Neighborhood Councils in Los Angeles: A Midterm Status Report

Neighborhood Participation Project
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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report considers the progress made implementing the Los Angeles neighborhood council system during the three years following adoption of the Plan for Neighborhood Councils in 2001. The Charter provisions creating the neighborhood council system, adopted June 1999, created a citywide system that would represent the diversity of stakeholders, defined as those who live, work, or own property in the neighborhood. The broad goal is "to promote more citizen participation in government and make government more responsive to local needs."

While the neighborhood councils have no formal powers, the Charter contains several provisions expected to improve neighborhood participation in the city policymaking process, including creation of an "Early Warning System" (later renamed the "Early Notification System" in the Neighborhood Council Plan) to support information to, and feedback from, neighborhood councils. The Charter was broad in its outlines, leaving much detail to be resolved by ordinance in the planning process. The Plan left many details about design to the discretion of neighborhood council organizers, and provided little guidance regarding administration of the system or policy regarding the involvement of councils in governance.

The charter requires appointment of a commission to review the system in 2006. Looking toward 2006, this report provides an assessment of intermediate achievements of the system, and establishes benchmarks against which to evaluate outcomes over time.

Evaluative Criteria and Methodology

The vision for the neighborhood council system outlined in the Charter is very broad, allowing varying interpretations of what the neighborhood council system should accomplish. We identify four activities in which neighborhood councils might be involved, including policy influence, service oversight, partnership on neighborhood-oriented projects, and community building and enhancement of civic culture.

Given that the neighborhood council system is still in a formative stage, we believe it is premature to evaluate long-term outcomes. Hence this report focuses on the following intermediate outcomes that have been found by researchers to be requirements for successful neighborhood involvement in governance. These are (1) representation of natural neighborhoods; (2) a citywide system; (3) support for the councils in the form of resources and participatory innovations; and (4) development of a strong "participatory core" of neighborhood councils that are democratically legitimate and deliberative.

The evaluation used a multi-methodological approach, combining documentary research with qualitative and quantitative field data. Primary sources of data collection included:

- Focus groups of neighborhood council stakeholders, convened in November 2001 (12 individuals), and September 2003 (10 individuals).

- Field observation of more than 80 community and neighborhood council meetings throughout the city, as well as meetings of the citywide Alliance of Neighborhood Councils, the Valley Alliance, the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners, and the Government Efficiency and Education and Neighborhoods Committees.

- Semi-structured interviews with more than 100 appointed and elected city officials, city administrators and project coordinators, neighborhood activists, and observers in academia and the media. Survey data were collected from neighborhood council elected board members, city council staff, project coordinators working with the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, and randomly selected LA residents.

Evaluation of Intermediate Outcomes

The evaluation of intermediate outcomes considers whether the City and neighborhood councils (NCs) appear to be developing the organizational capacity to support effective and democratically legitimate neighborhood councils. We find:

- The City is not providing support resources commensurate with the scale of the reform, and the administrative requirements imposed on the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE) and neighborhood councils.

- Despite this rather limited support, the system of neighborhood council is almost citywide; there are 81 neighborhood councils and only 18 communities remain without certified neighborhood councils. There are gaps in coverage in the West, North Valley, and central/east Hollywood areas.

- Most neighborhood councils have successfully held their first elections, and many are moving on to their second. While most neighborhood council elections are non-controversial, some high profile electoral challenges could place at risk the democratic legitimacy of the system. The City needs to develop standards concerning elections that address such issues as qualifications, outreach requirements, absentee balloting, administration and dispute arbitration.

- Elected neighborhood council representatives do not yet adequately represent the diversity of the city in terms of stakeholder affiliation or demographic difference. The City needs to make additional resources available for community organizing, and neighborhood councils need to consider how to structure their operations to be more inclusive.

- The City has made varying progress in implementing the charter provisions designed to empower neighborhood councils. There is a need for earlier notification of pending policy decisions and a more systematic means of involving NCs in monitoring service delivery. Moreover the Congress of Neighborhoods needs to be reconstituted as a deliberative forum that engages NC delegates around citywide policy issues.

Benchmark Measures of Long-Term Outcomes

We consider initial benchmarks of long term success with respect to (1) emerging organizational capacity of neighborhood councils and the quality and impact of their initial activities; (2) participation in their activities and the "social capital" developed by the relationships they create; and (3) measures of stakeholders' political efficacy and their attitudes regarding city government and their community. Future evaluative activities should also assess the manner in which community stakeholders judge the activities and accomplishments of neighborhood councils. Our initial findings suggest:

- While a number of neighborhood councils appear to be running effectively and getting things done, others are struggling with operational issues, personality conflicts, or lack of strategic direction.

- About one-quarter of neighborhood councils are ranked as having defined achievable goals by PCs. These neighborhood councils appear to be more successful in achieving community improvements.

- A number of neighborhood councils have community-level accomplishments in such areas as advising on land use policy, facilitating service delivery, and supporting community events, neighborhood beautification projects, and youth activities.

- Participation at neighborhood council meetings varies considerably, with the average meeting drawing fewer than 50 attendees. There is a need for better data on interactions between neighborhood councils and stakeholders.

- Neighborhood councils appear to be developing networks of relationships connecting stakeholders, councils, and the City. The average Board member surveyed reports 12.3 connections related to neighborhood council involvement.

- Neighborhood council Board members typically express relatively positive attitudes toward their communities, and relatively high levels of political efficacy. They are fairly critical of city government; only about one-third rank City performance as good or excellent. Interestingly, the Board members rate the City's performance more highly than do residents of the city in general.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Most of Los Angeles is now represented within certified neighborhood councils, and many neighborhood councils are working productively on community activities and advising on larger policy concerns. This is a remarkable achievement that must be credited to the volunteer activities of hundreds of neighborhood leaders, and to the efforts of a relatively small cadre of dedicated city officials and their staff. Some neighborhood councils appear however to be struggling still with procedural and operational challenges.

The next step is to build the deliberative capacity of the city, the neighborhood council system, and of individual neighborhood councils. We specifically recommend the following:

- *Resolve elections procedures.* There is a need for the City to develop clear minimum standards for elections, and to consider whether to contract with third parties for elections administration and arbitration of disputes.

- *Streamline open meeting and ethics provisions.* The City needs to consider policy changes to streamline the rules designed to ensure transparent decision making and ethical operations.

- *Organize for inclusion.* The City and individual NCs need to adopt strategies aimed at increasing stakeholder and demographic diversity on Boards and offering avenues for participation that extend beyond the governing Boards.

- *Involve NCs in city governance.* There is a need to continue developing channels for NC input in city policy making and service delivery, such as an improved ENS and institutional systems for feedback on service delivery.

- *Develop a deliberative Congress of Neighborhoods.* The Congress of Neighborhoods should be reconstituted as a deliberative forum that will connect neighborhood council delegates in debating citywide policy issues.

- *Build organizational capacity of neighborhood councils.* There is a need to target additional technical assistance and training to develop organizational capacity among neighborhood councils that are still struggling with structural and procedural issues.

II. INTRODUCTION

In June 1999, Los Angeles voters enacted charter provisions creating a citywide system of neighborhood councils (NCs), and three years have passed since the City Council approved an implementation plan. The broad goal of the reform is "to promote more citizen participation in government and make government more responsive to local needs." The charter requires appointment of a commission to review the system in 2006. Looking toward 2006, this report provides an assessment of intermediate achievements of the system, and establishes benchmarks against which to evaluate outcomes over time.

The Charter requires that neighborhood councils represent all stakeholders within a neighborhood, and defines stakeholders as those who live, work, or own property in the neighborhood. While the neighborhood councils have no formal powers, the Charter contains several provisions expected to improve neighborhood participation in the city policymaking process, including creation of an "Early Warning System" (later renamed the "Early Notification System" in the Neighborhood Council Plan) to support information to, and feedback from, neighborhood councils. The Charter was broad in its outlines, leaving much detail to be resolved by ordinance in the planning process.

The final Plan for neighborhood councils, adopted in May 2001, envisioned a flexible, organic process of council development, and left considerable room for councils to develop from the grassroots. The Plan left boundary designation, structure of governing structures, and crafting of bylaws largely to the discretion of local organizers. The planning process did not, however, specify support and institutional mechanisms for neighborhood council involvement in the governance process. Nor did it provide much detail regarding neighborhood council operations following certification. Hence many operational details were left to be resolved during the certification phase.

The implementation of neighborhood councils in Los Angeles has faced a number of serious obstacles, including lack of a clear vision for the system, lack of unified political support during the planning phase, limited resources, a challenging socio-economic environment, and institutional obstacles:

A divisive governance environment. A catalyzing event for charter reform was the threatened secession of the San Fernando Valley, and a high degree of political alienation and mistrust of the City has characterized both the planning and certification phases.

Vague policy goals and objectives. The multi-textured politics of charter reform contributed to vague objectives. Section 900 of Article IX, states that the purpose is to "promote more citizen participation in government and make government more responsive to local needs…" It further states: "Neighborhood councils shall include representatives of the many diverse interests in communities and shall have an advisory role on issues of concern to the neighborhood." These goals lack operational definition in the Charter, and the planning process did little in the way of goal clarification.

Mixed political support. While the Mayor has oriented his administration toward neighborhood services, support has been mixed among city council members. Moreover, city departments vary in their willingness to work with neighborhood councils around service delivery or policy issues.

A constrained resource environment. During the last two years of implementation, the City has experienced severe funding constraints as a result of fiscal policies undertaken at the State level. The City has recently been subject to an across-the-board hiring freeze, and most departments have experienced budget reductions.

Socio-economic barriers to participation. While neighborhood councils have shown to be successful in improving the quality of participation in other American cities, there is a remaining question about whether these success stories can be generalized to a city as diverse as Los Angeles. Given the rapid demographic change currently experienced by Los Angeles, it is likely that some neighborhoods contain several language groups, and to be poor, to have limited experience with American political traditions, and limited resources to overcome obstacles to participation.

Other cities that have created neighborhood councils systems have required many years to implement their plans fully, suggesting that the Los Angeles system is still in a formative stage. As such, we believe it is premature to judge the ultimate outcomes of the system. We focus primarily on *intermediate outcomes,* namely the extent to which the system is beginning to develop democratic capacity and respond to the goals established in the Charter. We also identify benchmark measures of longer-term outcomes, including breadth and quality of participation, development of social and political networks, and impacts on city services and civic life in the city. The report focuses in particular on accomplishments and challenges that emerged following October 2001, the date that the City began accepting applications for neighborhood council certification.

III. EVALUATION CRITERIA AND METHODOLOGY

Evaluation Criteria

Evaluating the successes and shortcomings of the system of neighborhood councils requires a clear consensus of what this system should achieve for the city. It is important to avoid unrealistic goals, such as an expectation that neighborhood councils will dramatically increase voter turnout in municipal elections. At the same time, the variety of benefits that can be achieved through this system must be recognized. As it develops, the system is likely to achieve some goals better than others, and an understanding of the full range of objectives will help clarify where additional effort and attention is warranted. The self-determining character of neighborhood councils suggests, moreover, that NCs across the city will likely focus on differing goals, meaning that one set of uniform criteria may not be appropriate.

As we have discussed in earlier reports, the vision for the neighborhood council system outlined in the Charter is very broad, allowing varying interpretations of what the neighborhood council system should accomplish. The Charter states that the purpose of the neighborhood council system is to "promote more citizen participation in government and make government more responsive to local needs…" Neighborhood councils must be representative of the diversity of interests in the community, and every part of Los Angeles must be located within a neighborhood council. Article I of the Plan adopted to implement the system broadens the goals stated in the charter. In addition to the goals of promoting participation and making government more responsive, the Plan supports "opportunities to build partnerships with government," and mentions the goals of promoting collaboration and building a sense of community.

Neighborhood council board members and stakeholders have articulated wide array of visions for the emergent system. In focus group discussions have neighborhood activists have spoken about the importance of community building, lobbying regarding community needs, influencing city services, and connecting to the broader city governance process. Many articulated the desire to influence city planning; one focus group participant hoped to promote a linked process of "greening his area," creating parks, greater employment and recreational opportunities for youth, and ultimately, reduced crime and social strife. Another member quoted former NYC Mayor LaGuardia: "The essence of city government is good housekeeping." This prompted another to quip, "Neighborhood councils should not be the maid with the vacuum cleaner but the mother-in-law with the white gloves." The concern that the City would "offload" maintenance duties was echoed by a participant who stated, "We don't want to do the City's job for free… like a self-service gas station."

It was felt by some focus group participants that the neighborhood councils could influence broad governance processes, such as redistricting, while others articulated the importance of community building through social activities such as community festivals. The participants tempered their visions, however, with a degree of pragmatism. "No one has hope for revolutionary actions," one member stated, "but the simple ability to be heard." Another agreed, "I don't entertain any delusions that neighborhood councils will share power – I do entertain the vision that neighborhood councils can serve as forums for different interests to get together and address issues. There is more value in the fact that these different groups with separate interests come together to focus on community issues."

Based on these observations, and research on neighborhood councils in other cities, we suggest four types of activities on which neighborhood councils will likely focus:

- *Policy influence.* Representing the concerns of the entire range of neighborhood stakeholders to help make city planning and policies more responsive to local preferences;

- *Service oversight.* Monitoring service delivery and providing "street level" feedback to departments to improve the delivery of city services;

- *Project partnership.* Engaging neighborhood councils, city agencies and other parties in projects such as community policing or community improvement;

- *Community-building.* Enhancing community identities and developing relationships among individuals, local organizations, and stakeholder groups, and fostering participation and civic attitudes.

Intermediate Measures: Lessons from Other Cities. As we discuss in an earlier report, neighborhood councils exist in many cities, including Seattle, Portland, St. Paul, San Antonio, and Minneapolis to name a few.[1] A number of researchers that have examined these systems have identified four characteristics common to successful systems.[2] These requisites would appear to be minimum intermediate indicators as to whether the neighborhood council system is developing democratic capacity and is on the road to achieving the long-term goals described above. These are representation of natural neighborhoods, a citywide system, support in the form of resources and participatory innovations, and development of a strong "participatory core," neighborhood councils that are democratically legitimate and deliberative.

Representation of small natural neighborhoods. Researchers have found that successful councils are organized around small, well identified neighborhoods. Berry, Portney, and Thomson, for example, found that successful councils typically containing 2,000 to 5,000 residents. The largest associations were in St. Paul, with an average size of 16,000 (p. 49). Representation of relatively small community groupings helps to facilitate "regular, face-to-face discussion of the issues… by all who would take the time to be involved." (Id.)

Citywide system. Researchers have also noted the importance of having a citywide system so that the benefits of neighborhood organizations are available to all. In three of the five cities studied by Berry, Portney, and Thomson, neighborhood councils represented all areas of the city within three years of the system's inception. Citywide coverage is lacking only in San Antonio, where neighborhood organization emerged with less city oversight out of an Alinsky-type citizen action organizations (p. 52).

Political support and provision of resources. A third characteristic of successful systems is the support of key political actors both in terms of open access to policy making and in the provision of resources. These systems were also accompanied by the early creation of "political innovations" (p. 50) such as information and communication systems and mechanisms for meaningful political involvement in issues such as planning or budgeting. (p. 50)

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[1] Musso, Kitsuse, Lincove, Sithole, and Cooper, "Planning Neighborhood Councils in Los Angeles: Self-Determination on a Shoestring," NPP report, April 30, 2002.
[2] Berry, Jeffrey M., Kent Portney, and Ken Thomson. 1993. *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.

A strong participatory core. A fourth requisite is a strong "participatory core," meaning that the councils that make up the system must participate openly and effectively with their constituent stakeholders (Thomson, 2002). According to Thomson: "The key characteristics of the core organizations are 1) effectively representing all elements of the community, 2) being internally democratic and deliberative, 3) being responsive to community members on a wide range of issues, and 4) providing full opportunity to whomever chooses to participate." Effective representation requires open elections of the governing board and broad, representative participation in NC processes. Deliberation requires effective outreach to stakeholders, solicitation of their viewpoints, and effective communication of these views by means of the appropriate channels to City Hall.

Long-Term Benchmark Measures. Ultimately, the neighborhood council system should be judged by the extent to which it changes the character of civic engagement in Los Angeles, and the resulting effects on services and quality of neighborhood life in the city. There is a need for baseline assessment of the following factors, using standard measures that support comparison to other cities, and over time.

Who participates and how? One set of objectives has to do with the extent to which neighborhood councils result in increased breadth or quality of citizen participation. Neighborhood councils in other cities have not been found to increase the *numbers* of participants. They have resulted in higher *quality* participation, involving people in meaningful activities to solve community problems and potentially alter patterns of political influence.[3] A successful neighborhood council system should also contribute to the civic culture of the city by creating sustained relationships that build "social capital" – norms of trust and reciprocity. Over time, a measure of success will be the extent to which relationships develop within the neighborhood councils, connect across the city's communities, and facilitate effective participation in governance.

