributing draft minutes or summaries:

22. Recommend that BONC, as an example for other commissions, send drafts of its minutes to those who have asked to be sent the BONC agendas so they can be made public sooner.

23. Recommend that one BONC member write a short summary of what took place at its last meeting and post it on the DONE website, and submit it to CityWatch.

#### Adding more information to the minutes:

24. Recommend that the minutes of the BONC meetings include a description of the issues raised during the discussions, the reasoning behind their decisions, and the points raised by the public speakers.

#### Respecting the public:

25. Few people want to speak at a City Council meeting just to see the council members not paying attention. A few years ago, a creative attorney videotaped the City Council fiddling around while he was addressing them. He secured a judicial order requiring the members to pay attention. NCs could do the same thing, or propose some new rules of civility for the City Council.

#### Financial transparency:

26. Recommend to the mayor that each city department discuss its finances at a regularly scheduled or special meeting of its commission prior to submitting its proposed budget to the mayor, and gather input from neighborhood councils. This could begin with BONC and DONE setting the example.

Be clear about the rules:

27. Recommend that the City Council and commissions write their procedures and laws in a way that is transparent and easy to understand without the need for a great deal of interpretation. Decades ago, a City Charter amendment that I designed requires the city to write city ballot measures in simplified language and send it to all voters. Therefore, city staff has the skills to do this.

Advertising NC elections at no cost:

28. In every city election pamphlet, there are several blank pages because the pamphlets are printed in multiple pages on a single large sheet, cut, folded, and stapled. Recommend that DONE return to the practice of asking the Office of the City Clerk to print a page in each ballot pamphlet that encourages people to get involved in NCs. At no cost, this information was placed in the hands of over one million voters.

Describing agenda items:

The Brown Act requires that, at a minimum, agendas must include a brief general description of each item. But the City Council shouldn't do the minimum just because it can.

Often the descriptions of agenda items do little to explain to the public what is to be discussed.

There have been too many examples in the past of items that were purposely worded to be so vague that nobody knew the importance of the item. That does little to promote public participation in government.

29. The Office of the Chief Legislative Analyst could assist in developing standards for writing agenda item descriptions.

30. One creative person in a neighborhood council could set an example by rewording one of its agendas to explain to people what is truly being discussed and why it's important for the public to share its opinions.

Improving the City Council's public testimony rules:

Limiting public testimony on each item to a cumulative amount of time for all speakers might work if it was assumed that all the speakers would have nothing of value to say. But that's playing to the lowest common denominator. Along with making those who wish to provide general public comments wait until the end of the meeting, this rule takes the City Council in the direction of discouraging public participation.

31. Recommend that the City Council form a task force that would attempt to find out why people with valuable comments to share, other than paid representatives, don't attend City Council meetings. A solution might be to use Internet technology to give people a convenient way to submit comments, ask questions, and get responses. Few people are able to take a day off work, or from their families, travel to City Hall, wait hours to speak for two minutes, if at all, and then be ignored.

Visiting elected officials who wish to speak are always pushed to the top of the speakers' list. The justification is that they represent a large number of people.

32. Recommend that representatives of official neighborhood council positions be guaranteed an opportunity to speak whenever they request to do so. The City Charter created the neighborhood councils to advise city officials.

33. Recommend that the City Council and BONC change its rules to allow speakers who take the time to attend a meeting, speak both before the City Council begins its discussion, in order to influence the course of the discussion, and after the discussion but before the vote in order to correct any misinformation or respond to comments made so that the City Council members may have before them the best information possible before making a decision.

34. Recommend that Council Rule 7 be amended or abolished:

The rule states that the City Council doesn't have to permit public testimony if public comment was permitted during a committee meeting. The obvious flaw is that the vast majority of the City Council members don't attend other committee meetings, and likely don't know what was said. Recommend that in the same way that the issue is reframed by city staff or the committee chair at a full City Council meeting, so should the public's comments.

Do you know where your City Council member is?

Rule 11 permits the presiding officer to determine the duration of speakers' comments based upon the impending danger of losing a quorum. This misses the underlying problem of why a quorum is about to be lost. Legally, there is very little required of the City Council members. One would think that showing up and staying for work would be a minimum expectation.

