Toward Community Engagement In City Governance:
Evaluating Neighborhood Council Reform in Los Angeles

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TOWARD COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN CITY GOVERNANCE: EVALUATING NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL REFORM IN LOS ANGELES

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POLICY BRIEF

This report presents findings from the Neighborhood Participation Project's multi-year study of neighborhood council implementation in the City of Los Angeles. We discuss the extent to which the system has developed the institutional requisites for success, including democratically legitimate councils, political innovations to support participation, and the capacity for neighborhood councils to act on issues of interest to their constituent communities. We also consider the long-term effects of the reform on political networks and civic culture in Los Angeles. We find a mixed record of success. While a citywide system of certified councils is in place, and some neighborhood councils have developed the capacity to act on behalf of their constituent communities, other neighborhood councils struggle, and the City has done a poor job of developing participatory arenas within which councils can interact constructively with city government.

The charter reform that created neighborhood councils was enacted in June, 1999. Formulation of a plan and related ordinances to structure system development required an additional two years, and certification was launched late in 2001. By 2004, a system of certified neighborhood councils with elected boards was largely in place. At this writing, there are 86 councils, of which 83 have elected boards, advising the City on behalf of residential communities that average about 39,000 in size. This system emerged from the grassroots; the self-organization of councils must be attributed to the dedicated efforts of community volunteers, good news for a city that is frequently maligned as devoid of civic identity.

Now eight years into the reform, we see variable results regarding the legitimacy, capacity, and influence of neighborhood councils. The most obvious—and regrettable—shortcoming is that neighborhood councils do not adequately incorporate the cultural diversity of Los Angeles. Homeowners with long tenure in the community are most heavily represented, which is not surprising considering that the councils are geographically defined advisory boards. The ramification of this stakeholder orientation is that Latinos are underrepresented, and boards are disproportionately wealthy, white, and highly educated. These representative biases endanger the political legitimacy of the councils, and raise questions regarding their ability to speak and act on behalf of diverse constituencies.

We also identify critical shortcomings in the City's development of political reforms—"empowerment innovations"—that would support constructive engagement of neighborhood councils in governance. The Charter contains five provisions intended to create forums for interaction to connect neighborhood councils in advising policy formulation and service delivery. These provisions received scant attention during the City's planning of neighborhood councils (the plan focused primarily on DONE responsibilities and certification procedures), and institutional support for council involvement with the City subsequently has evolved in an ad hoc and halting manner. There is not adequate support for council engagement with the City. We advocate that City officials broaden their mental mapping of the neighborhood council system to contain not only the 86 councils, but also structured arenas for their interaction with the City Council, the Mayor's office, boards and commissions, and city departments.

Four conditions for success are identified in Berry, Portney, and Thomson's (1994) renowned study of neighborhood councils: a citywide system, adequate resource support, political support, and empowerment innovations to support participation in city governance. While the citywide system is in place, political support and institutional reforms have been lacking. Moreover, it is not clear that neighborhood councils have the leadership resources required to operate effectively. Consequently neighborhood council capacity varies considerably across the City. Given the exigencies of self-maintenance, and the limited assistance provided by the City, it is not surprising that some neighborhood councils struggle with the outreach required to sustain let alone to diversify stakeholder participation. While group conflict and electoral controversies get political attention, many more councils struggle quietly to gain traction on community issues.

The neighborhood council agenda is diverse. While instances of land use opposition gain attention, NIMBYism constitutes a relatively small space on the agenda. Neighborhood councils shape community design guidelines, assist local community organizations, organize festivals and invest in community beautification. What is not widely understood is that they devote an extraordinary share of efforts to self-maintenance and external relations activities. These operational tasks are necessary to survival, and they absorb a tremendous amount of volunteer time. Neighborhood councils and Department of Neighborhood Empowerment staff agree that outreach is the single most difficult challenge for neighborhood councils.

Neighborhood council systems in other cities have been found to improve civic culture by deepening the quality of participation and fostering more positive attitudes toward city government. Many of these effects are attributable to the relationships that develop among neighborhood councils, their stakeholder constituents, and city officials. Connections to community stakeholders are important to inform council members of local needs and preferences and enabling councils to leverage resources for community action. Relationships with city officials in turn connect councils to the agents of government, promoting information exchange and helping to foster understanding and opportunities for partnership.

We do not see the councils developing strong relationships with the community or with city officials, perhaps not a surprising finding given the institutional weaknesses of the system. Rather, there is growth in political relationships *between* neighborhood councils, the types of political networks that can support more generalized political mobilization. Indeed, in several instances neighborhood councils have exercised their muscles: in response to the city burglar alarm and DWP rate increase proposals, and most recently, in opposition to City Council placement on the ballet of Proposition R to extend term limits.

What emerges, in sum, is a system that while efficacious in some communities, needs to be broadened to incorporate a more diverse group of stakeholder participants. The City needs to provide much greater assistance to councils with outreach and leadership development, while developing more structured arenas for engagement around policy formulation and service delivery. We recommend reforms in the following areas:

Participatory representation. To increase diversity and improve community linkages, the City should assume responsibility for elections and generalized outreach. It should support councils in performing targeted community organizing to diversify stakeholder involvement. This engagement should not be limited to meeting attendance; councils should increase direct stakeholder involvement in committees, and undertake voluntary projects that are targeted to involve underrepresented groups.

Empowerment innovations. To engage councils constructively there is a need to develop structured arenas for participation in policy making and service delivery. Improved communications are critical. The City should improve the Early Notification System to be searchable and to provide earlier notice so councils have more time for consultation. The City also should expand emergent service partnerships, such as the DWP and Public Works memoranda of understanding. It should create regional forums for neighborhood councils to deliberate with city departments. The Mayor's budget process should be made more concrete, enabling councils to provide actionable input on specific decisions such as capital investment or community development. These reforms will require changes to the culture of government in Los Angeles and political leadership that takes seriously the special role the Charter establishes for neighborhood councils.

Neighborhood council capacity. To increase the capacity and efficacy of councils, the City should invest in sustained leadership development programs with a particular focus on conflict negotiation and collaboration. Neighborhood councils should develop better deliberative forums at the community level in order to function more as conveners of community dialogue and less as formalistic mini-City Councils. There is also a need to emphasize community organizing around projects, not simply meetings, and to facilitate sharing of information around council best practices.

I. OVERVIEW OF EVALUATION

In July 1999, when Los Angeles voters approved a new city charter, the city embarked on an ambitious project in participatory democracy. The new Charter created a citywide system of advisory neighborhood councils that would represent the diversity of stakeholders, defined as those who live, work or own property in the neighborhood. The broad goal of the reform as stated in the Charter is "to promote more citizen participation in government and make government more responsive to local needs." The Los Angeles model of neighborhood councils stands out because Los Angeles is extraordinarily large in both population and geographic scope, and diverse in ethnicity, class and languages spoken. While other large cities, such as New York, have forms of neighborhood governance, those systems are appointed and directed centrally. In contrast, Los Angeles sought to create a system that would evolve organically from the grassroots.

The Charter contains several provisions expected to improve neighborhood participation in the city policymaking process. However, the Charter was broad in its outlines, leaving much detail to be resolved by ordinance in the planning process. In turn the Neighborhood Council Plan left many details about design to the discretion of neighborhood council organizers, and provided little guidance regarding the involvement of councils in governance.

The City has invested significant resources in developing this system. It currently appropriates about $4.3 million per year for expenses incurred by neighborhood councils, including the up to $50,000 a year each neighborhood council receives.[1] Through FY 2005-2006, the City had appropriated $10.9 million for neighborhood councils. In addition, the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, mandated to support neighborhood councils, had a $4.3 million operating budget in FY 2005-2006. Yet the most significant investments are the time and efforts of the volunteer neighborhood council participants—many of whom devote tens of hours a week to their responsibilities.

In 2006, the Charter required the appointment of a commission to review the system to examine its development and assess the degree to which it has achieved its goals. The timing of this review is propitious in some ways but premature in others. On one hand, the system of neighborhood councils has had time to develop its central components: The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE) has operated for eight years; neighborhood councils have formed in almost every neighborhood in the city; and some administrative reforms—such as the creation of an Early Notification System and the Mayor's Neighborhood Council Budget Process—have been implemented. It is appropriate to assess how well these components are operating. On the other hand, it is still relatively early to reach conclusions on the overall impacts of the system. Some neighborhood councils, for example, only have been certified for a few months. More importantly, the fruits of democratic reforms may take a long time to materialize.

Evaluative Criteria and Methodology

The evaluation of an institutional reform such as neighborhood councils is fraught with difficulty. Some members of the press have declared the system a failure hobbled by infighting and irrelevance. Others tout it as an emerging social movement that effectively can address local problems and that has gained the organizational strength to become a force in city politics. Obviously, where one sits has a large influence on one's perception of the system.

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[1] City of Los Angeles Office of the Controller. Performance and Financial Audit of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. Nov. 28, 2006.

It is important to understand the roots of these disagreements in order to evaluate the successes and shortcomings of the neighborhood council system in a way that allows for broad consensus on the direction this system should take.

The first issue is that the vision for the neighborhood council system outlined in the Charter is broad and allows varying interpretations of what the system should accomplish. The Charter states that the purpose of the system is to "promote more citizen participation in government and make government more responsive to local needs." Neighborhood councils must represent the diversity of interests in the community, and every part of Los Angeles must be located within a neighborhood council. Article I of the Neighborhood Council Plan, adopted to implement the system, broadens the goals stated in the Charter. In addition to promoting participation and making government more responsive, the Plan supports "opportunities to build partnerships with government," collaboration and building a sense of community.

The wide range of possible interpretations of these provisions was evident in focus groups the Neighborhood Participation Project conducted early in the implementation process. The neighborhood activists who participated spoke about the importance of community building, lobbying regarding community needs, influencing city services and connecting to the broader city governance process. Another member quoted former New York Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia: "The essence of city government is good housekeeping." This prompted another to quip: "Neighborhood councils should not be the maid with the vacuum cleaner but the mother-in-law with the white gloves." The concern that the city would "offload" maintenance duties was echoed by a participant who stated: "We don't want to do the City's job … like a self-service gas station."

Some focus group participants felt neighborhood councils could influence broad governance processes, such as redistricting, while others articulated the importance of community building

through social activities, such as community festivals. The participants tempered their visions, however, with a degree of pragmatism. "No one has hope for revolutionary actions," one participant stated, "but the simple ability to be heard." Another agreed: "I don't entertain any delusions that neighborhood councils will share power—I do entertain the vision that neighborhood councils can serve as forums for different interests to get together and address issues. There is more value in the fact that these different groups with separate interests come together to focus on community issues."

Beyond the broad and vague Charter mandates for the neighborhood council system, the basic character of this systemic effort at governance reform is inherently difficult to evaluate due to the process orientation of the reform, and the typically contested nature of system outcomes. Because of this, we rely heavily in our evaluation on the extent to which the system seems to be developing capacity for action.

Process orientation. The creation of the neighborhood council system primarily changed the process rather then setting concrete outcome goals. Evaluating the attainment of process goals remains very much in the eye of beholder. For example, more participation generally is preferred to less, but more participation also increases the probability of conflict either on policy or personal grounds. Less consensus exists on how much conflict should be promoted and tolerated in the system. To some, long raucous meetings in which different parties clash signal that new voices have joined the debate, while to others, such clashes point to a system run amok.

Contested outcomes. The extent to which neighborhood councils make substantive achievements has been contested. If nothing else, urban politics is about resolving conflicts between contending interests. By adding new voices the neighborhood council system changed the dynamics of these policy debates, creating new winners and losers. Naturally, winners and losers

will have contrasting opinions on the value of neighborhood councils in these debates.

The creation of neighborhood councils has been an exercise in building community capacity. *Capacity* indicates the potential for community action, but when and how that capacity may be exercised remains elusive. *Community capacity* often remains latent until a mobilizing issue, such as a rise in crime rate or deterioration of traffic mobility, prompts the community to act.

Simply looking at neighborhood council actions to date provides an incomplete picture of their underlying capacities. The notion of capacity *building* implies a continuous, dynamic process. Therefore, looking at neighborhood council accomplishments in the relatively brief period since council inception provides only partial evidence on how well organizational capacity will be developed and maintained over time.

In this evaluation of the neighborhood councils, we strive to address these difficulties head on. We seek to employ as broad a base of evidence as possible by combining multiple data sources from eight years of field work. Our criteria can be divided into long-run effects of the system versus the intermediate-level system reforms that are necessary prerequisites for the long-run success of the system. The intermediate system goals include:

● *A strong participatory core.* Councils that make up the system must participate openly and effectively with their constituent stakeholders, which in turn requires open elections of the governing board and broad, representative participation in neighborhood council processes. Deliberation requires effective outreach.

● *Political support and provision of resources.* Support of key political actors both in terms of open access to policy making and in the provision of resources is crucial. These requisites include appropriate support by DONE and the implementation of the political innovations

outlined in the Charter, including early notification, input into the budgetary process and monitoring of services.

These intermediate goals are discussed in Sections II through IV of this report. The long-run goals of the system of neighborhood councils, which are assessed in this section of the report, are:

● *Increased participation of diverse stakeholders.* The system is intended to increase both the quantity and quality of civic participation in Los Angeles and thereby foster partnerships between the City and communities to address pressing public problems.

● *Improved community capacity.* By increasing the organizational capacity of their communities, neighborhood councils should be able to have a positive influence on policy decisions and their neighborhoods.

● *Strengthening the civic culture of Los Angeles.* Neighborhood councils can influence stakeholder perceptions of their government and their role as citizens. Residents of Los Angeles currently have relatively low levels of trust, and high levels of political disaffection. The question is whether these attitudes can change as a result of involvement in neighborhood councils.

This evaluation uses a multi-methodological approach, combining documentary research with qualitative and quantitative field data. Primary sources of data collection include two surveys of neighborhood council board members; two surveys of Department of Neighborhood Empowerment project coordinators; in-depth interviews with neighborhood council members, city council staff and city department executive liaisons to neighborhood councils; a survey of city department staff who interact with neighborhood councils; documentary data; three focus groups involving neighborhood council stakeholders; and extensive field research, including neighborhood council meeting attendance and observation.

System Overview

The reform has been successful in creating a citywide system of operating neighborhood councils. As the authors elsewhere discuss, given relatively limited resource support from the City, the development of the current citywide system must be attributed to the tremendous efforts of hundreds of volunteer community activists. By 2004, the system was largely in place, with 81 certified neighborhood councils and 74 elected governing boards. Thus the city has had what might be considered a functioning neighborhood council system for approximately three years. There are currently 86 certified neighborhood councils of which 83 have elected boards; the number of councils may increase in the future as some of the larger councils are discussing the possibility of dividing into smaller entities.

It is perhaps more accurate to conceptualize the neighborhood councils as "community councils" given that councils represent on average residential areas of 38,000 people. The average size of a neighborhood council board is about 21 board members. Most of these boards meet monthly, and many have committee substructures that consider policy issues and forward action items for consideration by the governing board.

Neighborhood councils are also beginning to coalesce into regional and citywide policy networks. These include the Citywide Alliance of Neighborhood Councils; the Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Congress; Valley, Harbor, and Northeast Alliances; and other issue- or identity-oriented networks. These various neighborhood networks have increased the flow of information among community activists in the city's many sub-regions.

Civic Participation

The Charter lists promoting citizen participation in government as a central goal of neighborhood councils. Improved participation can be measured in a number of ways. Neighborhood councils can increase the number of times that individuals undertake a participatory act, such as volunteering, voting or attending a meeting. They also can lead to higher-quality forms of participation in which individuals feel a greater sense of empowerment or learn civic skills. These effects occur through a variety of means, including direct involvement on neighborhood councils, the ability of councils to involve communities, interaction with city officials, and building networks of relationships throughout the city among neighborhood activists.

