

## **Congress Working Group meeting**

Meeting date: June 11, 2005 Location: 233 S. Beaudry 11<sup>th</sup> floor

Observer: Mark Elliot

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## **Background**

This is the fifth Congress Working Group meeting to be held following the CLP's previous January 29<sup>th</sup> meeting. Twenty-six attendees opened the meeting, which increased through the meeting to include a total of thirty. The room was characterized by a capacity crowd and a dull roar of energy. Additional interest attends this meeting given the working group's outreach, stoking interest as it works towards its 'coming out' at the upcoming June 25<sup>th</sup> DONE congress event. (A piece in the June 7<sup>th</sup> issue of Citywatch advertised the DONE event.) This meeting was notable for Pacific Palisades attending for the first time, and for a journalist from the LA Alternative Press also in attendance. (Some in the working group seemed very interested in full disclosure of her press affiliation.)

It was not clear what the overall outreach plan is, however, Ken said the committee sent out a flier. The June issue of Citywatch, for example, also plugged the DONE Congress on June 25<sup>th</sup>, and an additional piece in that issue advertised the LANCC effort:

More than 40 Neighborhood Council leaders, known as the LA Neighborhood Council Congress Working Group, have met over the past five months in an effort to create a Neighborhood Congress designed around citywide and regional issues and managed by Neighborhood Councils. A draft of the structure and the plan for such a Congress will be discussed by the Working Group on June 11. A presentation and discussion of the concept is on the morning schedule at the upcoming June 25, DONE-organized, Congress of Neighborhoods.

## **Notes**

Len Shaffer opened the meeting by crediting the outreach committee for increasing attendance, and Ken Draper added, "Attendance speaks for how well we're doing." Len gave an outline of the steps so far for new attendees. But the overview has been a sore point for some of them, who chafe at having to begin as if from scratch each meeting when there are new people. There is some sentiment that the working group will never really get off the ground if it has to entertain a review of past accomplishments every time.

Len said, "We hope a deliberative body working on city issues with neighborhood councils taking a united stand will work towards being able to bring into practice the charter mandate: a congress of neighborhoods when requested by neighborhood councils [exercising] the right to form their own body, and become a proactive rather than a reactive body." He referenced their mission statement. "Not to supplant neighborhood councils but to complement them – to enhance them."

Roger said, "It's important to enhance – not supplant. This is where neighborhood councils can come together to put combined pressure on issues that go beyond an neighborhood council." He added that website links can be useful to individual neighborhood councils to publicize events such as street fairs, or be a general posting place for neighborhood councils as a bulletin board. Mike suggested that neighborhood councils also need a place for agendas and a "place to vote" if people can't make meetings. "If there is a position taken, a vote can be taken by email so people can respond."

Len clarified that he didn't think that the Brown Act applied, "Unless the City Council decides to make it an official body by ordinance – which we'd have to fight. So, we can do voting and polling." The Pacific Palisades representative, Ann Hull, said, "Be careful with content, especially message boards." She added, "We could be liable for slander." David Villegas [?] suggested an ethics committee," to which Len added that a 501 c3 should shield individuals from liability.

Mike Cohen asked about whether there existed a set of non-profit bylaws for the group in formation (no) and noted that there was no board in place yet to administer the website. He suggested that the 'core' working group sit as a board for the purposes of making funding and website decisions and, as he said, "to own it." He noted that with Valley Vote, a website developer owned it, which was not an ideal situation. "We want the organization to control it." Jacque also noted that the working group had 90 days to appoint a board, but there was some confusion over who would be appointed to a board. "Who belongs to the corporation?" someone asked.

Jacque nominated Roger Kulpa to oversee the website, and suggested a committee of 5 to 7 people (including J.J. Popowich and Mike Cohen) to oversee web content and then "bring it back to this body" for review, rather than have an open forum like a blog, she said, "where everyone can come in and post." Soledad Garcia asked about how they can keep the information posted restricted to neighborhood councils – rather than "the whole world" accessing it. "Keeping it in-house." Jacque replied, "You can't control it." Bob Gelfand noted the opportunities that "e-democracy" presented, saying that it overlapped with the congress intention of being a deliberative body. "We've been doing e-democracy with Citywide Issues Group and it would fulfill that purpose."

Ken suggested that the group focus on developing the congress, and worry about the uses of the website later. "Develop the website out of the needs of the congress, rather than altering it later." Bill Murray said that the LANC Issues Group already has a website. "It's an open architecture, and we have government people and labor leaders [participating]. Join it if you like; I can add prior [congress working group] meetings - I maintain the website." He added that the LANC Issues Group had made the offer before, and said that the offer "is a temporary thing," sounding defensive about the failure of the LANCC to bite at joining up with the LANC Issues Group.