City Council presidents, going back in time forever, have struggled with the problem of getting a meeting started on time due to late-arriving members. It would be revealing to know when the last time was when a meeting actually started at 10 a.m. Monetary penalties have been discussed but never implemented.

35. Recommend to the City Council that members arriving late to meetings be required to explain publicly why they are late, or why it is necessary for them to leave early, especially if it causes a loss of a quorum, something that is insulting to the City Council and the public. All the explanations should be recorded in the minutes so they can be referred to at election time.

36. Recommend that the City Council president direct ITA to turn on the Channel 35 cameras in the Council Chamber at 10 a.m. so the public can see for themselves who has shown up on time and who is tardy. Let the court of public opinion have an opportunity to do what no council president has been able to do ... get members to show up for work on time.

37. Additionally, the Council minutes clerk could note and post on the Internet what time each member arrives, distinguishing between those who have been previously excused and those who haven't, and publish that information on the Internet.

Treat each other nicely/Amend Council Rule 12:

38. Rule 12 refers to the rules of decorum. However, it is only directed at the conduct of the public. It should include a Code of Civility that describes how council members interact with each other. The California League of Cities has offered suggestions for a code.

39. Rule 12 also requires everyone in the Council Chamber to remain seated. That would seem to prohibit "standing-room only" crowds. This rule should be applied as much to city staff as it is to the public.

Waiving items through committee/Amend Council Rule 17:

This rule permits the chair of a committee to waive consideration of an item pending in that committee.

40. A majority of the committee members should be required to allow a committee to waive consideration of an item pending in a committee if this is permitted by the Brown Act.

List future items on each agenda:

41. If it is anticipated by the Council President or committee chair that an item MAY appear on a future agenda, that item should be listed at the bottom of all preceding agendas.

Often lobbyists and parties with a financial interest in an item will privately arrange with the Council President or committee chair to have an item scheduled for a specific date, usually at a time when it's convenient for them. The problem is that the public never knows about it until the agenda is released, 72 hours in advance for a regular meeting, or 24 for a special meeting when the insiders want to wait until the last minute.

The future item can include a statement that the date is tentative and subject to change even after the agenda is released.

Commissioners into the community:

The city's commission system was developed in the '20s as a way to infuse more public participation in the decision-making process. However, no one can remember a time when an individual city commissioner went into the community and gave people an opportunity to share thoughts and concerns with him/her on a timely issue in an informal and meaningful way.

42. Recommend that one BONC commissioner, as an example to all other commissioners, plan a meeting in their area to have face-to-face, real discussions with NC members and stakeholders.

Being transparent about all the City Council "urgencies":

Council Rules 16, 23, 39, and 64 allow matters to be considered by the City Council without being referred to a committee, or meeting the normal 72 hours posting requirement.

43. Recommend that the Council Rules be amended to require that any such action include an explanation for the urgency, even if the reason is that it's a routine, non-controversial matter. Far too often there is no real urgency, and the public's ability to participate in the decision-making process is severely hampered by design.



44. Recommend that an explanatory statement of urgency be included whenever a "placeholder" item appears on a City Council agenda. This is done when the City Council committee plans to meet on an item after the City Council agenda is posted. Often the committee meets just an hour before the City Council meeting is scheduled to begin.

The public should know why it isn't possible for them to have at least 72 hours notice of a committee's discussions and actions.

Releasing reports:

45. Recommend that the City Council tell the mayor that, except in the event of an urgency, the Council will not schedule an item, or cast a final vote on any item until the staff report has been made available to the neighborhood councils and public X working days before the meeting.

46. Recommend that the mayor give this same instruction to city commissions.

47. BONC should take the lead and adopt this policy immediately.

Too often, critically important reports aren't available until moments before a meeting is to start. A rule within government is that the amount of time it takes a government employee to complete a report is exactly equivalent to the amount of time they are given to do it.

Explain "forthwith" actions:

Council Rule 51 allows the City Council to send a matter immediately to the mayor for signature or veto without allowing time for the City Council to reconsider its action at its next meeting, and without giving the public time to communicate with the mayor.

48. Recommend that "forthwith" actions include an explanation of the urgency. This would help alleviate concerns by skeptics that the action has been taken to purposely eliminate the public's ability to influence the mayor's actions.

