

Congress Working Group meeting

Meeting date: May 14, 2005 Location: 233 S. Beaudry 11th floor

Observer: Mark Elliot

Notes

Len Shaffer opened the meeting by asking about outreach – that appeared to be the driving force and was the first agenda item after introductions. Ken Draper noted that 30 neighborhood councils are represented by 45 people “at some level” in the Congress working group process “so we’re growing – we’re in good shape.” Only 9 participants attended this meeting, but Ken compared it to the DWP process “at this stage” before their 40 or so councils had signed on. Ken also noted website glitches to be worked out, and Jacque Lamishaw suggested that software exists to contact people by geographic area.

Talk moved quickly to funding, with Jacque suggesting “a California non-profit for community benefit corporation,” and said she’ll run a mission statement by Jeff Jacobberger, who is drafting the charter framework in committee. Brady Westwater said he would make inquiry calls to foundations for support or ‘seed money’ to establish the website. “We’re not ready as a foundation yet,” he said of structuring the congress as a fund-raising organization, “but we have people spoken to.” Jacque suggested a full-color brochure for the congress to sell it to neighborhood council reps.

This opened up discussion about the DONE event, where the WG expects to present the body to neighborhood council representatives. “We ought to be deciding the menu of the [congress] breakout session,” Ken said, noting that the DWP session occurs simultaneously, but adding, “I think we can compete with that group easily – we’ll be of interest to a lot of people.” Jacque [who participated in the DWP MOU process] said, “I’m getting questions about it – does it need to be 90 minutes?” Jeff replied that it could be 45 minutes if it’s not a review but “from here on...” Jacque suggested a 45/45 minute split for both sessions to allow neighborhood council people to move between them.

Talk resumed to financing. ‘LANCC Benefit Association’ was suggested as a name, but Joel Fisher balked. “I don’t know our name, our mission, our charter [and as a result] nobody will give us anything. Decide that [first].” Ken asked, “Do we want to pay for it ourselves? There are people spending pocket money.” Joe Vitti asked, “Can we be reimbursed?” (Discussion suggested that retroactive reimbursement is not possible.)

Dan Wiseman asked, “Do we lose our image as volunteers? Adrienne [?] noted that neighborhood councils aren’t authorized to “make donations” and asked if neighborhood councils should apportion funding. Dan replied, “I don’t hear a budget or items that need to be funded.” Ken noted that the DWP MOU process cost \$4,000 and that an account was opened to administer it. “We went to commercial interests – we didn’t expect the neighborhood councils to contribute – and there’s a limit as to what we can ask [working group people] to pay.” Jacque replied, “This group owns it – and pays for it,” but Brady countered, “This group doesn’t exist yet.” Len Shaffer noted, “It’s like when we put neighborhood councils together,” and frustration was expressed that the City did not reimburse for neighborhood council formation costs.

Jeff returned the discussion to “core principles,” and asked about limiting the body to the City of LA – or to make it a regional body, “as in the ‘Southern

California' AQMD." Joe countered, "We're a City organization," but Adrienne added, "There will be national and international issues that affect us." Jacque replied, "That's still 'city,' as it impacts the City of LA." Ken said, "Leave it to the congress to decide," adding that a state bill concerning the Brown Act *does* affect neighborhood councils. Jeff mentioned Homeland Security funding distribution. But Joe noted, "We're an advocate for the City council – that's where we come in; we can't [lobby] our own state senator." Brady noted that there's too much going on downtown to attract participants attention there to national or international issues.

Joel noted that there are joint City council – county supervisor initiatives such as MTA "and we need to be included." Len noted three housing bills at the state level and said, "The City should be weighing in on issues that may be impacted by state and national [legislation]." (There appeared to be consensus that 'citywide issues' may be larger than the mere boundaries of the City.)

Talk turned to communication between the body and the neighborhood councils. Joel suggested that they should be covered in a 'statement of purpose' but that "you don't need a mechanism in the charter." Jeff replied, "Is it only a mechanism for neighborhood councils to raise an issue? Or for the body to say, 'IZ is coming and here's a packet of information'?" Adrienne called for an outreach to neighborhood councils that includes both a website and email. Ken suggested that the committee come back to the WG with a proposal. He suggested thinking of the congress not as a 2x or 4x per year meeting but as "an issues center ongoing, where issues can be processed."