Direct involvement. *A clear success of the neighborhood council system over the last seven years has been the creation of a nearly citywide system from the grassroots.* Individual volunteers from across the city have labored tirelessly to organize neighborhood councils, undergo the certification process, and manage operations. They have attended countless meetings, trainings and city-level events, such as the Mayor's Budget Day and the Congress of Neighborhood Councils. These accomplishments are all the more impressive given limited city support and often antagonistic relations with the city.

This accomplishment must be qualified, however. It is doubtful that these core volunteers include many newcomers to volunteerism and city politics. In our 2006 survey of neighborhood council board members, almost 98% said they vote either always or nearly always. In addition, neighborhood council board members are substantially more likely than neighborhood residents to be white, wealthy, highly educated, and homeowners, as discussed in Section II of this report. This is not surprising given the enormous dedication required to be an active board member, but it also suggests that neighborhood council decision-making may not represent the majority view of community stakeholders.

Community involvement. *Neighborhood councils have exerted increasing effort to reach out to their communities.* For example, more councils report outreach in 2006 compared to 2003. This outreach has improved the community awareness of neighborhood councils. A 2003 survey by the

Public Policy Institute of California found that only 27% of Angelenos had heard of neighborhood councils. In contrast, a 2007 survey by the Leavey Center for the Study of Los Angeles found that nearly 60% of Angelenos were aware of their neighborhood council.[2] While levels of awareness are slightly lower for groups that tend to participate less in politics—the young, minorities, and renters with lower incomes and less education—these differences are not disconcertingly large (see Figure I-1). Despite widely reported problems concerning election disputes, elections have been relatively successful. Most importantly, they attract multiple office seekers leading to a large number of contested races. Turnout is low but respectable for advisory bodies in a city with historically low voter participation.

Relationships with Los Angeles city government. Implicit in the goals of improving the responsiveness of city government through participation is the notion that neighborhood councils would help forge stronger relationships between community stakeholders and city officials. These relationships are slow in developing because the city has not systematically implemented one of the most important elements of successful neighborhood councils, political innovations to support participation with the City (see Section III).

Instead, forums for interaction have developed haltingly. While the Mayor's Budget Day and the Congress of Neighborhood Councils attract relatively large audiences, they are not structured as deliberative forums. Several City Council members hold regular meetings with neighborhood council representatives or send field staff to meetings, but others maintain distance. While neighborhood councils have had positive experiences negotiating MOUs with certain city departments, many departments pay little or no attention to them.

This failure of the system to forge more collaborative and productive relationships is the primary frustration voiced by neighborhood council board members. When asked what can be done to improve the responsiveness of the City, the majority of suggestions point to either improving communications with the City or the responsiveness of individual officials. In contrast, less than 30% of board members specifically cite problems with neighborhood councils.

The available evidence on everyday interactions does not paint a picture of strengthening relationships. The average number of contacts neighborhood council board members report with city officials remained stagnant between our 2003 and 2006 surveys (Figure I-2).[3] Moreover reported board member contacts with community stakeholders declined slightly between the two surveys, suggesting weak linkages to the constituents that boards represent.

Board members report the highest level of satisfaction with their contacts when they interact in person with city officials. For example, more than 80% of the board members who contacted the Mayor's office face-to-face reported being satisfied or very satisfied, while only 50% of those who contacted the Mayor's office by other means were satisfied. Unfortunately, personal interaction is becoming less frequent, for example, falling from 62% in 2003 to 49% in 2006 of all contacts with the Mayor's office as seen in Figure I-3.

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[2] Further results of the survey by the Leavey Center for the Study of Los Angeles may be accessed at lmu.edu/csla/community/LARiots1651ToplineReport051507.pdf

[3] In 2003 board members contacted an average of 2.3 offices in the two weeks prior to their last board meeting. This number increased marginally to 2.4 in 2006.

FIGURE I-1: PERCENTAGE OF LOS ANGELES RESIDENTS AWARE OF NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS
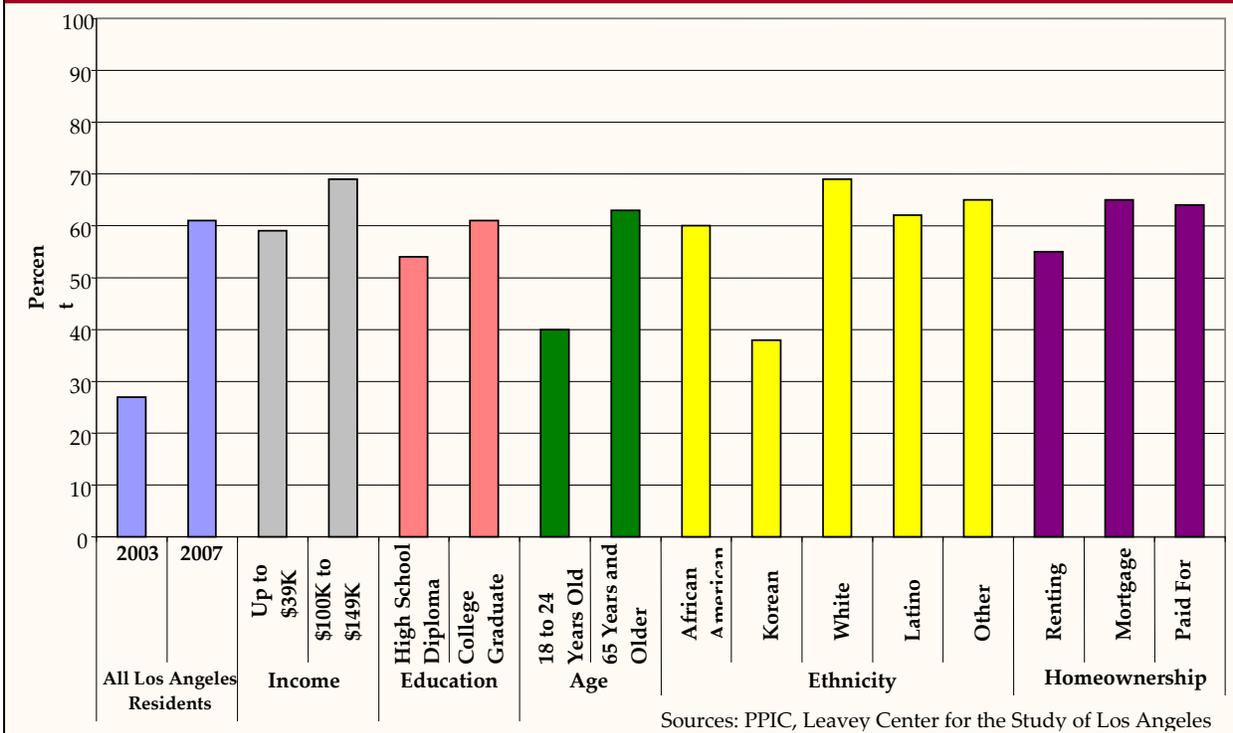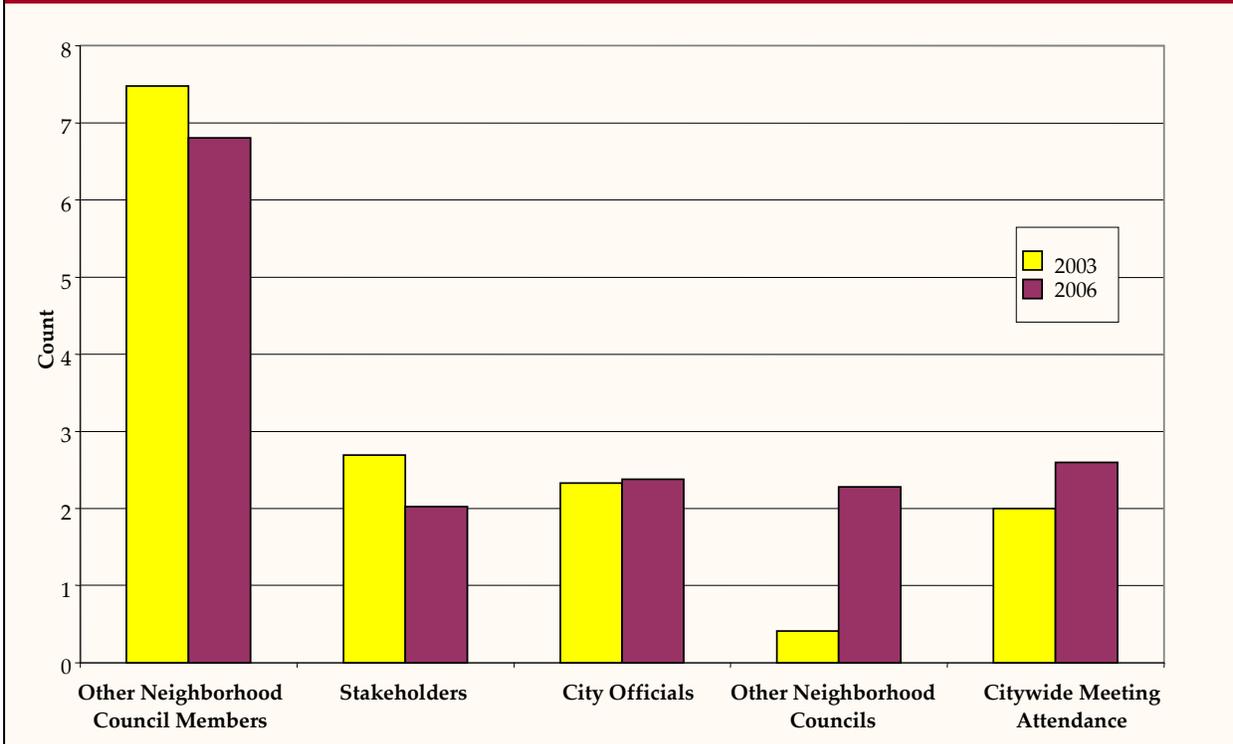

Sources: PPIC, Leavey Center for the Study of Los Angeles

FIGURE I-2: AVERAGE NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL MEMBER CONTACTS AND MEETING ATTENDANCE

Citywide networking. Neighborhood council activists reported an increase in citywide networking over time, from 0.4 board contacts with other councils in 2003 to more than two in 2006. This network represents a significant innovation in Los Angeles politics. These new connections represent a store of political and social capital that can serve the neighborhood councils well in the future. Councils can improve their use of this network by sharing and disseminating best practices and innovative ideas.

Community Capacity

To advise the City effectively and help make the City more responsive to community needs, neighborhood councils must develop basic organizational capacities, including the ability to run meetings, recruit and manage volunteers, set goals and conduct debates on controversial issues while avoiding acrimony.

Getting people with differing interests, work styles and busy schedules to volunteer together to achieve common goals constitute a tall order. Many community organizations fold after only a short time. Neighborhood councils face particularly entrenched difficulties because of their hybrid nature. For example, they are volunteer organizations but mandated to be inclusive. Volunteer organizations reduce conflict by attracting like-minded members. Members of the Sierra Club, for example, share common views on environmental issues, which go a long way toward facilitating group activities. The mandate for inclusiveness means neighborhood councils have to learn how to manage conflict effectively.

Similarly, neighborhood councils are grassroots organizations but are also creatures of city government. Although they survive on the volunteer efforts of their members, neighborhood councils are burdened by the Brown Act and other government mandates that typically apply to agencies with a paid workforce.

Despite these challenges, neighborhood council organizational capacity has continued to develop. Our survey of DONE project coordinators finds that a larger percentage of neighborhood councils in 2006 can run meetings effectively and set goals. Neighborhood councils also have accumulated a steadily increasing set of accomplishments, such as advising on land use issues, community-building events and neighborhood beautification projects (see Section IV of this report for details). These successes appear to be primarily local in character; Figure I-4 shows that DONE project coordinators agree that nearly 60% of neighborhood councils have had a positive influence on their communities.

Respondents identified only 39% of neighborhood councils as having influenced citywide policy, a perspective generally shared by City Council staffers interviewed by our project.

Our survey of city administrators who interact with neighborhood councils, which asked administrators to rate different actors on their importance in providing information and developing policy also found little neighborhood council influence. Clearly, city departments have not responded to the spirit of the Charter that gave neighborhood councils a special role in monitoring service delivery issues. Efforts to implement MOUs between some departments and neighborhood councils and to establish a community planning process in the Department of City Planning may ameliorate this situation, but much room for improvement exists.

The successes of neighborhood councils in building organizational capacity are fragile. Leadership changes, burnout by key members or new controversies can weaken these organizations. In 2003 and 2006, we asked DONE project coordinators whether neighborhood councils had encountered difficulties. In both years, a large number experienced either decreasing community involvement (often due to conflict in the neighborhood council) or increasing group conflict (see Figure I-5). It is clear that this system will face continued needs to recruit capable community leaders, train activists and support group activities.

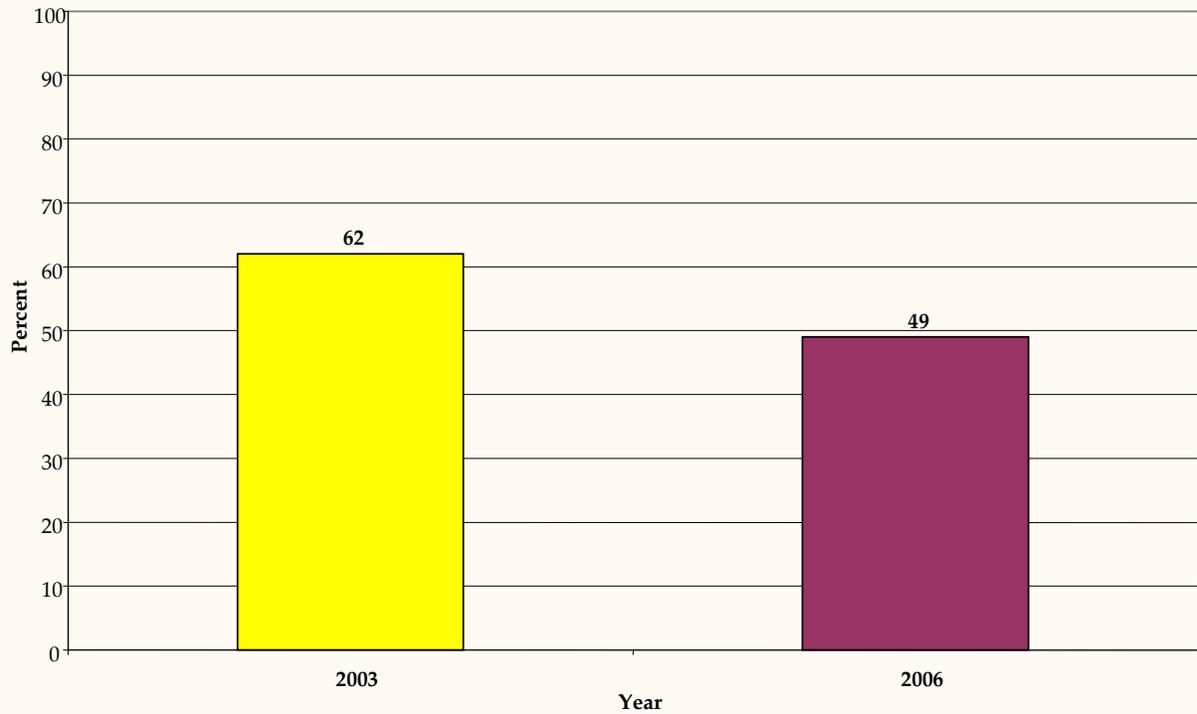**FIGURE I-3: NCS REPORTING PERSONAL INTERACTION IN CONTACTS WITH MAYOR'S OFFICE**

