

## Congress Working Group meeting

Meeting date: March 26, 2005 Location: 233 S. Beaudry 11<sup>th</sup> floor

Observer: Mark Elliot

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Ken Alpern opened the meeting by noting the progress of the DWP MOU process, which has been often raised as a model effort that brought NCs to their seat at the table alongside City departments. Len Shaffer gave some background on the Congress of Neighborhood Councils effort, noting the intent of the Charter to allow NCs to meet as a congress and then suggesting that the group “take that concept and run with it and provide something new in LA City politics.” (He closed the meeting with the same sentiment.) Len noted that at the last meeting, 12 people got together – “and I thought there would be more” – and he added that yes, the Congress should be an independent body “for and by NCs with a Senate-type representation.”

Joe Vitti noted that he had heard that the working group was exclusive, emphasizing, “This is not a special group.” Len replied that word had indeed been circulated; that there were 37 participants in attendance at the January 29<sup>th</sup> (USC) Congress discussion, accounting for “half of all certified councils” (as Jacque Lamishaw said). That is where the working group was first formed and announced. This meeting would focus on outreach, Len said. “I still call it communication: how do we get the word out, that this group wants a lot of people here, and that we’re not trying to get rid of the Alliance, or the Valley Alliance? We want everybody.”

Len said, “Number 2, *we have a right*. DONE, I think, disregarded the original intent of the Charter to get everybody together to discuss the issues.” Don Larson replied that a “trade show on government” remained a good idea, “But we need a real congress.” The DONE event should expand, he said, but there was a call for a NC-driven initiative. “Greg supports what we’re doing,” Joe added.

Suzanne Thompson got to the point. “We also want political power, and that needs to be on the table.” By coming together, she said, they could seize it. She then asked for a show of hands as to how many participants had been to a City Council meeting to advocate on an issue. Two-thirds indicated that they had been.

Len looked to lobbying as a model for the Congress’s objectives. “When a trade group is interested [in an issue] it’s one or two that [appear and] say, ‘I represent \_\_\_\_ and this is how we feel....’ That somebody can go before a commission [and say], ‘I represent my NC’ or say, ‘I represent 85 or 95 NCs and we’ve come to a majority opinion’? That’s the power that we’re talking about.”

Len then moved on to the letter to NCs announcing the effort. “What are we trying to do on outreach by offering the letter of introduction to NCs?” Opinions flowed quickly. Brady said, “Make it shorter – hit what the Congress has got to be – a reason for people to come. *‘Oh – so we can have collective power.’*” Don said, “We need a mailing, not just email – a letter has to go out.” Michael suggested simplifying the message. Rich Waters suggested to “establish our legitimacy in the first paragraph and then hand it over to Ken” for finishing. Roger Kulpa thanked USC “for carrying it forward,” but added that the history of the effort is not as important as the fact that it’s moving forward.

Rusty said that not all NCs are at the same level, and that it ought to be simplified. Judie Sanchez said, “It’s got to be short,” and added that some in Northridge East don’t yet understand the MOU. “It’s difficult to even recruit candidates let alone do something [substantive] – we have more than apathy, it’s brain dead.” [To laughs.] But land use and NIMBY is a major problem.” Suzanne said of the apathy issue, “We’re asking them to join – we’re inviting people. Highlight our successes, and the opportunities.... This letter could have more information.”

Bob Basch from Winnetka said, “Sell the sizzle – get ‘em excited on the first line and at the end, and request a definitive response.” He said that he preferred a letter by mail, too, and that he receives too

many emails as it is. “But there’s 1500 boardmembers,” Jacque noted. She said that outreach does work, and that 52% of NCs signed on to the DWP MOU agreement. “Most of them that have not signed on have not received the presentation yet – we sold it by email, saying what the benefits are for you.” She said of this Congress introduction letter, “It’s a sales letter.”

Joe asked, “If the president gets a letter, is he going to pass it on?” Bob Gelfand noted the need for presentations in person to sell the effort, and said that the DONE congress (in June) “is our best opportunity to get people involved.” He suggested that presentations be made with enough advance time for NC action prior to the June event. “Preferably by their April meeting,” he added.