"Thanks for the offer, but we're looking towards an independent identification," Len replied, saying that that meant also maintaining a separate website, and he suggested that the communications/website committee get up and running to handle content development.

Len introduced planning for the DONE event sessions by describing the morning session as 'Come see what was done' and the afternoon (LANC Issues Group-organized) session as 'Come see what will be.' He envisioned the afternoon session as a panel of 4 or 5 people perhaps facilitated by Greg Nelson, who had, Len said, described the congress as his "ultimate goal" for the system. Murray spoke up to say that the LANC Issues Group "invites anyone to propose an issue [and] we don't take a position but are a forum, then take it back to your neighborhood council for a vote on the issue." He said that the DWP rate hike was a fight championed by the LANC Issues Group.

Brady suggested to have City Council representatives introduce the congress effort at the beginning of the DONE event "for credibility," then have the facilitators introduce them in the congress breakout session, in order to attract more attendees and "give seriousness to what we're doing." This seemed to be a reply to Joe Vitti's suggestion that the attendees might not know what the purpose of the session was.

Jacque said that the city council "lead in" was a good idea, and suggested that Janice Hahn, Wendy, or Laura Chick would be appropriate. "Call [the charter] a 'proposed structure' to be discussed at the next LANCC meeting in July." There was no suggestion of having the outgoing mayor make the

introduction. Brady suggested having it where city departments are, but there was disagreement. “Greg’s very supportive,” Joe said, “but he gives the wrong message.”

But J.J. Popovich asked, “What ARE we trying to do here?” Len replied, “Gaining credibility for the group [and show] what neighborhood councils can do, then move it forward to see what our group can do [as a deliberative body].” Popovich added, “What will this organization be? What will they be voting on [in the session]?” Len replied, “Our main purpose is propaganda – outreach.”

Ken said that the intent is to network, and to focus on issues, and that the group should remember that the charter granted “the right to form a congress.” He suggested that Chemerinsky could offer a statement in support. He asked how many attendees will attend the DONE event. Two thirds raised hands. “There’s a credibility gap in this group itself,” he said. “If people in this room are there, it carries credibility.” He urged caution about inviting Greg Nelson, though. “The City Council is not a part of this process – consider having commissioners there instead.” Ken said that the congress charter draft was an outline, but complete enough to hand out. But Joel Fisher said that there was time for another draft.

Ann Hull expressed caution. “People are not aware of the group, or they think we’re a puppet group under city hall. We have to assert our independence and show we’re attached to city bodies for the purposes of making improvements. Bring in people from outside the community and government officials, but be careful how downtown people are presented.” Roger Kulpa agreed. “At the [DONE] congress we’ll have more new people. Tell them what we are and who we are, that we’re not a puppet or a tool of DONE.”

Mike Cohen suggested that the presentation be about “selling the benefits of acquiring more power” by stressing that it’s an ongoing organization devoted to “discussing issues among neighborhood councils.” He cautioned against having it viewed as an “ad-hoc process.” He noted that the congress confers benefits and obligations and that the session should present them, “so people can say, ‘yes – this is good for me,’ or for them to see the drawbacks.” David [?] saw the session as a way to determine “key objectives” and a “tactical plan.”

J.J. Popovich said that the mission statement needs to be firmed up today, along with a timetable and a set of goals and, most importantly, finalize the charter for feedback. “Get this body going - we have a short period of time to establish power and legitimacy.” But Joe Vitti said that it would take years to get the congress working. “When neighborhood councils mature, they’ll recognize that citywide issues are of paramount importance [beyond addressing zoning challenges] so make sure we have a way of following up with them. Have a table.”

A new participant said it sounded like “mixed messages” and observed that it’s not clear if the congress presented an “adversarial relationship” with the city bureaucracy or the City Council. “Are they accountable to our needs – or are we working with them? You’re proposing a political body, but we’re not elected by a large number of voters. In my council, we had 100 votes. In terms of legitimacy, it doesn’t bring much to us.”

Ken Marsh agreed. “We got into organizing but we become institutionalizing. We represent the voice of everybody [at the grassroots], so keep the grassroots nature of our mandate. Can the congress enhance actions [like DWP MOU] or consolidate power in our own aegis and cut off other agencies? Institutions have to be build upon representation.”

Jim McQuiston replied, “The Charter says ‘You shall advise,’” and asked how 85 neighborhood councils could monitor 50 city bodies and commissions. “We don’t have the capacity, but I look to this group to assign knowledgeable people to do this – and to go to their neighborhood council. Say, ‘This is what we’re going to do – to get this information and to monitor it so that you can act on it.’” He said

that neighborhood councils and their representatives need to be down at city hall “8 hours a day.” Dan Wiseman called it “The next step to democracy,” and added, “Leaders in city government think that we’re ready to take these steps.” But he said that he’s seeing the same faces over and over again. McQuiston said that the congress was an avenue to interest new people.