City policy and quality of life. Another set of goals has to do with the effects of participation on city services, and ultimately, on neighborhood life. As noted above, neighborhood councils are likely to work in four areas of activities: influencing city planning and policies; facilitating service delivery; partnering around local community projects; and developing community identity and civic values. Some fear that neighborhood councils will fuel a parochial approach to development by taking a reactive stance to proposed projects. Research in other cities suggests that these fears are unfounded, as neighborhood councils provide a forum for addressing development concerns of residents, allowing developers an earlier gauge of community support or resistance.

[3] Berry, Portney and Thomson, p. 286.

Political attitudes and tolerance. The third set of important objectives has to do with the manner in which involvement in neighborhood councils influences stakeholder perceptions of their government, their role as citizens, and other members of the city. Berry, Portney and Thomson found that people in cities with vibrant neighborhood councils were less disaffected, more politically efficacious, and more tolerant of others. This was true even of residents who were not directly involved in neighborhood councils. Residents of Los Angeles currently have relatively low levels of trust, and high levels of political disaffection. The question is whether these attitudes can change as a result of involvement in neighborhood councils.

Methodology

This evaluation used a multi-methodological approach, combining documentary research with qualitative and quantitative field data. Primary sources of data collection included focus groups, field observation, interviewing, and structured surveys.

Focus Groups and Workshops. The project team convened two focus groups of neighborhood council stakeholders, in November 2001 (12 individuals), and September 2003 (10 individuals). Focus group recruitment attempted to get a broad range of geographic coverage.[4] The first focus group asked participants about their visions for the neighborhood council system, and inquired about the certification process and on improvements they believed were required for the system to function effectively. The second focus group asked participants to discuss several specific issues that appeared to be challenging or contentious, including community conflict, elections, representing diversity, and resources. These focus groups were facilitated by one of the principal investigators; student researchers took notes on the conversation and produced a focus group report shortly thereafter. Additional input was solicited in a January 2002 conference in which neighborhood councils, academics, and local and visiting city officials discussed the progress of L.A.s neighborhood council system.

Field Observation. Members of the project team attended more than 80 community and neighborhood council meetings throughout the city. They also observed 14 meetings of the Citywide Alliance of Neighborhood Councils, two meetings of the Valley Alliance, 14 meetings of the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners, and several meetings each of the Government Efficiency Committee and of the Committee on Education and Neighborhoods. In addition, members of the project team acted as participant/observers in providing technical assistance to neighborhood councils in the form of visioning workshops, training around work plan development, consulting informally with the City regarding its development of budget participation, and conducting learning/design forums to develop working relationships between neighborhood councils and city officials.

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[4] The November 2001 focus group included individuals from Central Hollywood, Sun Valley Area, Valley Glen, Mar Vista, Grassroots Venice, Brentwood, Atwater Village, Arroyo Villages, Downtown, Hyde Park, Central San Pedro, and Coastal San Pedro. The September 2003 focus group included participants from Boyle Heights Neighborhood Council, Central Hollywood Neighborhood Council, Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council, Empowerment Congress North Area Neighborhood Development Council, Greater Cypress Park Neighborhood Council, Greater Toluca Lake Neighborhood Council, P.I.C.O. Neighborhood Council, Vermont Harbor Neighborhood Council.

Interviews and Surveys. Project members have conducted more than 100 semi-structured interviews with appointed and elected city officials, city administrators and project coordinators, neighborhood activists, and observers in academia and the media. The project also collected survey data from several sources:

- A survey of the members of 45 elected neighborhood council boards conducted between July and September of 2003 (response rate 66%);

- A Public Policy Institute of California/USC survey of Los Angeles County residents conducted in 2002, from which data were extracted for 799 Los Angeles City residents;[5]

- Surveys of DONE project coordinators and city council staff collected information regarding their evaluations of neighborhood councils. Data was provided from 19 (95%) of the 20 project coordinators on 66 (81.4 %) of the 81 neighborhood councils certified to date. 49 city council staff from all 15 council districts also provided evaluations on 81 neighborhood councils;

- Three rounds of semi-structured interviews with field and legislative deputies from the 15 city council offices were conducted between 2002 and 2004. A total of 64 deputies were interviewed representing all 15 council districts.

IV. INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES

This section considers whether the City and neighborhood councils (NCs) appear to be developing the organizational capacity to support effective and democratically legitimate neighborhood councils. We find:

- The City is not providing support resources commensurate with the scale of the reform, and the administrative requirements imposed on the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE) and neighborhood councils.

- Despite this rather limited support, the system of neighborhood council is almost citywide; there are 81 neighborhood councils and only 18 communities remain without certified neighborhood councils. There are gaps in coverage in the West, North Valley, and central/east Hollywood areas.

- Most neighborhood councils have successfully held their first elections, and many are moving on to their second. While most neighborhood council elections are non-controversial, some high profile electoral challenges could place at risk the democratic legitimacy of the system. The City needs to develop standards concerning elections that address such issues as qualifications, outreach requirements, absentee balloting, administration and dispute arbitration.

[5] Baldassare, M. *PPIC Statewide Survey: Special Survey of Los Angeles County, March 2003*

- Elected neighborhood council representatives do not yet adequately represent the diversity of the city in terms of stakeholder affiliation or demographic difference. The City needs to make additional resources available for community organizing, and neighborhood councils need to consider how to structure their operations to be more inclusive.

- The City has made varying progress in implementing the charter provisions designed to empower neighborhood councils. It has made relatively good progress making information available on line, and developing a process for involving NCs in the budget process. There is a need for earlier notification of pending policy decisions and a more systematic means of involving NCs in monitoring service delivery. Moreover the Congress of Neighborhoods needs to be reconstituted as a deliberative forum that engages NC delegates around citywide policy issues.

Weak Support for the High Costs of Participation

The City of Los Angeles has not furnished the amount of resources necessary to support the system of neighborhood councils envisioned in the Charter. Rather, the emerging system has been placed in a double bind. The Charter and Plan place significant administrative burdens on DONE and new neighborhood councils, while at the same time, DONE and the councils are required to operate on tight budgets.

Regulatory Requirements. As we discuss in earlier reports, the Plan adopted by the City imposes high operational expectations for both DONE and the neighborhood council system. DONE must provide a wide array of support activities, which until recently consisted largely of assisting neighborhoods with the certification process[6] and making recommendations on certification to BONC.[7] DONE staff is also responsible for advising on policies regarding neighborhood council operations, providing technical assistance and civic education, coordinating biannual meetings of the Congress of Neighborhoods, and maintaining information clearinghouse functions, including the early notification system and a database of information about certified neighborhood councils.[8] DONE is directed to pay particular attention to areas and groups that have "traditionally low rates of participation in government."[9]

The 'do-it-yourself' nature of council formation has devolved most operational responsibilities to stakeholders. Neighborhood councils are expected to self-organize into councils that are "as independent, self-governing, and self-directed as possible," while complying with a variety of regulatory requirements. They must satisfy open meeting requirements under the Brown Act, which requires 72-hour notice of meetings.[10] They must maintain outreach activities and establish procedures for communication with all

[6] Plan, Article III.
[7] Ibid, Article IV.
[8] Id., Article VI.
[9] Id., Article I and Article VI.
[10] This was a legal opinion of the City Attorney's office that has been incorporated into the Plan.

stakeholders. They also are required to maintain a system of financial accountability and make regular fiscal reports to the DONE. In addition the Plan requires neighborhood councils to survey community stakeholders at least biennially, to "assess whether their Certified Neighborhood Council has met applicable goals" in the Charter and Plan.[11] To date, this requirement for self-evaluation has not been enforced.

Of particular concern to councils are the implications of City Attorney findings that neighborhood councils are instrumentalities of the city government.[12] Neighborhood councils are subject to Brown Act open meeting requirements, which include 72-hour notification of meetings on the part of Boards and standing committees.[13] While intended to ensure open deliberation, these requirements prevent Boards and their committees from meeting informally, and slow their ability to respond to policy issues. In addition, a number of neighborhood council members view city financial disclosure requirements as onerous and intrusive when applied to volunteer neighborhood council board members. The City Attorney is currently re-examining the legal opinions that established the application of Brown Act and city ethics provisions to neighborhood councils.

At this halfway point in the first six years of the system, it appears that councils have been preoccupied with organization, certification and elections – 'putting out fires,' as one board member described it. Indeed the Plan produced during the first two years following passage of the Charter focused almost exclusively on the process of certification, providing few guidelines regarding operations. As a result DONE and the NCs have often developed procedures reactively, as problems or challenges have emerged. The administrative frustrations experienced by neighborhood councils have been exacerbated by the City's balancing act between encouraging autonomy versus regulation of neighborhood councils. Neighborhood council representatives have expressed broad concern that the policies and regulations that are evolving to govern the neighborhood council system are inconsistent with both the spirit and the letter of the Charter. At the same time, there has been frequent frustration with a perceived lack of clear policy direction from DONE.

In some cases, neighborhood councils report having been given particular advice, then asked to shift or reverse course, as new directions emerge from a fluid policy environment. "They keep changing the rules," appeared to be a common sentiment. In other instances, different DONE Project Coordinators may offer conflicting advice on the same issue. There is a perception that the differing approaches of individual project coordinators may have resulted in an unequal distribution of resources across neighborhood councils. As an example, a focus group participant stated his belief that some neighborhood councils have been able to secure city resources to distribute notices about upcoming elections while others have been told that such resources are not available.

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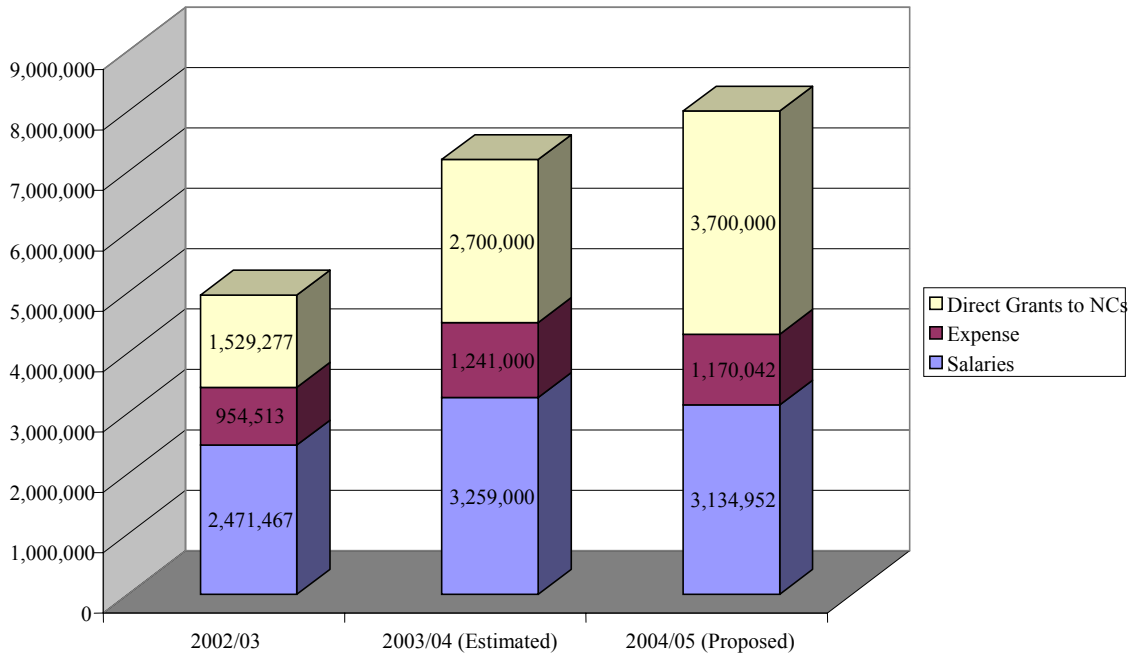
[11] Id., Article V (1).
[12] Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, "Common Legal Questions Regarding Certified Neighborhood Councils," no date, www.lacityneighborhoods.com.
[13] This was a legal opinion of the City Attorney's office that has been incorporated into the Plan.

Resources. Considering the Plan's broad goals and wide-ranging administrative requirements, the City dedicates very limited resources to support the operations of the Department and certified councils. Direct budgetary appropriations for DONE increased from $3.4 million in 2002/3 to an estimated $4.5 million in the current fiscal year (Figure 1). The Mayor's budget proposal for 2004-5 reduces funding to DONE to $4.3 million, and eliminates six positions.[14]

The City also maintains a "Neighborhood Council Funding Program" that funds in-kind support to neighborhood councils, expenses to other city departments, and costs of the Congress of Neighborhoods. This fund provides the direct annual operating grants of $50,000 promised to qualifying neighborhood councils. The Neighborhood Council Funding Program has grown from $1.5 million in 2002-3 to the $4.0 million budgeted for 2004-5.[15] At present, some sixty neighborhood councils have qualified for funding under this program.

Figure 1: Neighborhood Empowerment Expenditures



[14] In FY 2003-4 DONE was budgeted originally at $4.9 million but has lower expenditures due to staff attrition resulting from the City's hiring freeze. In addition, the CAO has reduced DONE's printing budget by $100,000.

[15] Budget for the Fiscal Year 2004-5, Proposed by Mayor James Hahn, Schedule 18, p. 216. The $4 million for 2004-5 includes $300,000 carried over from prior year and a new appropriation of $3.7 million. http://www.lacity.org/cao/budget2004-05/Proposed_04-05_Budget.pdf

A factor critical to the success of neighborhood organization is adequate support, monetary or otherwise, from an early stage (Peterman, 2000; Berry, Portney and Thomson 1993). The City's support does not appear commensurate with the size and scale of the undertaking. To put this in perspective, we observe that current funding for neighborhood empowerment in Los Angeles represents approximately $2 per city resident, including the direct grants program. In contrast:

- Operating expenses alone for Portland's highly reputed Office of Neighborhood Involvement are proposed at $7.1 million in 2004, or $13 for each of the city's 529,121 residents.[16]

- Seattle's Department of Neighborhoods is proposed for funding of $7 million in 2004, or $12 per resident.[17]

- In Minneapolis, the award winning Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP) receives operating expenses on the order of $8 million annually for a city one-tenth the size of Los Angeles ($21 per resident, excluding direct grants).[18] In addition, the NRP has recently approved distribution of $41.7 million dollars in direct grants for neighborhood revitalization to its equivalent of neighborhood council organizations.

A specific manifestation of resource limitations is that staffing constraints hinder effective administration of the system. Thomson (2001, 2002) argues that it is typical for cities with successful neighborhood council systems to dedicate a full-time staff person for each neighborhood council. Given LA's large councils, Thomson suggests that coordination and communication requirements would justify staffing on the order of four staff people per council. The staff of project coordinators at DONE, responsible for policy direction, organizing, and technical assistance, has declined through attrition due to the City's hiring freeze from a high of 21 to the present 18. This signifies a current staffing ratio of one project coordinator for each five neighborhood councils. The operating grants are not likely to provide adequate support for direct staffing of NCs considering that they also fund outreach and communication and in some cases, space rentals or community projects.

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[16] City of Portland, Mayor's Proposed Budget for 2004-5 http://www.portlandonline.com/shared/cfm/image.cfm?id=44993; Census 2000 data.

[17] City of Seattle, 2004 Proposed Budget, Department of Neighborhoods, pp. 225-226 http://www.cityofseattle.net/budget/04proposedbudget/default.htm

[18] City of Minneapolis 2004 Adopted Budget, Section 8, Community Planning and Economic Development, http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/city-budget/2004adopted/index.asp

These low levels of support pose significant risks for the longer run development of the Neighborhood Council system. As we have discussed in earlier reports, the system faces a number of daunting challenges.[19] Councils must organize and coordinate activities in communities that are very large and highly diverse with respect to income, ethnicity, and language. They are required to conduct outreach and hold open elections for their governing boards. To operate effectively they need to learn the complexities of city policy processes and develop networks with officials who are not accustomed to involving community members in decisions.

While DONE and several community based organizations and charitable foundations have provided some training and technical assistance to neighborhood councils around these challenges, the responsibility rests with neighborhood councils and their constituent communities to mobilize voluntary resources in order to operate successfully. Consequently, the most successful neighborhood councils will be those operating in communities that have the capacity – financial or organizational – to support volunteer action subject to the regulatory requirements affecting neighborhood councils. The neighborhood council system could thus evolve into a two-tiered system that reinforces existing political inequities rather than empowering all of the city's communities.

A Citywide System Emerges

Despite these fiscal constraints, a clear measure of progress is the extent to which the system has developed citywide, as intended in the Charter. During the planning phase in Los Angeles, there were concerns that reliance on self-organization and grassroots designation of boundaries would exclude lower income or historically disenfranchised neighborhoods. This fear has proven to be unfounded. As of April 16, 2004, a total of 81 certified neighborhood councils represented communities containing 3,150,652 residents – an average of 38,411 residents per neighborhood council (Table 1). There are, nonetheless, gaps in the system.

Gaps in the System. As Map 1 and Table 1 indicate, four of the city's seven planning areas contain communities that do not, as yet, have certified neighborhood councils. Currently, the area with the most uncertified communities is in the North Valley, in areas north and east of the Old Northridge Neighborhood Council. Although a certification application was submitted from Northridge, it was denied on grounds that the group had not conducted sufficient outreach. Support for secession ran high in this area of the Valley, suggesting that political disaffection from the City may have slowed development of neighborhood councils in the North Valley.