FIGURE I-4: PERCENTAGE OF NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS IDENTIFIED AS INFLUENCING CITYWIDE AND LOCAL ISSUES
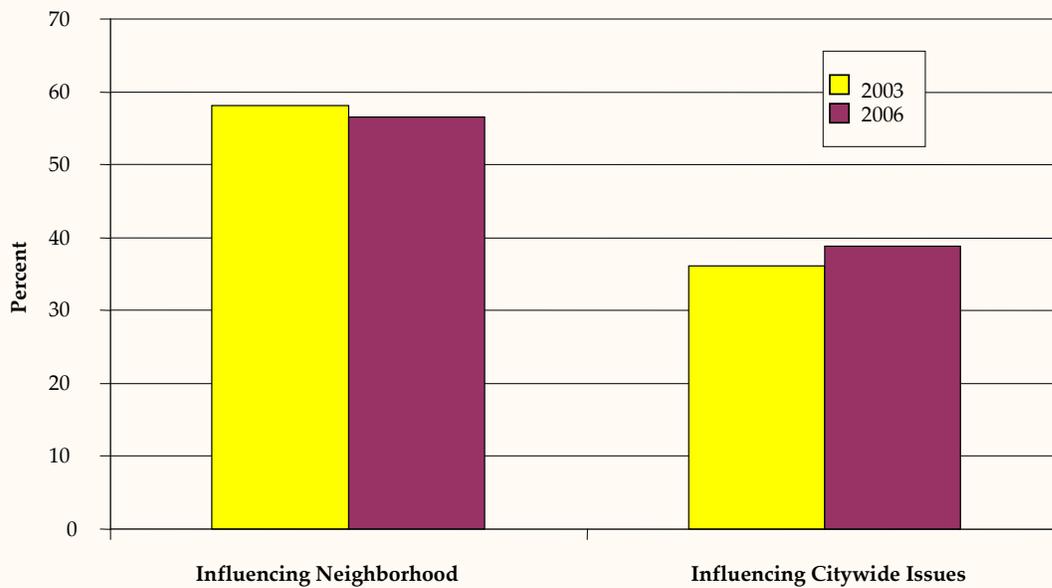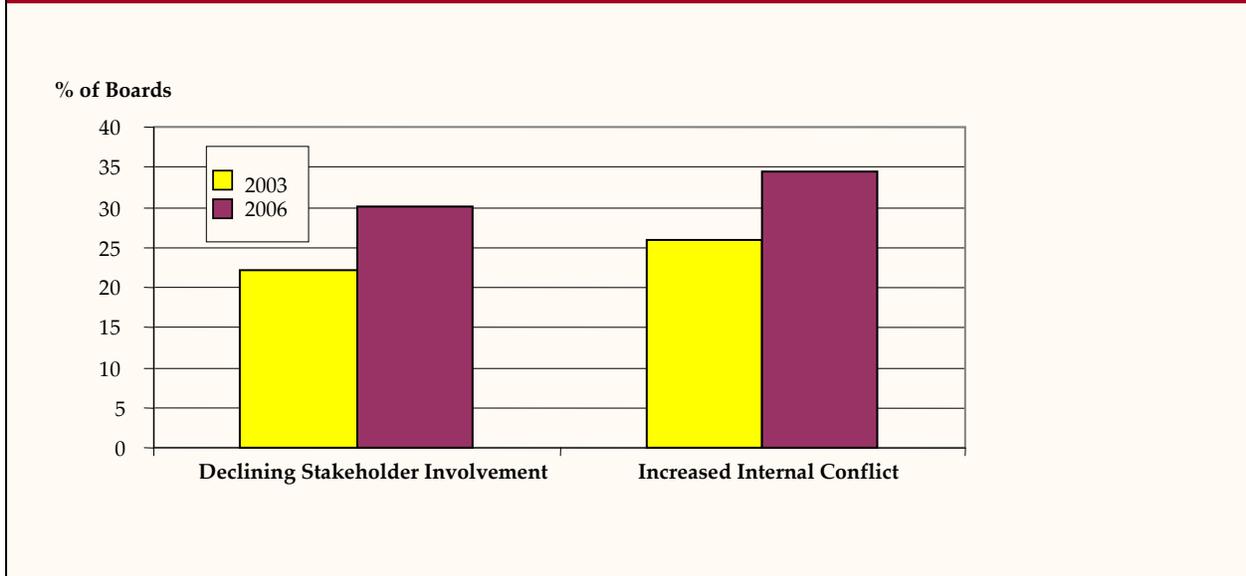
% of Boards

Strengthening the Civic Fabric of Los Angeles

The ultimate test for Los Angeles' system of neighborhood councils is whether it can improve governance by making citizens feel more empowered and government more responsive. As we have argued, this evaluation can provide only an early glimpse of a process that will take decades to take root. *Unfortunately, the early returns on the broad impacts of neighborhood councils on Los Angeles are at best mixed.*

The good news is that compared to 1998—the year before Charter reform was adopted—Angelenos feel better about the direction of the City and, in particular, the direction of their neighborhoods (see Figure I-6). Council board members continue to feel empowered: 90% of them in 2003 and 2006 felt they could influence city government working together.
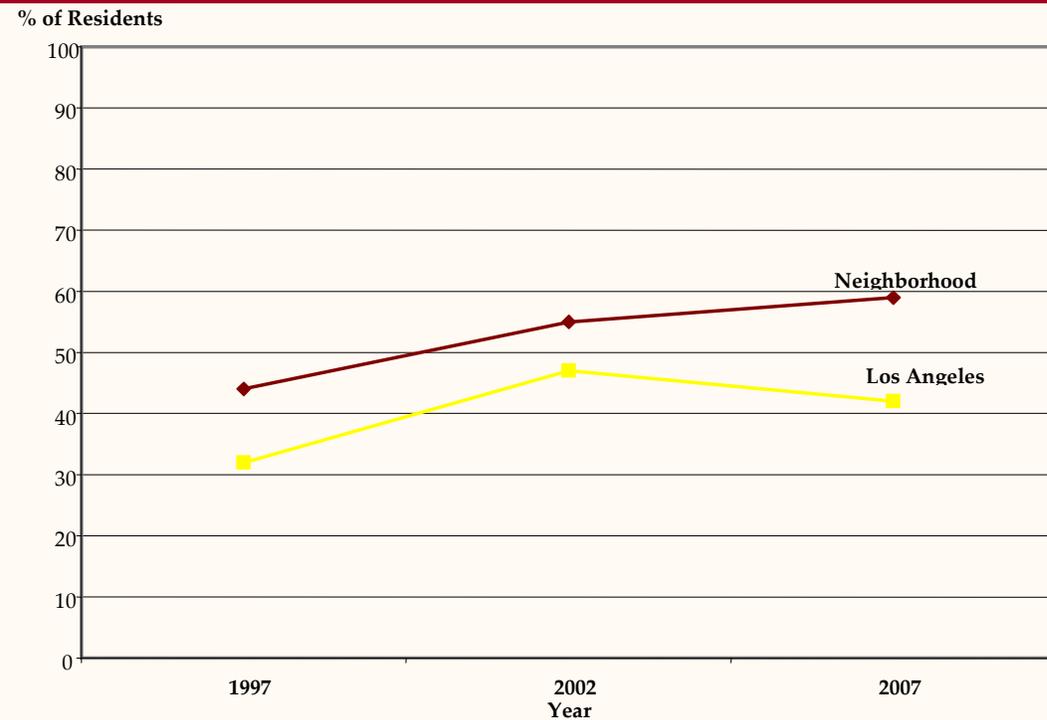
But this improvement does not appear to be due to better government performance. Public Policy Institute of California surveys from 2003 to 2005 find that citizen perceptions of the ability of the City to solve problems increased only marginally and remained consistently lower than the ratings for other cities in Los Angeles County, as seen in

Figure I-7. When residents are asked about particular services, the responses are similar (Figure I-8). Satisfaction with service delivery (with the exception of the Los Angeles Police Department) declined between 2003 and 2005, and remained consistently lower than other Los Angeles County cities. And finally, after five years of experience with neighborhood councils, Angelenos are distinctly less confident that neighborhood councils have a positive impact on the governance of the city (Figure I-9).

In sum, the capacity of councils to work on behalf of their communities appears to be growing, but varies across the city. While the limited attitudinal evidence we can bring to bear does not suggest a strengthened civic culture in Los Angeles , it is important to acknowledge that civic attitudes are slow to change and difficult to measure.

We next turn to the elements of the system that are critical to an effective neighborhood council system: representative legitimacy, innovations that engage and empower neighborhood councils, and the fostering of capacity for neighborhood councils to act on behalf of their constituent communities.

FIGURE I-6: BELIEF THAT NEIGHBORHOOD AND CITY ARE HEADING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

% of Residents

Source: The Leavey Center for the Study of Los Angeles

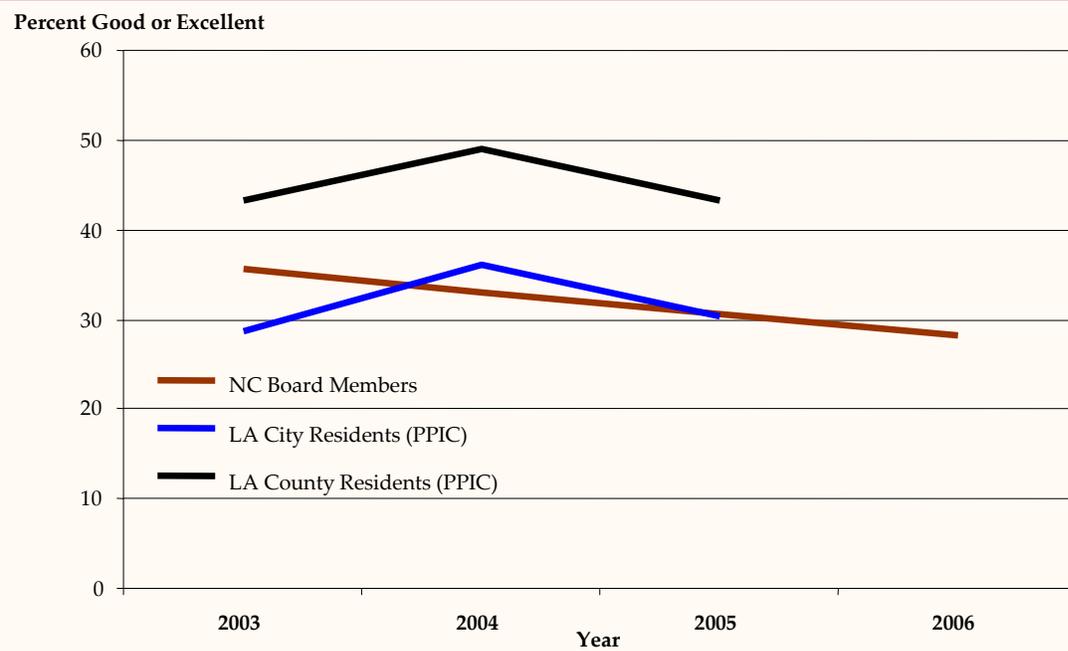## FIGURE I-7: HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE PERFORMANCE OF YOUR CITY IN SOLVING PROBLEMS

Percent Good or Excellent

FIGURE I-8: LOS ANGELES RESIDENTS' RATINGS OF CITY SERVICES

Legend: 2003, 2006

Y-axis: % Good or Excellent (0–100)

Recreation and Parks — City, County
Street Services — City, County
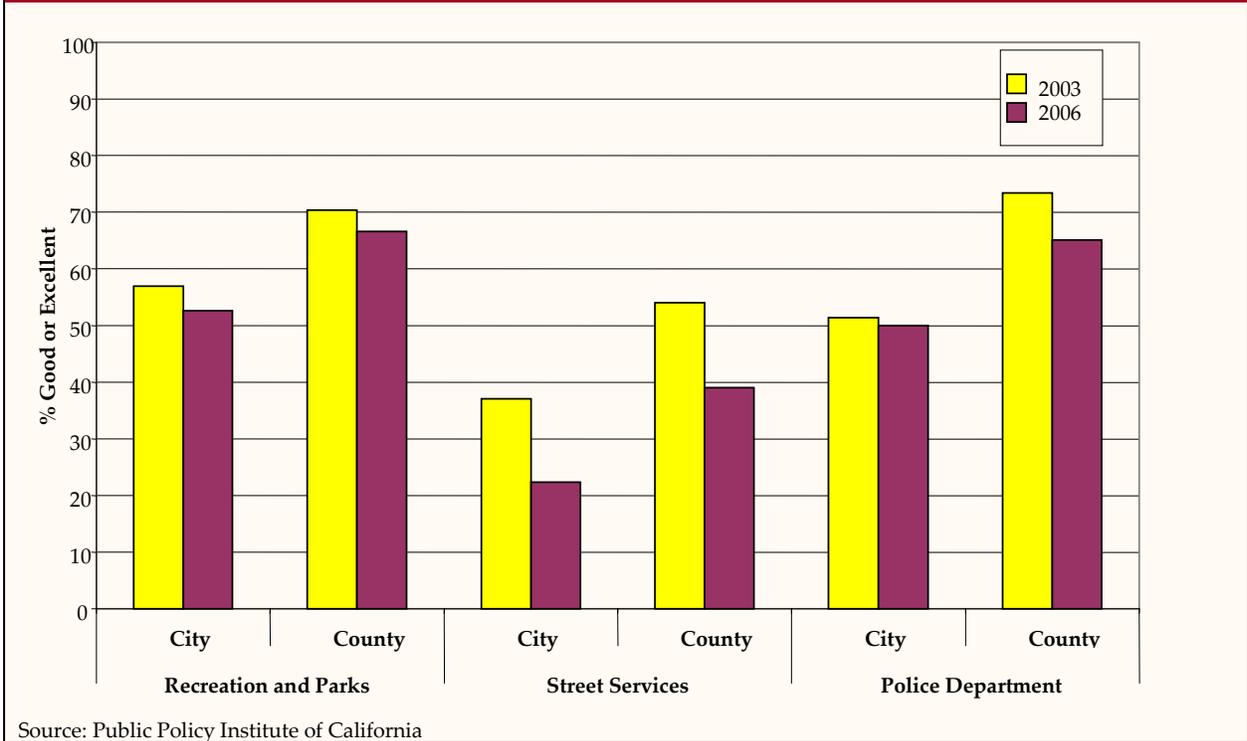Police Department — City, County

Source: Public Policy Institute of California

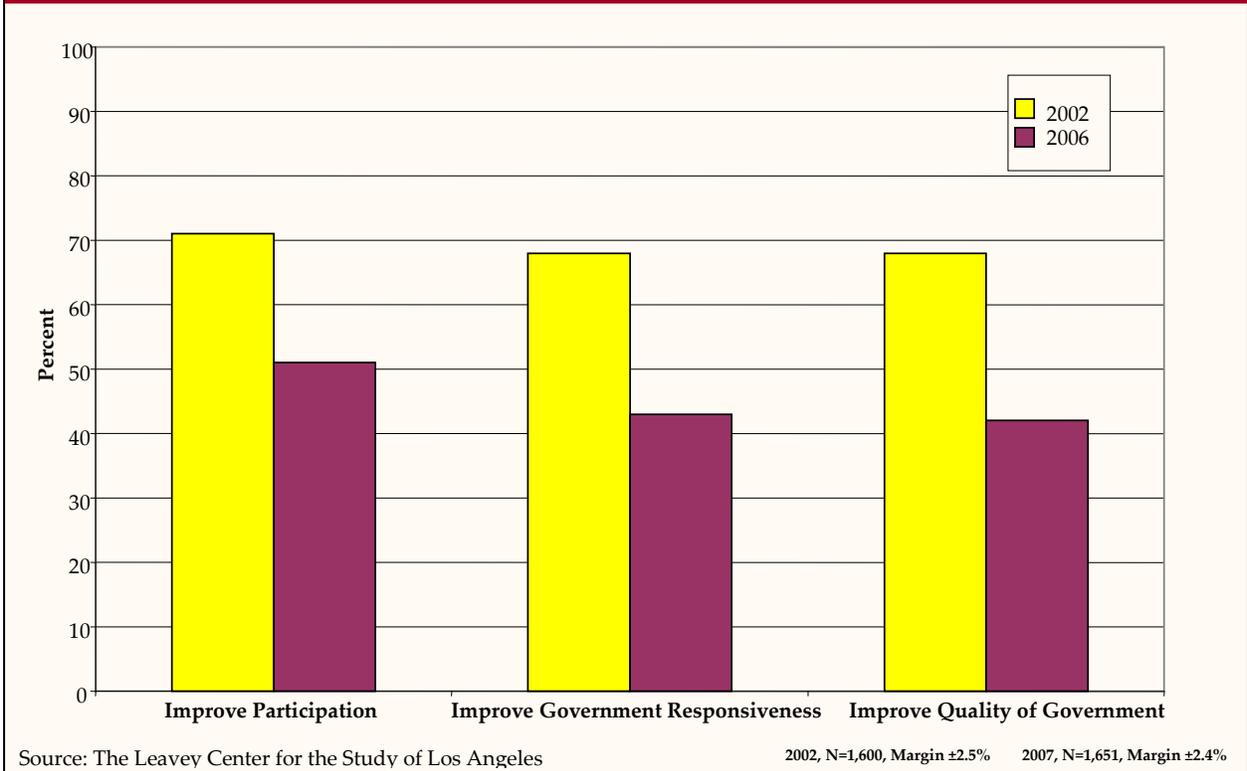## FIGURE I-9: PERCENT OF LOS ANGELES ADULTS WHO RESPONDED "YES" TO NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL QUESTIONS IN 2002 AND 2007

