

**THE POTENTIAL FOR NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL  
INVOLVEMENT IN AMERICAN METROPOLITAN GOVERNANCE**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the role that neighborhood associations might play in helping to govern American cities. In contrast to recent arguments that there has been a decline in grass-roots level “social capital,” the empirical evidence suggests that local neighborhood associations are growing in number, and are increasingly active. We discuss the theoretical foundations for involving neighborhoods in governance, and argue that informal associations can mediate between citizens on the one hand, and large-scale bureaucracies and businesses, on the other. In addition, a formal system of associations may encourage discussion among fragmented neighborhoods, which in turn could improve conflict negotiation and develop mutual understanding. We argue that a major impediment to the development of a neighborhood council system in Los Angeles has been a lack of information about existing neighborhood-based associations, and discuss an ongoing initiative to develop a comprehensive base of information regarding neighborhood associations in Los Angeles.

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The growing sense of alienation from government at all levels, expressed by the citizenry of the United States with increasing intensity over the last three decades, has called attention to the importance of civil society for a government aspiring to be democratic. While voluntary associations have a long tradition in American civic life, there is now re-emerging interest in formally integrating neighborhood organizations into the policy-making process in local government. This essay suggests a normative framework within which one can understand the push toward civic participation, examines recent evidence regarding the characteristics of neighborhood councils, and discusses the difficulties involved in establishing a neighborhood council system where it is most needed, in a sprawling modern metropolis. It then illustrates some of these challenges by discussing the recent movement in Los Angeles to include a neighborhood council system in charter reform. Finally, it discusses the crucial role the university can play in fostering neighborhood councils by developing centralized and accessible information regarding existing organizations, and by providing institutional design advice and coordination during the policy formulation process.

### ***Normative Foundations: Civic Participation and the Neighborhood***

The neighborhood movement and the push for participation in governance at the neighborhood level can be understood as one aspect of American pluralism that is challenging the Progressive approach to the rationalized governing of highly diverse communities. Participatory democracy has been an important element of American political culture since the colonial era. This tradition has not vanished; however, it has been eroded by the growth and urbanization of the nation, which increased the scale of governments at all levels. As well, some of the reforms instituted by the Progressive Movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contributed to its decay.

In American history, one can identify the foundations of local self-governance in the Puritan covenantal communities of the colonial era, and in Jefferson's notion of "ward republics," the small-scale units of government in which true democracy would be rooted. Moreover, the Antifederalist cause has been interpreted as a call for highly localized, participatory democracy, rather than larger scale, representative approaches. One of Alexis De Tocqueville's most salient observations about the

United States was the importance of association and participation to American civic life.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Progressive municipal government reforms set us on a path toward a science of administration separated from politics, focused on efficient administration to be achieved through the development of generic scientific principles for structuring and managing organizations. This approach assumed the centralization of authority, along with the standardization of policies, management practices, organizational design, and service delivery. The ethical norms associated with Progressivism were economy and equity. There was an obligation in public service to treat everyone the same (equally) in order to treat everyone fairly (equitably), not an unreasonable norm in the context of machine government of that era. Moreover, progressive reforms supported efficiency of a limited sort (maximum output for a given input) through centralized bureaucratic organization and standardized rules, regulations, and priorities.

Social critics including Deidre English, Barbara Ehrenreich, Christopher Lash, and John McKnight have condemned the evolution of professionalism and bureaucracy as “a parallel process in society where the new class of professionals and technicians has challenged people’s control over their lives and their day-to-day interactions with each other.” The high scale of specialization inherent to professions, argued Boyte, meant that “the individual is then broken down into systems of problems.” And, “when the capacity to define the problem becomes a professional prerogative,” concluded McKnight, “citizens no longer exist.” To use McKnight’s phrase, professionalization and bureaucratization “infantilize the citizenry,” and prevent neighbors from competently addressing communal problems. As such, the neighborhood council movement can be understood as a response to the growing tension between the homogenizing legacy of the American Progressive Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, on the one hand, and the increasingly assertive pluralism of American society, on the other. American public policy is being pulled in different directions by the dual forces of modernization: *rationalization* in the tradition of Weber, Wilson, Taylor and Gulick: and *pluralization* in the form of rights-based struggle among such groups as women’s, gays and lesbians, racial and ethnic groups, and environmentalists and preservationists. In contrast to the limiting “cost-effectiveness” norms of the former, the latter calls for decentralization, differentiation, and flexibility with efficiency of a broader kind

(adaptability of the political and social system to a turbulent environment). At the most fundamental ethical level, rationalization opts for equity as equality, while pluralization views equity as sometimes requiring equality of treatment (voting rights) and at other times calling for inequality (affirmative action, Headstart, handicapped access requirements) to redress injustice experienced by certain groups.