Jeff asked about the Alliance of neighborhood councils or the LANC issues forum for this purpose. Len said that asynchronous communication meant that the group doesn't have to meet – and that the Brown Act wouldn't apply to such communications. "Have meetings as needed." Joel added that the Alliance and the LANC Issues Group are "not democratic in structure," and that this would distinguish the congress from them. Joe agreed with Ken on the 'issues center' idea, noting that most everyone has email. "In Valley Vote, we take votes by email."

The discussion turned back to outreach, with Len noting that in Tarzana, 14,000 election notices generated only 10 phone calls. Joel noted declining participation in subsequent elections across councils. Adrienne hoped to attract 100 voters to the polls. Len replied that the central issue was "educating the public about neighborhood councils." Jacque said of participation in the congress, "They will come," to which Len added, "It will be issues driven." Jeff wondered if neighborhood council volunteers had the time, and asked, "Will this body allow whatever level of participation they can provide?" You don't want to usurp neighborhood council-level activities, Jeff added. "The congress shouldn't preclude neighborhood councils from taking on issues and including minority voices."

Joel noted that electronic communications provided an opportunity to everybody to participate at some level. Len said that electronic meetings could supplant the role of the congress as a meeting body, but added that the body can take votes electronically. Ken agreed. "The opportunity to reach a citywide consensus is the value. It will take time for people to figure out the process." He added that Playa del Rey never took their issue to the City as a whole for support. "Only Playa was

important – and they lost.” He noted that education is important, and that “If I can get your support on it...” Joel raised the issue of dog parks in Hollywood, noting that the alternative scenario exists: that local residents may want them, but that the community supports them – and he added that there are dog loving friends in every neighborhood council. “That’s something we can pick up on.”

Joel suggested paid staff to deal with issues and communicate with neighborhood councils, leaving the body to address issues in committee. “The committees can meet as needed.” Jeff asked about a periodic mass meeting. “What a concept!”

Brady replied. Participants here discussed the ‘burnout factor’ that evidently suppresses community involvement at the neighborhood council level. Len suggested a board structure, so that “people will see an end” to their obligation. Ken described a body where everybody participates but that representatives participate in a senate, “with an administrative committee to handle senate and congress and keep issues working between meetings. The senate can meet at a mass meeting – or if there’s an emergency – but someone has to keep [us] up to date on the issues.” He added that at an assembly, “I get to talk – as a stakeholder I have a place as well.” But not a “trade show,” he added, but a “two-dimensional congress” where “I can connect my local issues citywide.” He said, “Presenting an issue does not necessarily imply voting.” Proponents of plans (such as LAX) come to educate, and members can listen, Joe added. Joel suggested an “informal vote to refer it to the senate” for action, but this received a lukewarm reception.

[This did raise the issue of surfacing issues – and how the gates get kept.]

Jeff suggested that regular meetings were important to “get neighborhood councils to come and sign on.” Joe said that too much structure might discourage participation. “Look at the meeting today – participation dropped off. We need to sell the concept without getting into details – and it’s an arduous task.” Jacque said that people do want the details. Joe replied, “I’m not for rehashing,” and given the scant attendance, he described “near term problem with outreach.”

The discussion turned to body structure. Joel reiterated, “One plus an alternate?” Joe reminded the group that there was once the suggestion of three votes per neighborhood council to reflect a minority sentiment at the neighborhood council level. There was concern that if the neighborhood council vote was by a 1-vote margin, and the congress voted by a one-neighborhood council margin, that there needs to be a way to reflect the minority sentiment. “If this group votes up or down without expressing a minority view, we’re not doing our job,” Ken said. “There’s an opportunity to be persuasive.”