[19] Juliet Musso, Alicia Kitsuse, Evan Lincove, Michael Sithole, and Terry L. Cooper, "Planning Neighborhood Councils in Los Angeles: Self-Determination on a Shoestring;" and Evan Lincove, Terry L. Cooper, and Juliet Musso, "Mobilizing the Grassroots: Outreach, Community Organizing, and the System of Neighborhood Councils in Los Angeles." Neighborhood Participation Project reports, University of Southern California, April 30, 2002.

In the South Valley, certification applications are pending for the Mid-Valley and West Van Nuys/Lake Balboa Neighborhood Councils, while to the West, the communities of Westwood, Brentwood, Palms and Pacific Palisades have not yet formed neighborhood councils.20 The communities of Brentwood and Pacific Palisades have highly organized homeowner associations that have not yet decided whether the administrative burdens of joining the official neighborhood council system are merited. The progress of Palms apparently lagged due to its high concentration of renters. However, according to DONE, leadership has emerged in the community and Palms recently submitted a certification application. Certification also is lagging along the eastern edge of Hollywood, where the Hollywood Studio District, East Hollywood, and Commonwealth neighborhood councils have yet to submit certification applications.

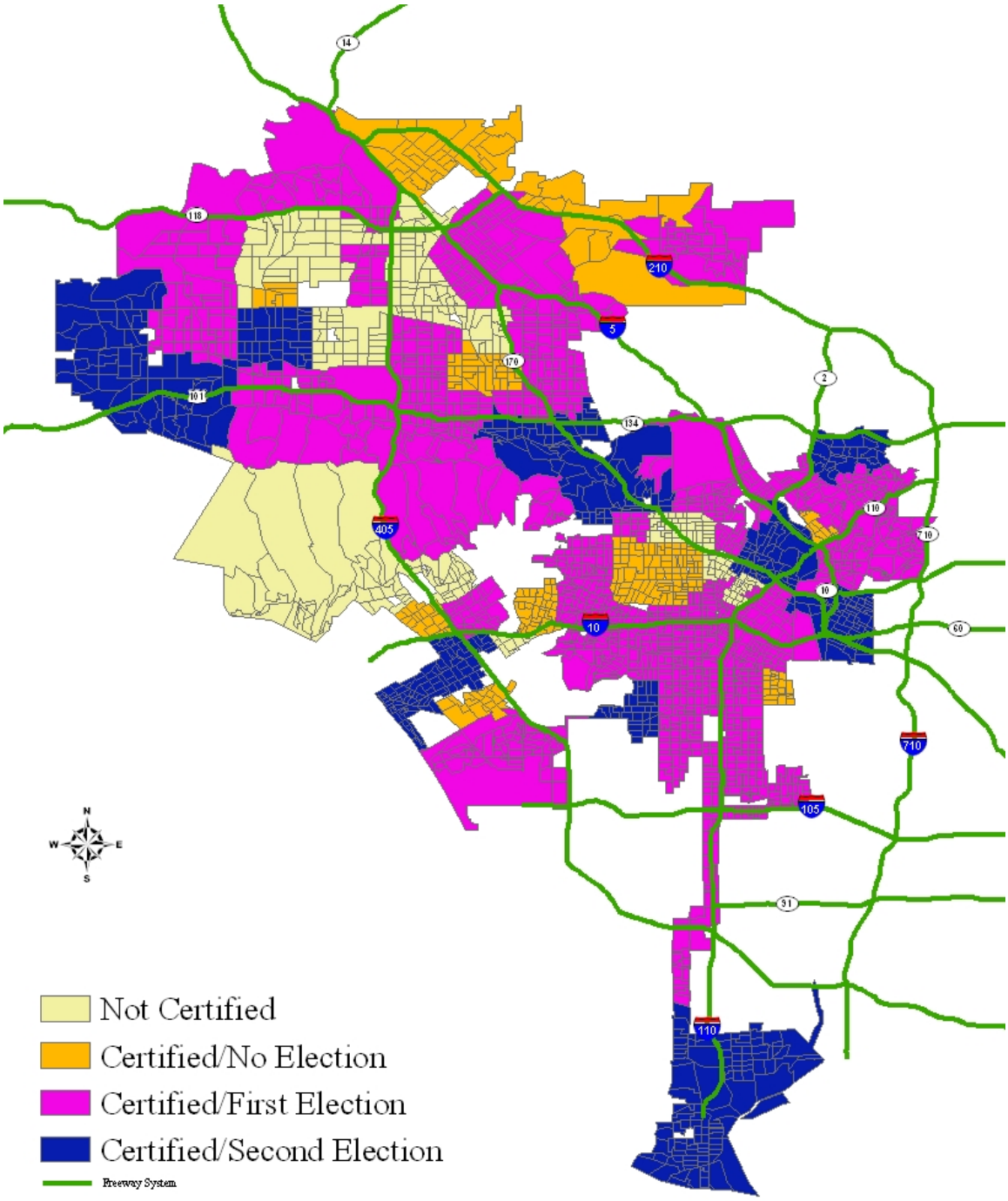
Table 1: Certification Status by City Planning Region

Planning Area	**Certified Councils**	**Councils with Elected Boards**	**Average size (residential population)**	**Communities without Certified NCs**
North Valley	11	8	34,342	7
South Valley	15	14	41,737	3
Central	13	10	37,008	4
East	12	11	38,796	0
West	8	5	36,690	4
South	15	14	43,078	0
Harbor	7	7	31,540	0
Citywide	**81**	**69**	**38,411**	**18**

Source: Department of Neighborhood Empowerment Neighborhood Council Certification status report, April 16, 2004

[20] According to DONE, Palms

Map 1: Certification and Election Status as of 2004



Large Size Brings Coordination Issues. A potential disadvantage of the Los Angeles neighborhood council system is that the councils are larger than the size that has been found to work well in other cities. At 38,000, the average size of Los Angeles councils is twice as large as the minimum size recommended by the City. From a standpoint of civic participation, this is undesirable: smaller neighborhood councils have lower barriers to participation at the community level. In a 2002 paper, Ken Thomson observed that neighborhood councils in other cities typically reached six or seven hundred households: "Neighborhood meetings routinely draw in 20 to 40 people at each event. Eight or ten committees might bring another hundred to two hundred people. Several hundred more develop relationships to the neighborhood organization through events and friendships with those who regularly attend the meetings."(p. 13). Thomson concluded:

> …We found in strong participation cities a … significant impact when on the order of fifteen to twenty percent of the community has an active relationship of this type… [Thus], the typical size of neighborhood that allows the system to work well is on the order of 3,000 to 5,000 people. (p. 14)

The relatively large size of neighborhood councils seems to reflect a sense of historical community that is not elsewhere expressed in the city's governance structure. It also relates to administrative practicality; the City does not currently have the organizational capacity or political willingness to work with a system that incorporates many more than 100 neighborhood councils. It should be acknowledged, nonetheless, that the relatively large size of the city's neighborhood councils increases the administrative responsibilities for outreach, communications, and elections, taxing their capacity to represent the entire diversity of the community, as directed within the Charter. As Thomson (2001, 2002) suggests, larger councils require much more coordination and hence greater administrative support than the City currently is putting into the system.

In sum, the City has certified 81 neighborhood councils between October 2000, when certification commenced, and December 2003, when the last certified council was approved. This is a commendable achievement considering the grass-roots character of the reform, the size and scale of the city, and the limited resources dedicated toward neighborhood council organizing. Given the resource constraints currently confronting DONE, we would recommend that they target future organizing efforts to assist communities with capacity constraints such as low income levels, limited numbers of community organizations, or lack of history in civic or political participation.

Elections Controversies

Effective representation requires open elections of the governing board and broad, representative participation in NC processes. As discussed by Cnaan (1991), the election of governing board members through free and open processes helps to ensure that councils function democratically. Appointment or self-selection of board members increases the danger of capture by one or a few constituent groups. Broad and representation participation—in elections as well as governing processes—also helps to assure substantive legitimacy, meaning that the governing board will voice the

substantive concerns of constituent stakeholders. According to Cnaan (1991, p.620) research on neighborhood organizations has tended to find that the level of participation in neighborhood-level elections is extremely low. Many elections are not competitive, meaning that they involve a single slate. The implication is that the outcome is not distinguishable from self-appointment.

Neighborhood councils have had an impressive record of competitive elections with respectable turnout, though several elections have been marred by considerable controversy. As of April 2004, seventy NCs had at least one election to select Board members. Although official statistics have not been kept on the number of individuals standing for seats on boards, anecdotal evidence indicates that the number is large and that most seats have been contested. As Cnaan (1991) suggests, Los Angeles compares favorably to other cities in the degree of competition for NC seats. Turnout in first-round elections averaged 372 stakeholders (Map 2). Voting participation in first elections exceeded 20,000 residents throughout the city, an average of 1.3 percent of the residential population of Los Angeles. Given that the city's recent history has been one of relatively low political participation -- turnout in the last general election constituted just 4 percent of city residents – this level of turnout is encouraging.

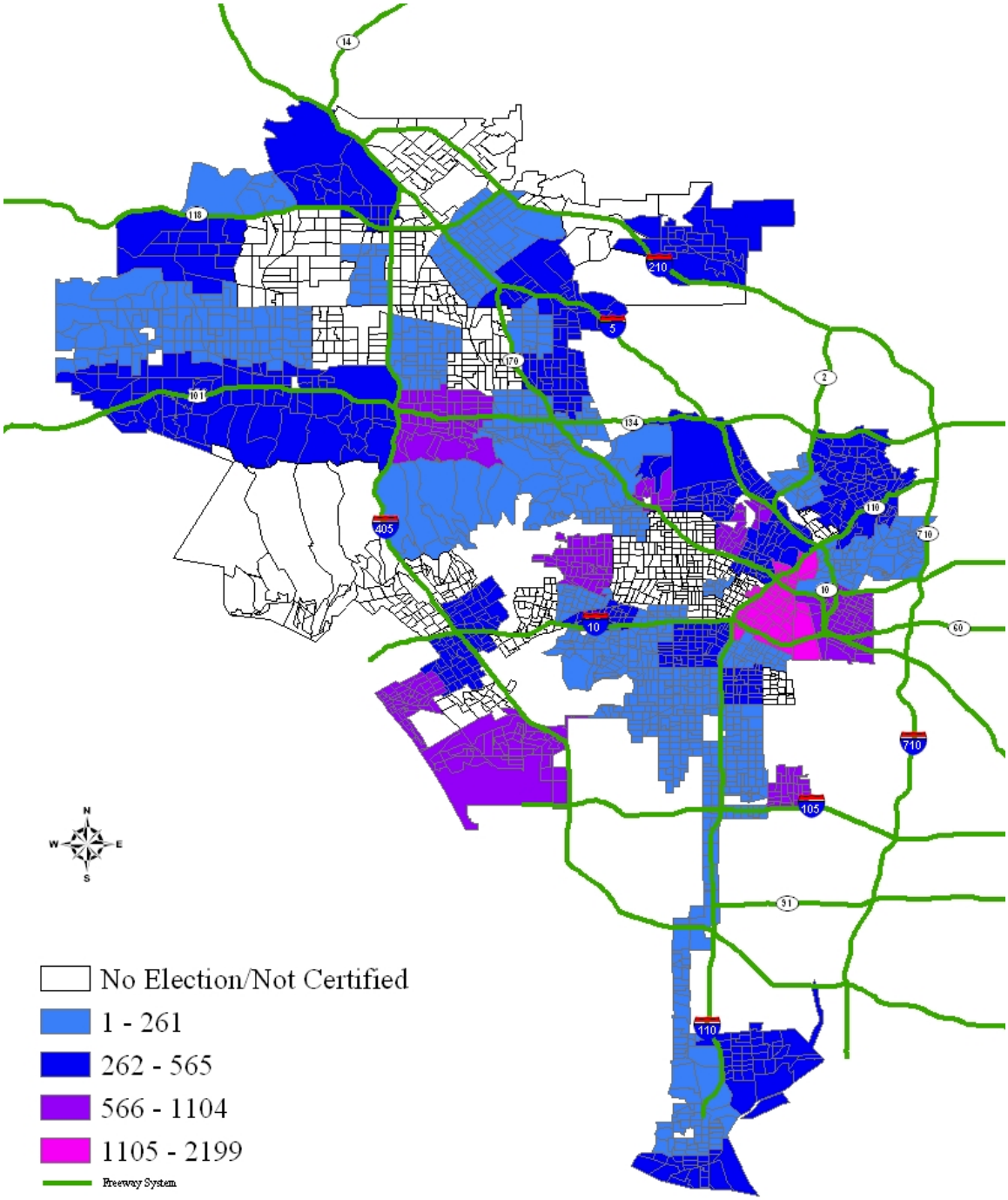
While the turnout for, and interest in, elections is positive, the election process has led to considerable controversy, partly due to the degree of competition for seats. These controversies are threatening the democratic legitimacy of the system. Many of the controversies are rooted in a central tension within the neighborhood council elections process. On the one hand, the self-determining spirit of the charter allows neighborhood councils to select or elect their officers in the way they see fit, and on the other hand, the charter mandates that neighborhood councils be open and inclusive of all stakeholders. This tension has opened the door to both administrative confusion and political conflict. As one respondent characterized them, elections have been "a huge messy mess"[21] resulting from a lack of standard policies on elections procedures, political divisions within communities, and the lack of designated authority over the elections process.

Lack of Standards. In keeping with the broad discretion that the charter appears to confer to neighborhood councils, DONE's policy has been to allow neighborhood councils to individually devise their own elections procedures, but to require that the procedures be submitted for the department's approval. DONE's concern has been to insure that procedures result in a fair and open election. However, crafting elections procedures is a time-consuming process that entails careful consideration of how outreach is conducted, how candidates will be recruited, how voter eligibility is determined, how balloting is handled, and how disputes are resolved, among other things.

In some cases, neighborhood councils included detailed elections procedures within their bylaws, which were approved by the City upon council certification. However, most bylaws contained only general or vague elections provisions, or none at all. This led to a prolonged period during which DONE project coordinators worked individually with certified councils to create detailed election procedures that met with DONE's approval.

[21] Respondent 225, interviewed January 8, 2004.

Map 2: Total Number of Votes Cast in NC Elections



This delay was frustrating to neighborhood council leaders, who had already invested substantial time and energy in preparing certification applications and had not anticipated the complications of conducting elections. For some councils, frustration was amplified by administrative inconsistencies stemming from the lack of guidelines for elections procedures. The work-in-progress nature of the elections process meant that DONE's policies emerged incrementally, while councils were struggling to finalize their procedures. In some cases, this led project coordinators to reverse previous policy. In other instances, project coordinators gave differing advice to different councils.

The onerous character of elections is expressed in the reluctance of some NCs to involve DONE in later-round elections. DONE requires councils to seek approval for their election even if they are not planning on changing their elections process to insure that the council has not changed bylaws in such a way that their elections process would be affected. However, some have failed to submit documentation for subsequent elections, asserting that administrative duties have become too burdensome. "We are being empowered into a corner with paperwork," a focus group participant complained.[22]

Political Divisions. In addition to administrative confusion, local political divisions have made neighborhood council elections a centrifuge for conflict, both within councils themselves, and between councils and DONE. Observers note that a recurring concern among the neighborhood councils is the fear that the Board will be taken over by some single element of the community. Fear of takeover has led some councils to design elections procedures to minimize the possibility of a Board takeover, rather than maximizing the possibility of participation. As one actor observed, "there are other agendas out there than having a fair and open election."[23]

In some cases, the "us and them" mentality appears to reflect racial, ethnic, and/or class, divides. Racial, ethnic and class frictions may stem in part from the rapid demographic changes occurring throughout Los Angeles, which in some cases have dramatically changed the composition of neighborhoods. Given that that neighborhood council process emphasizes bringing new voices to the political process, elections may serve to heighten long-term residents' concerns about neighborhood instability. However, racial and ethnic tensions are not the sole—or even the predominant—source of election controversy. Ideological, organizational, and even personal divides have also led to election conflict.

The fallout from political divisions has also led to conflict between councils and DONE. While DONE does not have the authority to forbid specific practices, the Department has responded to perceived exclusion by pushing neighborhood councils to conduct greater outreach before holding their election, or to change their bylaws provisions regarding elections. This has led to friction between the Department and councils, who charge DONE with over-regulation. As one neighborhood leader asserted, "(The City) is supposed to assist in elections, not impose cookie-cutter requirements."[24]

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[22] Focus Group #2.
[23] Respondent 224, interviewed November 6, 2004.
[24] Nash, James. March 4, 2004. "Valley Glen Victory: Delgadillo overrules DONE regulations." Los Angeles Daily News.

Lack of Authority. Finally, the lack of clear authority over elections left ample room for conflict between neighborhood councils and DONE. Given the charter's ambiguity, DONE's authority to disallow certain elections practices and demand compliance with others is unclear, leading to challenges from neighborhood councils. DONE's authority to administer elections, arbitrate disputes, and apply sanctions for non-compliance are similarly unclear.