Legend: 2002, 2006

Y-axis: Percent (0–100)

Improve Participation   Improve Government Responsiveness   Improve Quality of Government

Source: The Leavey Center for the Study of Los Angeles

2002, N=1,600, Margin ±2.5%   2007, N=1,651, Margin ±2.4%

II. REPRESENTATIVE LEGITIMACY: DEMOCRATIC FOUNDATIONS OF THE SYSTEM

A number of provisions of the City Charter and various ordinances seek to ensure the representative legitimacy of neighborhood councils. A stated purpose of neighborhood councils in Section 900 of the Charter is to "include representatives of the many diverse interests in communities." Section 906 requires that neighborhood council bylaws must include "assurances that the members of the neighborhood council reflect the diverse interests within their area," as well as "guarantees that all meetings will be open and public, and permit, to the extent feasible, every stakeholder to participate in the conduct of business, deliberation and decision-making." What has been less clear from the onset is what it means to represent and reflect "diverse interests" within a neighborhood council area. As Figure II-1 suggests, there are several conceptions of representation that are applicable to neighborhood councils in Los Angeles.

To date, enormous attention has focused on formal and descriptive aspects of neighborhood council representation, with relatively little attention to participatory and substantive forms of representation. Implicit in this approach is an apparent "top-down" logic that suggests that focusing on formal representative measures such as fair elections, open meetings, and grievance procedures will encourage descriptive representation, and that a board that mirrors the socioeconomic or cultural profile of a community will necessarily represent the substantive interests of the community. Yet this relationship is not entirely clear. While some studies do suggest that organizations that are descriptively representative of their constituents also tend to be more substantively representative, others find that even descriptively representative boards may stray from representing the broad-based interests of communities.

In the case of neighborhood councils, the operative question is arguably: Can a descriptively non-representative board be substantively representative? Our research suggests that they can. However, we argue that a "bottom-up" focus that emphasizes diverse pathways to direct participation is necessary to insure the robustness of substantive representation. An analysis of the bylaws of 40 neighborhood councils revealed that the level of participatory access to neighborhood council activities varied across councils. Some councils are relatively open to participation by their general membership—allowing members to organize and sit on committees and to speak at Board meetings—while others appear to have duplicated the bureaucratic style of City Hall, in which committee membership is limited to Board members and public comment at meetings is constrained by time limits and submission of speaker cards.

Evolution of Descriptive Representation

A significant challenge to descriptive representation is the well-established finding that higher-income residents are more likely to be politically engaged across all forms of voluntarism. Figure II-2 displays data from the American Participation Survey, which shows that, in general, the income bias is greatest in the category of attending local meetings. This suggests that neighborhood councils are among the civic and political entities least likely to achieve descriptive representation. This is certainly true of the neighborhood council system, which has a high concentration of individuals who are white, upper-income, highly educated, and homeowners. Moreover the system has experienced little evolution in the demographic profile of neighborhood council boards between our first survey in 2003 and the second in 2006.[4]
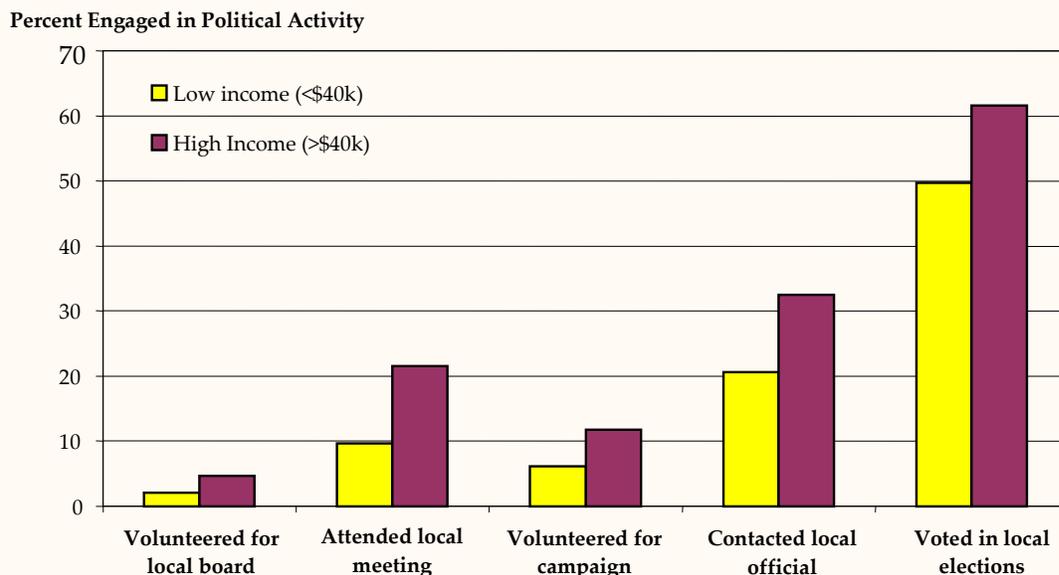
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[4] Unless otherwise indicated, data compares responses from 41 neighborhood council boards surveyed in 2003 with 86 boards surveyed in 2006. Los Angeles City figures are from the 2000 U.S. Census.

FIGURE II-1: CONCEPTS OF REPRESENTATIVE LEGITIMACY

Concept of Representation	Definition	Example(s)
Substantive representation	"Acting for" various group interests in a manner responsive to them; congruence of interests between representative and represented	An agenda contains issues that are of interest to stakeholders within the community
Formal representation	Formal arrangements to ensure accountability and legitimacy of representatives	Fair elections; open meetings; recall or grievance procedures
Descriptive representation	Leaders mirror or reflect politically relevant characteristics of constituents	Percentage of substantive stakeholders or cultural groups on board (e.g., representation of renters; businesses; Latinos).
Participatory representation	Organization provides opportunities for direct participation of stakeholders in NC activities	Direct involvement of stakeholders in committees, multi-way communication channels; town hall meetings, etc.

Source: Adapted from Guo and Musso (2007), "Representation in Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations: A Conceptual Framework, Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 36,2 pp. 308-326.

FIGURE II-2: HIGH INCOME VS. LOW INCOME PARTICIPATION IN VARIOUS POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Percent Engaged in Political Activity

Source: Data from American Citizen Participation Study, 1990

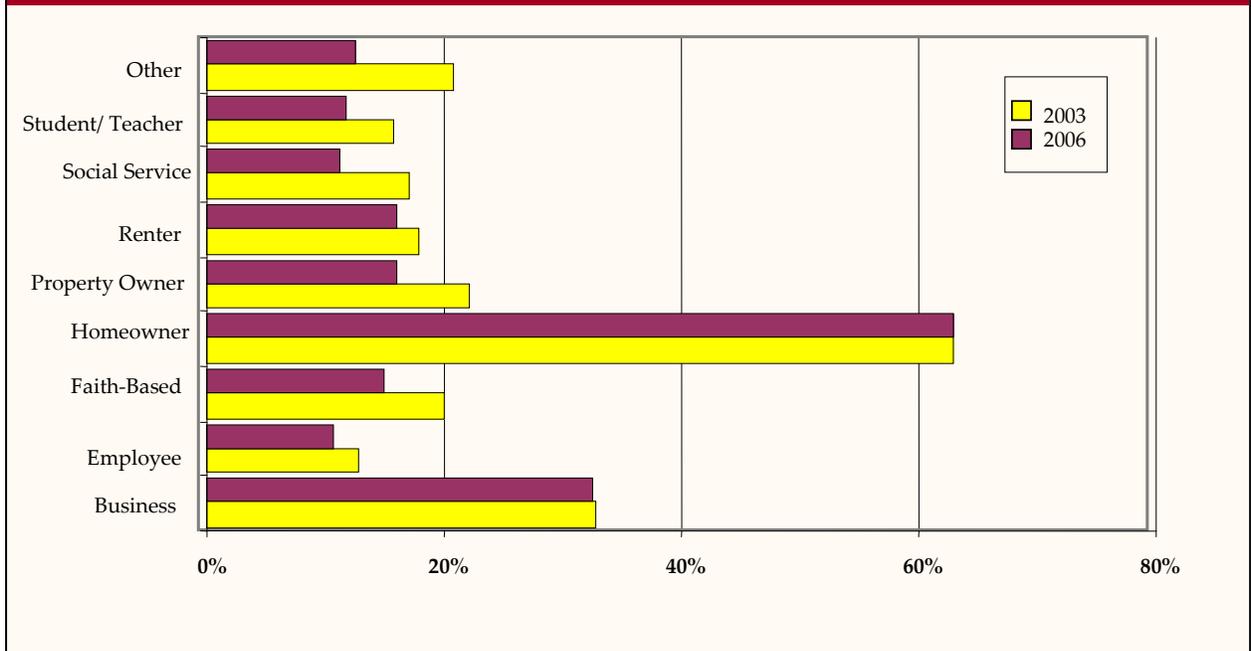## FIGURE II-3: STAKEHOLDER REPRESENTATION: CONCENTRATION OF HOMEOWNERS OVER TIME

FIGURE II-4: RACIAL/ETHNIC MAKEUP OF NC BOARD MEMBERS AND CITY OF LOS ANGELES
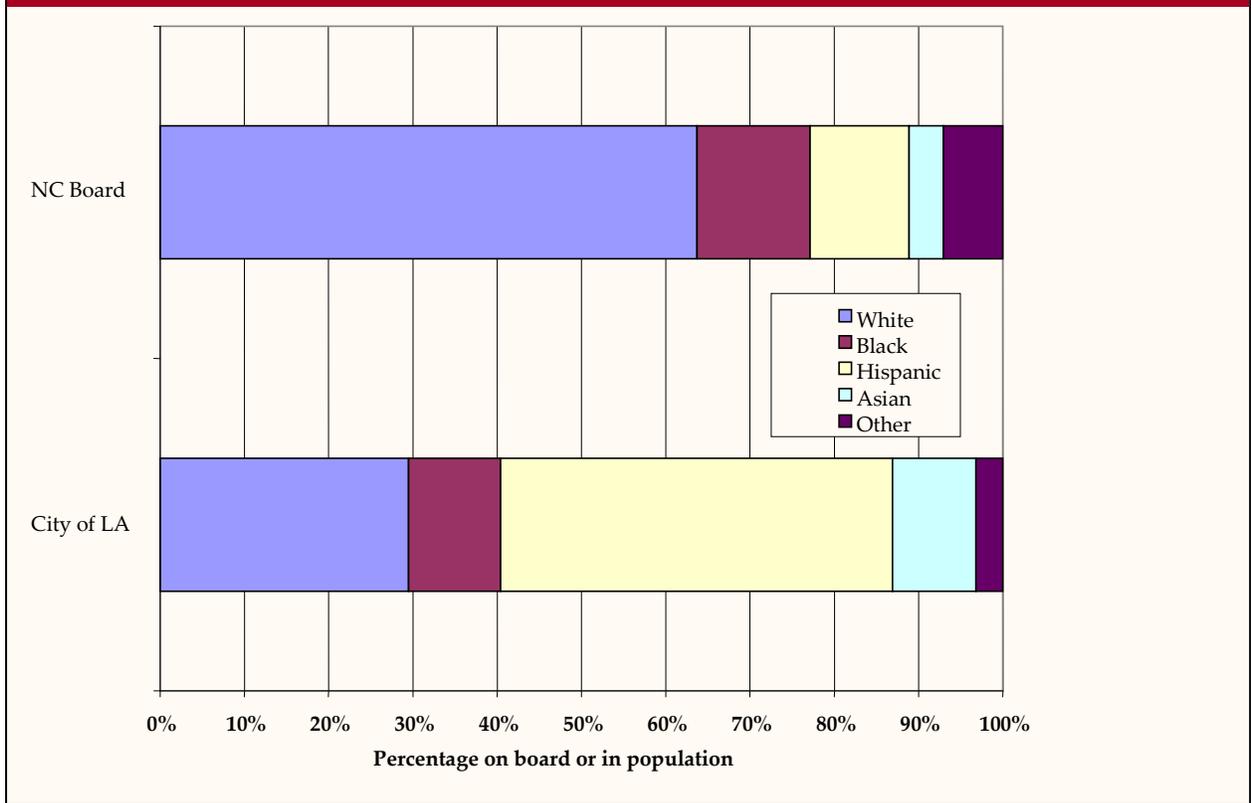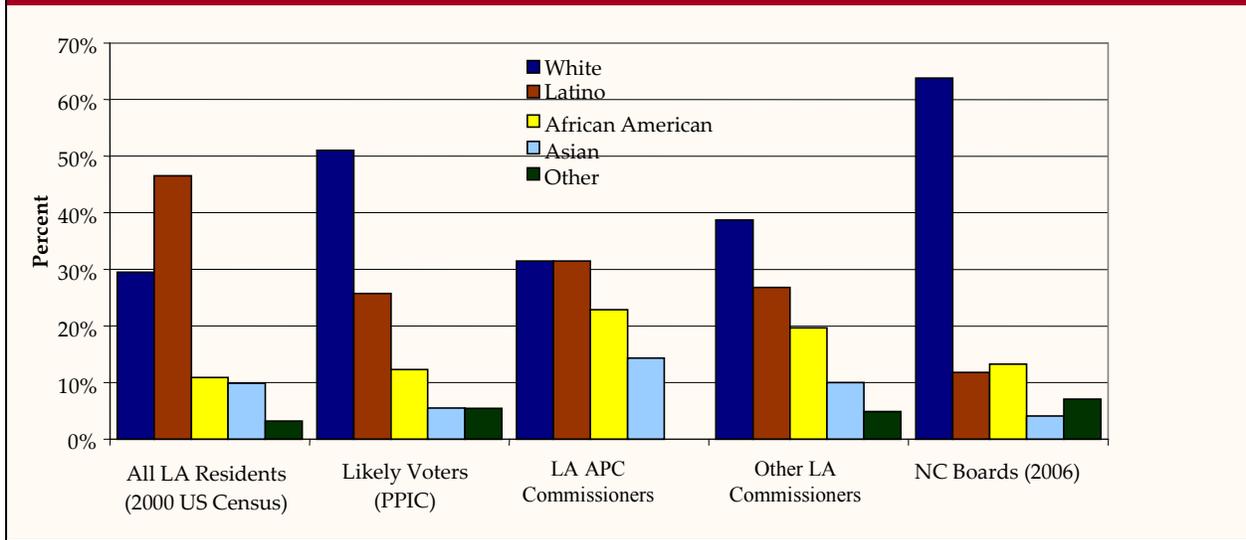
FIGURE II-5: RACE ETHNICITY BIAS IS PRONOUNCED COMPARED TO OTHER FORMS OF PARTICIPATION

Homeowners continue to be the major stakeholder group within the composition of neighborhood council boards (Figure II-3). Allowed multiple responses, 63% of Board members identified themselves as homeowners in both 2003 and 2006. Meanwhile, the survey showed declining identification with all other stakeholder groups except business, which increased slightly to 32%. Asked to identify their primary stakeholder affiliation, half of all respondents identified themselves as homeowners.