49. Forthwith actions should require 12 votes, not just 10.

Improve the City Council's electronic voting system:

50. Council Rule 48 provides that members' votes be recorded as "yes" if they haven't voted yes or no using the electronic voting system. This is not the case when oral votes are taken. It shouldn't be asking too much of a council member to actually go to their desk and cast a vote.

If this recommendation is too radical, at least the rules should clearly state that members must be in the Council Chamber at the time of the vote, and being in the restroom or eating snacks in the back room doesn't count as being present.

Improve the Council file referral system:

51. From time-to-time, motions are referred to more than one committee either when the motion is submitted or afterwards. Whenever this happens, the City Clerk should create a copy of the file so that each committee has one. In this way, any of the committees may take an action and send it to the full City Council.

This would eliminate the problem of one committee chair refusing to place the item on his/her committee's agenda. And under current rules, the file "dies" after without appearing on an agenda for two years.

Certainly, it is possible for the City Council to use Rule 54 and withdraw any item from a committee, but the reality is that this tactic is rarely if ever used because the process is so contentious.

If one of the committees decides to place an item on the City Council agenda, arguments can be presented as to why the City Council should not act on the committee's recommendations.

52. Recommend that twice a year, the City Clerk should post on its website a list of the files pending in each committee. These lists already exist in electronic form so posting them wouldn't create additional work for the office.

Require responses to the public:

53. Recommend that there be a public discussion about how city agencies, including DONE, can be required to provide responses to comments, questions, and suggestions made to it by NCs and the public. The Scottish Parliament did it.

Be responsive to the public:

Some city elected officials have websites that include "blogs." The shortcoming is that the blogs are used only as a one-way tool designed to push out self-serving news releases.

54. Recommend that the mayor and City Council members, who have the largest staffs in the nation, utilize 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies to make it easy for people to ask questions and make suggestions, and get a reply. Everyone who takes the time to contact a city official deserves a response, even if the response is that the answer is a simple "no."

Assign responsibility:

55. Recommend that the mayor assign one of the deputy mayors to be responsible for promoting transparency and public participation throughout city government.

Organize 21<sup>st</sup> century town hall meetings:

56. Recommend that the City Council and mayor rent or buy hand-held voting equipment and computer software that would permit thousands of stakeholders to meet, learn about, and have their choices recorded on the city's most pressing issues.

This is nothing new. It has been used by non-profit organizations for quite some time. Instead of sitting and listening, attendees are asked for their opinions in a private way, and the results are instantaneous.

Post DONE's rules:

57. DONE has posted the rules of the funding program on its website, but it has not posted any of its other rules thereby making it difficult for everyone to be on the same page. As a result, DONE opened up itself to complaints that its staff gives contradictory advice, and is "making it up as it goes along."

Closed City Council sessions:

58. Recommend to the City Council that if a closed session is for reasons of anticipated litigation, the recordings shall be made public after two years if no litigation is filed, when the statute of limitations passes, or when the controversy is concluded.

59. Recommend that after closed door sessions, the City Council or commission shall publicly announce which items were discussed that weren't confidential.

60. Recommend to the City Attorney that if his representative in a closed meeting of the City Council leaves after issuing warnings that a potential violation of the Brown Act has occurred, or is about to occur, the Office of the City Attorney shall notify the public and media ASAP so that transparency may be demanded.

61. Recommend that every member's vote on a final action must be disclosed at the end of a closed session.

The city of Riverside, in adopting many of these reforms for its City Council said it best: "Our values lie not in hiding embarrassment and unpleasant occurrences."

Disclose City Council settlements:

62. Recommend to the City Council that before it agrees to a settlement, the deal shall be made public at least 10 calendar days before the meeting, or 15 days if it's a collective bargaining agreement.

Summarize public comments:

63. Recommend to the City Council that its minutes shall include a brief summary of each person's statement made during the public comment period for each item. Written comments of up to 150 words shall be included in the minutes.

Make City Council minutes available:

64. Recommend to the City Council that the draft minutes of its meetings shall be available no later than 10 working days after the meeting.

Make public documents available:

65. Recommend to the City Council that all preliminary drafts and department memoranda be declared public information.

Public information requests:

66. Recommend to the City Council that requests for non-exempt public information shall be delivered by the end of the next working day.