Ken Draper said, “We can’t write this with 25 people. Two have to get together.” Len suggested forming an outreach committee to finalize the letter, adding that hardcopy and email is the best way to communicate. Committee discussion culminated in a proposed 6 members and per Len’s suggestion they could appoint a Chair at the first meeting. Committee volunteers included Jacque, Suzanne, Brady, Joe, Michael, and Ken. “The one thing I’d like to see come out of the committee is a speaker’s bureau,” Len said, “To talk to NCs.”

This group dwelled at length on how to communicate best with NCs. Suzanne said that there’s City TV, Citywatch, Ken Marsh’s TV show. Joe noted that Jacque had handled outreach for the DWP MOU. Brady noted that the LA Times “refuses” to acknowledge NCs, so he will work with the NY Times.

Representation continued to be raised as an issue in the working group process. Steve asked about geographic representation in the working group. “We’re getting better,” Len said. “I’ve got a working group address list, and an alternate list of the 37 from the January session,” he added.

Ken referenced the DWP process and asked about the difference between NC representatives in the Congress and ‘walk-ons.’ Representation had been built into the DWP process, he said. “At the outset, people were officially representing their councils.” Elizabeth expressed some concern about the working group process, however. “If I had just walked in, I wouldn’t have a clue as to what we’re doing,” she said. “Bring me to the table....What tools are you going to be using? How are you going to get us there?”

Len said they’re trying to get NCs on board.

“But you don’t have a plan,” she said, to some disagreement.

Len replied that they all started with their NCs according to a general idea of what they wanted for their neighborhoods – “But look at the variety.” He said, “Here we’ve come up with a vision – the outreach to and education of NCs, but we’ll need people to talk to NCs in person [saying], ‘Here we are.’”

“[DWP MOU] made us understand what the benefit is to our NC,” Elizabeth said. “If you don’t get the message out, then you’re just spinning your wheels. I don’t see that you’ve thought about what the benefit is to NCs – a statement that is clear. We have 80 NCs across the city with different levels of understanding and different things that they want.” George later agreed, saying that if they want to interest NC participants, “We need something concrete,” which he implied was something on paper for distribution to NCs. He said, “By the third or fourth version of the MOU, I was in – hook, line, and sinker. But if we don’t have a structure to talk about?”

But Jeff Jacobberger wasn’t pleased. “We’ve been here for an hour, and all we’ve decided is to send a notice to NCs. What are we going to do? Is outreach all we’re going to talk about?” Soledad Garcia said it was her first time in the working group, and also took issue with what she saw as a lack of progress. “I wanted to know what you are going to be doing, but it sounds like you are still in the formative stages. I wanted to hear what the NC issues are, but you don’t have representatives from your councils. Outreach is great, but DWP outreached for a specific purpose.” She suggested “more meat” in the invitation letter and asked, “Are there specific issues?”

Len replied, “We’ll try to educate the community as to who we are.”

Roger Kulpa clarified that this meeting is not of the Congress, but only of the Working Group. "It's our 4<sup>th</sup> meeting...and we have discussed the [senate structure] body and today we're gong back in more detail. We've gotten stuck on outreach, but there's more... [It's] not issues now, but forming the congress...."

"Then develop what outreach is going to say – what we want said," Elizabeth replied. "How do we get what we're trying to get? Outreach stages and steps, then bring it back to this committee for approval then get it out to NCs. [In DWP MOU process] We all trusted each other."

The discussion turned to the political aspects of the Congress effort. Regarding the DWP rate proposal, Rusty Millar said, "Five of us were going around to the City Council offices to put the squeeze on them, and then getting NC support to oppose the increase. And in March, nobody voted to support it." He said that a Congress could function the same way: "To push these folks downtown – the fifteen little princes. It's the people, and DWP [MOU] showed them." He again compared the DWP MOU and Congress efforts, and said, "We may have concerns specific to our neighborhood, but they apply to everybody."

Len said that they were trying to give power to the NCs "as the *framers* thought we should have – not the politicians." He continued, "Maybe NCs will bite politicians in the fanny," adding, "they wanted NCs to stay in our neighborhoods and not deal with issues like DWP, or the burglar alarm issue." In response to Elizabeth's question, Len said that the congress could lend "the political power that an organized group gives." Ken added, "That's why we're here – why you're here."