The racial and ethnic composition of neighborhood council boards does not mirror that of Los Angeles residents. As Figure II-4 indicates, whites continue to make up the greatest share board membership, while Asians and Hispanics continue to be under-represented in proportion to their share of the city's population. The disproportion in racial/ethnic representation increased somewhat from 2003 to 2006. The race/ethnicity bias among neighborhood council board membership is still more pronounced when council boards are compared to the leadership of Area Plan Commissions and other boards and

commissions in the City, positions that are appointed by the Mayor (Figure II-5).[5]

However, it is important to note that the racial/ethnic profile of Boards varies widely across the city. When representation is measured in proportion to racial/ethnic share of the regional population we see that people of color are better represented in areas of the city with higher concentrations of non-whites. For example, African Americans are more highly represented in the North Valley and West, South, and Central areas of the city. Representation of Asians is particularly concentrated in the South. Latinos are underrepresented across all areas of the city, but are more strongly represented in East and West Los Angeles than elsewhere.

The overall picture is one of "elite" dominated boards, with high-income residents over-represented compared to LA City residents as a whole. A dramatically disproportionate percentage of board members have household

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[5] Note that while other volunteer commissioners may be more ethnically diverse, it is likely that they are not representative with respect to socioeconomic status. We do not have data regarding commissioners' income level.

income in excess of $100,000 per year, 41% as compared to 14% of Los Angeles residents. The percentage of members who reported household incomes of less than $20,000 is only 3.7%, compared to 28% among Los Angeles residents as a whole. Along the educational attainment dimension, we again see an inverse pattern between neighborhood council board members and Los Angeles residents. Residents at large are much more likely to have <u>less than</u> a high school education, and Board members are <u>more</u> likely to be post-graduate than either residents or likely voters. These disparities increased between 2003 and 2006.

There is also a continued gap in board representation between those who have long-established roots in their neighborhood and relative newcomers. Although nearly half the city's residents have lived in Los Angeles five or fewer years, nearly half of neighborhood council board members surveyed in 2006 lived in their neighborhoods for 20 years or longer.

Substantive Representation

Not surprisingly, neighborhood councils' policy concerns continue to center around a local quality-of-life agenda. In both 2003 and 2006, Board members identified public safety, transportation, and land use as the issues of greatest importance to them (Figure II-6). Los Angeles residents similarly highlighted a strong concern for public safety, but were much more to be concerned about education. Neither council boards nor the public express strong concerns about the economy, environmental quality, health and welfare, or housing, suggesting that these issues are better addressed at a higher level of jurisdiction than the community.

An analysis of neighborhood council agendas shows that the substantive work of the councils is somewhat different from the concerns identified in surveys of board members and the general public. Land use figures prominently in the Board's discussions, as do community-assistance and beautification activities. Notably, public

safety items are less prominent on board agendas relative to other areas of concern.
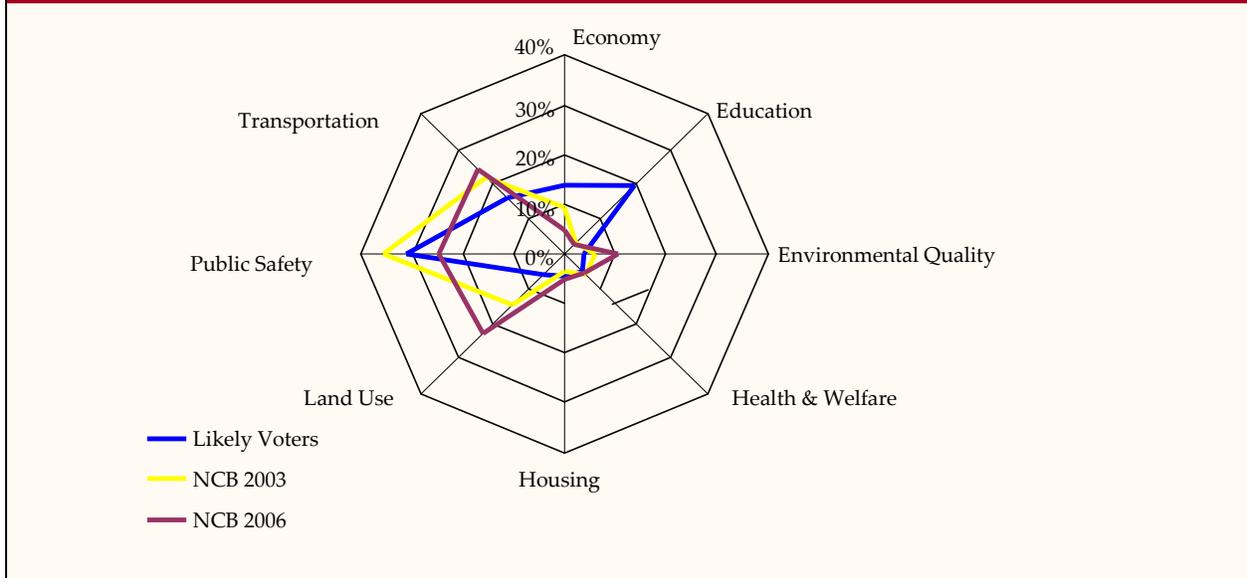
Summary of Findings on Representative Legitimacy

Eight years after the inception of the neighborhood council system, council boards fail to reflect the rich socio-economic diversity that characterizes Los Angeles. On the whole, board members are significantly whiter, more highly educated, and more rooted in their communities than the rest of the Los Angeles populace.

Yet we argue that a narrowly defined emphasis on descriptive representation is misplaced. Indeed, empirical research suggests that striving for boards that "look like" Los Angeles places an unrealistic demand on the neighborhood council system. Rather, the goal should be neighborhood governance structures that "act for" the community in addressing issues that are of concern to stakeholders.   To accomplish this requires more attention to participation of stakeholders in an array of council activities.

Some neighborhood councils responded to the charter's call for diverse representation by adopting formal governance for stakeholder composition of their boards. For example, a number of neighborhood councils have designated seats for particular stakeholders, or elect board members by geographic district. *These alternatives to at-large elections, such as district-based seats or seats designated for specific stakeholder groups generally did not increase minority representation on boards.*[6] By contrast, participatory mechanisms and measures that would increase the connections of elected boards to stakeholders have been virtually ignored by both neighborhood councils and the City.

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[6] For more detail, see Kyu-Nahm Jun, *The Democratic Legitimacy of Community Associations: Los Angeles Neighborhood Councils in Context*, USC dissertation, 2005, and Jun and Musso, Explaining Minority Representation in Place-Based Associations: Los Angeles Neighborhood Councils in Context, forthcoming in the *Journal of Civil Society.*

"Action committee" structures that allow stakeholders to form and disband committees as the need arises as well as meeting arrangements that encourage informal exchanges between board members and stakeholders are examples of more participatory approaches.

The other issue is that neighborhood councils—and the City—frequently use impersonal and broad-based outreach techniques such as fliers and internet messaging. In contrast, community organizers find that face-to-face invitation and involvement in specific projects are required to motivate busy individuals to become involved in volunteer activities. Such targeted invitations are particularly important for groups that have limited resources, such as the lower-income stakeholders who presently are under-involved with neighborhood councils. Some options for increasing participatory representation include:

• Targeted organizing around specific projects, rather than generalized outreach, to encourage members of underrepresented groups to become involved with the Council;

• City incentives (targeted or in-kind grants) for projects where neighborhood councils can demonstrate that they involve underrepresented stakeholders in activities;

• Identifying and sharing "best practices" for targeted community organizing across neighborhood councils.

To date, much of the responsibility for incorporating diversity has fallen to neighborhood councils themselves. Yet outreach and community organizing and outreach are demanding tasks; indeed in our survey neighborhood council board members identified them as their single greatest challenge. Hence we advocate that moving forward, the City provide greater resource support for development of participative and substantively representative neighborhood councils.

Specifically, we suggest that the City assume responsibility for running neighborhood council elections to ensure formal legitimacy and relieve overburdened councils. The City also can achieve economies of scale in broad-based outreach and advertising. This would free neighborhood

councils to focus on targeted community organizing with the goal of increasing diversity of participation in the system. We further recommend that the City provide technical assistance and incentives to encourage neighborhood councils to invest in such community organizing activities.

III. EMPOWERMENT INNOVATIONS: PARTICIPATORY ARENAS FOR NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS

This section of the report considers the extent to which the City of Los Angeles has implemented Charter provisions intended to empower neighborhood councils in city governance. The Charter contained five provisions that required the City to provide channels for neighborhood council involvement, including participation in the city budget process, relations with city offices and departments, support for a Congress of Neighborhood Councils, and the establishment of an Early Notification System.

Studies of successful neighborhood councils in other cities have emphasized the importance of political innovations to support engagement of councils with the City. Thus the Neighborhood Council system in Los Angeles comprises not only the 86 certified neighborhood councils but also institutional reforms that create participatory opportunities for neighborhood councils. Figure III-1 summarizes the institutional targets of the provisions contained in the Charter, the intent of each provision, and the current status of implementation. The remainder of this section discusses the City's accomplishments with respect to four of these five these empowerment provisions. We do not discuss the Charter provision related to delegated hearings (section 908) in detail because there has been no action to implement this provision.

The Congress of Neighborhoods

Section 901c of the Charter requires DONE to "arrange Congress of Neighborhoods meetings if requested to do so by recognized neighborhood councils."[7] The apparent intent was to promote neighborhood council orientation to citywide issues, reduce parochialism, and create a sense of citywide collectivity. The implementing language in the Plan for a citywide system of neighborhood councils stipulates a more directive role for the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment to "coordinate, arrange, and convene biannual Congress of Neighborhood Councils meetings." Meetings of the Congress of Neighborhoods as organized by DONE have primarily functioned as opportunities for information dissemination and provision of training and technical assistance to neighborhood councils rather than deliberative forums.

Beginning in 2004, there was increased attention to the idea of developing a Congress that would function as a deliberative forum. In October 2004, the USC Collaborative Learning Project sponsored a facilitated meeting to discuss the idea of a deliberative congress. The neighborhood council representatives in attendance agreed on the need for a deliberative body. Subsequently, a coalition of neighborhood council members created a working group that operated independently of USC. In February of 2006, the working group elected an interim chair and inaugurated the Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Congress (LANCC). The following July LANCC voted to approve a form and mission that patterns LANCC loosely on the US Congress: a 'general assembly' bring issues to the attention of the 'senate.' LANCC also established a provision that allowed it to take position votes with input from individual neighborhood councils. To date 40 neighborhood councils have voted to affiliate.

Since its establishment, the organization has turned away from taking issue positions, and instead serves as a forum in which neighborhood leaders discuss broader strategic objectives. In November of 2006, for example, the LANCC was a forum for organizing resistance to Measure R, the term limits/ethics reform proposal. Although Measure R made it to the ballot and was passed by voters, LANCC leaders term their efforts a qualified success for influencing the policy debate.

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[7] Charter for the City of Los Angeles, Article IX, Sec. 901 (c).

FIGURE III-1: STATUS OF EMPOWERMENT PROVISIONS

Institutional Target	Charter Provision	Status
Creation of networking and deliberation opportunities to orient NCs toward citywide issues, reduce parochialism, and create a sense of belonging to the larger City of Los Angeles.	City will provide support for a citywide Congress of Neighborhoods (Section 901c)	⇒ The DONE organizes a Congress of Neighborhoods that functions primarily for technical assistance and networking ⇒ A coalition of NCs created the Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Congress as a deliberative forum to discuss citywide issues
Public involvement in decision making by City Council, boards, and commissions requires timely information. Prior charter reform public notification occurred only 72 hours in advance, through physical posting at hearing venue (typically downtown).	"Early Warning System" to notify neighborhood of pending city decisions with "reasonable opportunity to provide input." (Section 907)	⇒ City provides automated distribution of agendas, a significant innovation ⇒ Agendas are distributed only 72 hours prior to meeting, no earlier than before ⇒ Some departments are providing earlier notification and better information ⇒ Need to make system more user-friendly, and provide earlier notification of issues
City Council deliberations are centralized in downtown Los Angeles and distant from community stakeholders	City Council may delegate hearing authority to neighborhood councils on matters of local concern. (Section 908)	⇒ No action by City.
Prior to charter reform public involvement in budgeting occurred in public hearings by City Council, after decisions had already been made.	Neighborhood councils may make budget requests to Mayor (Section 909)	⇒ A regional budgeting process has been in place since the 2004/5 budget ⇒ The process elicits only general information about NC board priorities ⇒ There is a need to systematize NC influence over specific arenas, such as capital budgeting
Service delivery is simultaneously centralized downtown and fragmented between numerous city departments. Community members have difficulty knowing who to contact with service needs or complaints.	Neighborhood councils will monitor service delivery and meet periodically with responsible officials. (Section 910)	⇒ City has not adopted consistent policies for feedback on service delivery ⇒ There have been some efforts at developing memoranda of understanding between NCs and individual departments ⇒ There is a need to develop more systematic channels for interaction between NCs and departments

Under the leadership of its present chairman, Brady Westwater, position-taking has been set aside in favor of a technical assistance orientation. For example, LANCC has recruited former department officials to advise neighborhoods on policy issues (such as transportation) and focused on facilitating issue-oriented sessions at the DONE-sponsored Congress of Neighborhoods.

It is interesting that both the City-sponsored Congress and the neighborhood council's self-organized LANCC now focus primarily on technical assistance and information provision. This is in no small part due to differences in philosophy among neighborhood council members. While some activists would seek broader influence over city decisions, others believe that the appropriate focus of neighborhood councils should be on the local community, or are hesitant to relinquish their advisory powers to a citywide representative body.

Early Notification System.[8]

Charter Section 907 mandates an "Early Warning System" (subsequently renamed the Early Notification System) that would notify neighborhood councils "as soon as practical" of pending city decisions and provide them with a "reasonable opportunity to provide input." The goal was to address information gaps that often prevent community members from getting involved in city policy. The system debuted in July 2001 as a web page from which individuals may subscribe to receive official notices via e-mail. In February 2003 the City Council adopted a system for "community impact statements," whereby the official view of neighborhood councils will be part of the official agenda of city policy bodies, and a full statement will be made

part of the permanent record.[9]The ENS has made significant improvements in information access. Prior to establishment of the system, the City Clerk distributed agenda information to about 800 on-line users. Since the advent of the ENS, distribution of information on City Council activities has blossomed to tens of thousands of recipients. It is heavily used by City Hall insiders, but about 60% of the subscriptions are from outsiders. The range of available information has expanded to include the activities of dozens of boards and commissions not previously available on the City Clerk's system. The use of internet-based dissemination is supported by almost three quarters of neighborhood council board members.

Compared to other cities this system is innovative in its use of technology and breadth of available information, but its usefulness is hampered by a number of factors:

- *It is not user-friendly.* Neighborhood council representatives report having spent over 20 hours per week sorting through notices to find relevant events. While the City had planned to make the system searchable by neighborhood and policy issue, these improvements have yet to be implemented.

- *It is not early.* Notification is not sufficiently in advance of hearings to permit neighborhood councils to provide meaningful input. Because councils must agendize and discuss issues prior to taking an official position, the usual monthly meeting cycle precludes a rapid response. During the Charter reform process, ENS proponents envisioned early notification to provide 30- or 45-day notice periods. During the implementation process, however, advance notice has been defined in terms of California's open meetings law, the Brown Act, which only requires posting of agendas 72 hours prior to public meetings.