Sanctions are an especially delicate issue. DONE's two main sources of leverage are decertification, withholding elections funding, and refusing to allocate operating funds. For political reasons, decertification is an unlikely option,[25] as is withholding operating funds. In several cases, DONE has threatened to withhold elections funding, but this sanction is unlikely to hold power in the future, as neighborhood councils build up their organizational coffers.

To date, no group has gone forward with an election without DONE's approval. However, there are currently 9 certified councils that have significantly delayed elections. This does not appear generally to reflect deliberate disregard of the election requirement on the part of neighborhood councils. In some cases the lag has been due to organizational impediments on the part of neighborhood councils. For example, some councils have experienced difficulty getting a quorum at board meetings due to officer resignations or other problems. In other cases, council elections have been delayed due to inadequate organizational infrastructure on DONE's part. Because of the individualized and labor-intensive nature of each election, the DONE lacks the human resources to respond in a timely manner.

In sum, although the majority of elections appear to be proceeding without major problems, the process of conducting elections is proving administratively burdensome, in part due to organizational capacity issues at the NC level, in part due to administrative inconsistencies at the City level. There is a need for the City to develop clear minimum standards for elections, addressing issues such as qualifications, outreach requirements, acceptable balloting procedures, and guidelines for administration and dispute resolutions. Moreover, in order to shield DONE from charges of favoritism, and reduce the burden on NCs, the City should consider whether to contract with third parties for elections administration and arbitration of disputes.

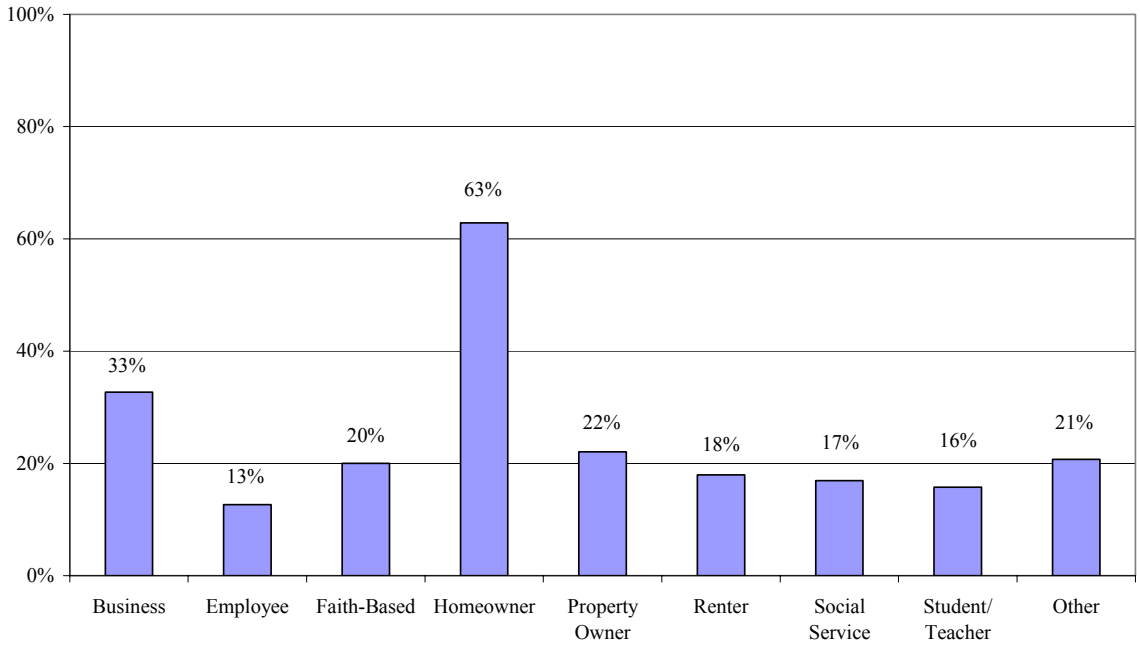
[25] Respondent 225.

Issues of Diversity in Representation

We now consider the extent to which emerging Neighborhood Council Boards represent the diversity of stakeholder groups, demographic differences, and political interests found across the broad range of Los Angeles communities.[26] Because democratic legitimacy requires that Neighborhood Councils speak for the full array of interests in a community, it is critical that the Councils and the City continue to explore approaches to encourage diverse participation.

Stakeholder Representation. Though the Neighborhood Council Boards on the whole represent an array of constituents, homeowners are the single largest stakeholder group. Figure 2 shows that when Board members were allowed to list multiple stakeholder affiliations, 63% identified themselves as homeowners, 33% as business representatives, and 18% as renters. Workers are least represented at only 13% of Board members.

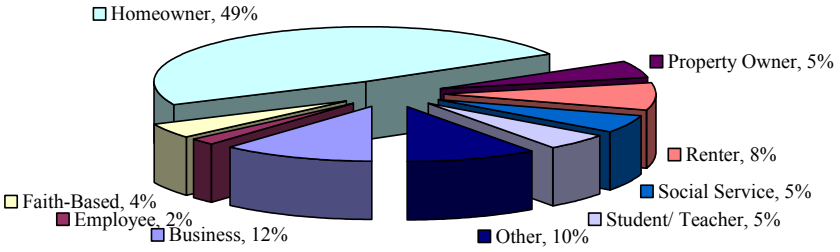
Figure 2: Stakeholder Membership of NC Boards (Multiple Responses)



[26] The analysis employs data from a survey of 45 elected neighborhood council boards, conducted between July and September of 2003. Out of 894 board members, we received 587 responses, for a 66% response rate. We also employ data from the 2000 United States census, and from a random telephone survey of Los Angeles county residents conducted in March 2003 by USC and the Public Policy Institute of California. The USC-PPIC survey included responses from 799 Los Angeles city residents. NC Board data are compared to census data in Figures 3 and 4, Table 1, and Map 1, and to PPIC data in Figures 5, 7, and 8.

However, when asked to specify the single group with which they most closely identified, almost half of all respondents described themselves as homeowners, while only 12% identified themselves as representing business interests and 8% as renters (Figure 3). Because many Board members identify with more than one stakeholder group, stakeholder affiliation alone cannot tell us which types of stakeholder interests might dominate on the Council Boards.

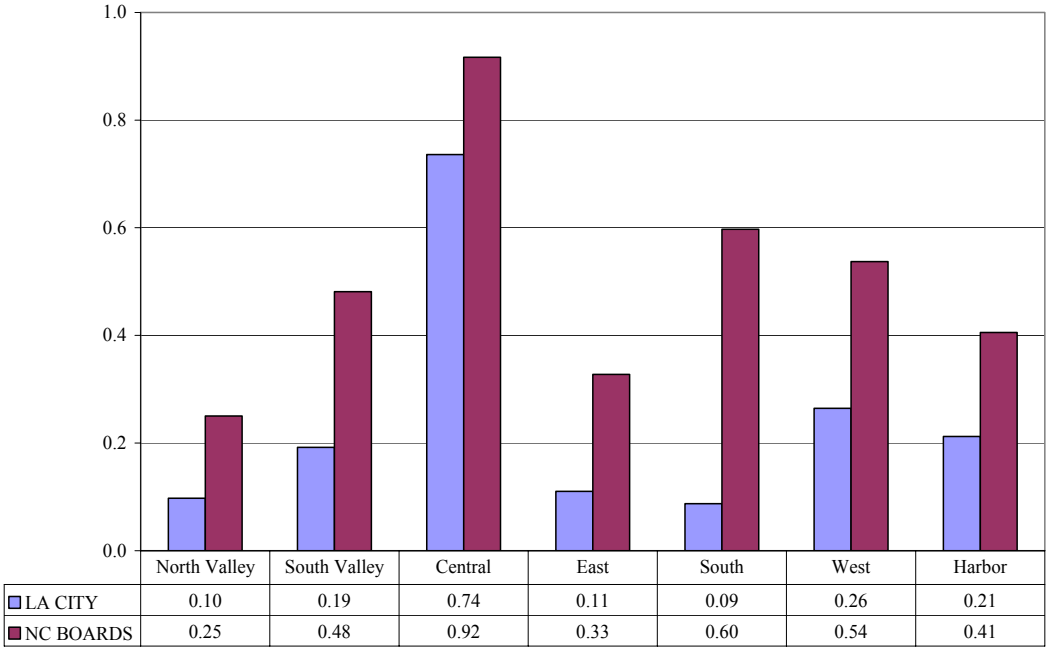
Figure 3: Main Stakeholder Membership of NC Boards (Single Response)



Stakeholder representation varies regionally, with businesses represented more strongly in areas where they are more concentrated. As Figure 4 (next page) shows, the ratio of businesses to homeowners on Boards is highest (a nine to 10 ratio) in Central Los Angeles, where business interests are particularly concentrated (seven businesses for every 10 homeowners).[27] By contrast, business representation is much weaker in the North Valley, where there is only one business for every 10 homeowners, and where business members are found on Neighborhood Council Boards at a 1-to-4 ratio. In sum, while it would appear that homeowner interests would appear to dominate neighborhood councils, to some degree validating an early criticism of the system that NCs would become glorified homeowner associations, the prominence of homeowner interests is mitigated to the extent that it varies across the city, and may be balanced by the tendency of stakeholders to identify with more than one stakeholder group.

[27] The data for City of Los Angeles was extracted from Economic Census Data (2001) by ZIPCODE area (http://www.census.gov/epcd/www/econ97.html). Layering with Area Planning Commission, the data will inflate the number of establishments and employees due to the fact that some ZIPCODE areas are not congruent with the boundaries of Area Planning Commissions.

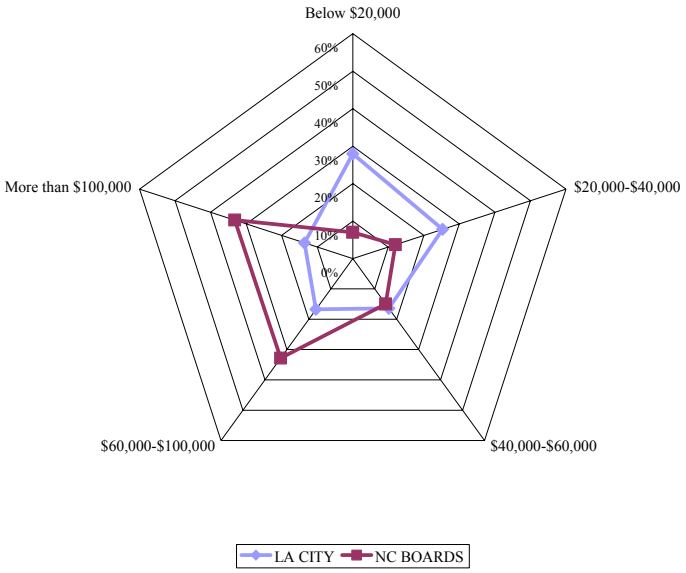
Figure 4: Ratio of Businesses to Homeowners



	North Valley	South Valley	Central	East	South	West	Harbor
LA CITY	0.10	0.19	0.74	0.11	0.09	0.26	0.21
NC BOARDS	0.25	0.48	0.92	0.33	0.60	0.54	0.41

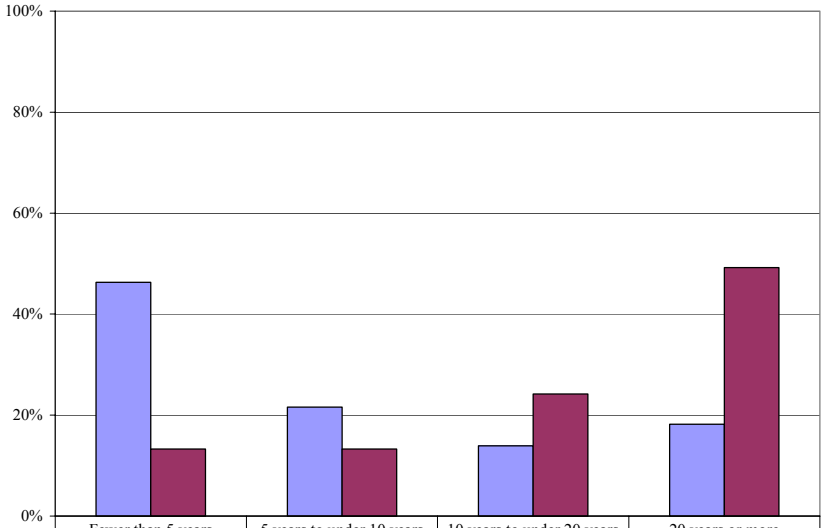
Demographic Representation. Turning to examine the extent to which Board membership reflects the demographic characteristics of the city, we see clearly that Neighborhood Council Boards under-represent lower income individuals. Figure 5 shows that fully 33% of Board members reported incomes in excess of $100,000, despite the fact that this income group comprises only 13% of the city's population. By contrast, only 7% of Board members have incomes of less than $20,000, when this income group is 28% of the city's population.

Figure 5: Income Level: City of LA vs. NC Boards



We also find that Boards have a disproportionately high representation of people who are older, more educated, are U.S. citizens, and are native English speakers. This may reflect the tendency of Boards to attract long-time community residents. As Figure 6 shows, over 50% of LA residents have lived in their community for fewer than five years. Conversely, Board members are predominantly long-time residents; 73% have lived in their community for more than 10 years.

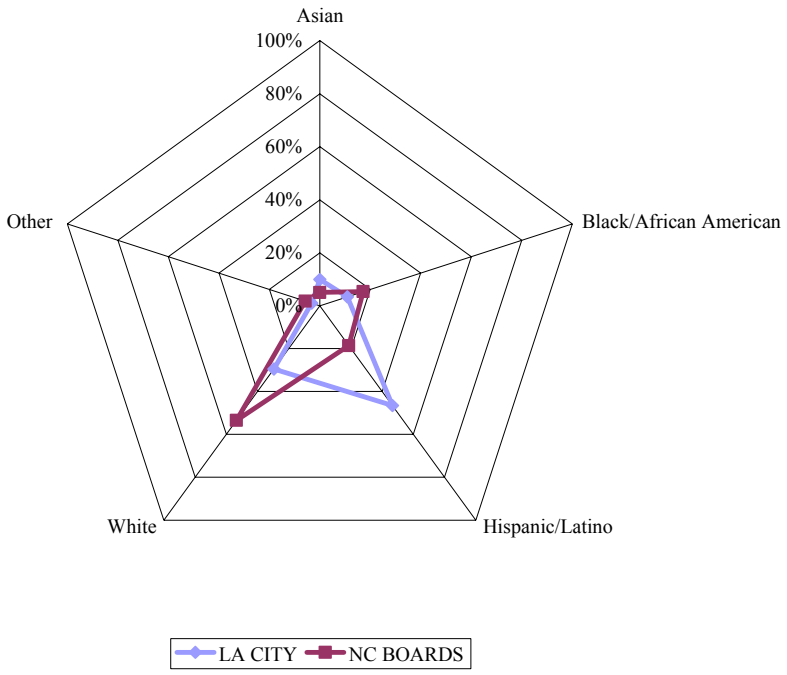
Figure 6: Tenure in Community: City of LA vs. NC Boards



	Fewer than 5 years	5 years to under 10 years	10 years to under 20 years	20 years or more
LA CITY (PPIC)	46%	22%	14%	18%
NC BOARDS	13%	13%	24%	49%

In terms of racial composition, Neighborhood Council Boards display disproportionate representation of whites relative to other groups in the city (Figure 7), though this tendency varies regionally. Map 3 (next page) shows that representation by people of color on Boards tends to be greater in areas of the city with greater concentrations of minorities, as is the case in South and East Los Angeles and in the North San Fernando Valley. Table 2 indicates the extent to which different racial groups are represented in proportion to their share of regional population. African American representation is particularly high in South and West Los Angeles. Latinos are strongly represented in the North Valley and in East and West Los Angeles, while Asian representation is more concentrated within Central Los Angeles Boards.