“The minority report could be part of the rules,” Len said. “But in our neighborhood council, if it’s 51 to 49% for the developer, you go forward and say, ‘Our neighborhood council voted to support.’ But if we’re looking to express views of our neighborhood councils, then a minority report could be presented.” (But who to prepare it?) Joe replied, “If you have 90% agreement, but another vote is 51 to 49, the 90% support will have more impact with the City council – they’ll take note of it - but in the other example, they can vote either way. Where we are in [full] agreement, it will have more impact.” Ken said that it does have the same impact – to disagreement.

Joel said that in his neighborhood council, “We’ve either said, ‘We support this unanimously’ or we’ve said ‘We mostly support this.’” Jeff asked about not only having representation of the minority view, but actually hearing representatives of

the minority view. Joel said, “We don’t want written legal decisions like the Supreme Court – US congress doesn’t do that.” In DLANC council, Brady said, “We don’t have a rule, but if we’re close [to consensus] we go back and do it until we get...consensus.” He used the example of complex issues such as homelessness that take time to move through decision in DLANC council. Ken said, “We’re an advisory group, and if we advise 51% o support IZ and 49% do not, then we’ve done our job. Getting our way is not the goal – it’s to advise – and if we’re divided then that’s the advice we’re giving.”

Joel disagreed. “If it’s 51 to 49 [in a senate vote], I don’t want our [CoNC council] representative going to the City council and saying, ‘We support it.’ We have to support it in a way that the City council can understand.” Len said the larger body consensus aside, how would the CoNC council represent each neighborhood council’s vote if each neighborhood council had expressed support by such a slim margin – “IF neighborhood councils are really divided on an issue?”

Brady suggested that most neighborhood councils could vote to abstain – as does DLANC council. “If we have 49% for, and 10% against, we abstain.” He added that the neighborhood councils have to decide individually and suggested that each of them has a responsibility to work it out at the neighborhood council level. (There was agreement that a supermajority vote need only apply to organizational changes, such as amendments to the CoNC council charter.)

Discussion turned to participation in the congress. Len added that people envision the congress as a gathering,” and Brady added, “Networking.” Joel differentiated the senate as a place where information moves up from the congress, and Len added, “Where people can process information.” Ken said that the congress was the opportunity for people to talk to you – about issues *and* networking – and Len agreed that the larger body would drive interest in the senate, too.

Jeff said that as a stakeholder, he’d go to congress if there’s a vote to be taken, while Len said attendance would allow one to speak on the issue – “Here’s my view.” Ken described the congress as a place to find out about issues – “What’s going on with planning, or participating in a committee handling an MOU. In the congress, I get to participate.” He said the senate might have to meet more often than a congress, but that the action will be in the larger body. “The *congress* is an event where people come together and listen to pro and con on certain issues.” The DONE event was discussed in this context, with Jacque suggesting that the DONE event be separate. Len replied that the DONE event is mandated by the plan but not the charter, “though if we can convince somebody to amend the plan to get rid of the requirement...” The discussion addressed how these events could co-exist. Joe said, “Our goal is to have a separate congress.” Jeff added, “Why not get what we envision?” Paid for by DONE, Brady suggested. Joel said he wants DONE support, but that they’re separate. “I’m not trying to convert [the] DONE event. Ken suggested that the neighborhood council-driven congress could meet, but that DONE could receive the credit for their obligation – with DONE’s support. “We have to know what we want to do and then fit DONE into it. Use DONE as a resource. Then we can secede from the city.” (To laughs.)

Back to structural matters, discussion addressed weighted representation (no) and issues surfacing. Len suggested an issues committee where any representative can send a request and then introduce it to the senate. Brady added that any committee

could introduce an issue. Joel advocated for “direct access” by any representative introducing an issue. Len agreed with Brady, noting the current discussion about Silver Lake’s council file index proposal. “It should go to the committees as a clearinghouse.” There was talk of the Senate being a slow-moving body, but Brady noted that committees could continue their work between meetings on particular issues.

Jeff asked if the senate would take up an issue if it was not a significant issue for many neighborhood councils. Joe suggested that the LANC council issues group could play this role. Jacque suggested that committee members often have the most information (i.e., the DWP MOU oversight committee), and that the congress could have committees formed to handle these issues. Jeff asked whether in the coming planning MOU process, the oversight committee shouldn’t be a committee of the congress. Len cautioned that the congress is “not a charter-created body,” but that neighborhood councils are charter created advisory bodies. Joel said, “We should behave like we are.” Joe added, “We’re advising the City council.”