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[8] For additional details, see Musso, Weare, Cooper et. al., "Neighborhood Councils in Los Angeles; A Midterm Status Report, available from the authors. Also see Musso and Weare, "Implementing Early Notification in Los Angeles: Citizen Participation by Other Means," *International Journal of Public Administration,* Vol. 29, July 2005.

[9] Harrison Sheppard, "Neighborhood Council Opinions Will Weigh More," *Daily News,* February 13, 2003.

- *It is necessary but insufficient to foster community involvement in city governance.* City government and departments have not embraced the spirit of collaboration that would provide a place for neighborhood council input early in the decision-making process. Without such proactive reforms to city policy-making routines, technological innovation cannot assure community consultation. Due to these limitations, system usage is declining and board members express much less confidence in its importance.

Some improvements to early notification continue to be implemented. The Department of Planning has distributed biweekly reports to neighborhood councils on new applications and has recently begun to distribute actual applications well in advance of decision points. The Department of Water and Power has entered into a memorandum of understanding with neighborhood councils that clarifies early notification requirements, sets a more useful goal of 90 days notice, and provides more background information with these notices. The City should build on these initiatives, but continued progress will require a sustained dialogue between the City and neighborhood councils.

Participation in City Budget Process[10]

Charter Section 909 authorizes neighborhood councils to make budget requests to the Mayor, and requires the Mayor to inform councils of the deadline for submitting such requests so that they may be heard in a timely fashion. The goal is to provide greater community involvement in a budgeting process that previously was shrouded from the public until the final stage, when City Council voted on a budget that had largely been negotiated between the Mayor's office and departments in advance. However, neither the Neighborhood Council Plan nor any

implementing ordinances provided direction on implementation of the budgetary process, leaving administration of participatory budgeting to the discretion of the Mayor's office.

What has evolved is a regional deliberation process that involves neighborhood councils in providing input on broad service priorities.[11] In general outline:

- The Mayor holds a Budget Day in which neighborhood councils are oriented to the annual mayoral priorities and the technical aspects of creating the annual budget.

- The participating neighborhood councils discuss and decide community budgetary priorities in a public meeting.

- Each neighborhood council is invited to send two representatives to a regional caucus (one for each of the city's seven regions) to discuss neighborhood priorities.

- Each of the seven regions then selects two representatives to meet with the Mayor and discuss regional priorities.

- The regional representatives are expected to report back to neighborhood councils in the region about the outcome of the budget process.

On its face, the Mayor's budget process embodies several design features that are central to successful participation. First, the City generally provides information to neighborhood councils, including in recent years a *Neighborhood Budget Summary* that discusses revenue, appropriations, and capital expenditures. Second, there has been an attempt to collect systematic information regarding neighborhoods' budget preferences (in some years, from stakeholders, in some, from neighborhood council board members). Third,

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[10] For more information see Juliet Musso, Mark Elliot, Michael Sithole, and Chris Weare, "Implementing participatory budgeting: The case of Los Angeles," working paper available from the authors.

[11] The authors provided input to the City on this process, including a policy briefing recommending use of a regional panel approach.

there is an opportunity for regional deliberation and direct citizen input by regional delegates.

On the positive side, the process has brought many stakeholders to the table that had not previously participated in the policy process. Requiring stakeholders to administer (and answer) a citizen survey has reminded neighborhood activists that outreach and education are important aspects of policy-making. The process is limited, however, by issues related to the character of neighborhood council representation, difficulties of providing appropriate information, and the challenges of structuring deliberation that leads to meaningful and actionable outcomes.

Issues of representation. Participation in the budget process has varied substantially over time, but a number of councils regularly decline to be involved. For example, the FY 2005-2006 Priority Based Budgeting process involved only 46 of the 82 neighborhood councils certified at the time across the city. Moreover, given the elite biases in participation discussed above, it is not clear that neighborhood councils can speak authoritatively on community fiscal preferences.

Issues of information. Both city officials and neighborhood stakeholders have identified gaps in stakeholders' understanding about the budget process. One respondent noted that neighborhood councils must learn to rationalize needs and make budgetary justifications or else requests from neighborhood councils are simply inactionable "wish lists."[12] Other neighborhood activists have called for selective information that will help them understand which areas of the budget are open to influence.

Issues of deliberation. It is not clear that neighborhood councils generally engage community members in deliberation regarding the budget. Regional deliberation is also hampered by vague or conflicting expectations regarding the process. Moreover, the current

regional process is too removed from the real politics of city budgeting. Some neighborhood council leaders have expressed defeatism about the extent to which they can be involved meaningfully. Others seek the ability to "take apart" the budget, and advise on fundamental reforms, arguably not a feasible expectation given the generally incremental nature of budgetary decision making.

The Mayor's office continues to meet informally with a working group of regional budget delegates to discuss future reforms to the system, though a formal working group formed for that purpose appears no longer to meet. We would suggest that the following principles for participatory budgeting be the basis for reforms to the Mayor's budget process:[13]

• The deliberative process should lead to actionable recommendations. In other words, an arena for budgetary recommendations should seek neighborhood council advice on specific matters where implementation is feasible rather than on the citywide budget or general priorities. For example many cities involve their neighborhood councils in advising capital budget decisions related to community improvement.

• The process should be structured to integrate data about preferences from a broadly representative survey of the general public. The City rather than neighborhood councils, should be responsible for implementing this stakeholder survey.

• Neighborhood councils should be provided the survey information for purposes of outreach

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[12] Interview with Respondent 201, June 24, 2002.

[13] These recommendations are informed by the literature on policy and budgetary participation, including Renn, Ortwin, Thomas Webler, Horst Rakel, Peter Dienel and Branden Johnson, (1993) "Public participation in decision making: A three-step procedure," *Policy Sciences* 26(189-214); Simonsen, Bill and Mark D. Robbins. 1999. *Citizen Participation in Resource Allocation*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press; Ebdon, Carol (2000). "The Relationship Between Citizen Involvement in the Budget Process and City Structure and Culture," *Public Productivity and Management Review* 23(3) 383-393.

and agenda-setting, as well as receive comprehensible information regarding the budget process, real opportunities for influencing city fiscal priorities, and the political context of Mayoral policy priorities.

- Neighborhood councils should be encouraged (if not required) to involve community stakeholders in a town hall-style discussion of their budgetary deliberations. This could be accomplished through creation of neighborhood council budget committees charged with outreach and public deliberation tasks.

Relations with City Departments[14]

Charter Section 909 states that neighborhood councils shall monitor the delivery of city services in their respective areas and meet periodically with city department officials. The goal of this provision is to increase communication and coordination among the neighborhoods and city service departments. This requirement has not been implemented systematically by the City, with the effect that departmental coordination with neighborhood councils varies substantially throughout the city.

While systematic citywide implementation of Section 909 has not occurred, several experiments for developing neighborhood council involvement with city services have emerged through university-community partnerships and grassroots organizing. For example, USC's Collaborative Learning Project's Learning and Design Forums facilitated the development of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between four South Valley neighborhood councils and the Department of Public Works concerning the delivery of street services. Subsequent forums brought the Department of Cultural Affairs and the Department of Transportation together with
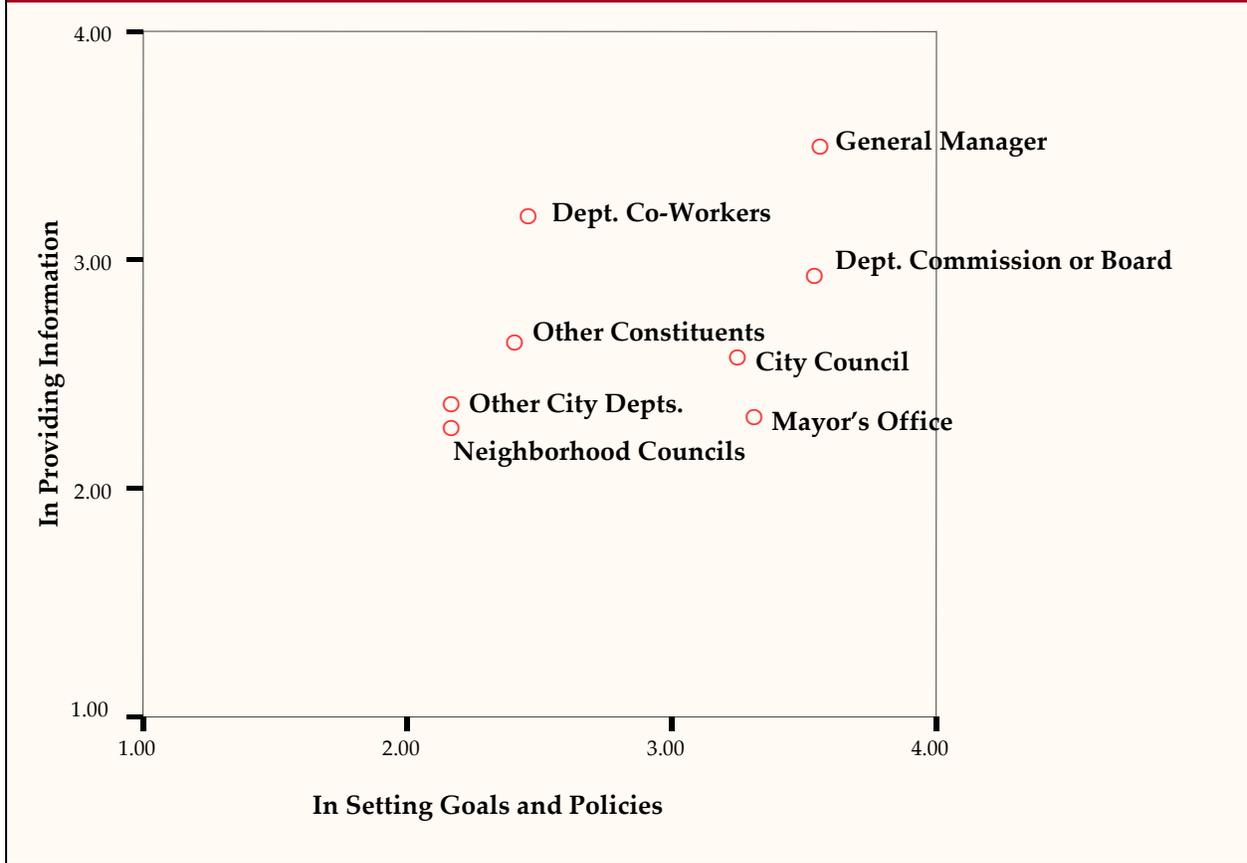
councils to discuss cultural programming and transportation policy, respectively. Moreover, neighborhood activists mobilized support for a citywide MOU that was established in 2005 with the Department of Water and Power in response to the controversy surrounding a proposed 18% rate hike in 2004. The 15-page MOU contains several provisions favorable to neighborhood councils, including a departmental liaison for neighborhood councils, advance notification of significant matters, education on departmental issues, and regular meetings regarding service delivery. Nearly half of the city's neighborhood councils are signatories to the agreement and are represented on a taskforce to oversee it.

City departments vary concerning their relationships with neighborhood councils. In addition to the MOU discussed above, the DWP sends a liaison to citywide meetings of neighborhood councils. The Department of City Planning has also recognized that neighborhood councils are important representative bodies. Yet our interviews with 17 departmental liaisons to neighborhood councils in 2005 suggest that the neighborhood council system has not altered considerably the day-to-day operations of most city departments.

While departmental officials perceive that many councils have become more savvy in working with the city, a perceived lack of representative legitimacy seems to hinder council influence. Rather than viewing councils as an official part of the city service delivery system, departmental staff members appear to view them as only one in a crowded field of service constituents. In a survey of city department staff, neighborhood councils ranked last in importance to city departments in setting departmental goals and policies and in providing important information to departments (Figure III-2). These rankings suggest that there is a strong need for a more formalized system of departmental interaction that can promote the value of community connections to city department activities and service delivery.

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[14] For more information see Jun, Weare, and Shiau, "Determinants of department responsiveness as a local government performance measure: The case of the Los Angeles neighborhood council system," working paper available from the authors.

FIGURE III-2: IMPORTANCE OF NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS TO CITY DEPARTMENTS

In Providing Information (y-axis: 1.00 to 4.00)

In Setting Goals and Policies (x-axis: 1.00 to 4.00)

Plotted points:
- General Manager
- Dept. Co-Workers
- Dept. Commission or Board
- Other Constituents
- City Council
- Other City Depts.
- Mayor's Office
- Neighborhood Councils

Source: Survey of 154 line administrators from the Los Angeles Police Department, Los Angeles Public Library, Dept. of Public Works and the Los Angeles Dept. of City Planning in 2006.

IV. DEVELOPING NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL CAPACITY

Capacity to address problems in the neighborhood council context means effectively marshalling individual and collective energies to identify problems, access resources, and take action. As in many voluntary organizations, personal relationships and networks of engagement allow volunteers to leverage resources inside and outside the community for these purposes. Yet outcomes are only one indication of capacity. Others include operational efficiency, the extent to which the organization's leadership is representative of the broader interests of the community, and numerous other factors.

This section examines community capacity in the neighborhood council system as suggested by neighborhood council activities and participants' observations. It assesses the types of activities councils are pursuing according to general meeting agendas; what they have accomplished as described by board members and other observers; and, through surveys of participants, the extent to which councils have been able to tap resources and solve problems. Finally we offer brief examples of citywide policy effects that suggest achievements in capacity-building.

There appears to have been a slight drop in participation in neighborhood council activities between our midterm report and this writing. The DONE project coordinators reported in our 2006 survey that 22 stakeholders on average attended meetings (down from about 26 in 2003).[15] Though hot-button issues attract over 100 stakeholders, general meetings more often attract only a few stakeholders. Still more

worrisome is an observed decrease across the system in the number of councils that were able to attract stakeholders to participate in committee work. According to project coordinators, only 42% of councils were able to count stakeholders as regular committee members or chairs, down from 47% in 2003.

Neighborhood Council Agenda Activity

Neighborhood councils differ from other participatory entities, such as citizen panels charged with a specific task, or residents' associations, which involve a relatively homogenous membership and a limited agenda. To gain an accurate idea of what neighborhood councils are actually discussing, we coded the content of agendas from 43 certified councils that were active over a three-year period.[16] Agendas show how councils spend time and suggest how they may allocate their resources.

Non-Issue Activities. *Our agenda analysis finds boards devoting fully two-thirds of their energies to internal operations* (Figure IV-1). Internal operations include attention to procedures and bylaws changes, managing committees, and appointing officers. We view these non-issue activities as the 'overhead' of neighborhood council operations. While the City Council has paid staff to handle operations, volunteers undertake this responsibility in neighborhood councils. The second most common area of non-issue activity is government relations (26%) followed by community relations and events, which jointly account for 17% of non-issue agenda items.

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[15] Our own fieldwork also shows that meeting attendance has not significantly declined or increased over that time. We found from attending approximately 175 neighborhood council general meetings (across all regions since mid-2002) that only 20 stakeholders attended a general meetings on average – barely one-third more than the number of board members attending.

[16] Requested agendas for monthly meetings were selected randomly from each quarter for which the council was meeting in the three years prior to collection efforts in mid-2006. We received every agenda requested from only 15 neighborhood councils; for 28 others we were able to gain most of the requested agendas by request or via the council website. A total of 410 of the requested 794 agendas were received. We were unable to secure any agendas from 19 additional certified councils despite multiple attempts.

This distribution of agenda items hints at the types of capacity building activities neighborhood councils are engaging. Relationships with City Council office staff and city department administrators develop councils' capacity to oversee service delivery, while community relations and involvement in events develop networks within the community. Networking between and among neighborhood councils is an area where there is little agenda activity, an interesting finding considering that board member survey data suggests an increase in inter-council connections. It may be that these types of relationships are developed at the individual level and do not involve official actions of the Board.

