

Workshop of the NCs on the future of the Congress of Neighborhood Councils, January 29, 2005

Facilitator: Ron Kuramoto

Observers: Collaborative Learning Project Team

Notetaker: Mark Elliot

This second session of the NCs on the future of the Congress of Neighborhood Councils was held at the University of Southern California campus in order to distance the effort from the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment and assure participants that neither DONE nor USC can claim ownership. Fortunately, there was no DONE representative in the room. DONE participation emerged as a concern because several participants argued that it should be a neighborhood effort, and though USC/NPP/CLP is positively regarded, there is political sensitivity in some communities that the councils as a whole could be directed - or perhaps undermined - in their ongoing organizing efforts. Sensitivity to neighborhood council prerogative was acute; the university-community partnerships issue was addressed explicitly by one participant, who repeatedly referred to the working group as “the study” in a derisive way.

Ron addressed the issue of ownership right away by explaining the session as part of an ongoing exploratory effort. “You can decide what you want to do and how you want to move forward. Our desire is to work ourselves out of a job today.” That statement proved prophetic, as the group later voted to appoint their own facilitator and moved quickly to define the agenda, set a next meeting date, and grapple with the issue of representation and the selection of the working group. “Some of us want to get rid of DONE,” said Steve Twinnings, from Beverly Bel Air. In answer to some vocal critics that DONE might play a controlling role, Ron said, “We have an interest in this workshop as a mechanism of deliberation though DONE doesn’t really have a part in it.”

As Dr. Cooper was not in attendance, Ron Kuramoto made the introduction. He stated that the agenda would proceed as follows:

- Time for basic questions;
- Questions on materials;
- Time for a facilitated forum;
- And ‘what’s next’

The group raised questions immediately. Will it be one or two people from each neighborhood council? Who’s represented here – and who isn’t, and why is that? We are now sitting in a neighborhood council area – are they involved? What specifically can USC provide in terms of places to meet? Will we ever see you again?

Ron explained the outreach process and said of the many neighborhood council representatives who were invited but were not present, “that’s their choice.” Getting the process to this point, he said, was the CLP function, “but if there is a request from this group, we’re amenable.” He said that there was no USC funding in place to continue in a substantive supporting role. “You said you’re looking to get out of a job,” one participant said, broaching the substantive role of CLP in the session. “Beyond today, how do we become something other than 30 people having lunch together?”

Ron replied, “We’re a conduit to get you from there to here. As to sustainability, he continued, “That may be something that this group wants to address.” One participant asked, “Why would people ask for something in addition to the Alliance [of neighborhood councils]?” Ron said, “Put it in the hopper.” “The Alliance,” another asked, “is it supposed to morph into a congress?” Ron said that the Alliance is one alternative, “not necessarily that this should evolve into a different organization.” Ron encouraged additional suggestions but nobody raised any specific examples beyond the Alliance and the Issues Action Network. (Note that the website of the IAN is out of service currently.)

Wanting to get a sense of the scope and structure of their congress, someone asked, “What is the number of stakeholders represented by other cities’ neighborhood councils?” Others asked how other cities do it.

“Is it open forums?” Another returned the focus to LA and asked what a congress is supposed to look like, according to the Charter. “It’s evolving, but what’s it supposed to be?” Is it to be an umbrella organization? “The Alliance started as a place to begin – and it’s done a good job,” another said, adding, “A way you can help is to help us evolve – to get us into an alliance.” Most other out-of-LA councils are 5-10,000 people, someone noted, “but we’ve got some at 85,000 people.” He suggested that the Congress be a deliberative body meeting twice a year, adding with impatience, “I want to get started – I want to see something happen.”

Structure and representation issues were a chief concern. “I think we should be taking positions citywide, so they know what we think at the grassroots,” another said, to some agreement. Another participant said, “The DWP proposal, or inclusionary zoning – these are issues that City Council thinks that they know all about. But 3.6 million people may not agree.” Another suggested a “corporate structure” where each neighborhood council forms a committee to make recommendations to each of 7 district representatives. “The Congress could be a couple of reps from each district – only 14 [total] and each could have input – a ‘trickle up’ as in a corporate structure.” Another said, “Is this even something that we want to invite? I keep hearing about structure and bureaucracy,” she said, calling this “an opportunity to create something” that would address the need for cross-neighborhood council debate, education, and especially to address board turnover.

