

Congress Working Group meeting

Meeting date: April 23 2005 Location: 233 S. Beaudry 11th floor

Observer: Mark Elliot

Leonard Shaffer began with a process overview, describing it as a “formation committee” that was to put together a citywide Congress “to give us the clout and power we deserve.” Specific organization structure decisions were deferred until a larger group can come together, and in the meantime “to see what we can do to get everyone involved.” He noted the “letter of introduction” that was drafted and sent to all neighborhood councils, and he predicted more robust turnout for the next meetings. “In May we’ll expand to a larger room for a whole lot of people,” he said.

Ken introduced the work of the communications committee (formed at the last working group meeting) and described its work as “mak[ing] sure everybody can participate and that everybody knows what we are doing.” He said, “We have some responsibility to follow on these meetings with what’s happened,” and noted that there’s been talk that appears to be unfavorable to this process that is airing in the community. “We should have a vision put together [that] answers the questions – have them worked out – and be available for input” at the upcoming DONE event to preempt speculation. “Plan for a core, but also a transient set [of participants],” he said, “and once there’s a final model we won’t have 20% of them saying, ‘Wait a minute....’”

Regarding funding, there was talk of the need for a 501 c(3) organization to receive contributions. Currently there is no funding mechanism in place, with WG participants footing the bill for copies, etc. Others argued that neighborhood councils couldn’t donate to a c(3) and suggested a simpler California Association structure instead. Jacque Lamishaw noted, for example, that the federal non-profit filing fee was \$500. The WG should consider a \$1,000 budget to start, she said.

Rich Waters suggested that they worry about the paperwork with the Congress cost paid by DONE. Ken replied that the City Council offices “write off thousands in taxpayer supported events,” but that “there are those who want to free us from the convention center – to separate from the DONE Congress [event].”

Adrienne suggested assessing each neighborhood council a \$100 fee for operating costs, but Ken asked to what account donated money would go. “This group has to work it out, or it just keeps getting referred back to DONE because they have the people.” He added, “But if we take it over, we need to ask how much we can ask of DONE.”

Talk then turned to a sponsored Congress. Milton Gaines suggested putting together a sponsorship “package” to fund the Congress “until this organization gets independent.” Some participants accepted the branding opportunities the event would afford, while others bristled at a Congress “brought to you by....” Ken said, “DONE is waiting for a proposal from us to say ‘We can’ or ‘we can’t’ do this, but if we take too much, DONE will begin telling us what we can do. DONE can give us office space without dictating.” Roger Kulpa agreed. “We should not cut off DONE for the positives – meetings and office space. We can say, ‘Help us with this meeting,’ but keep our distance with minimal assistance. I’m leery of the money issue,” and added, “I’m saying, ‘I’m here from Woodland Hills’ and not from the Pepsi Cola neighborhood council. Foundation funding may be better.”

J.J. Popovich said, "We need to work with DONE – we're part of the City, a City agency, but it's up to us to police ourselves. We'll have a charter – you'll know the rules." Suzanne noted the practical aspect of DONE support, such as mailings, insurance bonds, etc. "It's a lot of money," she said. "If we're associated with the City, we can make them work for us." Don Barnett said, "If we take money, our stakeholders can lose respect for us."

Leonard noted that while DONE is obligated to assist the Congress effort, and neighborhood councils have taken the lead, that the City Council can, through ordinance, exert control. "That worries me," he said. Tommy Thomason focused on DONE control as the problem, to agreement in the room. Jacque agreed that DONE should provide and office and funding, but added, "If we assess neighborhood councils \$1,000, then we can form a committee and a 501 c(3) to solicit donations and DONE cannot touch it – it's completely separate." Soledad Garcia clarified that "separation from DONE" need not mean that whomever wishes to participate can do so. "What if someone says, 'I'm a stakeholder....'" Tommy noted that the neighborhood councils are represented as "bodies," to which Soledad asked about the distinction between voting participants and observers in the eventual Congress. "As part of their council," Tommy replied. "I represent West Hills here," he added, though it was not certain how many participants today are designated participants. "But if I'm not a boardmember?" Soledad asked. Leonard added that at the Congress, neighborhood councils would send "one or two" representatives, either BMs or stakeholders.