But Elizabeth McClellan was frustrated. “Can we spend all of our time hashing this out?” Soledad agreed. “An agenda committee for the convention could have cut this [discussion] down to 15 minutes.

Len cut short the discussion before the break and replied, “I will draft people who will be helpful for this group to be at the breakout sessions. I apparently am moderating.”

#### Break

After the break, Jeff noted that the congress is supposed to be a permanent structure “to supplant what DONE is calling a ‘congress’ and enumerated its proposed functions: an opportunity to network, a place for substantive presentations, and a structure to tally NC votes.

There was discussion about the form of the congress – whether it should be a house of appointed representatives or less formal to invite less city council attention and perhaps oversight. “Why delegates?” McClellan asked. Jeff replied that it’s a deliberative body with a focus on the senate – as in one person from each neighborhood councils gets one vote. Len said, “We’re going beyond the charter by setting up a group within the congress that becomes a decision-making body – a senate with equal representation from all neighborhood councils.”

Jeff said, “This senate as not a decision-making body but an agenda-setting, issue-identifying body – and not 100 people expressing their independent will.” Referring to sensitivities that the congress may take the prerogative away from neighborhood councils and undermine their autonomy, he added, “It will be amplifying neighborhood councils voices rather than being a separate voice.” Bob called the proposed delegates “signatory members.” J.J. Popovich said, “Deliberation goes on in neighborhood councils and decides and that’s what the rep is going to say....[the rep] has no individual choices, he’s just carrying out the message.”

Bill said, “If the senators are not making any decision, and just taking a vote, then don’t use government names.” Popovich replied, “They’ll make decisions as to what neighborhood councils want to say. The [expressed] majority [opinion] of the senate will be the voice of the neighborhood councils.” Jeff asked whether delegates or senators would be elected or appointed or not even necessarily a board member. Another participant asked other fundamental questions:

Should a majority opinion be decided by a majority of all certified councils – or merely a majority of participating councils?

Would a quorum be judged by the same criteria – at 50% + 1 neighborhood council?

What if only 20 show up but 11 express a position...is there a threshold number to qualify for a ‘majority’?

Jacque said that with 100 neighborhood councils eventually, they can’t expect a quorum to be 51 neighborhood councils. Len suggested another means of voting, such as having a quorum for discussion where an official delegate is present for discussion and information sharing but voting takes place electronically. Mike Cohen agreed. “We can’t have a small subset voting because they have the time. These are neighborhood councils – we’re not formulating laws – and they could send a delegate to appear or notify us of an excuse [to modify the quorum threshold].”

Ken said, “We’re hung up on a 2X per year idea with votes, etc. Think of it as an ongoing 12-month issues center, where the group acts on and moves issues forward. The issues center meets on a regular

basis, but not as 87 people but maybe 43 [issuing a] detailed reporting-out including minority voices. In the DWP MOU, we said, '40 now, 60 later, but never all of them. We'll still have impact by reporting out how many voices [contribute] so that [the city council] know what the impact [on neighborhood councils] really is."

Bob Gelfand said, "This group is moving towards concluding what the LANC Issues Group resolved 2 years ago – an organization to define issues and send them back to neighborhood councils as the legitimate unit with authority to advise." He added that the senate does not have authority. "What if someone says, '67 neighborhood councils voted, it has legitimacy,' but the neighborhood councils voted in favor as advisory to what? Not to the city council, but to neighborhood councils to take up the issue." Nancy agreed. "We're lessening the voice of the impact statement – it's no longer the individual voices of neighborhood councils...they're swallowed up [under this proposal]." Jim agreed. "You say it's a deliberative body, but you say they don't have to deliberate." He then said that e-democracy "can be a repository for votes – and you don't even have to have a meeting."

Len clarified. "Delegated deliberation on an issue and then take it to your neighborhood council – 'Here is what was discussed, here is the motion, and we'd like to take it to you.'" Jim replied, "[Delegates] don't have the power to shape the issue for their neighborhood council." Dan said, "We are reporting. There are 4 million people, and this body may or may not be able to represent them. If the deliberative body indicates in a report who, how many, the majority and minority [positions], then it goes back to neighborhood councils where there is the opportunity to do an impact statement and take the report to the city council."

The working group adjourned to anticipate the June 25<sup>th</sup> DONE event and to prepare the outreach materials necessary to communicate their mission to the wider NC public.