Issue Activities. *Despite a necessary occupation with internal operations and government and community relations, councils manage to address issues at a variety of* **scales** (Figure IV-2). Issue-oriented items account for one-third of all agenda items citywide. Neighborhood councils are involved in a variety of quality-of-life issues at the neighborhood level, as well as addressing regional issues. For example, they are monitoring (and in some cases opposing) port and airport expansion as well as seeking to mitigate the regional environmental effects of waste facilities. Councils are also active on larger issues, such as public financing of campaigns, animal rights advocacy, and homelessness.

Land use and planning (including transportation) together constitute the single most important issue area to councils at 49% of all issue-oriented activities. Activities related to specific discretionary actions, such as requests for zoning changes and other project-level variances, account for nearly half of land use agenda items. These specific project activities comprise a quarter of all issue activities.

Contrary to perceptions that neighborhood councils are reflexively oppositional, not-in-my-backyard- (NIMBY) oriented activities account

for only a small fraction (3%) of all land use agenda activities citywide. Indeed after specific projects, transportation-related planning (nearly a third of land use agenda issues) and proactive planning (13%) are most common land use activities.

Assistance (including funding) to local programs comprised 13% of issue-oriented items, followed by beautification at 11% of items, the fourth largest category. Some 12% of council agenda items addressed public safety concerns. Agenda items on the environment were 7% of all issue items, while the economy (clearly an issue of interest beyond the neighborhood) accounted for 5% of issue items.
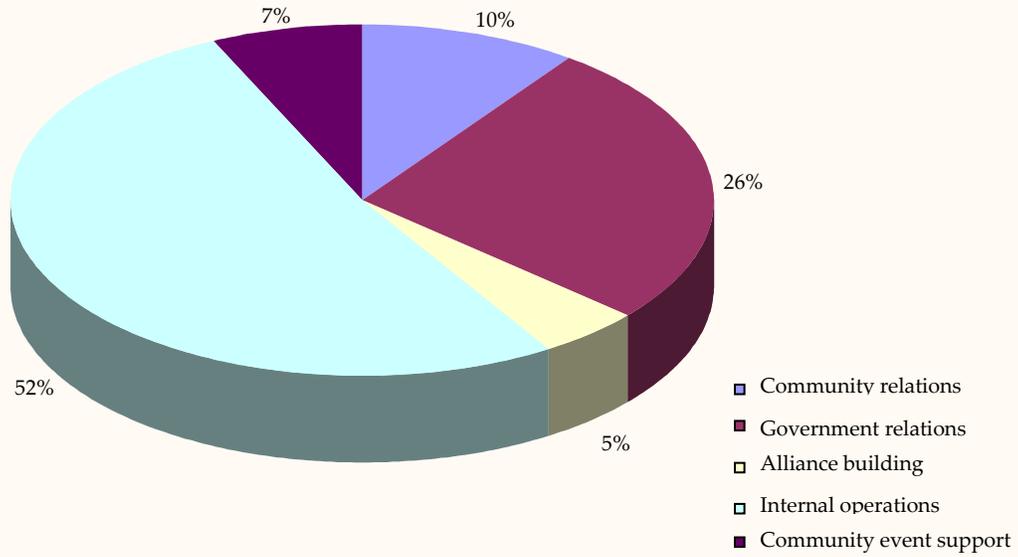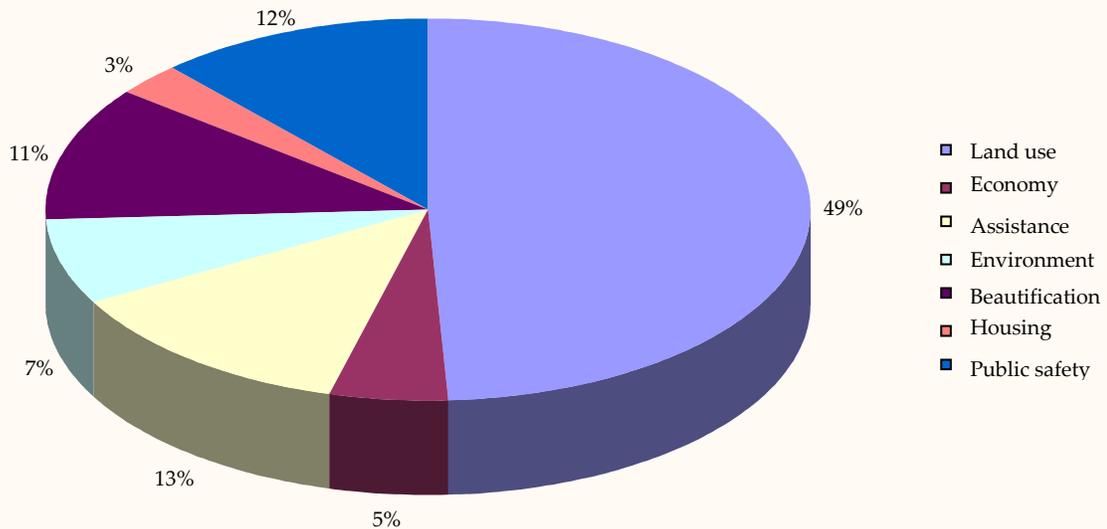
FIGURE IV-1: NON-ISSUE AGENDA ITEMS BY TYPE

7%   10%

26%

52%

5%

- Community relations
- Government relations
- Alliance building
- Internal operations
- Community event support

FIGURE IV-2: ISSUE-ORIENTED AGENDA ITEMS BY TYPE

12%

3%

11%

49%

7%

13%

5%

- Land use
- Economy
- Assistance
- Environment
- Beautification
- Housing
- Public safety

Neighborhood council agendas vary by planning area (Figure IV-3). Land use assumes a larger place on the council agenda in the West and North Valley areas than in the Central and South Valley areas. By contrast, East and Harbor area councils focus more on issues other than land use, such as beautification and larger concerns such as the economy, environmental issues, and community assistance. Agendas from the South Los Angeles focus on social issues and prioritize community assistance to a much greater degree.

Neighborhood Council Accomplishments

While agenda items suggest what neighborhood councils are engaging, items included in surveys of board members and project coordinators asked what councils had actually accomplished. Of 530 respondents to the 2006 board member survey, 470 (89%) reported more than 800 accomplishments. Of these, nearly half (48%) were non-issue operational accomplishments related to community relations and outreach, internal operations, or government relations. Accomplishments related to substantive issues accounted for 52% of reports citywide, and like council agendas, tended to center heavily on quality of life types of activities (Figure IV-4).

Citywide, land use was the single most frequently cited area of accomplishment (29%). Community beautification and transportation were mentioned at 23% and 11% respectively. Other issue accomplishments were safety (12%), assistance to community programs and parks (10%), education (5%), environment (4%), and accomplishments related to the economy (3%), such as influencing utility rates or helping businesses. The focus of reported accomplishments varies across regions, with transportation getting heavy mention in the West region, and environmental accomplishments noted more in the Harbor. Regionally, the South Valley shows the most accomplishments in land use and community beautification.

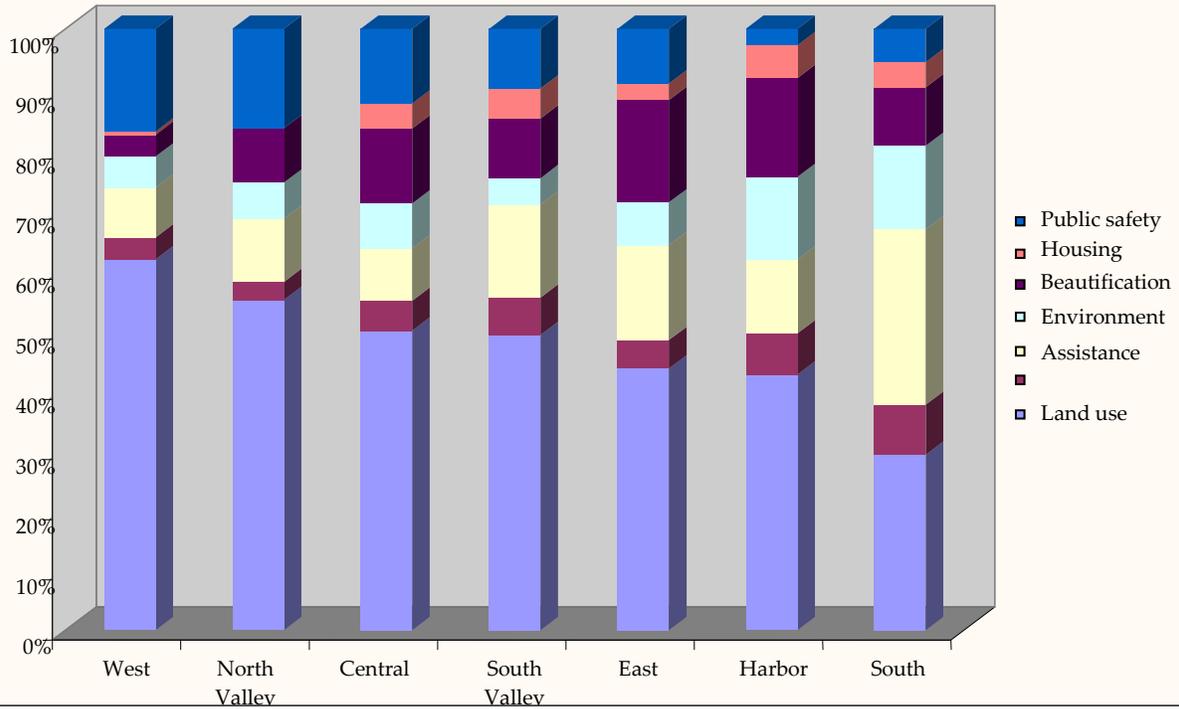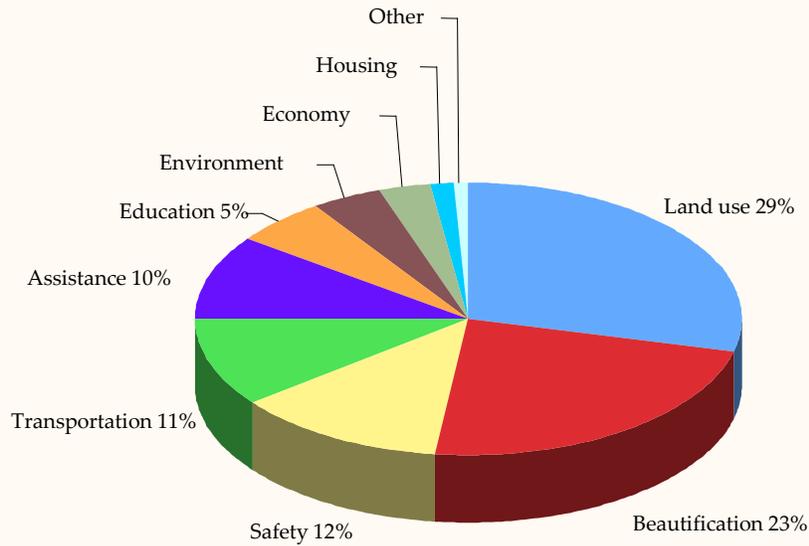**FIGURE IV-3: ISSUE ORIENTED AGENDA ITEMS BY PLANNING AREA**

FIGURE IV-4: ISSUE ACCOPMLISHMENTS REPORTED BY BOARD MEMBERS CITYWIDE

Local and Citywide Influence. When asked about neighborhood councils' local effects, project coordinators noted 89 specific accomplishments (across 51 councils) that helped to improve the community (Figure IV-5). Accomplishments fell into two general categories: improvements in the physical environment and outreach. Assistance and event participation comprised just under one-third of outreach-related accomplishments. Efforts such as trash pick-ups and tree planting suggest how these categories may overlap, however, while larger social accomplishments, such as fighting gang activity, were mentioned as other achievements but don't neatly fit into any particular category. Nearly 60% of councils were viewed as having a positive effect on the neighborhood–a view unchanged from our 2003 survey.

DONE project coordinators in 2006 cited 38 examples (attributed to 25 councils) of positive citywide effects. Most frequently mentioned were land use and safety/preparedness, which together accounted for nearly two-thirds of observed effects (Figure IV-6). Success in opposing the DWP rate increase in 2004 was the most frequently cited economic effect, however, which confirms some board members' views that the agreement should be a model for department oversight.

Political Influence Is a Mixed Picture. We followed up on our survey of project coordinators with interviews to gain qualitative insight from their perspective on the extent to which councils have a political effect. Project coordinators who mentioned political influence said that influence appeared to increase as a result of neighborhood councils. Many of those who mentioned political support said that they thought the Mayor's Office has come to support the system. Yet project coordinators also thought that City Council offices were less likely to support councils. This mixed finding may reflect the different role played by executive and representative leadership. Because the City Council has historically been the channel through which stakeholders field complaints and receive services, the position of the new system of neighborhood councils in metropolitan governance in Los Angeles may complicate elected representatives' views.

The posture of the City Council toward neighborhood councils is also likely a function of political considerations. As elected officials, council members must take into account the representative legitimacy and credibility of council boards, but nearly half of the project coordinators in interviews said they thought that boards did not do a good enough job reflecting the issues that stakeholders care about (land use issues were an exception). This suggests an uphill battle for cementing the political influence of neighborhood councils within city government by local leaders.

Alliances also can be a key to marshaling political power. But Project Coordinators did not indicate that they were viewed alliances as particularly helpful to councils in the political arena. Few Project Coordinators mentioned the role of citywide alliances as forums for political mobilization or any other function, for example, and those who did were only slightly more likely to view them positively.

An important objective of Charter reform is to improve representativeness and increase local empowerment. The Neighborhood Council Plan assigns to DONE the responsibility of mitigating barriers to political participation in part by providing assistance to areas with traditionally low rates of participation. Yet one quarter of project coordinators interviewed thought that the system had actually exacerbated political inequalities. Neighborhood councils can become effective channels for stakeholder voice only if they are able to develop the institutional capacity to function effectively and efficiently and, most importantly, act as a bridge between all stakeholders and City government.