A participant noted the stages of neighborhood council formation – from organizing the council and the idea of a federation to the Alliance and now a potential congress. “By moving to a Congress, won’t we be cutting the legs out from those other building blocks, or getting away from the grassroots?” This sentiment arose several times, as some participants envisioned the system as a structure of neighborhood council-building blocks and dubious of any overarching structure such as a congress – with or without DONE participation. “We rush into this workshop in a hurry,” another agreed, “But is that what we need, a workshop? We have the Alliance.... can’t we find a place in existing groups to find something?” He added, “We’re volunteers – do we need another body?”

One participant said, “The Alliance is very tied into DONE and the Democratic Party, but it does give us access to our City Council members,” but adding, “It’s useful.” He went on to complain about the budget process and the new elections procedures. Another replied, “I have no problem with DONE – or its procedures. If not for DONE I wouldn’t be here today.” She continued, “I hear the same opinions at every meeting. We have become an elite group, but DONE ensures inclusiveness. My neighborhood council is an exclusive group. I say suck it up – we have rules and regulations, and I don’t have a problem with that...but I don’t think we need another layer of bureaucracy. We can work within the [existing] framework, but deliberation is lacking – we’re spoon fed.”

Other issues concerned ownership. “How can we assist DONE?” one asked. “The Charter said ‘Congress.’ It says ‘as requested by neighborhood councils,’ but DONE has been the one inviting us.” Another disagreed strongly, saying, “We need a body outside of DONE helping us.” Several participants questioned USC’s involvement, with sentiment ranging from the hostile to skeptical. “How did USC become involved in the operation of neighborhood councils? Did DONE of the City say, ‘Take a survey?’ Did DONE hire USC? They have us getting mad at each other – it’s an interrogation tool, an atmosphere,” he said of this working group environment. “What power do we have, and what power do we hope to have?”

Ron replied that the session was not meant to replace the Alliance but offer a format for discussion, adding, “USC is not hired – it is a research project – a deliberation convened that could be self-governing, and our involvement originated with DONE.” He replied, “Someone should have said, ‘This is a research program,’ that we’re not here to formulate anything. OK – fine, but let us know what it’s for.” A representative from CLP discussed the origins of USC’s involvement with neighborhood councils that predated Charter reform, and spoke briefly about the relationship between CLP and DONE as one not formalized by contract but rather of normative concerns. Most appeared to recognize the need to expertise or at least resource support and welcomed CLP assistance on those bases.

“I suggest that we go back to the October question of a deliberative body and what it should do,” one participant said. “Do we need a debate on the floor? Committees taking stances? If we go forward to set up something like a U.S. Congress with a representative, meeting once or twice a year, or a quarter. Do we debate things as they come up, and then take a position on it? It’s a voice to take to the City Council or the Mayor to say, ‘This is what the neighborhood council boards want’ on inclusionary zoning or whatever issue – it’s a voice to the mayor, to the City Council - a unified voice.”

Another mentioned that some councils are new - “only six months in existence” - and instead suggested a structure of 4 alliances with reps to a congress. One participant instead looked to an existing model of neighborhood council cooperation by bringing up the DWP-neighborhood council memorandum of understanding, noting that 40 councils were involved, that that structure was already in place. “We will have an oversight committee for DWP from now on,” he said, “and we can extend it to other city services. How can we integrate these?”

Another participant returned to the USC participation issue, suggesting that they all “take with a grain of salt” the position that this is merely a research project. “To my mind, they’re on the wrong side,” he said (noting allegations of conflict-of-interest relating to the CAD-CSP neighborhood council MOU process). He returned to the congress issue from a representation perspective. “There is no legitimacy for any organization to take decisions for neighborhood councils. The Alliance is in a sorry state, and it has a legitimacy problem – there are no elections of officials.” He agreed that models were around for a Congress, noting the DWP MOU process and the Issues Action Network role in the sales-tax/public safety issue. “We ought to start talking about issues.”

“Let’s talk about things that hold us back,” another participant said, adding, “I see that we address situations that don’t affect neighborhoods at all, and I don’t think that we have degrees to know about them. We should do our homework, asking DONE to assist us with planning and organizing so that we can talk the proper language, and move forward.” Noting that he works with “several councils” that have established a relationship with the LA City Planning Department. “We don’t understand it,” he continued, speaking of the language of providing City services, “and we need to.”

Another participant called the Congress effort a “crock” and insisted that it “started as a study” but that each representative today should work “within your own neighborhood council.” He then argued for respecting the place of the City Council office in the balance of power by noting that his council is represented by two City Council offices, and that “everything comes through them to us [then] we make a recommendation to our councilman, and that’s how it should be done.” Another participant disagreed. “I see how one neighborhood council tries to get support from other neighborhood councils, and nobody responds,” he said. “I see a Congress that could ratify MOUs and hear grievances or procedures that affect all neighborhood councils, and then be a united voice to bring bigger changes – if everybody votes on it.” Another agreed. “We could have someone from every City department at the next Congress for face time, and meet with each of them. We have someone from our City Council office at every meeting, but I don’t know if other neighborhood councils are that lucky.”