Keep public calendars:

67. Recommend to the City Council and mayor that department heads and elected officials be required to keep a public daily calendar of every meeting and event attended, minus personal events, including a general statement of issues discussed.

Make commission meetings more accessible:

68. Recommend to the mayor that city commissions meet at night and in the community as often as possible, and use online communication tools.

Use survey tools:

DONE uses SurveyMonkey from time-to-time to get feedback from NC board members and stakeholders.

69. Recommend that BONC should be using that tool to be constantly asking board members and stakeholders how they feel about important issues before voting on them, and thereby setting an example for other commissions.

Print agendas in Spanish:

70. Recommend that the City Council, and city commissions, led by BONC, print its agendas also in Spanish, or include a link on its online agendas to Google Translate, which can translate English into 64 other languages.

Use an empowerment analysis:

71. Recommend that BONC set an example for other commissions that are deciding on matters that directly affect all neighborhood councils, by including on the agenda an "Empowerment Analysis."

It would be a statement about the effect that the proposal would have on promoting public participation in government, and in empowering neighborhood councils.

The statements would ensure that the commission has considered the extent to which its decisions empower or restrict neighborhood councils.

Make it easier to communicate with city elected officials:

72. Recommend that the City Council tell the Information Technology Agency to modify the city's website so that people can have the option of sending the same message to all members of the City Council at the same time with a single command.

Presently, 15 separate messages need to be sent regarding a City Council issue. The goal should be to promote public participation.

Improve DONE's neighborhood council database:

73. Encourage neighborhood councils to amend the online database of council board members to include members' committee chair positions.

74. Recommend that DONE modify its database so that the title field can be filtered. In this way, for example, all those interested in planning and land use, traffic, public safety, etc. can easily communicate with each other and share ideas.

FINANCIAL TRANSPARENCY:

Neighborhood councils could take a leadership role in demanding more transparency in the financial operations of the city of Los Angeles.

75. They could begin by asking the city controller to regularly publish a list on the city's website of how much each elected official receives in total financial compensation. In this way, the public could hold accountable the city council members who made promises to refuse pay hikes or reduce their spending.

76. We could also see where their discretionary funding is going. Each time an NC gives money to a community organization, it's decided in a public meeting, and the transactions are posted on the Internet. But City Council members make the same decisions privately, and it takes a Public Records Act request to find out where the money went. Yet it's the same taxpayers' money.

77. The NCs could ask that DONE post the details of its budget on its website.

#### MEMORANDA OF UNDERSTANDING WITH CITY DEPARTMENTS:

78. Recommend that all the city's major service delivery agencies develop memoranda of understanding with neighborhood councils that describe how the agencies will provide the neighborhood councils with early notification of its actions, solicit and process recommendations, collaborate on the design of important policies and programs, and share information, and to provide neighborhood councils with a meaningful way to monitor city services, which is required by the City Charter.

Examples exist from Mayor Hahn's administration.

The next department to be approached might be DONE.

#### 79. CREATE AN ONLINE TOWN HALL:

By making a more effective use of the Internet, NCs can better meet the City Charter goal of promoting participation in government.

Very few people can take the time to attend meetings of NCs or governmental bodies in person ... often to speak for just two minutes and be ignored. There are simply too many people who are transit-dependent; work; have family or religious commitments; have other volunteer activities to attend; are uncomfortable speaking in public, perhaps because English isn't their second language; or have more valuable information to share than time permits.

These traditionally disenfranchised people need a way for them to participate.

Blogs and public forums are most like soap boxes, and are dead ends for the development of solutions.

Creating an electronic town hall would allow participation by infinitely more people than can currently participate in not just sounding off, but in reaching an action-oriented consensus on a variety of issues.

It only takes one person using free programs to create a place on the Internet where local and citywide issues could be listed and discussions held. People wouldn't be limited in the number of comments they could make, and there could be real back-and-forth discussions.

The key is that a few people would be needed to moderate the site in order to control the ranters and off-topic posters who have made so many other sites unpleasant and unproductive places, just as would be done in an in-person meeting.

The moderators could encourage experts to provide facts, answer questions, and respond to legitimate comments in order to create a fertile environment where ideas could grow. For instance, the CAO wouldn't have to attend 90 NC meetings in order to discuss the city budget.