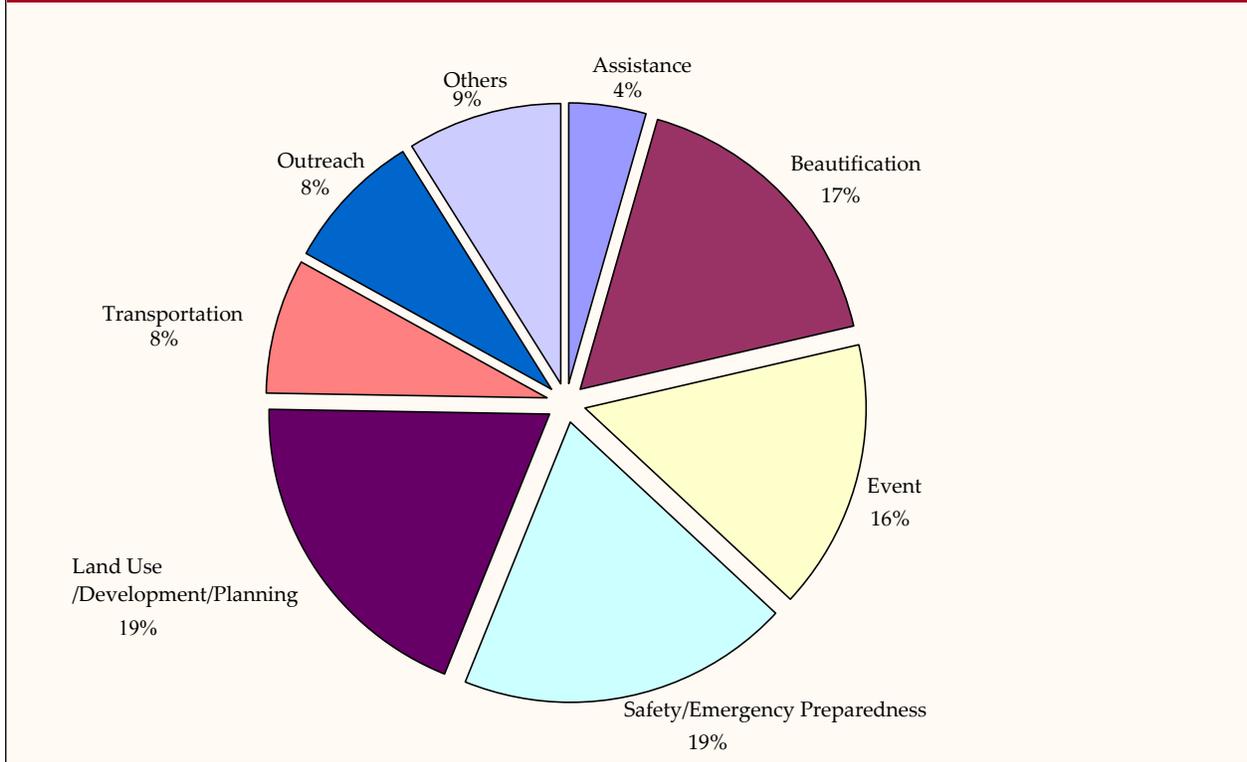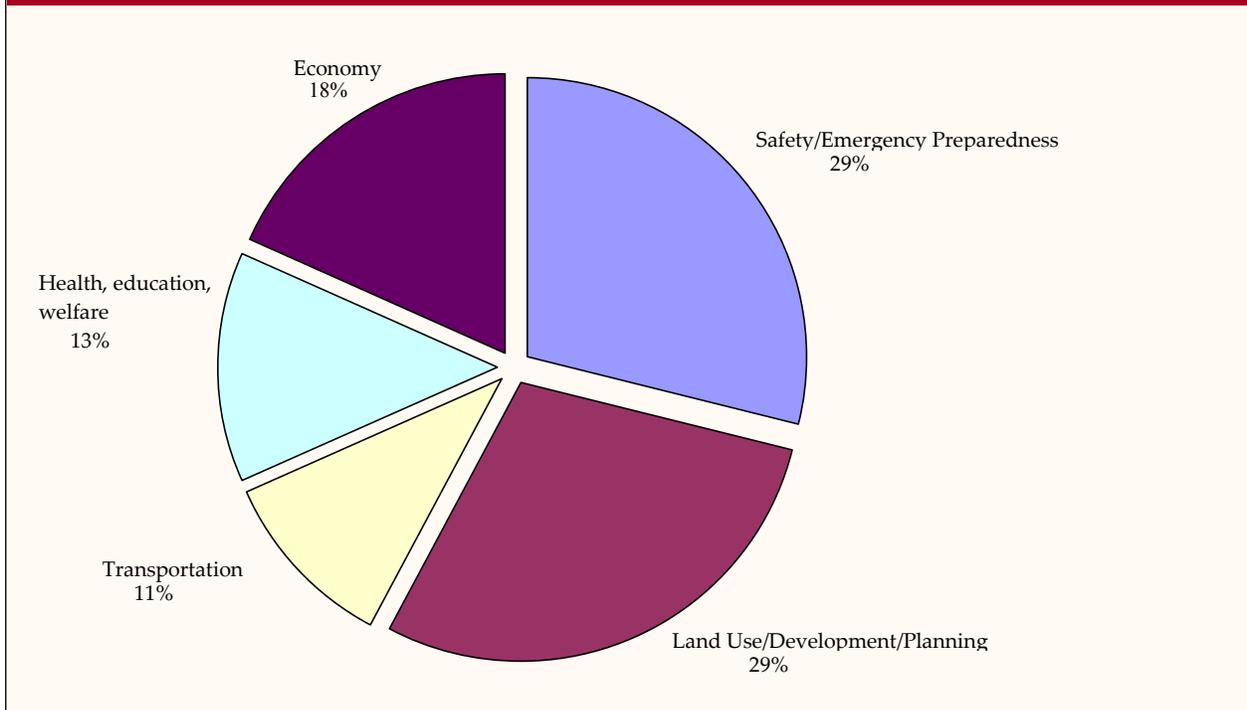## FIGURE IV-5: PROJECT COORDINATOR IDENTIFICATION OF COMMUNITY EFFECTS

Others 9%
Assistance 4%
Outreach 8%
Beautification 17%
Transportation 8%
Event 16%
Land Use /Development/Planning 19%
Safety/Emergency Preparedness 19%

FIGURE IV-6: PROJECT COORDINATOR IDENTIFICATION OF CITYWIDE EFFECTS

Economy 18%
Safety/Emergency Preparedness 29%
Health, education, welfare 13%
Transportation 11%
Land Use/Development/Planning 29%

Challenges to Neighborhood Council Capacity

DONE project coordinators identified an array of challenges that may impede capacity building at the neighborhood council level (Figure IV-7). Challenges related to group processes were cited most frequently by project coordinators on a citywide basis. Project coordinators identified increased internal conflict as a challenge for over a third of councils, up from only a quarter three years earlier. Interviews confirmed that for a significant segment of the councils, an inability to work together productively interfered with the council achieving its goals. Problems included divisiveness, lack of commitment, "rogue" board members, and procedural challenges.

Though the most-publicized cases of public discord appeared to be an anomaly, the perception of conflict could be a factor in depressing stakeholder involvement at meetings. For nearly a third of councils, according to project coordinators, declining stakeholder involvement was a greater challenge in 2006 than earlier (up from less than a quarter of councils in 2003) despite a greater use of community newsletters and increased participation in community events. Low turnout at meetings (and elections) was identified as a problem by board members, too, in both our 2003 and 2006 surveys.
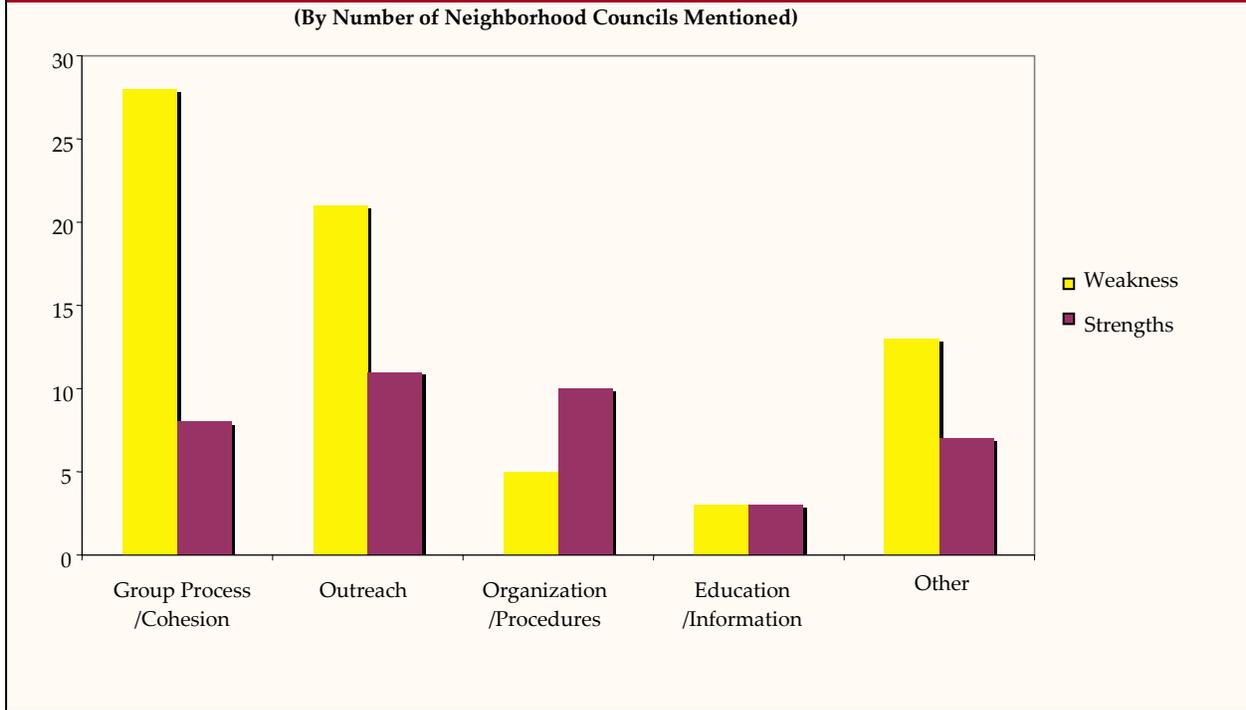
In our 2006 neighborhood council board member survey, in fact, over a third of respondents (37%) indicated that outreach was a continuing challenge to their council. Yet at the same time, nearly one-third identified outreach as an accomplishment of their council. Indeed 63 respondents cited outreach as *both* an accomplishment and a continuing challenge.

While meeting turnout is not necessarily an accurate measure of capacity, an inability to bring stakeholders to meeting has a multiplier effect: it may dampen enthusiasm among fellow elected board members; suggest to elected officials that the system does not function as a credible representation of stakeholder interests; and fail to encourage new people to participate in council activities. Without public participation, moreover, councils forgo volunteer labor that could expand the capacity of the council. Achieving diversity in representation is another key objective of the system, yet board members themselves say that councils are not as representative as they would like. In our survey, representation accounted for nearly 10% of all mentioned challenges.

Other challenges concern institutional (or contextual) factors that may inhibit council capacity. Project coordinators in interviews overwhelmingly (14 of 19) remarked that Department of Neighborhood Empowerment staffing was below what was required to adequately support the council system, though respondents were divided on whether there was sufficient operational support in the field. It is worth noting that only 20% of identified challenges described by board members in our survey were attributed to city policies. Challenges related to conflict, organization, and vision comprised more than a third of all challenges mentioned by board members.

Lastly, our attendance at meetings and interviews with project coordinators suggest a troubling divide emerging between councils that are able to attract stakeholder interest and those that lose the interest of the public. Board members who specifically said that the board had alienated the public were also less likely to name an accomplishment and sometimes observed that their council was merely 'spinning its wheels.'

FIGURE IV-7: NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

(By Number of Neighborhood Councils Mentioned)

Examples of Influence on Policy Making and Service Delivery

While we do not have information to assess the effect that 86 neighborhood councils have had on their communities, we can identify several cases where councils have influenced policy formulation and service delivery by the City. These cases are reflective of neighborhood council capacity to organize for impact. While not always achieving the objectives that leaders identified, there have been some neighborhood council initiatives that have met with qualified success.

Burglar Alarms. The LAPD joined nearly 90 cities in early 2003 to reconsider their burglar alarm response policy in order to reduce the 92% false response rate in Los Angeles. The Police Commission announced a new alarm policy in early 2003 without early notification of the issue, prompting neighborhood council volunteers packed City Council chambers to protest. The neighborhoods found support among several council members, and neighborhood council representatives joined the Burglar Alarm

Taskforce to roll back the policy, which was modified to include task force recommendations in June 2003.

DWP Rate Increase. After 12 years without an increase, the DWP proposed in November of 2003 to increase water and power rates an average of 18% without advance notice. With support of at least three City Councilmembers, neighborhood council gained time to coordinate a campaign in opposition to the policy. Council leaders succeed in gaining resolutions in opposition to the increase from 39 of 83 then-certified councils.

Organized opposition to the proposed rate increase in late 2003 encouraged the City Council to recognize the political costs of failing to notify councils. In early 2004 the City Council balanced neighborhood councils' demands to be included in the decision against the department's warnings of fiscal crisis. Taking a pragmatic approach, the City Council supported a compromise increase of 11%, and ultimately entered into a letter of intent to include neighborhood councils in future decisions.

Service Co-Production Agreement with Department of Public Works. At the invitation of the USC School of Policy, Planning, and Development's Collaborative Learning Project, four South Valley neighborhood councils and the Bureau of Street Services Division of the Department of Public Works committed to a series of four working sessions in the Fall of 2003 to explore opportunities for better cooperation in the delivery of constituent services. The express intent of the USC process was to formalize responsibilities for both participating neighborhoods and the department in terms of communication and knowledge-sharing to deliver services more effectively.

With the support of the Mayor's Office and City Council, a memorandum of understanding was signed in February 2004 (and ultimately recognized by City Council) to provide the four neighborhoods with street assessments, sanitation plans, tree plans, lighting plans, and an engineering report from the Bureau. The agreement also provided for neighborhood opportunities to participate in service delivery decisions. Though follow-through by the four neighborhoods varied, the Bureau was able to develop a model for a neighborhood-based annual service plan. Following on this agreement, Mayor Hahn's office directed that each neighborhood would be allowed to allocate $100,000 (in existing gas tax revenue) according to Infrastructure Assessment Reports distributed citywide.

Collaborative Policymaking: The DWP-Neighborhood Council MOU & Oversight Committee. The letter of intent signed by the DWP in early 2004 to include a greater voice for neighborhood councils in department policymaking served as a foundation for a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in 2005 that institutionalized a greater neighborhood role in department policymaking. Department responsibilities included effective early notification to councils (90 days) as well as a greater a role in collaborative policymaking. The MOU, signed by the department and 40 neighborhood councils in April of 2005, demonstrated that effective organizing could open opportunities for neighborhood participation with departments. It suggested the political value of citywide issue organizing through neighborhood councils as a new channel, and is today identified by community leaders as a template for future neighborhood-department relationships.

V. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We find a mixed record of accomplishments in the City's implementation of a neighborhood council system. Specifically:

(1) While the development of a citywide system is a major accomplishment, the neighborhood councils are not descriptively representative of the social and economic diversity of Los Angeles residents. They are less representative of residents than the population of likely voters or the mix of individuals who serve on Los Angeles boards and commissions.

(2) Many neighborhood councils struggle with outreach and infighting, which hampers their ability to address community issues, recruit volunteers and develop leaders.

(3) Neighborhood council board members have created strong citywide networks amongst themselves, creating the ability to mobilize politically. Nevertheless, neighborhood councils remain largely peripheral in city-wide policy making and service delivery issues. Moreover they do not appear to be developing strong networks connecting them to neighborhood constituents.

(4) While some neighborhood councils and city departments have developed arenas for improved participation, overall the City of Los Angeles has not systematically implemented the changes in practice envisioned by the Charter, constraining the effectiveness of neighborhood councils. As such most of their accomplishments are at the local rather than citywide level.

(5) The capacity and activities of NCs vary substantially across the City. Overall, neighborhood councils have focused heavily on land use and transportation issues, though they have also worked on sponsoring community events, beautifying their neighborhoods, and providing community assistance.

To achieve the core goals outlined for neighborhood councils in the Charter, neighborhood councils and the city have to work together in three key areas: 1) improving diversity of representation, 2) building leadership capacity, and 3) strengthening opportunities for neighborhood council input into city policy making. Specific actions can include:

- Transferring responsibility for elections and generalized outreach and advertising to the City, so that neighborhood council board members can focus on targeted outreach to improve and diversify participation. To accomplish this, it will be important for councils to develop an array of arenas for involvement that go beyond simple meeting attendance to include active engagement in projects and action committees.

- Providing incentives for targeted involvement of underrepresented groups in council activities. These might include specific grants for community improvement, education/recreation programs, public safety, or other activities demonstrated to increase diversity of participation in the neighborhood council.

- Providing more consistent technical assistance and administrative support to facilitate organizational maintenance and outreach by neighborhood councils. There should be recognition that as voluntary organizations neighborhood councils face particular challenges to sustainability, and that the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment needs to provide consistent support around the most difficult tasks: community organizing and conflict management.

- Providing in-depth leadership development for neighborhood council board members, with a particular emphasis on dispute resolution. This might involve programs that involve neighborhood council boards and stakeholders in deliberation and collaborative pursuit of community projects.

- Redesigning procedures for input into city policy making that recognize the special role reserved for neighborhood councils in the charter and encourage board members to reach out to stakeholders and share knowledge of community preferences with decision makers. These might include a searchable Early Notification System, reforms to the Mayor's Budget Process, and development of partnerships between neighborhood councils and city departments.