Michael said that the DWP was "out of control," and argued that "NCs should have control over what goes on in the city." He suggested it was the same with the current effort. "DONE is the middleman, but we want NCs to control the Congress process – not the city dictating."

Unberto agreed, and said that they needed a Congress "to face the city" and to "get every NC at some hearings." At present, however, "We're only a social gathering but we're learning to physically confront the power structure." Bob Gelfand agreed, saying, "*We're* not the princes," and emphasized the opportunity that the June DONE Congress presented. "The big [working group] meeting ought to be at the DONE congress."

Joe Vitti clarified the difference between the DWP MOU and the Congress. "This is not an MOU – it's not with a City department. It should be easier. We're talking about citywide issues – like campaign finance reform. It's not a zoning issue. This goes across all city lines" [sic]. Len lamented the absence of "a specific driving issue," adding, "When issues arise we'll be able to move forward – and maybe we'll raise the issues."

After the break, the discussion turned to modes of outreach. Roger discussed setting up a website, and Bob noted that the Citywide Issues Group is up and running. Referring to the June Congress, he said, "We can double team on this – the Issues Group wants to do a later session on clean money/full campaign financing."

Len asked about format, but Brady wanted to return to the political strategy. saying that a new Mayor in office in June "That is the time to nail them down, but we have to be united in going to him. Are we going to be involved in auditing departments? In commission selections?" Don suggested that the nascent Congress should "Bring the Mayor in front of *us*." Steve Twinings supported preemptive action instead, saying "We should push both candidates before the [runoff] election to get what we want." Soledad suggested that City Council people be invited because the Congress "requires the support of the council people," she said. Len replied, "Or deputies, at least."

Returning to the format of the DONE event, Rich asked if the afternoon session would be uncontested (nobody knew). He asked if there was time to meet after that (given the limitations, there would not be). Then Jeff replied to laughs, "It's our convention center!"

Elizabeth asked about having a survey on hand for attendees to the Congress breakout session to address the major points: “What is it we are trying to come to, and to have questions [that address the working group’s framed purpose] without telling them what to do.” To get people into the session, she added, “We need to have a great outreach piece.”

Rusty agreed. “I’d like the survey to look at ‘sexy’ issues that we can turn around to the mayor or the city Councilman to say, ‘This is what we think is important.’ NCs aren’t the tail of the dog; the city Council offices are the tail of the dog. We can say that these are the issues that *they* need to address.”

Bob said, “I’m seeing a wheel but it has to have rubber – and that’s the stakeholders.” Put out a survey to stakeholders, he said, to generate support and participation in order to “get to a point to where it ain’t NCs elected by 500 or less stakeholders.” Judy suggested a “hot-button issue [and] they’ll come in by the hundreds.” She noted the effect that Wal Mart had on galvanizing the community. “People don’t care, and apathy is the rule of thumb.”

Bob Gelfand suggested that the morning session could be presenting to the public the working group’s “best proposal for NCs to be” including a history, a chart, or other aids. “Then the later session could be clean money as a topic, and we could hold a practice Congress.” He said that they had to compete for attention, but couldn’t force the issue of participation.

Jeff replied that NCs should be asked to *appoint* someone to attend the (presumably second) breakout session. “Then it becomes a mini-Congress.” He continued, “Is the goal to communicate a proposal from this group, or to get input on the form it should take? If the latter, have 4 or 5 structures [prepared and then] debate the merits over the next hour. But I’m not sure that clean money is ‘sexy’ – it’s an inside issue. It’s not traffic, or paving, or streets.”

Suzanne asked, “Are we doing the right thing? We could end up with the same people in the room. In the morning session, have a 10-minute talk about the Congress. Then set up a Congress like a Senate. Campaign finance won’t get people [in]...[But] when it’s a development issue, or a new city planning person....”

Jaque noted the logistical limitations of the DONE congress event - including the 90-minute breakout session timeframe. She said, “We’ll have to have an orientation session, and I’d like to see a survey go out in advance. By email.”

