

Congress Working Group meeting

Meeting date: February 26, 2005 Location: 233 S. Beaudry 11th floor

Observer: Mark Elliot

This is the first self-directed Congress of neighborhood council Working Group following on the USC CLP-organized Congress exploratory session on January 29, 2005. This meeting built upon the USC session, in which the group took charge and appointed their own facilitator, Leonard Shaffer. Today's meeting followed a more flexible agenda and framed out the most general questions of structure, representation, and outreach.

After introductions, Ken Alpern opened the discussion by asking what it takes to establish a Congress, and suggesting that outreach and engagement was the key. "We've learned from DWP that looking for neighborhood council support is tricky – when we're ready to sign off [on a decision] it's for naught if councils can't support us," he said. "The success of the Congress relates to the success of the system, in that my neighborhood council is diminished if the system falters."

Brady suggested that the Congress of Neighborhood Councils follow the DWP effort. "For the first time there's a highly representative group and we have respect from the City. We need a Congress of Neighborhood Councils as a body to get MOUs from every agency in the City and then get specialists on every issue – or a few major issues." Bob noted that Coastal San Pedro "passed a motion against limited MOUs by small groups." Mick agreed, adding, "It's in effect – on paper. The 2002 [secession movement] was about the City as a colossus – a clumsy giant. We don't have a City as a whole." Mick said that the Congress "should be considered a separate department on footing with other departments," adding, "Take the [DWP MOU process] to another department, and then have an MOU with City Council."

Don Larson agreed. "There should be a counterbalance – a separate voice from DONE, and it will take a highly-skilled person to run it – to call a Congress together, to stand shoulder to shoulder with the mayor, the department heads....We're talking about structure here. Do we want to have equal representation per council or by population? Should they be chosen from a citywide group, or a representative from each neighborhood council? Let's get a structure set up and then hire a person that can force his way into City Hall and get a voice." Bob Gelfand termed neighborhood councils the "pothole police" and asked, "How do we create a supra-neighborhood council organization? The citywide issues group model is a communications organ - a nervous system for neighborhood councils, and maybe it needs to be taken to the next step. I'd rather see a grassroots effort."

Ron Kadota said that the DONE 'Congress' is important for information sharing. "We're educating volunteers, community-based politicians, and it is vital to running a neighborhood council. If we don't do [education and networking], the Senate will suffer." Suzanne replied that there's a real need for sharing knowledge regarding land use and planning, saying, "A Congress body could pool resources....We could ask [other councils], 'Do you know how to read plans?'" Mick asked whether the "real input" from a Congress would be binding on neighborhood councils, and Leonard replied, "It's the technical things. A charter is like a constitution – it's short on specifics. The ordinance said, 'a minimum of two' and 'shall assist in a biennial congress,' and the selection or election of a governing body."

Leonard agreed that the DONE Congress is valuable because neighborhood councils with experience can enjoy classes in planning and zoning. Leonard described the power that neighborhood councils could have if they came to consensus – with their own City Council

representative. “Look at how many people vote – 20,000 voters can swing an election. We can’t support a candidate, but we can point out issues and that has an effect.” Ken Alpern asked, How to learn how to move issues through your councilperson? “When we started the DWP MOU, we sent a letter to every neighborhood council to send a rep,” ensuring broad based support for decisions. “But for us to decide here – on our own? And then impose it on folks who are not here?”

Joe Vitti asked, “We want to take a vote, and I like [the idea of] a spokesman, but how to pay him?” He liked MOUs, “But what about campaign finance reform? This group should focus on that. Citywide issues,” he said, “are not covered by MOUs,” and he gave the LAX expansion as an example. “On issues that effect quality of life – we have got to act citywide to plant the seeds now. If we get 25-30 neighborhood councils, then the rest will come along.” Mick said, “Thirty people came to the DWP meetings, and 20 are active, but only 10 are super-active. So this will be tough, and outreach is important – and it’s ongoing. We need a steering committee, an executive committee, a website, minutes of the meetings that we can all review.” Brady agreed: We need a listserv to communicate with each other. We’re not Brown-acted.” A listserv would allow the working group to post documents, Mick agreed, and Leonard too agreed. Joe added, “the problem with the forums is that it’s ‘reply all,’ and the discussion has no structure.”

Brady said, “The senate [format] is the only option, because how do you allocate for population?” Roger Kulpa agreed: “It’s a starting point that we can take back to neighborhood councils and then tweak it, and get 80 neighborhood councils to agree.” Don replied, “If we could have enough action going, by the time we meet in June at the DONE Congress, we could put one person out and say, ‘Here we are.’ Can we move on this, and then call our own meeting?” Bob said, “The best example is the budget process,” to groans in the room. “This group has gotten to the point that our Issues group got to – to get together and discuss and carry back a recommendation, and then vote for options.” But he asked about “the legitimacy question,” noting that the problem is securing participation. “We [in the Issues group] are working with 30 neighborhood councils loosely, and we can continue that communications function, but the formal structure will [have to] come out of our first senate meeting.”