Milton said that only 73 have funding currently. Someone noted that the City Council has adopted a policy that "nothing will be free next year," and that momentum in Council is that neighborhood councils get the money to use it themselves. "We'll have to pay for the convention center."

Bob Gelfand suggested that different neighborhood councils host a Congress at rotating locations around the City, to which Jacque added, "Quarterly." Brady envisioned a foundation-supported body – at least in the beginning – and noted that foundations fund only through 501 c(3)s and not through California associations. "If we're setting up bank accounts, what about bylaws and a board to set up this body first?" Milton asked. "They'll look at the legitimacy of this organization." Leonard cautioned that it's only a formation committee at the moment. "A Congress may take a different form."

Discussion ranged about whether sponsorship was proper, and even the legitimacy of officers elected with only 500 or so stakeholders voting.

Bob moved that the Chair appoint a committee, a motion that was seconded and passed quickly and unanimously. Leonard asked two members to put together a depository for the funds, and asked others to contact foundations for sponsorship.

Bob noted, however, that approaching some groups that may later assert a political interest might create later problems. "It's a policy issue," he said.

Leonard returned to the central issue. "My fear is that unless we come with a package, that the City Council – the politicians listening to DONE and their commissions – will formulate their idea of how DONE interacts with a Congress, and it could be to our detriment. Have a strong plan – a charter. We are organized; they'll be less likely to give control to DONE." He added, "We don't fall under

present neighborhood council rules – we’re not a City entity. Do we have a motion to set up a committee for a charter for the new Congress discussion?” Roger said he liked the idea of a package. “But not a formal-looking constitution – we are a suggestive group to start the ball rolling,” he said, “but we do need to offer a package.” Bob said that the Citywide Issues Group was ready to participate. Joe Vitti added that Greg Nelson was very supportive. “He wants to see it happen – it’s his goal for councils.” He added that participants to the congress should be “officially appointed,” noting, “It’s an official constitution that we’re writing – ‘We the people of the neighborhood councils,’” he said to laughter. He suggested that the committee meet in City Council chambers in City Hall.

Participants advocated for quick action. Rich Waters said, “Get it out to neighborhood councils,” and Umberto reminded the group that each neighborhood council will have to take action. Bob added, “Get it in front of people – we’ll have a different vision.” Joel said, “I thought we’re all appointed here.” He complained that as president, he has to communicate these things to his board on a too-often basis. “We’re already confirmed and validated,” he added. But not all here today were appointed.

Jeff clarified the motion. “It is to create a committee to create rules for this group – or for the ultimate Congress? Start addressing the procedural issues.” J.J. advocated for a charter, noting that the Valley Alliance didn’t take that step first. “Once the Congress gets together,” Leonard said, “they can say, ‘Change this.’” He said to get something on paper. Soledad returned to her earlier point. “Unless you have representation,” she said, adding, “You need a structure, then the formation of committees, then the relationships.” Sharon added, “Don’t wait – I figured that 80 people would [already] be here.”

Ken Alpern said that once the Congress forms, the working group has no purpose. “Do we need something concrete for this group? The nitty gritty is not done by a committee of 40,” he said, urging a committee to get to work. “We have a model – the DWP Task Force,” he said. Through multiple versions of the MOU “we got closer and then took it to the neighborhood councils to see, and they all had representatives in the process. When it was finalized, it went to every neighborhood council for ratification and approval.”

Bob again suggested the Citywide Issues Group as offering to participate. Roger suggested that the committee have something before the May meeting. Leonard clarified, “an interim document emailed to this group for comments. Say to the neighborhood councils, ‘Here’s what we’re looking at,’ and then, ‘Will all of you comment?’”

Jeff Jacobberger, chief drafter of the DWP MOU, was suggested as the chair in this very active, round-robin style of discussion. Leonard called for a “core group” to do the drafting, but there were ample volunteers and some discussion and disagreement over how large that group could be and still operate. Mike Cohen said that the group of nine volunteers was not too large. After additional discussion that parried the issues, Jeff expressed frustration with “the endless discussion about the group and procedure,” and added that he wanted ideas. “I feel like I’m wasting my time.”

