

Neighborhood Councils Must Be Doing Something Right

Recent criticisms leveled at NC's seem to be way off base.

by Bob Gelfand

Within the last few months, the neighborhood council system has come under attack from just about every quarter of the city. At every turn, arguments that were either not supported by facts, or conclusions based on faulty views of what neighborhood councils actually do, were passed along uncritically by the news media. It is important to set the record straight, which we shall attempt to do here. At the same time, we might conclude that we must be doing something right in order to have earned such splendid opponents; if we were doing nothing, nobody would be noticing us.

The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE) is the city agency that is supposed to protect and support us. Instead, under the city's new administration, it has become our worst antagonist. Early in 2006, DONE began a concerted campaign of attacking neighborhood councils by rigorously enforcing election rules that had only recently come into existence. DONE failed to carry out its own required duties (for example: creating the forms that councils were required to fill out in order to get election procedures approved). In the absence of the required forms, DONE refused to permit elections in numerous councils; the colloquialism for this kind of problem is Catch 22, and it was clearly a Catch 22 that many of our councils experienced as 2006 progressed.

Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council saw its elections postponed numerous times due to interference by DONE; as a result, our usual May election finally happened at the very end of October. With all this "help" from DONE, our electoral turnout, typically in the 300 - 500 range, was a measly 75 votes cast, and our previously robustly contested elections this time saw only 14 people running for 17 seats.

In November 2006, DONE's interim General Manager Lisa Sarno released a memo that accused neighborhood councils of being contentious and disruptive. As our neighbors who have attended meetings know all too well, this is about as far as you can get from the truth when it comes to our San Pedro area neighborhood councils. But the Daily Breeze went with a headline calling us "rowdy." We have been accused of many things (long winded being the most common), but the Sarno memorandum misses us by the proverbial mile.

When neighborhood council volunteers looked into the Sarno memo more carefully, we found a collection of wild assertions and hearsay, but no real attempt on DONE's part to discover the facts. For example, DONE accused a newspaper editor from the northern part of the city of writing "a racist article." Numerous people from that area of the city came forward to dispute the allegation. The editor, when contacted by The Coastal Current, denied the charge. What became painfully apparent is that DONE failed to investigate the charges, but merely tossed them into the memo in a display of reckless arrogance.

As we have been investigating other charges, we find a similar pattern. For example, one highly inflammatory section of the memorandum accused a board member from one of our neighboring councils of bringing a weapon

onto a high school campus. The story as written implied an act of contentious intimidation, whereas witnesses dispute the tone of the DONE piece and its insinuations. Apparently, DONE failed to contact either the witnesses or the man accused of the act; one witness we spoke to described the DONE allegations as "highly slanted."

Another story: City Controller Laura Chick released an otherwise useful audit report on DONE, but tossed a few grenades in our direction by arguing that DONE needs more authority; Controller Chick eventually disavowed part of this argument, but it did some damage, in that it has allowed DONE some political cover in its attempts to gain more authority over our neighborhood doings.

And then there was the University of Southern California, which has a department that has been studying the evolution of our neighborhood council system for most of a decade. At a meeting on the USC campus a few weeks ago, members of the USC group reported on its studies; one element of their study included a survey which was completed by a little less than half of the governing board members of the city's neighborhood councils. Based on that survey (a self-selecting response group to be sure), the USC group expressed some concerns about how well our neighborhood council boards represent the ethnic diversity of the city as a whole; the result was that the news media ran with this story, implying that the system is, in this sense, a failure. The media failed to report on a more careful explanation by members of the study team, and presented by the web site www.CityWatchLA.com, that explains that our system is actually quite a success.

What seems to be missing from all these wild assertions and specious conclusions is any sense of what neighborhood councils were invented to do, namely to be a place where neighbors can get together and talk about our mutual issues. The neighborhood councils were not established to enact legislation or to oversee city departments. We were specifically created to provide advice; we are empowered to collect input from our districts and communicate it to government; in one sense, we act as additional eyes and ears for Councilwoman Hahn.

For a collection of volunteers empowered to be advisory to the city (and nothing else), we certainly have been taking a lot of criticism because we have not, as yet, reformed government, brought an end to crime, or achieved world peace.

We must be doing something right to have earned all this attention. The press calls us rowdy, the city government accuses us of doing too much or doing too little, and the public is left to wonder who we are and what we actually do.

We are the Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council, one of 86 neighborhood councils created in the City of Los Angeles over the past five years. We came into existence as part of a compromise

that guided the City Charter reforms of 1999. The 1999 act was created largely in reaction to the valley secession movement, but we would like to think that it was also part of a broader, more idealistic attempt to make local government more workable. If nothing else, we point out that we exist by right of the city Charter, which ordains that a neighborhood council system shall be created.

It is now obvious that some of the government agencies and elected officials have a problem with this concept. Most interestingly, the agencies that are created by the Charter to work with us, aid us, and support our activities have been among the worst. DONE's recent activities speak for themselves. In addition to DONE, the charter act established a Board of Neighborhood Commissioners (BONC) to advise DONE and carry out the official act of certifying neighborhood councils. For example, our Wilmington and Coastal San Pedro councils went before BONC and were officially certified in December 2001, the first pair to achieve this honor.

The earliest members of BONC were careful to nurture the newly developing councils, and were extremely careful not to abuse their other statutory authority, which is to decertify councils that fail to live up to their responsibilities. Now, we find that the newly appointed members of BONC speak in a way that suggests a determination to rule over us and administer our activities at the more direct level. The new BONC actively discusses ways to bring neighborhood councils into line with their preconceived notions of what we are supposed to be and to do. This clashes with the more traditional view that we exist in order to represent our own interests, and to do so we need to set our own agendas and to self-define what we are and what we do.

Perhaps the problem is that we are a new sort of political entity, a governmental invention that threatens to bring real change to the old order. As a result, we are running into predictable fears and suspicions; the people who have been used to having their way - billionaire developers and the Port of Los Angeles come to mind- don't quite know how to deal with us.

It shouldn't be too surprising that the traditional political structure has been hostile to some extent. The new mayor is not invested in the neighborhood council movement to anywhere the extent that the previous one was.

On the other hand, we in the harbor area have been uniquely lucky in that Councilwoman Janice Hahn has been a leader in the movement to create and empower neighborhood councils from day one. Where this will go is not clear, but the immediate future promises to be interesting.

Things you can do to clean the air

walk more - drive less - bike more
carpool - take the bus - use non-toxic cleaners
turn off a switch - plant a tree - don't smoke
use energy efficiently - go solar - spread the word!

www.coalitionforcleanair.org

Air Quality Monitoring Stations Soon Ready for Observing AQ Conditions

Approximately 30 monitoring stations located in the harbor area are gathering data on air quality and will be providing results for public viewing in first quarter 2007. The Air Quality Monitoring Program was implemented by the California Air Resources Board, the South Coast Air Quality Management District, and the Ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles under the Clean Ports Initiative. The monitoring stations are placed in San Pedro, West Long Beach, and Wilmington. Stay tuned for further updates on the web site where the results can be viewed.