Figure 7: Race/Ethnicity: City of LA vs. NC Boards



Map 3: Racial Composition: City of LA vs. NC Boards

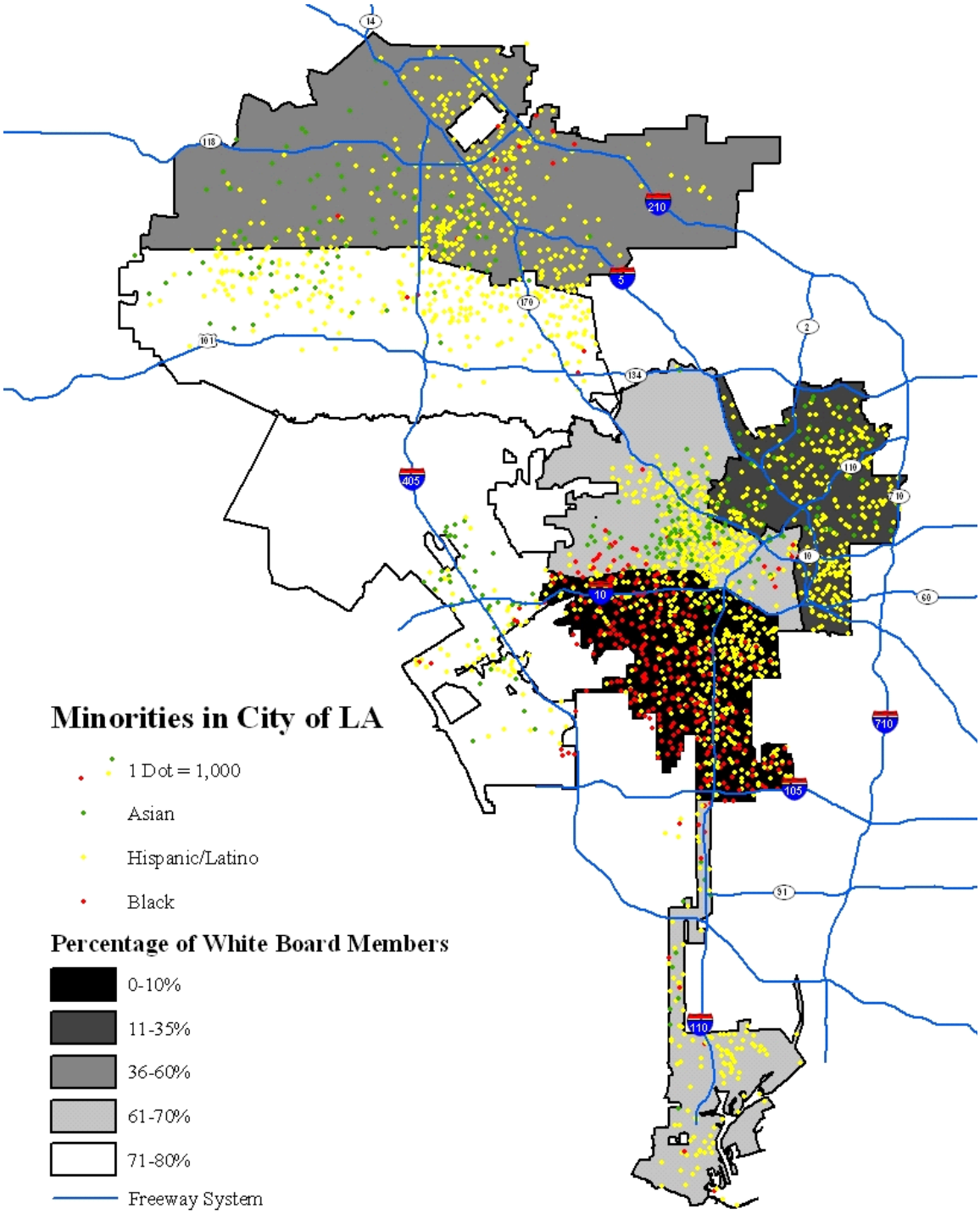


Table 2: Ratio of NC Board Representation to Share of Population

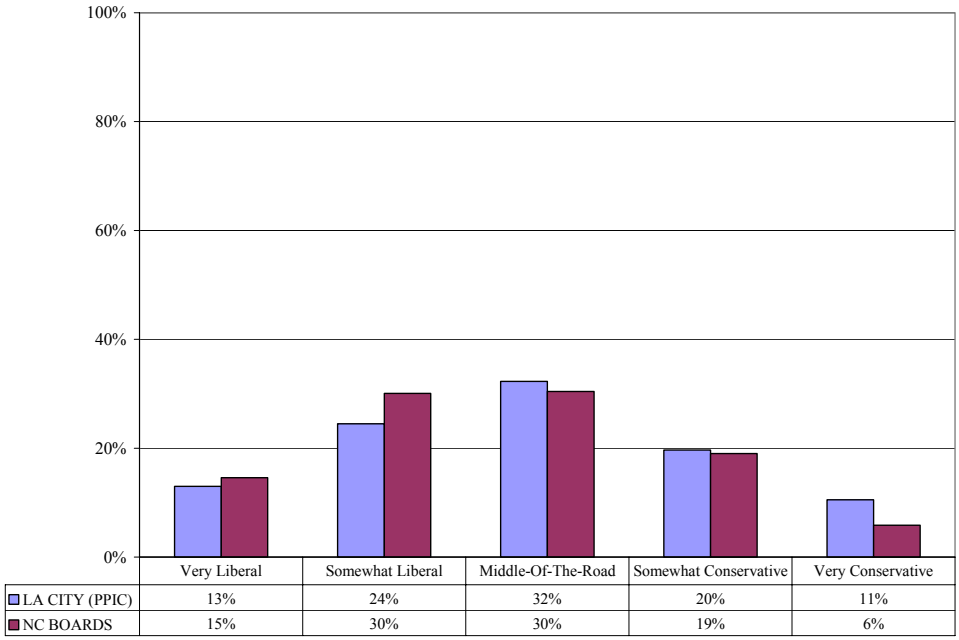
	North Valley	South Valley	Central	East	South	West	Harbor	Total
Asian	0.29	0.38	0.68	0.55	0.00	0.52	0.24	0.51
Black/African American	0.69	0.22	0.97	0.76	2.09	1.26	0.69	1.58
Hispanic/Latino	0.67	0.38	0.25	0.68	0.18	0.55	0.33	0.40
Whites	1.72	1.52	2.29	2.88	2.60	1.28	2.75	1.81

Values in cells equal proportion of racial/ethnic group on NC Boards divided by group share of LA City population by Area Planning Commission (APC).

Values in cell = 1 : Represented in proportion to population
> 1 : Board representation exceeds population proportion
< 1 : Represented less than proportionally to population

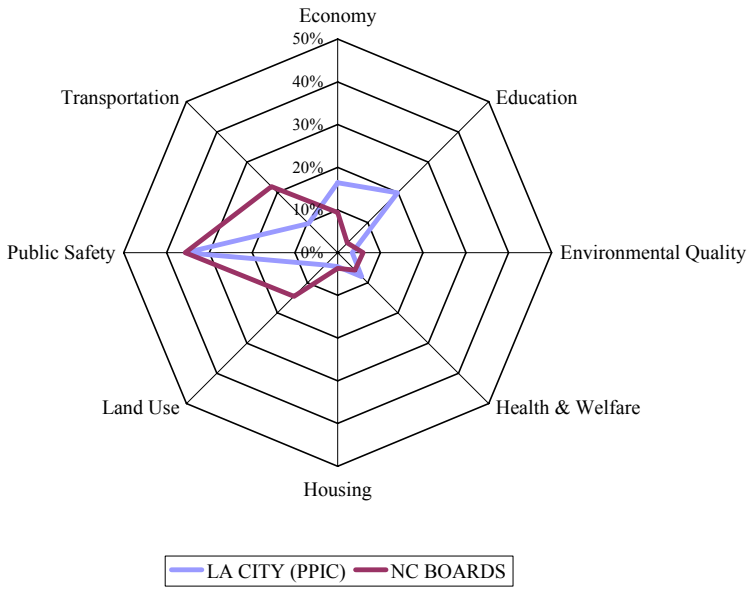
Substantive Representation. Neighborhood Council Boards do not appear to differ greatly from the general population with respect to political orientation. Figure 8 shows that Board members are relatively centrist in their politics, about 80% characterizing themselves as being somewhat liberal, middle of the road, or somewhat conservative.

Figure 8: Political Ideology: City of LA vs. NC Boards



In terms of policy interests, Figure 9 makes clear that public safety is by far the most important issue for both Board members and city residents. Neighborhood Council Board members are more likely to be concerned about land use issues and transportation than the general population, while the public is more concerned about education. These differences are likely due in part to jurisdictional issues (Los Angeles City government does not have authority over schools) and partly due to the over-representation of older homeowners. Neither Board members nor community residents articulate strong concerns about health and safety, the environment, or housing in their communities, suggesting that these issues should be pursued at a higher level of jurisdiction than the community.

Figure 9: Policy Concerns: City of LA vs. NC Boards



Organizing for Inclusion. In sum, as they are currently constituted, Neighborhood Council governing Boards predominantly represent homeowners, though the tendency of Board members to have multiple stakeholder affiliations makes it unclear just *whose* interests prevail. What is clear, however, is that Board members are most likely to be long-term community residents, who are disproportionately well-off and well-educated, white U.S. citizens. Although there is general coherence of interest between Board members and stakeholders with respect to public safety, Neighborhood Councils appear more attentive to land use and transportation issues, and less attentive to education, than the population at large. This difference in substantive interests likely reflects the predominance of homeowners and of older, wealthier individuals on Neighborhood Council Boards.

The demographic profile of Boards is most likely the manifestation of higher Board participation among those who are strongly vested in the community by virtue of property ownership and/or long-time tenure. To satisfy the Charter directive that Neighborhood Councils represent the diversity of Los Angeles, neighborhood councils will have to adopt community organizing practices and participatory innovations that attract groups other than property owners and long-time residents.

Community outreach, however, is consistently identified as a shortcoming by neighborhood council participants and DONE Project Coordinators. In focus groups neighborhood council participants have agreed that while they want to increase the diversity of their groups, they lack the resources and strategies to do effective community organizing. At one of our focus groups, for example, a (white male) participant complained, "At every meeting I go to, the people all look like me." Another commented, "We need strategies beyond sending out flyers inviting people to meetings."

Figure 10: Project Coordinator Perception of NC Outreach

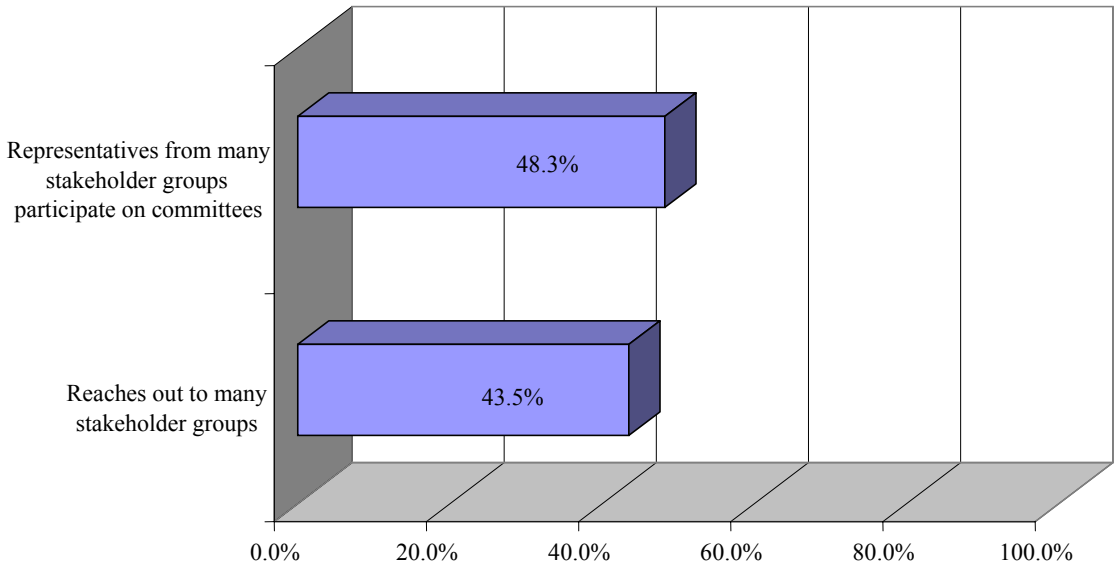


Figure 10 shows that project coordinators perceive that only 43.5 percent of neighborhood councils conduct adequate outreach, and less than one-half involve representatives from many different stakeholder groups on committees. In answering an open-ended question about neighborhood council weaknesses, project coordinators identified outreach or lack of diversity as a problem for 26 of 58 neighborhood councils for which problems were identified. Sample comments include:

- “I think by nature many members are used to being on boards and used to making decisions. I think they don't understand that outreach is as much part of their duties as board members.”

- “While I feel that the group is nominally committed to diversity it has not yet fully realized its potential to recruit leadership from many facets of the community. In particular it is struggling to overcome historical mistrust/animosity that runs deep in the more working-class, predominantly Black and Latino section of the NC area”

- “Many board members have established roots within the NC and feel that there is no need to inform stakeholders about the NC; consequently participation has declined incredibly.”

- “They are focusing on outreach solely to their email group. For the last two meetings that I have attended there appeared to be less than 10 stakeholders in attendance.”

- “Their general meetings are poorly attended. Often stakeholders who attend their meetings complain that the meetings are boring and nothing gets done. In fact … a great deal gets done but it's difficult for the public to sit through a three hour meeting and listen to board discussion.”

The crux of the problem is that neighborhood councils do not have the resources or organizational capacity to overcome the socioeconomic biases that characterize political participation. Political science research finds that participation tends to be most concentrated among educated, middle-class individuals. Moreover, as discussed above, neighborhood councils by nature appear to attract long-term community residents who tend to be more focused on “street-level” issues such as land use and transportation. To overcome this structural bias will require innovation on the part of neighborhood councils, as well as policy direction and dedicated resources from the City.

Table 3 (next page) outlines strategies aimed at increasing stakeholder and demographic diversity on Boards and offering avenues for participation that extend beyond the governing Boards. It is particularly important that the City ensure that Neighborhood Council elections maintain a high level of transparency and inclusiveness. Neighborhood Councils can improve stakeholder representation on their Boards by designating more Board seats for key stakeholder groups such as businesses, renters, and workers. In addition, resources are required to support community outreach and organizing strategies targeted at underrepresented groups. The City could contract with community organizers to work with neighborhood councils on mobilizing participation. Indeed, during the planning phase the City had circulated a Request for Qualification for community organizing assistance, but has not subsequently followed up.

Table 3: Strategies for Improving Representation

GOALS	SAMPLE STRATEGIES
Improve stakeholder diversity	Ensure transparent and inclusive elections Designated seats for stakeholder groups on NC boards
Improve descriptive diversity	Ensure transparent and inclusive elections Targeted community organizing activities Relevant community projects that encourage diverse participation
Expand participatory opportunities	Action committees to undertake projects Ad hoc community activities that involve people in specific tasks

At the same time, it is important to recognize that many people will not desire elected office, but may wish to participate on specific projects. Hence Neighborhood Councils should strive to encourage a broad range of participation through the creation of *ad hoc* community improvement committees. Given the apparent interests of the broader population, this strategy will be most successful if these committees focus on projects that improve public safety and address the needs of local youth.

City Makes Halting Progress on Participatory Innovations

To be relevant, neighborhood councils require avenues for meaningful input into city policy. An essential characteristic of successful neighborhood councils is systemic innovation that provides a clear role for the council in the governance process (Thomson, 2002; Berry, Portney and Thomson, 1993). The NC planning process has done little to develop the "political innovations" necessary to support participation. As Thomson (2002) observed:

> The initial definition of council role in policymaking in Los Angeles is… problematic. Charter, ordinance, and Plan are all vague in their specification of council policy roles and their relationship to actual policy decisions… Other cities were clear at an early stage exactly how the neighborhood process would integrate with community development, housing, land use, crime prevention, or other specific city programs. This could become the Achilles heal of the Los Angeles system if clear and productive relationships with city departments do not quickly develop.

Table 4 (next page) summarizes the status of charter provisions intended to empower neighborhood councils. The City has made relatively good progress in a couple of areas, most notably on-line information availability and NC involvement in budgeting. There is a need, however, for earlier notification of pending city decisions and an improved system for feedback regarding service delivery. DONE is now reorganizing its technical assistance and training to occur through an "Empowerment Academy." Consequently, the

Congress of Neighborhoods should be reconstituted as a deliberative forum that will engage councils around citywide issues. We now discuss each of these provisions in more detail.

Table 4: Status of Empowerment Provisions

Charter Provision	***Status***
"Early Warning System" to notify neighborhood of pending city decisions with "reasonable opportunity to provide input." (Charter Section 907)	⇒ Not fully implemented ⇒ City provides automated distribution of agendas, a significant innovation compared to notification arrangements in other cities ⇒ Agendas are distributed only 72 hours prior to meeting, which does not provide reasonable opportunity to provide input ⇒ Need to make system more user-friendly, and provide earlier notification of issues of import to neighborhood councils
Neighborhood councils may make budget requests to Mayor (Charter Section 909)	⇒ Mayor implemented regional budgeting process for 2004/5 budget, and has published a neighborhoods budget report
City will provide support for a citywide Congress of Neighborhoods (Section 901)	⇒ Congress of Neighborhoods has functioned primarily as a forum for technical assistance and training ⇒ There is a need for a deliberative forum to address systemic and citywide issues
Neighborhood councils will monitor service delivery and meet periodically with responsible officials. (Section 910)	⇒ City has not adopted consistent mechanisms for feedback on service delivery
City Council may delegate hearing authority to neighborhood councils on matters of local concern. (Charter Section 908)	⇒ No action

Input to the Budget Process. Charter Section 909 authorizes neighborhood councils to make budget requests to the Mayor, and requires the Mayor to inform Councils as to the deadline for submitting such requests so that they may be heard in a timely fashion. Neither the Plan nor any implementing ordinances provided detail, on how certified neighborhood councils might be involved in the budgetary process, leaving this to the administrative discretion of the Mayor's office.