This would make it immeasurably easier for people to participate. People would have a meaningful opportunity to be heard, and action plans to be developed.

#### IMPROVE THE CITY'S BIDDING PROCESS:

80. Even if it requires an amendment to the City Charter, the city should want the ability to allow all the qualified bidders for a service or product bid against each other until there is a winner.

This would take the politics and corruption out of the process, and produce more revenue or less cost for the city.

As it is done too often, city staff designs the bid requirements and evaluates the submissions. They rank the bidders and eliminate those who don't meet the city's minimums. And the lobbyists for the losers begin negative campaigning in attempts to reverse the recommendation.

#### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN:

81. Recommend that the mayor and City Council develop an economic development plan for the city that outlines to whom and when the city will provide economic incentives to business people. Presently, there is no plan so the financial and other incentives appear to go to whoever has the best political connections.

#### INDEPENDENCE OF NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS:

Article II(4) of the Plan for a Citywide System of Neighborhood Councils, reads in part: "Certified Neighborhood Councils shall be as independent, self-governing, and self-directed as possible."

This was not "throw-away" language. Unlike vague language that appears in so many of our laws, this sentence was crafted to provide a goal for city hall that would allow the neighborhood councils to achieve their greatest potential.

There is an ever-present temptation by government agencies to over-regulate because they can. Deputy Mayor Larry Frank, speaking a meeting of neighborhood council board members and stakeholders in Hollywood a few years ago, stated that the councils have been over-regulated.

82. There should be a brainstorming session of city official and NC members to develop more specifics for this important provision, otherwise it will be ignored by city hall.

#### MANDATORY TRAINING:

83. Discourage any attempt to require NC board members to take training sessions not required of city officials. It makes no sense for each NC board member to be trained in how the

NC Funding Program works when City Council members aren't trained in how the city budget works.

84. Even in the situation where state law requires NC board members to undergo training about the state's ethics law, there should be no punishment for non-compliance by NC board members because there is no punishment for non-compliance by anyone from the governor down to city commissioners

#### CITY COMMISSIONERS:

There will soon be a new mayor whose first job will be to find top-level staff, then commissioners for the high-level commissions, and then all the other staff members and commissioners.

85. NC should actively seek out commissioner candidates and recommend them to the mayor.

Research I conducted a few years ago showed that NC boards were at least as diverse as all legislative bodies and commissions in the city when what was being measured was economic status. By far, neighborhood council boards included far more people from the "working class" than any other elected or appointed governmental bodies.

86. Recommend that the City Charter Section 501(e) be amended to include socio-economic status as one of the categories through which the diversity of commissions is measured.

#### PROMOTE PET ADOPTION:

87. NCs could work with the Department of Animal Services and sponsor a pet adoption day in their area.

At one event, all 50-70 shelter animals that were brought to the City Hall Rotunda were adopted, including many mature ones. You'll feel good about it, and collect tons of karma points.

#### CREATING CITY COUNCIL FILES:

87. Re-propose that NCs (perhaps three of them) should be able to cause the creation of an official City Council file, and have it referred to a committee. And without the need for NC board members to first file conflict of interest statements.

#### SELECTING GENERAL MANAGERS:

89. Recommend to the mayor that neighborhood councils be formally involved in the interview process for general manager candidates, similar to what was done in the past in the selection of a Director of Planning and general manager of DONE.

#### EVALUATION GENERAL MANAGER PERFORMANCE

90. Recommend to the mayor that neighborhood councils be formally involved in his performance evaluations of general managers.

#### PRINTING COMMUNITY IMPACT STATEMENTS ON AGENDAS:

91. Recommend that the City Council return to the policy of printing Community Impact Statements on City Council and commission agendas.

Or, recommend adoption of the recommendation by the NCRC that ALL Community Impact Statements submitted by neighborhood councils should be printed on the agendas.

When the program was first adopted, the first CIS received would be printed on the agenda, and the City Clerk testified that it would not create an undue additional burden on his office.

Recommend that BONC actively encourage councils to submit Community Impact Statements to it, so they can be printed on BONC agendas, thereby setting an example for other commissions.

#### SPEND CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT FUNDS:

92. Recommend that NCs be given the ability to designate, subject to approval by the City Council and mayor, X dollars worth of capital improvement projects in several departments.

