

Introduction

This is the 2014 Plan for the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners (“Commission”), the body comprised of seven members appointed by the Mayor of the City of Los Angeles to provide oversight and set policy for the Neighborhood Council System. Given the nature and cycles of the work of this body, the report addresses issues that are strategic in nature with an emphasis on the goals for 2014.

Board of Neighborhood Commissioners

The Commission ensures that the City Charter and the Neighborhood Council Plan are realized by setting policies with the aim of making Neighborhood Councils diverse, inclusive, and representative of all community stakeholders. The Commission believes strongly that the individuality of Neighborhood Councils should function as a catalyst for change in addressing the needs of their communities. By increasing access to City government and City services through the network of local Neighborhood Councils, the Commission strives to increase quality of life for everyone living in Los Angeles.

The Commission has had some successes over the last few years, which can now be built upon, namely the creation of the Empower LA Awards which in its second year in 2013, inspired wide involvement by the Mayor and City Council in recognizing best practices by NCs in their liaison role with the city and in engaging stakeholders. In addition, another recent highlight was the work of the Plan Review Committee which involved over 40 neighborhood council members in revisiting the elements of the City Plan for Neighborhood Councils to propose revisions based on the 10 years of data gathered since the founding of the system. Finally, another important accomplishment was the compilation of Neighborhood Council Standards, Rules and Best Practices which put in one document guidelines for neighborhood council success.

The Neighborhood Council System and Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (Empower LA)

The City of Los Angeles neighborhood council system was formed over ten years ago to strengthen the relationship between citizens and city government with the goal of improving city services. As one would imagine, with such an experiment in citizen-engaged democracy, this is always an inspiring undertaking not without its frustrations for the councils and those associated with them. The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (Empower LA, “Department”), in particular, which provides day-to-day oversight to the City Chartered system, works hard to provide the Councils with support and tools, and to manage the tension between enforcing the rules necessary for the system to function and retaining the autonomy of the NCs.

The Context – Strengths and Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

As to be expected, the current context for the NC system presents significant opportunities and challenges. There is a new mayor in City Hall with a stated agenda to boost civic engagement and a view that neighborhood councils will play a central role in achieving this priority. Additionally, the City Council members and other City Departments appear more ready than ever before to partner with Empower LA and NCs in accomplishing the shared goal of effectively serving the residents. The continuing City Budget shortfall presents a significant challenge to leveraging this opportunity as the Department has again been asked to reduce its budget, on top of many years of reductions which limits staff capacity to support the growth, proper functioning and development of the councils.

Despite this and other challenges, DONE staff have worked hard to provide key tools to further the effectiveness of NCs including: new checking accounts to smooth financial transactions; an organized election process to lessen the burden on NCs and motivate a high level of citizen participation; and new trainings to promote strong leadership across the system. One goal of these trainings is to address the recognized need to increase the level of civility at NC meetings. Another need is to raise the visibility of the system to attract more participation from the diverse and multilingual residents of the city. Nonexistent or nonfunctioning websites are a critical barrier to this outreach process. Based on the feedback from the attendees at the 2014 Board of Neighborhood Commissioners retreat, there are five priority areas when striving for high quality councils:

- Increasing computer and web functionality with an eye toward improving the public interface.
- Ensuring that Department staff provide high quality support needed by NCs with enthusiasm.
- Improving the quality of leadership and succession planning within the neighborhood councils.
- Creating more accountability structures related to areas where there have been challenges like funding, by-laws, metrics and outreach.
- Develop metrics that apply to the Councils, Empower LA, and the Commission.



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Considering its role and the current context and the priorities developed with input from partners and stakeholders in the NC system, the Commission developed the following goals for 2014:

- Model developing metrics by developing a set for the Commission.

- Build trust and improve relationships with the Councils – start by sharing the metrics survey to get their input.
- Engage councils using strategies like providing Commission reports at their meetings, educating Councils on the role of the Commission, involving members in the creation of Commission policy and recognizing their effort through the Empower LA Awards.
- Support the effectiveness of NCs by creating policies related to outreach, training and other key area
- Create a Neighborhood Council Leadership Institute that engages leaders, experts, non-profits, and high profile trainers (possibly from the Mayor’s office or organizations such as Coro Southern California) and includes participants based on selective criteria.

These interrelated goals can be categorized into three areas: outreach, accountability in the form of policy development and implementation, and leadership development.