Discussion addressed applicability of the Brown Act, with some advocating for compliance as a matter of form and others suggesting that it would preclude information exchange and perhaps online voting. Jeff said, “If we want the City to pay attention....” Ken replied, “It absolutely has to be opened and noticed.” There was disagreement as to whether the body was an information dissemination agency or a voting body (both), and whether the vote was merely a reflection of neighborhood council-level votes (as suggested Adrienne) or a reflection of consensus discussions that went beyond the neighborhood council-level votes (as suggested Brady). “Have neighborhood councils sign releases so that representatives are not bound,” Joel suggested. “But are they voting in a way that the neighborhood council never authorized?” asked Len. “Neighborhood councils have the right to determine it,” Brady said. Joel said that as a rep, he would ask for feedback from his neighborhood council “but be able to go and vote my conscience.” If your neighborhood council gives carte blanche, Jacque said. “If the neighborhood council decides [an issue], then the individual will *reflect* how the feel,” Joe said.

Brady then asked, “But what if their neighborhood council never voted on [an issue]? They will vote on what’s important to them, but on other issues, representatives will be on their own.” Joel agreed. “We’ve got to be prepared. Only 4/10 neighborhood councils voted on the newsstand issue.” Len suggested that major issues – such as the MOUs – would stimulate participation. Joel replied, “There will be citywide issues that the board doesn’t discuss. My Hollywood neighborhood council doesn’t pay attention to San Pedro....” Joe called that an effective abstention.

Jeff took another tack. “For planning director, neighborhood councils are invited to put their voice in - and a lot have. Would the senate put their voice in?” Ken replied that the focal point focusing neighborhood council attention on significant issues would be a communications committee. “Neighborhood councils will know what that committee is about,” suggesting that its credibility would serve to heighten awareness. Joel replied, “A senate voting on a City appointment? That’s not something to get involved in.”

The question surfaced as to what to present to councils: a “turnkey operation” as Joel suggested, or a suggested framework? Joel suggested a 3-month period for adjustment or changes. “DO a certain number of neighborhood councils need to sign on?” Len asked. Joe replied, “Any number – then you keep adding.” It was agreed that neighborhood councils had to be certified and have an elected board. Ken asked, “So I don’t join anything? I just send an official rep? If I don’t send a rep, I’m not participating? If I’m from a new neighborhood council coming on, what makes me an official member?” Len replied, “Send it to neighborhood councils; have them approve it; send a rep.”

Ken said that each neighborhood council “has to agree to the charter – to sign off on the document and then you send an official rep. Your person just doesn’t show up.” Jeff asked about a quorum. “Is a simple majority too high?” Joel said, “A majority plus one....” Ken rejected the need for a quorum and said, “If only 10 show up – then that’s what we report out. If 10 show up, then it’s not so relevant. We’re a reflection of the views of neighborhood councils – it’s not like passing legislation.” He added that alternates might pose a problem as they can vote but not be a part of the process. “Could neighborhood councils take a position by email – even if nobody shows up?” Joe asked. Ken replied, “If you don’t care enough, then stay home – this is for those prepared to participate.”

“I’m saying we don’t have to have everybody there to have a reflection,” Joe replied. “The neighborhood councils will be sufficiently prepared on an important issue,” Len said. “They will have someone there.” Adrienne suggested a written proxy, but there was a consensus that that was not adequate for a participatory body. “IF they’ve taken the time to debate, then they’ll want their voice heard,” Len said. Ken said, “Let them supply an impact statement.” Brady suggested requiring that representatives (and alternates) serve on committees – as in DLANC council and other neighborhood councils. There was consensus to form issue-based committees.

Brady suggested to approval that the senate would grow to become an influential body. “In a few years, it will become a shadow City council.” Jacque chanted, “Who are we?! Neighborhood councils! What do we want? Real power!” she suggested that they take charge from DONE and seek to concentrate their power. “Taking charge of our congress is taking charge of our future.”