The discussion moved forward with a series of questions but the group largely did not contribute concrete suggestions:

- Milton asked, “What does a credentials packet look like? What is the charge of the Congress? How do we generate topics for discussion? Motions, balloting, electing....” He suggested that the Congress could move from planning area to planning area.
- Jim asked, “What purpose will the Congress play?” His concern was not to duplicate what neighborhood councils are doing already. “For initiating actions? For beefs? I suggest that the Congress relate to beefs that all neighborhood councils have, and want disposition [on] from the City.”
- Glenn asked, “Should it focus on the real lack of neighborhood councils taking positions and prioritizing issues? That’s the real challenge,” he said, adding to general agreement, “Consider if you want regional caucuses.”
- Dan suggested that they draft a mission, vision, and goals statement, and reiterated earlier suggestions. He asked, “And closing the loop – what are outcomes and expectations?”
- Suzanne suggested having ad-hoc help with elections issues or grievances. “And have a minority voice. Young people.”

Roger followed up on the call for specific ideas, and this spurred the discussion along. “One vote per neighborhood councils. And what we are to be? A combined voice of neighborhood councils and a liaison to the City Council.” He said to be careful that neighborhood councils don’t feel that the Congress is usurping their functions, or trespassing on the City Council’s prerogatives. Rich replied, “This Congress could bring up to the City Council stuff that’s not being addressed – politically sensitive stuff and we’ll do it through committees.” He suggested two representatives to address the possible absenteeism issue. “Some places aren’t represented by a neighborhood council at all,” Sharon Anton said. She spoke of low participation in other neighborhood council areas. “We’ll have neighborhood councils supporting it,” Mike said. “It’s for networking, for citywide and local issues, so people get information from other neighborhood councils – and not the City. Most issues aren’t citywide issues,” he said. “DWP and Planning are the exception.”

Jeff replied, “It’s a lot of talk about a Senate, but does it meet 2X per year, or 4X per year?” He suggested identifying 3 major issues, and then providing neighborhood councils with a packet “so that neighborhood councils can take a position.” He suggested that the DONE am session be broken into sessions, with each small group trying to reach consensus on Congress structure questions. “In the afternoon,” he suggested, “everyone comes together to deliberate and take on an issue. I say, work by consensus rather than majority vote.”

Brady replied, “I go with a supermajority – a higher bar – if neighborhood councils are to take a position [collectively].” He agreed with minority caucuses and alternates serving on committees “so they know what’s going on.” He endorsed further MOUs with City departments, but asked, “How do we incorporate oversight groups [for MOUs] into one [Congress] structure?” Soledad added, “And term limits for representatives.” She narrowed the focus on which issues should be under the purview of a Congress. “Issues should be

departmental issues, not just City Council [jurisdiction] issues,” she said. “And regional caucuses with training and education” would increase neighborhood council involvement with City bureaucracies.

“Once you deliberate, you still have to move on it,” Ken said, speaking of issues.

“It’s a year-round kind of thing – issues moved when you’re not meeting.”

Leonard added, “Communications is an ongoing committee structure that functions when the Congress is not meeting.” He asked, “Who speaks for the Congress?” Milton replied, “Elect a speaker.”

Bob Focosi suggested polling stakeholders to feed back to all City organizations, “Including this one.” He had spoken before about the questionable representation of stakeholder interests. “That was a concession at the last meeting, but [it did not surface] here.” Leonard replied, “That was Elizabeth’s [McClellan] idea, to which Brady added, “Have it in the [DONE Congress] package that goes out to everybody, so everybody gets it.” Jacque asked about making the survey interactive and putting it on the communication committee’s website. “To bring issues to the website.”

Discussion turned to the DONE event, including whether there would be a ‘mock Congress’ (evidently not) or a session on clean money (undecided). Bob plugged the Citywide Issues Group’s policies and procedures as predating the Congress effort, and J.J. asked about merging the two ideas. Bob called it “a strong possibility,” but there was no discussion on how the CIG and the Congress effort would fit into on another in the future. It did appear that the CIG would decide the pm session format and substance.

The next meeting is scheduled for May 14, 2005.