In Porto Allegre, Brazil, the NCs are given the ability to designate where ALL the capital improvement money is spent. Each year, 50,000 of the city's 1,500,000 people participate in the meetings.

A process for doing this was designed and utilized when each NC was given the ability to pick \$100,000 worth of street repair projects.

#### PUBLISH ATTENDANCE RECORDS:

93. Recommend that the City Council publish the attendance records of its members on the Internet.

#### 94. CREATE REPORT CARDS:

Once the NCs have agreed upon positions that are of most importance to them, notify the City Council members when a vote is forthcoming that will count toward their grade.

Keep updating their report cards on the Internet for all to see. Doing this will provide voters and the media an easy, quantifiable way to see which City Council members are the most supportive of NCs.

#### 95. SUPPORT CANDIDATES:

Legally, NCs can't endorse a candidate for political office, but the board members and those with titles can use them when supporting a candidate or a ballot measure as individuals. The average voter can't tell the difference. It's a powerful way to use political muscle.

#### ASK THE CITY ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER:

96. Recommend that NCs ask the CAO about those ideas for affecting the city's budget that they discuss privately, but never publicly.

Toronto hired KPMG to suggest some budget reforms. Two of them were very controversial, but all ideas should be discussed sanely.

To avoid further reductions in library hours, KPMG offered the possibility of turning over library operations to the private sector. One firm, Library Systems and Services, runs the libraries in 16 municipalities, including Riverside County, and surveys indicate that users don't notice a difference.



Toronto is also considering a proposal that would contract with community groups to maintain their local parks. In L.A. that could mean non-profits created by NCs.

KPMG questioned whether or not the off-street lots should continue to be run by the city. The consultants recommended that drivers be able to pay using cell phones.

It also suggested that the city stop requiring pet licensing, and give up the \$600,000 it gets in fees, because the cost of collecting the money and enforcing the law is greater than the benefits.

#### MUNICIPAL BEST PRACTICES:

97. Recommend that the mayor or City Council ask California and National League of Cities to create a database of best practices ideas so each city can learn from the others.

#### NAMING CITY FACILITIES:

98. Recommend that the City Council adopt a policy to guide how city facilities are renamed. You can build off language contained in CF 98-0097, a motion that I wrote but which failed.

The motion included requiring true community support; requiring the honoree to be dead; prohibiting the honoree from being a current officeholder, especially if they are able to vote to approve the very motion that honors them; and establishing an "extraordinary contribution" standard.

#### BECOMING ETHICS WATCHDOGS:

The City Ethics Commission is overloaded and understaffed.

99. NC leaders should meet with commission staff and discuss how NC volunteers could help its staff by being trained as watchdogs for Brown Act and openness violations in government.

Think of it a Neighborhood Watch for the Ethics Commission.

#### REAL ANNUAL SELF-EVALUATIONS BY BONC:

I don't know how many self-evaluations BONC has written. The idea to do them was good, but the evaluations weren't evaluations at all. Rather they were a list of what the members decided were their top accomplishments.

100. Recommend that BONC prepare annual self-evaluations that, like true evaluations, include self-criticism and areas of needed improvement. And posting them on DONE's website.

The evaluations should compare BONC's work to what is required and expected of them in the regulations.

#### IMPROVING TRAVEL REPORTS:

An ordinance I designed (Sec. 4.242.75 of the Administrative Code) requires any city employee who travels or who attends a convention, the costs of either of which are paid in full or in part by the City, shall, within 30 days of completion of the travel or convention, submit a report

to his or her appointing authority summarizing the nature and purpose of the travel or convention and describing the significant information gained and/or the benefits which will accrue to the city as a result.

The rationale was that the public and city officials need to understand the value of trips, and learn what value they have. Recent budget cuts have sliced travel money from departmental budgets, but some conventions are regularly attended by city staff, such as the California and National League of Cities. City Council members never tell us what they do at these events, because, in part, the law was amended at the last minute to exempt elected officials.

101. Recommend that the City Council amend the ordinance that requires travel reports to be filed to include elected officials, and to include attendance at any “city business” event that requires being outside the city whether or not payment from the city was received.