Roger suggested, “Let me throw something out: the concept of one representative with 3 votes to reflect a majority and a minority opinion – a 2 to 1 vote to allow a minority opinion.” Brady called it a proportional vote. Joe said it better reflected “what the neighborhood councils feel.” (Representation did also surface as an issue when it was noted that 6 of 12 participants were from the valley.) Suzanne asked about the formality of membership, however, noting that she was validated as a board officer in her Venice council but that BONC could decertify the neighborhood council. “So – am I welcome here?” There was agreement that Venice – or any neighborhood council – is welcome as long as certified.

Joe then recommended a pro-tem chair, nominating Leonard. “I’d recommend taking a vote,” he said. “Not to say ‘the way it’s going to be,’ but as a reasonable approach to get us started – to get DONE out of the picture.” Afterward, Mick said that it should have been an open nomination, but Bob then moved to adopt the senate model (and was seconded). Mick said, “We need an executive committee, and I make a friendly amendment” to send these ideas (of chair, of senate format) out as under consideration. Steve demurred, noting that Pacific Palisades and Brentwood “are out of the loop” in that case. Mick noted that they were like homeowner associations, and Leonard agreed, saying, “If this is an organization of neighborhood councils under charter, then voting rights should go only to neighborhood councils – with observer status going to the others.”

Talk of the motion was clarified and a vote of 10-2 for a senate form with one rep per neighborhood council was taken. "It's a recommendation," Leonard said, with Brady disagreeing. "Say 'A group is being formed,' not 'It has been formed.'" Brady lamented that they are too small a group to decide these things, and that it was not representative. "We'll say, 'We did this at the meeting,' and they'll say, 'What meeting?'" Ken raised the representation issue. "I'm opposed to sending out something that we've voted on. Learn from what we've been through...If I've chosen not to participate, that's one thing. But not knowing we're meeting? One mailing is not sufficient; there's a committee handling outreach for the DWP MOU. Are we deciding on our own? Just because we're the ones here?"

The discussion then turned to outreach, with Suzanne saying that it must go beyond only presidents and "include non-certified in a non-voting capacity." Roger suggested a basic concept for the email outreach: "A plenary group has come up with a congress of neighborhood councils and it's recommended a structure..." Bob volunteered his 90-minute (requested) block for the Congress. Tommy said that the group should emphasize that the event is NOT a DONE event, adding, "We're individuals gathering as a group." "Just word it properly," Joe replied, adding, "We're making some final decisions [at the meeting] and that they should be a part of it." Suzanne said, "maybe 85 aren't interested in participating...but to say we don't represent people?" Bob asked, "Do we want to use the citywide Issues Action Network as part of the communications system?"

Don suggested that in the next four months they schedule four meetings leading up to the DONE event. "Keep it up as a drumbeat," Mick agreed, and he clarified: An organization independent of DONE; a June 25th presentation; a senatorial model. "We should be able to distill down to every neighborhood council somebody we should talk to. Who's willing to make calls?" (All agreed.) "We could say, 'A plenary has met to set up a congress,' but maybe not include the term 'vote,'" Roger suggested. "Say, 'ideas are that the Congress could be of equal representation' – don't say senate – 'that discusses issue and forms clout.'" Tommy said, "Speak of it as being an offshoot of the USC study of neighborhood councils – that's really how this all got started. That identity takes us away from DONE and the City." Leonard replied, "But DONE may be involved – to find us a venue, and maybe pay for it."

Bob suggested proposing to DONE time during the June 25th event for a plenary or a breakout. Brady suggested asking for presentation time before the whole group, and or a session afterward. Ken agreed, saying, "We should use it as a networking opportunity, included printed materials. Bob proposed they "build the Issues group breakout session to define ourselves." "Join with the Issues committee to talk about outreach," Leonard suggested. Brady argued for a 15-minute address in the plenary to advance their identity. "We will tell them we're getting 15 minutes. Greg's in favor of what we're doing here." Len clarified what would be requested of DONE: 15-minute address; a table out front; and the Issues committee breakout.

The group closed by establishing a next meeting on March 26th for the working group, and wondered what to do if they received a big response. They settled on a name – "The Congress Working Group." They agreed that Brady and Bob would attend the DONE's March 24th Congress feedback session to raise these points. "We'll go to push this thing forward," Don said, calling the meeting to a close.