Given the lack of specificity in the Charter regarding the nature of budget involvement, and the lack of direction by ordinance, it is perhaps not surprising that the City's approach to budgetary participation proceeded experimentally and incrementally. Initially, it was structured as a one-day informational event. The first Budget Day occurred at the Los Angeles Convention Center in October 2002, and attracted several hundred neighborhood stakeholders. It was primarily designed to give neighborhood councils a chance to interact with department representatives, and to inform them about the budget process, but it did not detail a procedure for participation or the manner in which it would be acted upon. City efforts have also emphasized educating the public about the city budget process. DONE sponsored "City Budget 101" training and the Congress of Neighborhoods featured presentations on how the budgeting process works. However, the sheer complexity of the process, combined with a lack of clearly defined options for how neighborhood councils could be incorporated into the budget cycle made it difficult for participants at these early events to make meaning of the budget process.

The development of the 2004-5 FY budget represented the City's first attempt to institutionalize a formal process for neighborhood council involvement in the budget process.[28] Specifically:

- Neighborhood councils were invited to select two representatives to develop priorities for the city's seven regions.

- Each neighborhood council was invited to submit its top five budget priorities to the City. To do so, the neighborhood council had to solicit input from 200 stakeholders (the City made a survey available) and hold one public meeting in which it voted on the top five priorities and selected its regional representatives.

- The City held a series of regional budget workshops in November, in which the neighborhood council representatives selected five priorities for the region, to be submitted to the Mayor.

- Each region selected two representatives to meet with the Mayor and advocate for the five regional priorities.

[28] The authors provided input to the City on this process, including a policy briefing recommending use of a regional panel approach. For more details, see Musso and Sithole, "Implementing Participatory Budgeting: The Case of Los Angeles," presented at Association of Public Policy and Management research conference, October 2003, and available from the author.

- The Mayor developed a neighborhood budget, which was published and reported to the regional representatives.

- The regional representatives were responsible for reporting back to neighborhood councils about the outcome of the regional priorities.

The goal of the more regional approach to budgetary deliberation was to discourage parochial thinking and help neighborhood councils to acknowledge collective concerns. There has been considerable concern, particularly among city officials, about the cumulative effect of demands by one hundred neighborhood councils. Some suggested that the inability to satisfy neighborhood council requests might lead to disillusionment or anger on the part of neighborhood stakeholders. Others noted the potential for the process to degenerate into squabbling over fixed resources. Indeed, the process that evolved appeared to reflect the vision expressed by one neighborhood council leader:

> The City should just provide a liaison to work with a coalition of regionally based neighborhood councils to understand and consider budget needs…. Neighborhood councils could individually identify five budget needs and then participate in a regional meeting facilitated by a city budget liaison to narrow [these] … to a regional list of 3 or 4 projects that would benefit the whole region…[29]

At least on its face, the budget process implemented in 2003 embodied several design features that are central to successful participation. There was an effort to include some of the informational advantages of surveys (through solicitation of stakeholder input by neighborhood councils) as well as the deliberative advantages of direct citizen participation. By allowing neighborhood councils to appoint their representatives at a public meeting, some degree of representative legitimacy was attained. In keeping with the "bottom up" spirit of the reform, the process permitted neighborhood councils and regions considerable autonomy in determining their priorities, and as such, was flexible with respect to regional variations. The regional approach also provided a relatively cost-effective way to attain neighborhood council input in a large city such as Los Angeles.

The key area where the design of the system continues to be lacking involves the issue of information and expertise. The directive that neighborhood councils survey their stakeholders is intended to ensure that they gauge majority opinion in some way. The survey provided by the City, however, solicited opinion in the most general terms, not in terms of tradeoffs between community-specific issues (e.g., did people have higher preferences for criminal justice or street safety). Moreover neighborhood councils experienced difficulty complying with the compressed timeframe provided by the City.

In the future, the City should provide greater lead time to neighborhood councils, and design a survey approach that enables them to identify and articulate more specific priorities rather than broad categories. This will better enable communities to articulate specific community needs, and determine the extent to which resource allocation satisfies local preferences.

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[29] Interview with Respondent 52, June 11, 2002.

Early Notification System.[30] A crucial provision for improving participation is Charter Section 907, which mandates an "Early Warning System" that will notify neighborhood councils "as soon as practical" of pending city decisions and provide them with a "reasonable opportunity to provide input." The City made early progress implementing the first Phase of ENS, which debuted July 2001. The system involves a web page from which individuals may subscribe to receive official notices via e-mail. In addition, in February 2003 the City Council adopted a system for "community impact statements," whereby the official view of neighborhood councils will be part of the official agenda of city policy bodies, and a full statement will be made part of the permanent record.[31] This system has made some significant improvements in information access:

- Two years following operation on-line subscriptions had increased from 800 users (City Clerk's on-line subscription service prior to ENS roll-out) to more than 3500 individuals receiving well over 300,000 documents per year.

- The range of available information has expanded to include dozens of boards and commission not previously available on the City Clerk's system.

- Information transmission appears to extend beyond the close knit circles of City Hall insiders. Some 60% of city council notices go to e-mail addresses outside of the City Hall, and numerous neighborhood council activists report extensive use of the system.[32]

- In a survey of elected neighborhood council board members, 88% stated that the system would be important or very important to the success of the neighborhood councils. In addition, the board members support the emphasis on Internet technologies with 74% preferring the information to be disseminated via e-mail or web pages.

Two main problems confront the use of this system. First, it is not user-friendly. In a conference workshop on NC communications, several NC representatives stated that they spent over 20 hours per week sorting through transmissions to find the information that is relevant to their neighborhood. A Hollywood-area neighborhood council representative noted that the ENS information tends to be very focused on specific details of decisions and policies, and that too little information was available regarding the larger issues underlying the City's agenda. Finding relevant information in the mass of city documents is complicated by the arcane language in which issues are sometimes described.

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[30] This section draws heavily from Musso and Weare, "Implementing Early Notification in Los Angeles: Citizen Participation by Other Means," *International Journal of Public Administration,* forthcoming.
[31] Harrison Sheppard, "Neighborhood Council Opinions Will Weigh More," *Daily News,* February 13, 2003.
[32] In addition, the City Planning Department has begun providing e-mail reports to neighborhood councils of the applications for permits and variances that it receives. This service has been enthusiastically welcomed, but it provided on an ad hoc manner not connected with the main ENS service.

Moreover, the information needs to be accessible by region, at least, or by neighborhood council at best.

Second, an important shortcoming is that the notification is not sufficiently in advance to permit neighborhood councils to provide meaningful input. During the charter reform process, ENS proponents clearly envisioned early notification to provide weeks of lead time, such as 30 or 45 day notice periods. Implementation however has defined advance notice in terms of California's open meetings law, the Brown Act, which requires posting of agendas 72 hours prior to all public meetings. When this lack of advance notice is compounded by arcane language of proposals, and lack of contextual information, it is nearly impossible for neighborhood councils to formulate a reasoned and deliberative response that takes into account stakeholder viewpoints.

It should be noted that despite its limitations, the ENS is one of the more comprehensive systems for public notification among large American cities. In a survey of large American cities, 88% reported having some notification requirements, usually concerning land use decisions.[33] Only 20%, however, notify citizen by e-mail, and no city reported having a system as comprehensive as the one envisioned in the Los Angeles charter. Moreover, the mandate for early notification has emerged as an influential factor in several policy issues:

Burglar alarms. In January of 2003, the Police Commission's vote to stop responding to unverified private burglar alarms caught neighborhood councils and even city council members by surprise. Through an e-mail campaign in part orchestrated by a city council member's office and an alarm industry lobbyist, neighborhood councils placed pressure on the City Council to review the decision. While opinions were mixed about the wisdom of the policy change, the neighborhood councils widely agreed they had been inadequately notified. Eventually, a task force was formed with representatives from the Police Department, Neighborhood Councils, and the alarm industry. It developed a compromise proposal in which the police would only stop responding after a number of false alarms at a location.

Crenshaw renaming. In June 2003, outgoing Council member Nate Holden proposed renaming a prominent avenue after former mayor Tom Bradley. The City Council sent the measure back to committee in response to community opposition and complaints that neighborhood councils had not been given adequate notice.[34] A shift in the Council's decision style was perhaps apparent in an exchange between Council Members Holden and Zine, reported in the WAVE newspaper:

> The council's action of refusing to accede to the wishes of Holden and Parks is rare, since members habitually function on a notorious system of reciprocity…. In fact, Holden reminded his colleagues of that tradition… "This is what I want for

[33] We surveyed 102 large cities concerning their notification and feedback procedures and received responses from 41, for a response rate of 40%.
[34] Matea Gold, "Public Will Get Say in Bid to Name Street After Bradley," *Los Angeles Times,* June 28, 2003.

> my district and you're supposed to give it to me," he told his colleagues. Zine repudiated the tradition and declared: "This is another council. We want to hear what the people have to say. What would be the point of going to all that trouble to establish neighborhood councils and encourage citizen participation in government and then ignore what the people have to say?"[35]

Water rate increase. In April 2004, neighborhood councils rallied against the enactment of an 18 percent increase in water fees by the Department of Water and Power (DWP). In this case a member of a Valley neighborhood council mobilized the opposition, which resulted in 37 neighborhood councils taking positions to oppose the rate increase.[36] The City Council, which reportedly had the votes in March to pass the rate increase voted to impose only an 11 percent increase, holding the other 7 percent in abeyance pending a financial audit of the DWP.[37] According to the LA Times, "Humbled DWP officials acknowledged that they had made a strategic blunder by not winning the support of the neighborhood councils…. The vote also marked a lesson for Hahn, who initially backed the 18% hike before backing down amid neighborhood opposition."[38]

Inclusionary zoning. As this report is written, neighborhood councils appear to be mobilizing around another policy issue, a proposed city council motion requiring development of a mandatory inclusionary zoning ordinance. At an April 2004 joint hearing, in response to neighborhood council pressure, the Planning and Land Use and Housing committees adopted a motion instructing DONE to circulate materials to solicit NC input on the inclusionary zoning issue. Although NCs were initially given only 45 days to review and comment, at a subsequent hearing the two committees agreed to provide an additional 90 days for community input.

These examples suggest that involvement of neighborhood councils in policy issues is occurring reactively and selectively, in response to pressure imposed by neighborhood council organizers on particular issues. There is continuing anger and frustration at the perceived failure of the ENS to meet expectations for early notification. The editor of City Watch, also a neighborhood council organizer, commented on the City's involvement of NCs in the inclusionary zoning issue as follows:

> Only somebody with a minimal understanding of the Brown Act, and other requirements placed on the all-volunteer neighborhood councils, could actually believe that this time frame meets the spirit of the City Charter…. Is it any wonder that Neighborhood Councils remain suspicious of the intentions of City agencies? Or smell the hypocrisy when the Council or a Committee gets on the

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[35] Betty Pleasant, "Crenshaw Blvd. to Keep Its Name—For Now," WAVE Community Newspapers, July 3, 2003.
[36] "Deluged: The Larger Lessons of the DWP's Bad Day at City Hall," Robert Greene, Los Angeles Weekly, April 2-8, 2004.
[37] Ibid.
[38] "Chalk One Up to Advisory Councils. Council scales back DWP rate request in the face of wide opposition from community boards." Patrick McGreevy, Los Angeles Times, May 12, 2004.

> DWP for short changing NCs? It's way past time for City Hall folk to begin walking the walk. The talk-line has a limited warranty."[39]

The City continues to engage community leaders in discussing improvements to the ENS, and some improvements are being implemented such as providing online access to reports and other relevant information. Nevertheless, efforts to define necessary improvements have done more to highlight the difficulties of early notification than to generate solutions. The complex organizational structure of the city and diffuse nature of services of interest to residents defy neat categorization. Moreover, the City's fiscal woes have delayed implementation of contemplated improvements, such as proposals to categorize agenda items by geographical and subject matter codes. Most importantly, there is a lack of consensus about what the ENS should do. Policy issues such as the alarm debate and the DWP rate increase have played an important role in testing citizen expectations, but have not led to a means of usefully organizing information about emerging policy issues, much less promoting deliberation among stakeholders and their representatives.

Further improvements on the early notification system require that the City move beyond its technological focus. Making agendas and other information available on the Internet has improved information availability, but this information still arrives too late for consistent neighborhood council review. At this point, organizational and political factors are the most significant constraints to early notifications. Neighborhood Councils are still learning what information they want as they cut their political teeth, and political and administrative offices are unlikely to open up their decision-making processes unless there is a clear demand for specific forms of notice. Resolving this impasse will require a sustained dialogue between the City and neighborhood councils.

Congress of Neighborhoods. Section 901 (c) of the Charter requires DONE to implement a Congress of Neighborhoods, which the Charter requires DONE to arrange "if requested to do so by recognized neighborhood councils."[40] This would appear to imply that neighborhood councils will decide the frequency and form of meetings.

The final Plan adopted by City Council specifies that DONE will help "coordinate, arrange and convene the biannual Congress of Neighborhoods Councils meetings."[41] To date, meetings of the Congress of Neighborhoods have primarily functioned as opportunities for information dissemination and provision of training and technical assistance to neighborhood councils. One of the Congress of Neighborhood meetings was devoted to orienting neighborhood councils to the process for involvement in the budget process. DONE is now moving to provide training and technical assistance through its newly constituted "Empowerment Academy."

Structuring the Congress meetings around information dissemination and training was reasonable during the initial phase of certification, when few neighborhood councils were

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[39] Ken Draper, "On NC Budget Cuts: Watch Your Back," *City Watch 2, 9*, May 3, 2004.
[40] Charter for the City of Los Angeles, Article IX, Sec. 901 (c).
[41] Plan, Article VI (5).

certified, and the DONE required efficient channels for outreach and technical assistance to support certification. Now that most areas of the city are contained within certified neighborhood councils, this would no longer appear necessary. Given the value of orienting neighborhood councils toward citywide issues, to help prevent their being narrowly parochial, there is a need to develop more permanent institutions for citywide deliberation. Hence we would recommend that the City consider options for developing the Congress of Neighborhoods into a more structured citywide institution composed of neighborhood council delegates who meet regularly for policy deliberation.

Monitoring of City Services. Charter Section 910 requires neighborhood councils to monitor service delivery and to meet periodically with responsible officials of city departments. The Plan does not provide a mechanism for neighborhood councils to monitor and report on service quality, but rather contains vague language requiring the DONE to "provide assistance in developing strategies for providing comments and feedback" to the City.[42] The City has done little to date to implement Section 910. The Mayor has put into place a structure for facilitating service delivery called "Teamwork LA," which created Neighborhood Service Cabinets (NSCs) within each of the city's seven area planning districts. The NSCs, which are designed to meet monthly, include representatives from all city departments that provide "street level" services. (Included, for example, are Police, Fire, Building and Safety, Planning, and Street Services, among others).

The Teamwork LA is beginning to coordinate with neighborhood councils, although 7t is not clear that this coordination is occurring in a systematic fashion. One of the key Teamwork LA initiatives is to encourage the development of Neighborhood Council Federations to coordinate with the NSC. Teamwork LA has claimed credit for helping to establish the Harbor Federation of Neighborhood Councils.[43] However the City's main initiative for monitoring service delivery, LA STAT, brings together representatives from the Chief Administrative Office, the Mayor's Office, departments, the City Controller and geographic information specialists, but does not appear to involve neighborhood councils in a systematic fashion.[44]

Delegation of Hearings on Local Issues. Charter Section 908 permits the City Council to delegate to neighborhood councils its authority to hold public hearings prior to making a decision about matters of local concern. This provision was ignored in the planning process, and there are no provisions in the Plan or implementing ordinances for delegation of city council hearings. Hence, connections between City Council and NCs appear to be more informal, and to vary considerably across the city.

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[42] Plan, Article VI, 6.
[43] Teamwork LA Newsletter, "Harbor NSC Establishes LA's First Neighborhood Federation." May/June 2003, http://www.lacity.org/mayor/teamworkla/newsletters/teamworkla_intrnewsletters72312698_07162003.pdf
[44] Teamwork LA Newsletter, "LA STAT Taking on a Greater Role in Teamwork LA," January 2004, http://www.lacity.org/mayor/teamworkla/newsletters/teamworkla_intrnewsletters72316438_01052004.pdf

A measure of connection is the extent to which city council office representatives attend neighborhood council meetings. In our observations of over 40 neighborhood council meetings, we saw city council members, or their staff, at only seven meetings, primarily in the Valley, Harbor, and West areas. This may be due to the focus of much neighborhood council activity on internal organization. It will be important to observe whether city council offices' attendance of NC meetings increases as neighborhood council representatives turn their attention more to substantive policy or service issues.

V. BENCHMARK MEASURES OF LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

In this section we discuss three types of outcome that are more long term in nature. The first involves the extent to which the neighborhood councils (NCs) develop the organizational capacity and leadership skills to function effectively. This includes the quality and impact of their activities, which might fall into areas such as local and citywide policy influence, monitoring service delivery, and partnering around community improvement. The second is their effect on participation, including the "social capital" developed by the relationships they create. The third outcome is the degree to which stakeholders develop increased political efficacy and better attitudes regarding city government and their community.

Because the system is still in a formative stage, it would be premature to draw conclusions regarding longer-term outcomes. Hence this section sets forth initial impressions and benchmark measures in these areas, based on surveys of project coordinators from Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE), city council staff, and NC Board members. In addition, we draw upon our field work to support a more qualitative assessment of the leadership qualities and organizational capacity developing among neighborhood councils. Future evaluative activities should also assess the manner in which community stakeholders judge the activities and accomplishments of neighborhood councils. Our initial findings suggest:

- While a number of neighborhood councils appear to be running effectively and getting things done, others are struggling with operational issues, personality conflicts, or lack of strategic direction.