Goal Focus Area 1: Outreach

Outreach can be addressed at the Commission level to raise the visibility of the system overall and improve relationships between the Councils and the Commission. There is a real need for Commission involvement in this area as less than 1% of residents vote in the NC elections. In addition, the Commission can support the efforts of neighborhood councils to do more effective community engagement through the creation of a common definition of outreach and policies that support neighborhood councils in fulfilling their outreach responsibilities in accordance with this definition.

Key Strategies:

1. Promote the significance of NCs and Empower LA with the Mayor, City Council, other City Commissioners, City Departments and Community Leaders as well as the media;
2. Establish an Outreach Task Force to Develop Best Practices and Accountability Measures for NCs in this area;
3. Develop Strong Relationships with NC leadership;
4. Implement the Empower LA awards.

Goal Focus Area 2: Policy Development and Implementation

At the core of the work of the Commission is setting policy to support the effective functioning of neighborhood councils; but, a challenge has been creating policies with limited attention to how they will be implemented. Within this goal area, we intend to create policies based on the work of the review committee as well as new issues that arise, with a focus on how the policies will be

implemented once they are in place. This includes working with the mayor and other key city actors as well as developing consequences for not following policies. In addition, we want to develop metrics for our work as related to the policies we create for NCs so that there is clear accountability at all levels.

Key Strategies:

1. Develop policies based on previous work by the review commission as well as other issues that arise within the system.
2. Work with the city council, Empower LA and neighborhood councils to develop effective strategies for implementation and enforcement of policies.
3. Revisit past policies to determine if there are ones where work needs to be done to ensure implementation.

Goal Focus Area 3: Leadership Development

The most important factor relating to neighborhood council success is the leadership capacity of the officers and other board members. It was clear from the discussion at our retreat, past meetings and observation by commissioners, Empower LA staff, volunteer coaches and others that NCs could greatly benefit from an intense focus on the development of leadership skills. The Department is doing a great deal of work in this area as are actors within the system who serve as mentors and thought leaders as relates to neighborhood council effectiveness. The Board of Neighborhood Commissioners sees its role as establishing a partnership with all of those who are working to enhance leadership within the system.

Key Strategies:

1. Initiate presentations by leaders from within and outside the City family at the monthly Board of Neighborhood Commissioners meeting that takes place in the community.
2. Develop a Leadership Institute that involves NC leaders with leaders from other contexts to discuss key issues and strategies for effectiveness.
3. Support the Department in its efforts to train NC leaders.

We have established ad-hoc committees that align with these goal areas and their work plans are included on the following page.

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Measuring Success

In addition to work on the three goal areas, we have as a priority the development of metrics to measure the effectiveness of our work and that of the neighborhood councils. To this end, we will work together to ensure that every program developed by the commission is tied to our metrics, has a well-thought out implementation strategy and a measure for success.

Conclusion

It is our hope that the completion of this plan will address the critical issues facing the neighborhood council system, and strengthen our role as a commission. We are excited about the opportunity to partner with neighborhood councils, Empower LA, the offices of the Mayor, City Council and the other City Departments to contribute to the fulfillment of the mission of the system – to engage citizens in city government and to make city government more accountable.

Key Tasks and Timelines by Committee

Committee	Task	Start Date	Completion Date
Outreach	Provide commission members with guidance in promoting neighborhood councils in relation to elections and in general	March 2014	April 2014
Outreach	Provide commission members with guidance in interfacing with the neighborhood councils in their region.	April 2014	June 2014
Outreach	Establish Outreach Task Force to develop best practices and accountability measures	May 2014	December 2014
Outreach	Implement Empower LA Awards	April 2014	September 2014
Implementation	Develop Community Impact Statement Policy	March 2014	March 2014
Implementation	Finalize Posting Policy	January 2014	April 2014
Implementation	Develop Training Policy as relates to “Bad Behavior”	January 2014	May 2014
Implementation	Develop other policies as relates to accomplishing the goals of the commission	June 2014	ongoing
Implementation	Work with the City Council on implementation of the recommendations	March 2014	December 2014
Leadership	Incorporate Leadership Training/dialogue into the meetings of the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners	April 2014	ongoing
Leadership	Work with the Department to provide leadership training to NC leaders	April 2014	ongoing
Leadership	Create a Leadership Training Institute	September 2014	ongoing