#### CONGRESS OF NEIGHBORHOODS:

102. Recommend that NCs recommend how to clarify how Congress of Neighborhoods meetings are held.

City Charter Section 901(c) states that the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment shall “arrange Congress of Neighborhoods meetings if requested to do so by recognized neighborhood councils.” The Administrative Code goes further and calls for two events each year.

DONE’s original draft of the Plan for a Citywide System of Neighborhood Councils called for DONE to survey the councils before organizing each Congress. But the final version remained more vague.

As a result, there has never been a method through which neighborhood councils were able to decide if they wanted a Congress meeting, no less how it would be shaped.

Recommend that DONE staff listen to the tapes of workshops held at Congress of Neighborhoods, and regional congresses, and post notes on what happened on its website as it used to do. Ask for volunteers to help. Without doing this only the few people who attend the workshops know the information that was learned.

#### ENFORCING DONE’S DEADLINE REQUIREMENTS:

103. There should be consequences if DONE does not meet the deadlines prescribed in the regulations for it to act on bylaws amendment applications, applications for certification, etc. One suggestion is that DONE misses the deadline to act on a bylaws amendment request from a neighborhood council, it shall be deemed approved.

#### ESTABLISH A SUB-DIVIDING POLICY:

104. Recommend that BONC adopt a policy through which a neighborhood council may divide itself into smaller parts and form new neighborhood councils.

The average size of a neighborhood council is 39,000 residents, not including non-resident stakeholders. During the initial certification process (during one 52-week period, 52 councils were certified) no applications were rejected because they were too big, if there were no other applications forthcoming. The hope was that the larger councils would eventually find additional leadership and split into smaller, more manageable councils.

Some NCs have a resident population equal to that of the city of Burbank. Burbank isn't a neighborhood.

#### ESTABLISH A PUBLIC RECORDS ACT POLICY:

105. Recommend that DONE set an example for other city agencies by adopting a policy that describes which documents are available to the public without requiring persons to submit a Public Records Act request.

The public should have access to public documents without being burdened with having to file a Public Records Act request and await an answer.

#### BRING BACK NEIGHBORHOOD SERVICE CABINETS:

106. Recommend to the mayor that he bring back the neighborhood service cabinet system through which a deputy mayor and high-ranking city agency officials meet regularly with NC representatives, area by area, so that NCs present their service requests, and the deputy mayor gives directions to the city staff for handling them.

#### VERBAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES:

107. Recommend that the City Council, city commissioners, and NC board members, at the start of each meeting, declare whether or not they believe they have a conflict of interest in any matter, or have had private conversations with the parties about to come before them. This helps eliminate the "I forgot" excuse.

#### CAUCUS OF ATTORNEYS:

108. Begin the process of finding attorneys who support the NC system, and get them discussing about how NCs can defend their legal rights, such as protecting against violations of the Early Warning System of the City Charter by city hall.

#### CREATE A LIST OF DEPARTMENT LIAISONS:

109. Recommend that the mayor, or DONE on its own, create and maintain a list of persons in each city department who are the primary contacts for neighborhood councils.

#### 110. CREATE A MYTHBUSTER SERVICE:

Nationally, there are several websites that debunk rumors, myths, and just plain misinformation.

When you read something that seems a little off the wall, a good first stop is [www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com), officially known as the Urban Legends Reference Pages.

Located at the University of Pennsylvania, and funded by the Annenberg Foundation, [www.FactCheck.org](http://www.FactCheck.org) focuses on political misinformation.

If you like charts and numbers, [www.PolitiFact.com](http://www.PolitiFact.com) is an oft-quoted project of the Tampa Bay Times.

Neighborhood councils could significantly upgrade the quality of city campaigns by organizing a similar myth-busting service, or at least convince a local newspaper, or an organization like the League of Women Voters to lead the crusade for the truth behind the spin.

## 111. DESIGN A CITY BOND MEASURE

The usual process for the development of a bond measure for the ballot is for the City Council to late until the last minute, ask city staff to figure out which projects would be built, and how the bonds would be sold and paid off. The public is always left out of the entire process except to be asked to vote for it.

Instead, neighborhood councils could design a bond measure themselves with the assistance of city staff. Whenever the councils decide the time is right, they would ask the City Council to place it on the ballot. In this way, the campaign to pass the measure would begin with the support of a large segment of the public because they designed it. How could elected officials argue with that?

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December, 2012