

COASTAL SAN PEDRO NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL

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Governing Board Members

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Liaison to the City Attorney

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Vice President

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Chair, Recreation and Parks Committee
Mayor's Budget Representative

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Alternate to the Los Angeles
Neighborhood Councils Congress
Representative to the
LADWP Oversight Committee
Representative to the
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Editor, Coastal Currents
Representative to the Los Angeles
Neighborhood Councils Congress

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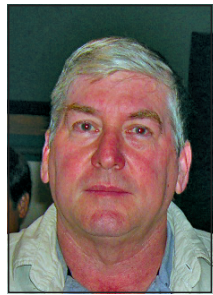
Chair, Port and Environment Committee
Representative to the Port
Community Advisory Committee

Governing Board Meetings

The Governing Board meets on the third Monday of each month (March through December) at 6:30 p.m. at the Cabrillo Marina Community Center, Berth 28, San Pedro. The Board meets on the fourth Monday during the months of January and February.

Left in Limbo

By Bob Gelfand, Board Member / Coastal Currents Editor



Our neighborhood council system should have been a clean, workable institution. Now the system is in jeopardy, solely through the stupidity of the people who were supposed to be in charge.

We started with a straightforward concept: We would create a place where neighbors come together to share their concerns, and we would communicate those concerns to city officials. It would

be simple and efficient, not unlike the New England town hall gathering. I like to think of it as the "simple little system."

The problem occurred when the city fathers tried to set down words to describe the new proposal. What transpired is what happens when you put together a collection of self-styled geniuses (they were called the charter commissions—two of them, no less, one elected and the other appointed), and then factor in their hidden agendas, political ambitions, and just plain thick-headedness.

The charter language they created and the legislation it engendered are masterpieces of self-contradiction and ambiguity, a recipe for failure. The fact that we have succeeded so well, so far, is a testament to our own stubborn commitment, but we are now in jeopardy.

Let's concentrate on the worst elements of what the city has done, and why it has created a continuing battle that has now gone on for two-thirds of a decade.

The charter commissioners writing the 1999 charter reform measure wanted to go beyond the simple little system described above. Remember, it would have divided the city into neighborhood groups, each of which would function to tell the elected officials what we, the people, actually think.

Such a system would have had immediate advantages: It would work, and it would be without electoral controversies. Eligibility to participate would depend only on residency, just as eligibility to vote for your congressman or your city council representative does.

But the charter commissioners weren't satisfied with creating an obvious, workable system. They decided that it was too limited for their utopian fantasies. They opted for a more grandiose model and in order to express their expansionist viewpoint, they adopted a term to describe the new customers that their system would serve: "stakeholders".

They argued that anybody who has a stake in the community (however ill-defined) should be allowed to vote in neighborhood council elections. How little can a stake be, and still be counted? This is a question that continues to bedevil us.

The commissioners also decided that stakeholders would include those who work or own property in a neighborhood council's district. It's not a terrible idea in itself, in that small business owners certainly have a stake in the success of the region.

The problems arose because the charter commissioners and the city council, in dramatic acts of non-partisan cowardice, failed to write defining language for what it means to work in an area. How little or how much work should you need to do in order to be eligible to participate as a non-resident voter? Shall we count only people employed full time? Most people thought this to be too limiting.

Should anyone who taps on his laptop computer in the local coffee house be entitled to stakeholder status on the grounds that this is work? Most of us thought not.

But the charter commissioners and the city council refused to define the limits of what it means to work in a neighborhood council district. Over the years, the right to vote has been handled on almost a case by case basis, with each of the nearly 90 councils trying to adopt its own rules.

More recently, the city has effectively thrown out all limits, and now allows for pretty much anybody with a pulse to vote in any neighborhood council district (see sidebar: the new stakeholder definition).

A stakeholder is defined as any individual who lives, works, or owns property in the Neighborhood Council area. In addition, stakeholder status is conferred on those who declare a stake in the neighborhood and affirm the factual basis for it.

To the casual reader, this must seem strange, almost absurd, but it is what the city fathers gave us.

Why is this such a problem to our own Coastal San Pedro neighborhood council? In a word, it is a threat to our democratic system. One sentence of historical context will explain things: The hundreds of people who participated in our council's founding back in 2001 chose to create a system that maximizes the right of you, the people, to elect the governing board.

Don't like us? Then throw us out. Like us? Then reelect us. Simple and effective. Not only that, but you the voters get to pick your own best choices out of all those who opt to run for election. Our system elects the top 17 vote getters out of all the candidates. At the risk of doing a little personal editorializing, I would like to suggest that this system has served us well and produced some outstanding public service on the part of our volunteers.

But this system comes with a price. It is unabashedly political. Choices get made—some candidates lose and some candidates win, and out of this develops our home-grown version of the will of the people.

To recap: The simple little system would have established moderate sized regions in which neighbors come together to share their concerns and communicate those concerns to elected officials. The system the city gave us added absentee property owners and the work force to the system. This also could have worked, had the city established reasonable definitions for what it means to work or own property in the area.

But for its own reasons, the city has failed to establish even the most rudimentary definitions for what it means to work in a neighborhood council district. When the city added the new, expansionary definition of "stakeholder" to the mix, your Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council found itself in something of a fix, because it means that we cannot even know who our stakeholders are, and we are subject to having our elections taken over by special interests who have shown by their previous actions that they wish only to undermine our ability to fight for clean air and enduring traffic and public amenities.

Our council chose to act by writing new bylaws amendments that would fix, once and for all, this gaping hole in our ability to function. We therefore wrote definitions for what it means to live, work, and own property in the Coastal San Pedro district, and submitted them to the city for what in any reasonable place should have been routine ratification.

It looked to us like apple pie, motherhood, and the flag. Who could possibly object to these definitions? But the city of Los Angeles apparently has a problem with instituting sanity into the proceedings. Through its oddly named agency, The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment ("DONE"), the city is telling us that we have no right to determine our own destiny. Even more oddly and a bit hypocritically, the DONE is telling us that we cannot define subgroups of stakeholders, in spite of the fact that the vast majority of neighborhood councils in the city have been allowed to do so.

Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council has chosen to contest the city's disapproval of our bylaws changes. The process involves an appeal to another oddly-named city agency, the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners (BONC), followed possibly by an appeal to the city council itself. We will keep you informed through these pages as to what transpires.

In the meanwhile, we can only muse over the fact that in attempting to act responsibly, we have been shot down by those who refuse to accept responsibility for the current state of the system. Let's hope that in this case at least, our good deeds will not be punished.

Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council Election Set for Saturday, October 25 at Point Fermin Park

The Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council will hold its final annual election in October. All 17 board members, who previously were chosen annually by the voters, will now serve two-year terms.

This is because the city council passed new rules forbidding annual elections for neighborhood councils. Board members chosen at this election will

serve through June 30, 2010.

The election is set for Saturday, October 25, from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at the Cetacean Society building in Point Fermin Park. All stakeholders at least 18 years of age are eligible to vote.

Stakeholders are defined as those who live, work, or own property in the Coastal San Pedro area or who "declare a stake in the neighborhood and affirm

the factual basis for it."

Those interested in running for a seat on the Coastal board have until September 25 to get their name on the ballot. Write-in candidates are not permitted.

For more information about the election, please visit the council's website at www.coastalsanpedro.org or contact the independent election administrator, Stephen Box, at (323) 962-1379.



One Call to City Hall!