Ron shifted attention from exploratory questions and debates to the process: “How do we proceed?”

“A working group – let’s go.” Another asked for consensus. “Is the Congress a good idea?” Do we model ourselves after Congress – one representative each?” Another replied that it was merely reproducing the problem the government itself has, noting that each neighborhood council has the capacity to go to the CC office or advice the mayor.

Another participant sought to clarify the role of the DONE congress as a plenary session and training forum. He spoke of “local issues such as planning and potholes” and suggested, “Go to your CC office for that,” but on citywide issues, “There should be a formal structure – a larger group involved that should be a Congress of neighborhood councils, and we can put it together.” He added, “We can call a Congress with no definition – a group called into session as needed.” One participant, struggling to describe the role of the Congress, likened it to a ship. “Neighborhood councils are like the rudder, and the Congress can be the steering of the ship. The rest is government – it is the engine.” Noting that long-term problems should

be the focus, he added, “We can say, ‘We need to do more on this [issue],’ and then the neighborhood councils are the rudder.”

Another agreed that the statue is vague, and that the power rested with the neighborhood councils. “We can make a regional or citywide organization - anything we choose to! We can build anything, so how do we decide? What is best for the City? I suggest that we establish a working group to draft an outline for what a real Congress of neighborhood councils would look like – people who have time to commit and are representative. Look at best practices in other cities or countries and the particular issues here and then come back to neighborhood councils for further input and – I hesitate to say [with a smile] – achieve consensus.”

“Can’t we agree on one vote per council?” So moved! was the reply. “I make a motion to decide whether we want to continue.” Then confusion broke out over parliamentary procedure, with one participant questioning the representation of this group. “Everybody was invited!” came the reply, as another added, “We have a quorum!” Representation remained an issue, however. “Are we voting as neighborhood councils, or as neighborhood representatives? Am I a research project? Who are we?” The reply came swiftly, “NO, this is real life action,” and confusion again broke out over which motion was on the floor. “Am I representing my neighborhood in this vote?” The reply from the group was a resounding, “Yes!”

“Motions imply quasi-parliamentary procedure,” one participant complained, to groans. He added, “We’re shutting each other down.” But someone shouted in frustration, “Get to your point!” The first one replied, “The Alliance screwed up on this, by not considering issues, but there are other forums [such as] the citywide issues group.” Stop making speeches! was the instant comeback, with some frustration. “We talked of a senate-type organization, and that’s the intent of the motion among the 32 people here.” A participant replied, “But you can’t represent your council [here] officially.”

Ron broke thru the confusion by calling out, “One person, one vote?” Yes was the reply – the ‘motion’ passed 24-4 with 4 abstentions.

“I make a new motion to elect someone to serve as facilitator,” someone said, taking Ron up on his earlier offer to put himself out of a job. “Ron’s done his job, and Ron can’t lead this now.” Someone nominated Ken Draper (from Citywatch), but there was an objection lodged that an appointed facilitator was “premature,” that perhaps for the next session.... But the reply was, “We’ve decided who we are and what we can do, and we need someone at our next meeting with an agenda. Do we need officers? Bylaws?” There was a suggestion that Leonard Shaffer be the facilitator, and the assembled agreed (14 voted ‘yes’ and 11 voted ‘no’).

Leonard took the center and moved quickly to establish working group structure, committee, mode of communication, and meeting place. “After the first meeting we can change it,” he reassured participants. The “unwieldy” structure of the large group prompted a call for volunteers for a “5, 6, 8, 10 person working group,” but debate continued over whether to have regional representatives to the working group or any/all volunteers welcome.

Yet the question remained regarding representation. “All of us have to go back to our councils,” someone said, as discussion proceeded. Should there be a small committee that decides structure, which is then taken back to neighborhood councils for agreement, or wait for boards’ permission? The representation question was not decided definitively, but it was decided to move forward with a working group meeting and then inform councils after that date - decided as either Feb 19th or Feb 26th from 10 am to 1 pm. “This group will meet and throw things out and hope that others will join” the effort, Leonard said.

“Is DONE invited?” No, was the unanimous reply. “Is USC invited?” There was disagreement, but no decisive show of opposition. “I think it’s good to have USC behind us,” someone said. “All they’re doing is looking at what’s happening, and I say, as a group, let’s continue to have USC. The group then voted overwhelmingly to have USC’s continued participation.