- About one-quarter of neighborhood councils are ranked as having defined achievable goals by the DONE PCs. These neighborhood councils appear to be more successful in achieving community improvements.

- A number of neighborhood councils have reported community-level accomplishments in such areas as advising on land use policy; facilitating service delivery; and supporting community events, neighborhood beautification projects, and youth activities.

- Participation at neighborhood council meetings varies considerably, with the average meeting drawing fewer than 50 attendees. There is a need to develop a better understanding of how neighborhood councils coordinate with stakeholders and involve community volunteers in committees.

- Neighborhood councils appear to be developing networks of relationships connecting stakeholders, councils, and the City. The average Board member reports 12.3 connections related to neighborhood council involvement.

- Neighborhood council Board members typically express relatively positive attitudes toward their communities, and relatively high levels of political efficacy. They are fairly critical of city government; only about one-third rank City performance as good or excellent. Interestingly, the Board members rate the City's performance more highly than do residents of the city in general.

Organizational Capacity Varies Across the City

At this mid-point in the process it is appropriate to consider the extent to which neighborhood councils are developing organizational capacity in the form of civic skills, knowledge-capacity, and motivation to establish priorities and get things done. It is also important to consider whether they appear to be developing democratic facilities, such as processes that promote internal deliberation and communication, to effective brokerage between the constituent stakeholders and City Hall (Thomson 2002). Deliberation requires effective outreach to stakeholders, solicitation of their viewpoints, and effective communication of these views by means of the appropriate channels to City Hall.

It is important to be open and accessible to all who wish to participate, and to develop credible decision making processes to help ensure that NCs are responsive to community needs (Weeks, 2000). Involvement of volunteers from the community with technical expertise and a wide range of experiences and perspectives will facilitate legitimacy and credibility (Chess, Hance and Gibson, 2000; Sinclair, 2002; and Itzhaky and York, 2002). This legitimacy will help neighborhood councils to gain credibility with the public and city council members.

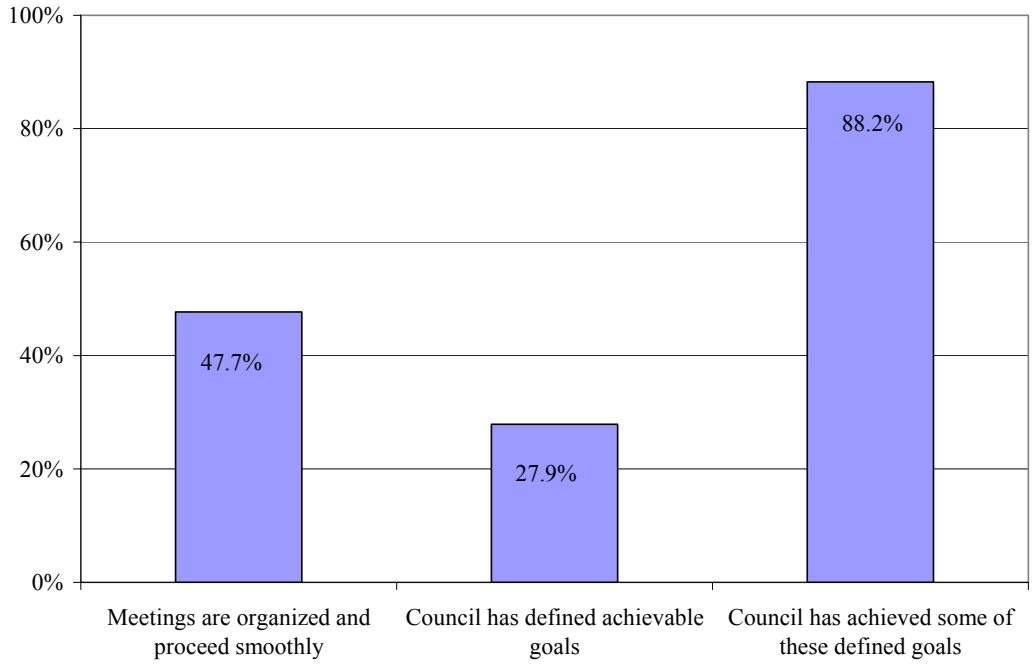
Development of organizational capacity and leadership skills is a long-term endeavor; the neighborhood council system cannot continue if fueled only by the enthusiasm of the first wave of committed citizens. Long-term sustainability requires that neighborhood councils are able to nurture participation through the development of the organizational capacity to mobilize communities around collective goals. Thus we consider:

- Are the Councils developing the organizational capacity to support collective action by Board members and their stakeholder constituencies?

- Have the councils determined the concerns, priorities, or goals that are important to the community? Do councils appear to be taking care of business?

Figure 11 summarizes benchmark assessments of organizational capacity by DONE project coordinators (PCs). Fewer than one-half of all neighborhood councils are rated as being able to organize and run meetings smoothly. In terms of goal identification, neighborhood councils do even less well; only 28 percent were rated as having defined achievable goals. Those who have defined goals appear to be making good progress in achieving them—of neighborhood councils with defined goals, 15 of 17 (88.2 %) were assessed as having achieved some of their goals.

Figure 11: Project Coordinator Assessments of Organizational Capacity



Based on our observation of over 40 NC meetings across the city, we would also assess the level of organizational capacity to be mixed. Some NCs appear to be highly professional, with well-run meetings that draw regular stakeholder attendance. Their meetings are carefully agendized, information is available on issues in advance, parliamentary procedure is respected, and stakeholders are given opportunity to comment. These smoothly operating NCs often appear to have built upon a critical base of existing leadership and community participation, suggesting that because they 'hit the ground running' they were more able to focus on substance. They are more likely to leverage committees for every aspect of council business: handling specific community issues, addressing tasks such as evaluating bids, or advising the council on operational matters. Their meetings are frequently attended by staff of city council offices and service department representatives.

For example, in a North Valley meeting we observed, not only was the board highly organized and the parliamentary procedure on track, but the audience was also aware of the procedure, interrupting to challenge a board motion to defer a matter (calling "Robert's rules!") or otherwise speaking up to assert their prerogatives. In a West Area NC "meet and greet," there were minutes available for the previous three meetings, and committee chairs presented to the public their committee issues from behind a central table. More than one hundred stakeholders attended (this without a galvanizing issue on the agenda) and the City was well represented by departments responsible for such services as sidewalks and tree trimming.

These examples stand in stark contrast to some less organized communities that have a tenuous handle of procedure – let alone substantive concerns. A number of councils appear to be encountering operational issues such as difficulty in running meetings effectively, lack of strategic focus, personality conflict, low turnout or absenteeism. Some appear uncomfortable with parliamentary procedure, and have difficulty staying on agenda while allowing stakeholder comment and moving to decision. In one meeting we observed, stakeholder attendees voted along with the board, not evidently aware that their votes were not being recorded.

Many of the neighborhood council meetings we observed were dominated by operational rather than substantive issues. For example, many neighborhood council meetings were focused on satisfying the requirements to access their operating budgets, or determining policy about the operations and powers of committees. One NC Board appeared confused about whether they had the power to establish standing committees without specific provisions in the bylaws. Others grappled with whether committees should be able to take positions without the imprimatur of the NC elected board, particularly if only one elected member sits on a committee.

These field observations were echoed by some focus group participants, who expressed dismay that, although they had succeeded in holding an election and creating a Board, internal conflicts and lack of leadership were detracting from their council's ability to get work done. They found that conflict and operational difficulties made it more difficult to attract members to meetings and engage their participation in the council. As one participant put it, "The problem isn't lack of outreach; the problem is that we (the Board) don't have our act together. People don't come back." Other focus group participants identified problems with groupthink among Board members, political cliques or lack of professionalism in Board operations.

Stakeholder participation and board member commitment also appear to be issues of concern for some neighborhood councils. Indeed, there appear to be councils that experience consistent difficulties achieving a board member quorum. Attrition presents a problem for a number of Councils that have experienced resignation of Board members. A board that is interrupted by the seating of new members risks increased frustration among the board and stakeholders alike. This 'revolving door' not only saps momentum

and drains enthusiasm but can maintain the council in a reactionary position - continually putting out fires.

Identifying Community Priorities and Taking Care of Business. Many neighborhood councils appear to be having difficulty answering the crucial question, "What's next for the council now that we're certified?" The focus on operational issues appears in the early years to have inhibited the ability of many NCs to assess community priorities and establish goals. This is reflected in the PC assessment that few neighborhood councils have identified achievable goals. Outreach committee members of a neighborhood council with which we worked on strategic visioning told us that they had difficulty attracting new membership because they could not articulate a vision for the neighborhood council. Other NCs appear to be operating largely reactively, providing advice on a variety of issues brought to it by stakeholders or the City, but not taking the lead in establishing priorities. The problem with this reactive approach is that Board members can feel pulled in many different directions, contributing to a sense of frustration and burnout.

Those neighborhood councils that are taking a more proactive approach have used a variety of strategies for goal setting. For example, a West Area neighborhood council with which we have worked circulated a stakeholder survey in conjunction with visioning sessions with Board members. Several neighborhood councils have organized visioning and goal setting sessions for their boards, or participated in Coro Southern California leadership training to identify and undertake community projects. Others appear to rely on the priorities and visions of the elected board members as representatives of the community. We would argue that given the small size of the Boards (averaging 20 members) and the size and diversity of the communities they represent, that there is a need to develop deliberative processes to gauge stakeholder viewpoints. No matter how councils develop their strategic visions, setting clear goals is associated with better performance. NCs with defined goals were consistently rated by DONE project coordinators as having had a greater impact on the quality of community life.

Neighborhood Council activities. To understand the current activities of neighborhood councils we can review their operating expenditures. Based on expenditures as of February 2004, it would appear that outreach and communications continues to be a central concern, even after initial elections. Almost half of neighborhood council expenditures are accounted for by direct outreach expenditures, printing, and telephone expenses (Figure 12, next page). Another 29 percent supports administrative activities, and 19 percent community events.[45]

[45] It should be emphasized that this is a preliminary indicator given the small amount of expenditures reported to date, and given the start-up nature of these voluntary councils

Figure 12: Initial NC Expenditures by Category

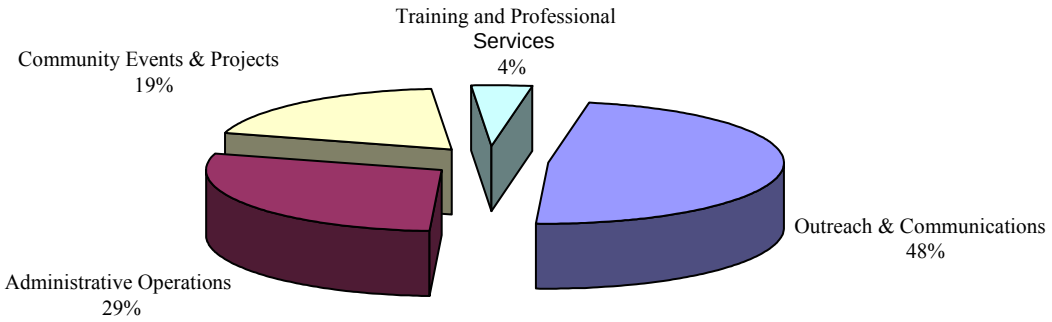


Figure 13: Perception of Neighborhood Council Activities

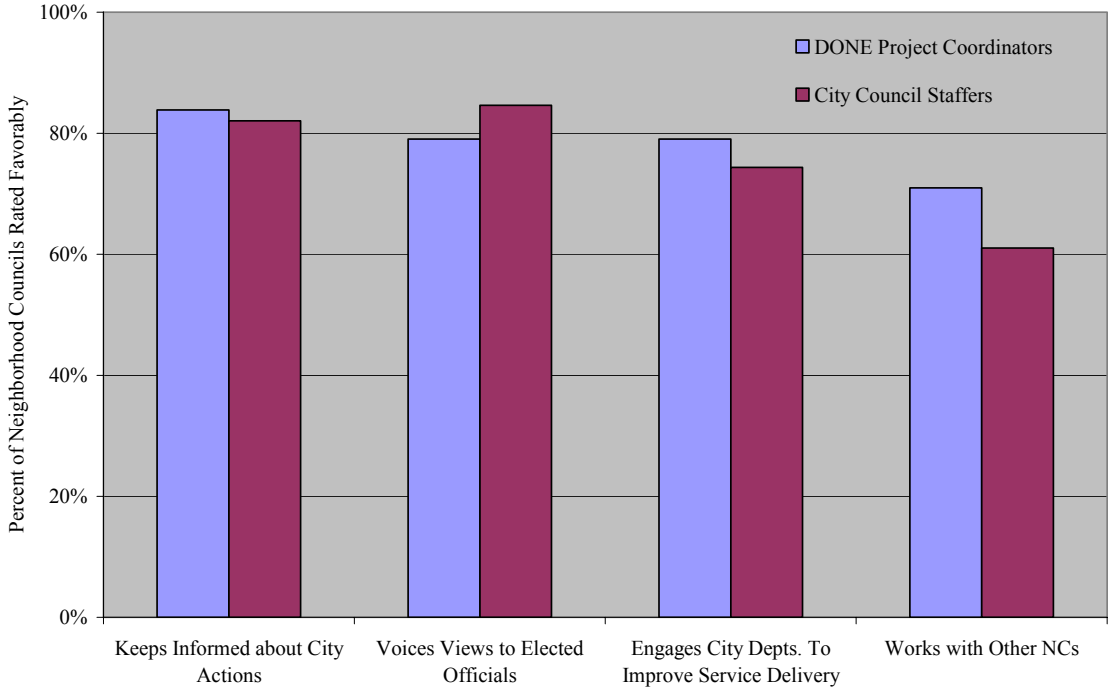


Figure 13 (previous page) suggests that the city employees who work most closely with NCs, DONE project coordinators and city council staff, rate favorably the activities of most councils they encounter. Around 80 percent are rated as keeping informed about city actions and voicing views to elected officials. Slightly fewer are perceived as engaging city departments to improve service delivery. Neighborhood councils receive the lowest ratings in the area of working with other NCs, reinforcing the need for a citywide Congress to encourage local networking. Qualitative information reported by neighborhood councils shows that they have worked toward accomplishments on a number of fronts:

- *Land use policy.* Neighborhood councils have worked with the City to site public facilities such as a new fire station. They have opposed a number of developments, such as the Ahmanson Ranch project, and worked with developers to redesign proposed projects. They are working with the LAUSD to find locations for new schools, and they have lobbied to be given permanent seats on Historic Preservation Overlay Zone Boards.

- *City services.* Neighborhood Councils have successfully advocated for needed services from the City. They have lobbied the City to develop a graffiti abatement program, to install a new railroad crossing, to provide new public transportation options, and to perform needed street repairs. Some neighborhood councils have coordinated with the police department to address gang issues, and others have purchased radar guns to enable the police department increase the monitoring of speeding.

- *Community events.* Neighborhood Councils have organized a number of social events to bring their communities together. These include health fairs, street fairs, concerts, "Day of the Horse," and a film festival. They have also planned informational events such as candidate forums and issue-based workshops.

- *Neighborhood beautification.* Neighborhood Councils have worked to make their neighborhoods more pleasant places to live through neighborhood cleanups in parks and along major thoroughfares. They have invested in their parks by such measures as helping to create a freshwater marsh, installing new rose bushes, and purchasing boats.

- *Youth-related activities.* A number of neighborhood councils appear to be focusing on activities and projects geared toward youth, such holding an Easter Egg hunt, replacing dilapidated playground equipment, hosting a "Passport to Reading Program" at a local high school, holding a job fair, supporting a reading program at a local library, and participating in beautification or fund raising for local elementary schools.

