

## Year-end Report to the Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Coalition

The working group established by the Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Coalition earlier this year for the purpose of examining the state of Neighborhood Councils (NCs) and their relationship to the City agencies that are intended to serve them has, over the course of the last several months communicated with NC board members and other volunteers, attended countless meetings, and worked to gauge the conditions under which the system operates.

As a result, the working group reports the following areas of concern regarding the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE), the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners (BONC), and other entities, including the Offices of the City Attorney and City Clerk:

- Agencies' failure to respond to queries by NCs in a timely manner hampers the ability of councils to operate. This was one of the most frequent complaints.
- Inconsistent responses, especially by Neighborhood Empowerment Advocates (NEAs) assigned to NCs. Answers and advice varies widely, depending on the experience and knowledge of individual NEAs. Specific complaints involve NEAs' lack of knowledge of parliamentary procedures and misinterpretation of bylaws and rules.
- The ever-increasing administrative burden laid upon NC board members and volunteers. Every new policy seems to create additional work for councils. Micro-managing in the area of financial matters has resulted in tremendous frustration for NCs. Each new mandatory training required by DONE provides another reason for NC board members to reconsider their commitment to civic engagement.
- Technical failures are another constant source of frustration for NCs. The Cornerstone system in particular is a regular source of complaints. The City Clerk's financial portal is also problematic. These technical inadequacies are particularly galling in an era when people are used to quick and convenient access to online services.
- The failure of DONE and the BONC to consult with NCs when formulating policy proposals. This results in lengthy and significant rewriting during the comment period. For many NC board members, the lack of initial consultation is indicative of DONE's and BONC's lack of respect for NC board members and the NC system as originally envisioned.
- As a result of the lack of consultation, policies are often viewed as impractical and ineffective, particularly given the bureaucratic failure to adhere to the policy requirements. The policies that have been enacted which need extensive reworking include exhaustive efforts, censure and removal, and the grievance process. The proposed Code of Conduct amendments will also require close examination and significant rewriting.
- Much of the foregoing results from the nearly complete lack of accountability on the part of the department responsible for assisting neighborhood councils. The DONE general manager and BONC commissioners serve solely at the pleasure of the mayor. There exists no administrative recourse for NCs or their board members and volunteers if they believe DONE or other city agencies assigned to support them has acted incorrectly or improperly.

When NCs were first established 20 years ago, the intent was to allow them to operate as independently as possible. DONE and the Office of the City Attorney offered guidance with the goal of empowering NCs.

This has changed greatly in recent years as the priority of DONE now appears to be minimizing engagement, restricting empowerment and focusing on risk management to limit the City's exposure arising from the actions and behavior of any of the hundreds of volunteers.

While the City preaches diversity and inclusion, it makes the NC's ability to attract and retain board and committee members much more difficult. Many Angelenos, whom the NC system was intended to empower, do not have the time and energy to navigate and cope with the increasing burden imposed by this over-regulation of nearly every aspect of NC operations.

NCs are charged with the twin missions of increasing stakeholders' participation in government and making that government more responsive to its constituents. Under the Charter which created the NCs, DONE was tasked with helping make that happen. Unfortunately, many of those serving on NCs today feel that DONE isn't helpful and is, in fact, a hindrance to their achieving those missions.