Bob replied, “Is it a talk-to, or a talk with a Q&A session?” He suggested a presentation followed by a “controlled” session showing how it could work. “Then give them the next step – a typical motion to take back to their NC to select a delegate. They could say [in their NC meeting], ‘I want to make a motion....’”

Len agreed that it was a competitive issue to persuade attendees to the event to select the Congress breakout session. “The important thing is to generate interest,” he said, and proposed an introduction followed by Q&A to a panel. “Maybe this group could have 5-10 minutes with all of the politicians to introduce ourselves.”

There was then discussion about how to make the event significant. Joe suggested that the mayor be invited to address the session as a keynote speaker. “We should say, ‘Participate – it’s a good thing.’” Don suggested a “well-known someone to act as president on that day,” adding that the “star-power” is part of it. Joe suggested Janice Hahn (to some agreement, while others said that she was “too political”) Don suggested a TV personality as a neutral option.

Ken said that they have to be careful about the mini-Congress aspect of the session. “Using the opening session as a promotion is great,” he said, “but the mini-Congress may give the impression ‘this is it.’ It leaves a negative impression. I’m suggesting being careful because many [people] are not yet informed. Elizabeth again suggested a survey because, she said, “we need a NC senate to focus on citywide issues

[but] each NC has a different flavor – so how to find that out?” She suggested ask a general question. “Come up with an issue then assess all 80 or 90 of them.” She was suggesting using this to select and then float an initial Congress issue.

Bob replied, “You should add to the survey local issues – make it a meal ticket. It should be in the newspaper...to challenge those who claim to be representing [stakeholders]. We ain’t doing that job of outreach.... The second elections are half [the turnout] of the first – with the same outreach. Pacoima still has vacant positions and they’re losing people.”

Bob Gelfand referred to the Citywide Issues Group and its focus on issues, but said that the Congress should “present what it’s all about and that we need a senate – and then try to get them to point themselves as senators for the [following] session.” Jeff replied, “Bring them on board, or invite input?”

Jacque cautioned the group that they should not confuse stakeholders until the DWP MOU process gets finalized, which she said should be the end of April. “So we’re looking at the first of May.” Given the letter and the survey possibly in development, the tight timeframe presented a challenge. “Getting ready for DONE [the June event] with only 2 more meetings?” Jacque asked. “I’d like to see 4 meetings.” Joe agreed, and asked whether they needed a couple of more meetings even before the next working group meeting on April 23<sup>rd</sup>. “If the letter is finalized on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, that’s fine,” Len said. But amidst confusion about what exactly the letter that the committee was working on should include - and when it should go out - there was agreement that the next invitation should go out *before* the 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Len asked if the working group was large enough at present to formulate what they wanted to achieve, and then should they bring other NC representatives in to say, ‘This is what we’re proposing’? “We had formation committees,” Len said, “and then did outreach from that. I’d like a show of hands that we’re sufficient to form a formation committee - and I’m not taking comments.”

Bob Gelfand replied, “Yes, you’re taking comments.”

Len again asked, amidst some confusion, “I’m going to play dictator - is this group large enough?”

Bob replied, “I’m not accepting this....”

Len said, “As Chair, are we large enough to say, ‘Here’s what we want to do to proceed?’ (14 indicated yes.)

Someone said, “Are we using parliamentary procedure? I’m opposed to the way you are presenting this. We are representatives. We’re at the table because we believe in the concept. If we’re calling it a formation group, OK. Will they have voting procedures? Do we orientate them first? If we commit that this is a formation group, leave it open-ended. Write rules that we establish. They can [only] talk about it.”

Jacque suggested preliminary bylaws but Bob Gelfand said, “Legitimacy is in question, and I resent that we have a motion without discussion.” To that some said, “We’ve had discussion!” and others said, “There is no motion!” Bob said, “Don’t shout me down.”

Len capped the meeting by saying, “With assent from this group we should go forward and put together a proposal with a separate sign-up sheet for others who come [to the session]. We put it out as a formulated idea and, later the Congress will have an opportunity to change it – as a Congress. I’m going to standardize this as a group (by email) and we’ll say, ‘We’ve got something tangible, come build on it with us.’ This is the start of something new and different!”