Figure 14: Perceptions of Neighborhood Council Impacts

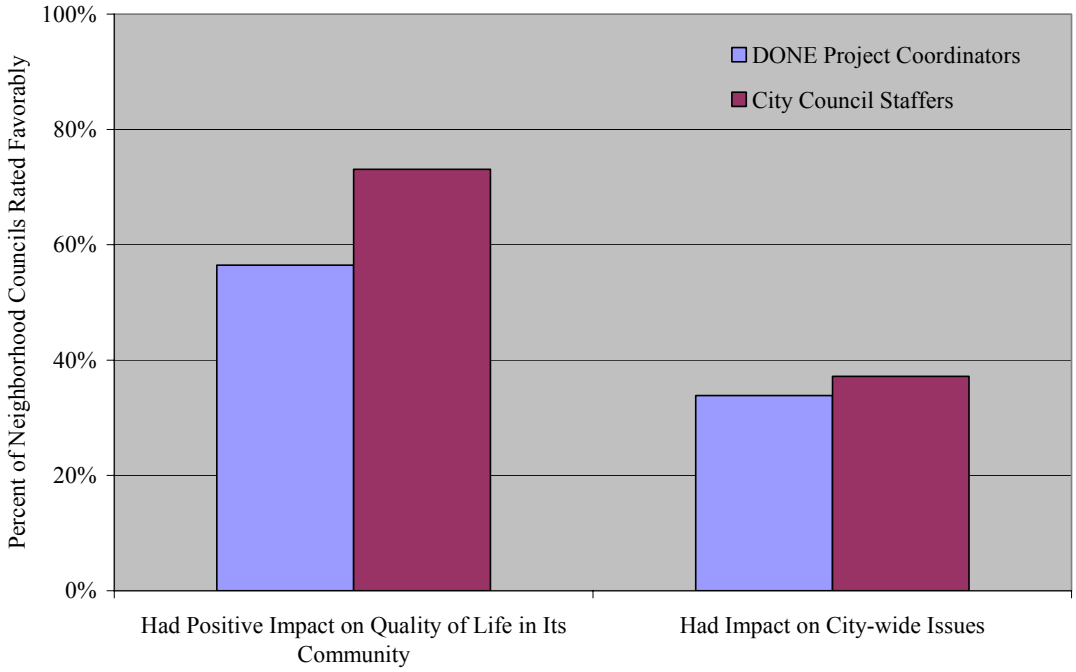


Figure 14 shows that fifty-six percent of the neighborhood councils evaluated by project coordinators and 73 percent of those evaluated by city council staff were rated as having a favorable impact on their community. Neighborhood councils are not generally perceived to have a significant citywide impact. This is consistent with other published research on neighborhood councils, which finds that they tend to be more influential at the local rather than the citywide level. There are nonetheless several citywide issues upon which neighborhood councils exerted influence, the most recent being their widely acknowledged influence in the decision by the city's Department of Water and Power to reduce a proposed 18 percent rate hike to 11 percent.

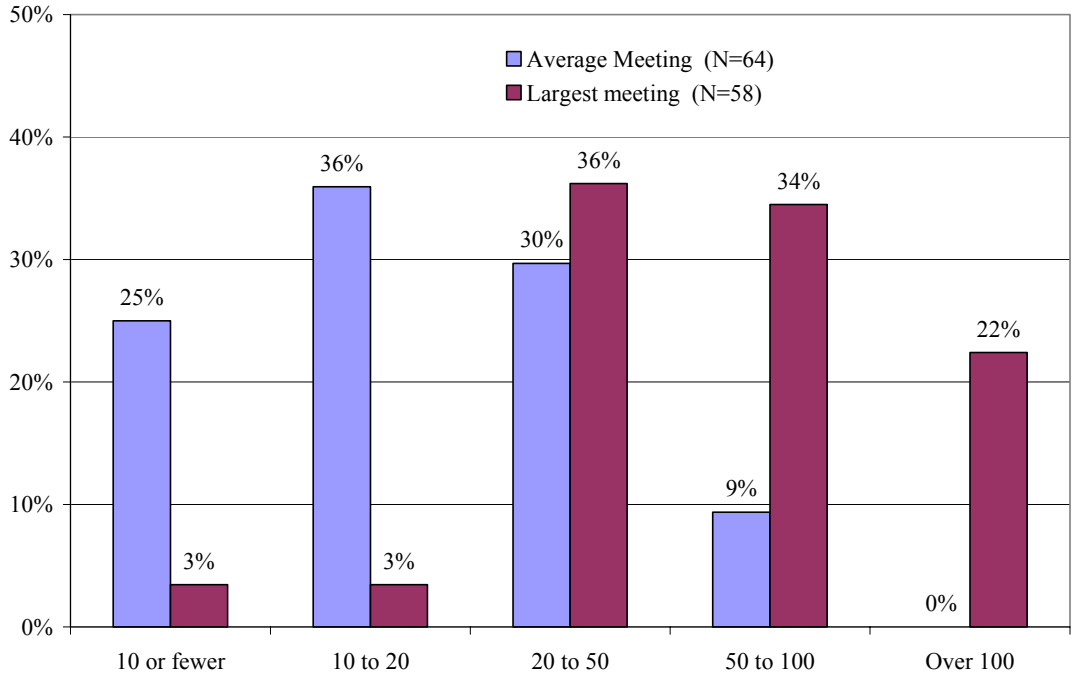
Increasing the Quality of Participation and Developing Social Capital

As mentioned in Section III, research on neighborhood councils in other cities has found that while they do not appear to increase the level of participation, they result in higher quality, more substantive participatory activities. Clearly community participation in civic affairs has taken a new form as the result of this reform: more than 1,500 individuals have volunteered to participate as elected NC board members. Project coordinators estimate that the average board has about 6 strongly committed individuals who represent a core of organizational strength and stability, and this number ranges

between 2 and twelve individuals. An important goal for the system over time will be to increase the number of core committed individuals, as reliance on a small core makes neighborhood councils vulnerable to burnout.

Information on non-elected individuals who participate in NC activities is more sketchy. As seen in Figure 15, attendance varies significantly at NC general meetings. Based on estimates by DONE project coordinators, about two-thirds of NCs attract between 10 and 50 stakeholders to an average meeting, and about 9 percent attract relatively large numbers of over 50. More worrisome is that a full quarter of the NCs attract fewer than 10 stakeholders to the typical meeting. Most individuals only become involved in political affairs intermittently when an issue or event catches their attention, and this fact is demonstrated by the numbers of attendees at neighborhood councils' largest meetings. Here the numbers are significantly larger with over half of the boards able to attract more than 50 stakeholders to at least one meeting.

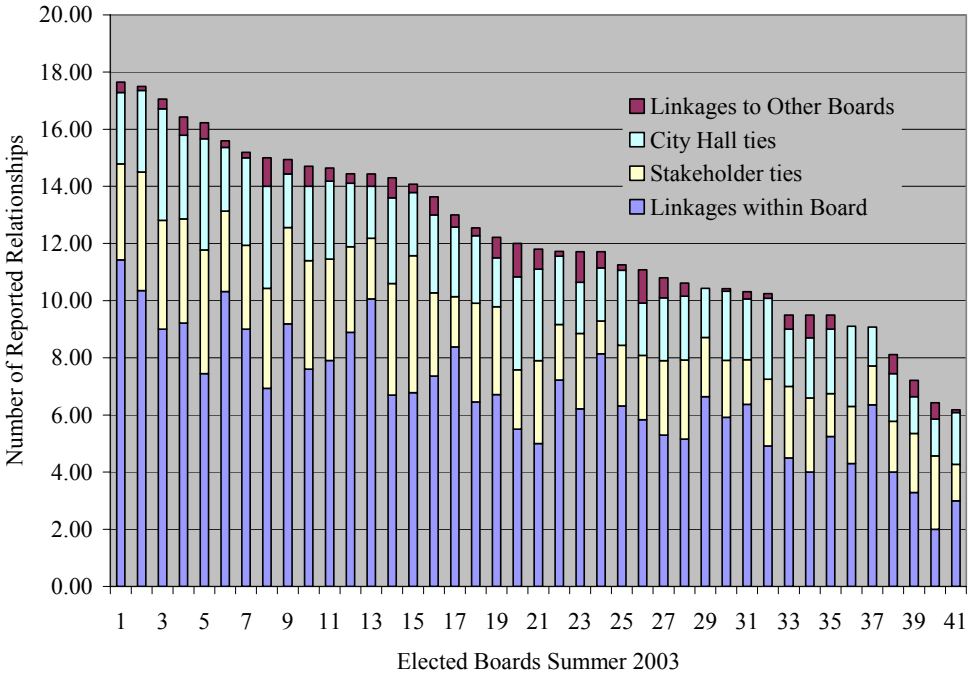
Figure 15: Attendance at NC General Meetings



Neighborhood councils are also developing contact lists that enable them to maintain more consistent contact with stakeholders. Information on these lists is less reliable and we only have estimates of the size of the contact lists of 37 boards. Nevertheless, sixteen percent of these boards had developed lists of over 1000 stakeholders and another 68 percent had list of between 100 and 1000 stakeholders. Unfortunately, we do not have good information about the extent to which these involved individuals are new to civic affairs, versus shifting their efforts from other voluntary activities. Future survey research should attempt to evaluate these questions.

A successful neighborhood council system should also contribute to the civic culture of the city by creating sustained relationships that build "social capital" – norms of trust and reciprocity. One specific goal is to create relationships that cross differences of stakeholder affiliation, ethnicity, and class, enabling board members to develop a broader understanding of the values and concerns of others. While researchers find that there is a strong tendency for individuals to talk with others that resemble themselves, our survey indicates that neighborhood councils have successfully avoided this trap and have generated cross talk between individuals representing different stakeholder groups. The survey also suggests that neighborhood councils have begun to develop networks of relationships connecting stakeholders, councils, and the City. The average Board member surveyed reports 12.3 connections related to neighborhood council involvement, of which 6.7 are with other board members, 2.7 with stakeholders, 2.4 with City Hall, and .5 with other neighborhood council boards (Figure 16). Over time, a measure of success will be the extent to which these ties thicken within the neighborhood councils, and connect across the city's communities.

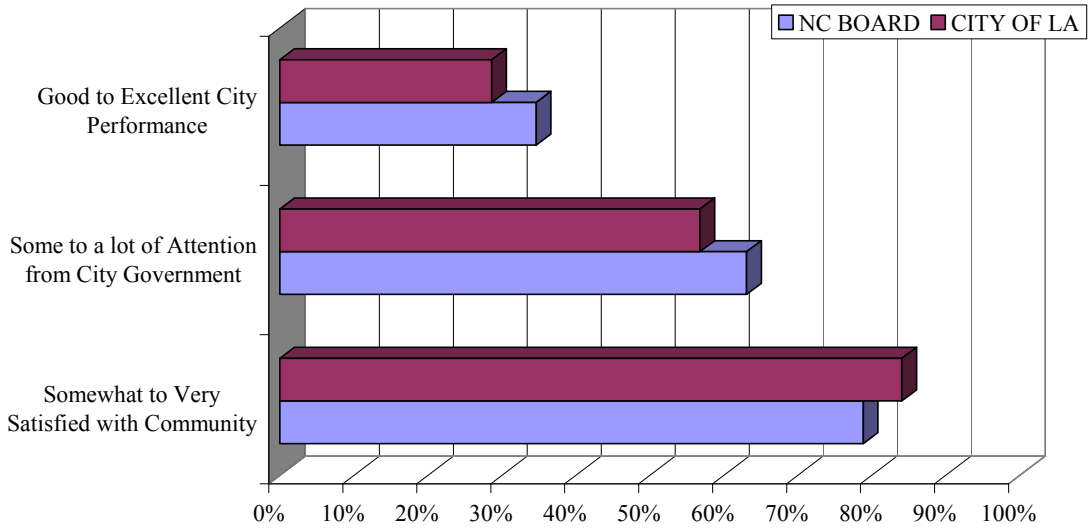
Figure 16: A Benchmark Measure of "Social Capital:" Reported Board Member Relationships



Political Attitudes of Participants

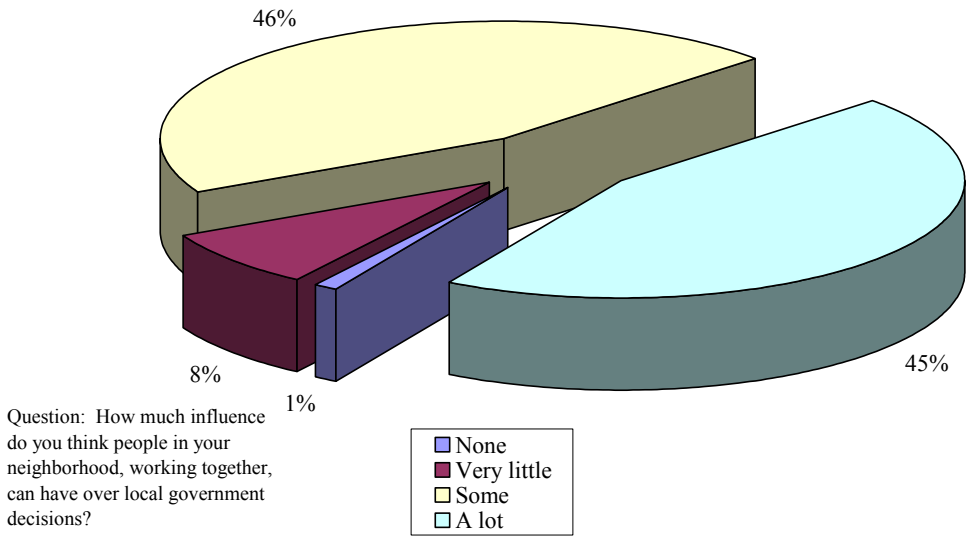
A last set of benchmarks involve the extent to which neighborhood councils influence stakeholder perceptions of their communities and the City, as well as impacts on political "efficacy," the extent to which people feel that they can make a difference. Figure 17 suggests that neighborhood council participants rank their communities less favorably than do residents in general. They are more satisfied with City government than the general population; around 60 percent of Board members report that their concerns receive attention from city government and only about one-third rank City performance as good or excellent. Over time, if the system increases City responsiveness, we would expect to see improvement in these measures.

Figure 17: Board Member and City Resident Attitudes toward the Community and City Government



Political efficacy, the extent to which individuals feel that they can influence political events, is an important constituent of civic culture, and is associated with political activities such as voting and volunteerism. Research on neighborhood councils in other cities has found that political efficacy tends to be higher in cities with well-functioning neighborhood councils. As Figure 18 shows, 45 percent of neighborhood council Board members express beliefs that people, working together, can have a lot of influence over political affairs. Only nine percent thought that people could have no or a little influence. We would expect attitudes of political efficacy to improve further if the City becomes more responsive to local concerns, as intended by the Charter.

Figure 18: Neighborhood Council Board Members' Perception of Political Efficacy



VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The neighborhood council system is an ambitious reform that has faced significant implementation challenges associated with the complexity, diversity, and scale of the City of Los Angeles. From the onset, the reform has not received support commensurate with operational expectations. Moreover, the City and NCs have struggled from the beginning with an inherent tension between the desire for local self-determination, and regulatory oversight to preserve openness, accountability, and ethical operations. This tension was not resolved in the planning process, which focused largely on certification, ignoring post-certification operational issues. The DONE consequently has had to develop policy reactively in response to emerging problems, a source of enduring frustration to neighborhood council leaders. The most visible manifestation of these operational issues has been the conflict that has arisen around elections.

Despite these administrative hurdles, and the limited resources allocated to the system, most of the city is now represented within certified neighborhood councils. Moreover, many neighborhood councils are working productively on community activities and advising on larger policy concerns. This is a remarkable achievement that must be credited to the volunteer activities of hundreds of neighborhood leaders, and to the efforts of a relatively small cadre of dedicated city officials and their staff. Other neighborhood

councils, however, appear to be struggling still with procedural and operational challenges.

The next step is to build the deliberative capacity of the city, the neighborhood council system, and of individual neighborhood councils. The City has made only partial progress implementing the empowerment provisions of the Charter, such as the Early Notification System and opportunities for input on service delivery. In the case of the neighborhood council system as a whole, there is a need for the Congress of Neighborhoods to function as a more institutionalized deliberative body that unites neighborhood councils across the city. And in the case of individual neighborhood councils, there is a need to increase diversity, and to involve stakeholders across a broad array of participatory forums such as committees, Board meetings, projects, and events. More specifically, we recommend:

There is a need for the City to develop clear minimum standards for elections, addressing issues such as qualifications, outreach requirements, acceptable balloting procedures, and guidelines for administration and dispute resolutions. Moreover, in order to shield DONE from charges of favoritism, and reduce the burden on NCs, the City should consider whether to contract with third parties for elections administration and arbitration of disputes.

Streamlined open meeting and ethics provisions. The City needs to consider policy changes to streamline the rules designed to ensure transparent decision making and ethical operations. This may require changes in state law to simply Brown Act and disclosure requirements for neighborhood councils.

Organizing for inclusion. The City and individual NCs need to adopt strategies aimed at increasing stakeholder and demographic diversity on Boards and offering avenues for participation that extend beyond the governing Boards. Neighborhood councils can increase representational diversity by designating seats for particular stakeholder groups, such as community-based organizations, faith groups, business, or labor groups. The City might consider making resources available for neighborhood councils to partner with local organizations around targeted outreach to underrepresented populations and stakeholders.

Involving NCs in City governance. There is a need to continue developing channels for NC input in City policy making and service delivery. More specifically, the City should invest in system and organizational changes to provide earlier and more user-friendly notification of pending city decisions. The City should also find ways to connect TeamWork LA and neighborhood councils in working together around local service improvements.

A deliberative Congress of Neighborhoods. The Congress of Neighborhoods should be reconstituted as a deliberative forum that will connect neighborhood council delegates in debating citywide policy issues. We recommend involving a task force of neighborhood council representatives and city officials in developing a structure for the Congress.

Building organizational capacity of neighborhood councils. There is a need to target additional technical assistance and training to develop organizational capacity among neighborhood councils that are still struggling with structural and procedural issues. This training should focus on leadership development, effective meetings, use of committees, civic skills, conflict resolution, and visioning/goal setting. NCs should incorporate greater reliance on issue committees that involve stakeholders, as committees can be a primary way to promote deliberative democracy.