

Many of you have received emails concerning a proposed new city ordinance governing community councils, their participation in NSP, and their right to be heard by the City. As a member of the working group appointed by Councilmember Laketa Cole and that met for over seven months to study perceived shortcomings in the current ordinance (220-1989), I am highly disturbed by the current recommendations. The proposed ordinance diverges dramatically from the findings and recommendations of the working group, which were agreed to by all but one member of the group.

What we have in the new proposal reflects the consistent agenda of that one member, who does not actively participate with any community council.

As written, the proposed ordinance would strip from community councils the right to establish reasonable requirements for voting privileges, such as joining the organization by paying membership dues, attending a minimum number of meetings or participating in volunteer activities, or waiting a reasonable period (currently 60 days) after joining before one can vote.

As private corporations chartered under state law, community councils have the right to establish such requirements. Many councils currently have in place some criteria for voting; for some that was done out of necessity to protect the viability of the organization and the best interests of the neighborhood.

Our working group concluded that the City has a legitimate interest in trying to determine whether a community council's request or position truly reflects the will of the neighborhood. Therefore, we suggested a change that calls for an open vote of residents, just like is done now on NSP proposals, on any matter a community council may convey to the City, be that a funding request, a zoning issue, liquor license issues, or any other request for City action. All other matters – elections, disposition of non-City funds, community activities not involving the City, etc. – would be left to the council to determine as it sees fit.

For many community councils, even our suggestion would cause a major change in the way they do business. It severely limits a council's authority to enable its board to conduct business and eliminates its ability to react in a timely manner. A really good example is the issue of administering the NSP. The new ordinance would have required community councils to conduct an open vote on the question before their leaders addressed or communicated with City Council their concerns.

As proposed, the new ordinance would impose upon community councils more stringent requirements for conducting votes than are in place for our political elections.

The proposed ordinance makes other changes to the existing law. Among them is a reference to how neighborhood boundaries are determined. As I understand, the goal is to assure there are no areas of the City that are not represented by a community council. I have no issue with that, but I think the language needs reworked to accomplish that while maintaining a community's right to determine for itself its boundaries.

Another is a requirement that each community vote once a year, at its annual meeting, whether to extend membership privileges to persons other than residents. This is an attempt to simplify the existing, somewhat confusing requirement that each council grant any five residents the right to call for a vote once a year.

The other change is a prohibition against a community council's involvement in a campaign by a candidate for public office. This is in line with IRS regulations for 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations.

I fail to see where new voting requirements contribute to the health and vitality of community councils not do they help councils be more representative of their neighborhoods.

A public hearing will be conducted on this ordinance at the meeting of the Vibrant Neighborhoods, Recreation and Public Services Committee at 2 pm Tuesday, April 14 in City Council chambers. I encourage everyone to share his thoughts at the hearing, or if you can't attend, communicate with members of Council.

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