The growing activity at the neighborhood level suggests that mediating organizations can play a crucial role in connecting citizens with their government representatives, and in mediating between individuals and large scale corporate and government enterprises. The larger scale of both development and government that is inherent in metropolitan areas have tended to make the public policy process, and the delivery of public services, more remote from the citizenry. The prominence of state and federal government in regulating local policy has had the same effect. The professionalization and bureaucratization of the administrative functions of government promoted by the Progressives have excluded the lay public from direct involvement in the day-to-day operation of government.

During the last 5 years, there has been growing concern that participatory democracy in the U.S. in the forms of grassroots political participation is being endangered. Robert Putnam has called attention to the alleged decline of “social capital” as evidenced by “bowling alone” trends, such as declining membership in voluntary, recreational, and fraternal organizations such as bowling leagues, the PTA, Elks Clubs, League of Women Voters, and labor unions. Moreover, a common refrain heard from government officials is that Americans are apathetic and that civic duty is waning seriously. It is argued that people are simply no longer interested in participating in the governmental process of shaping public policy. Dwindling electoral participation seems to support this assessment.

The continuing growth in diverse neighborhood and community organizations, however, calls into question Putnam’s diagnosis. Although in the late 1970s, and throughout the Reagan administration, federal support for citizen participation shrank sharply, it is now clear that organizing at the neighborhood level quietly continued on its own. For example, Boyte (1980) documented the ongoing “back-yard revolution,” which he attributed to citizen belief that “decisions about their own lives were becoming further and further removed—in both corporate and governmental structures.” He listed 21 support networks for neighborhood organizing, 11 selected neighborhood-oriented newsletters, 12 organizer

training schools spread around the nation, a sampling of 42 community organizations in major urban areas and a number of statewide organizations of neighborhood associations. This suggests that Americans are not apathetic; citizens have not turned their back on civic duty. They do engage in specific areas of public life, primarily in their own neighborhoods and local communities, in spaces as personal and intimate as a backyard. The challenge that is facing local governance in America today is not the lack of social capital, as Putnam suggests, but the need to invest that social capital in governance. The task is not to construct an infrastructure of citizens' organizations; these associations exist in great numbers. Rather, it is necessary to reconnect neighborhood associations to elected officials and career administrators, and to encourage regular interaction, deliberation, and debate among local groups within the larger metropolis.

Stimulating democratic participation and discourse at this level has the potential to play both instrumental and constitutive roles within American democracy. From an instrumental standpoint, neighborhood organizations can improve policy outcomes by mobilizing the citizenry to express their concerns and interests. In so doing they help establish a balance of power with economic forces and allow citizens to improve influence over local government activities. More localized decision making can improve the fit between local preferences, and public goods and services, and allow a better balance between the welfare gains from collective provision of public goods, and the costs of collective choice and political compromise.

Moreover, by voicing residential preferences to public administrators, neighborhood organizations may help to ensure that "urban outcomes" are not mechanical resultants of central administrative rule structures or professional norms. For example, the classic work by Levy et al. (1974) shows that in Oakland, library acquisition decisions tended to be centralized, and heavily influenced by the professional norms of librarians. This contributed to lower borrowing in poorer neighborhoods, because the collections in the local libraries did not respond to local needs (patrons of these libraries were more interested in vocational and training references than were patrons of more affluent libraries). In turn, because libraries' budgets were based on borrowing activity, the branches in wealthier neighborhoods, with greater borrowing activity, received higher budgetary allocations, a distributional trend the authors

termed “the more the more.” Neighborhood associations may be able to reverse these sorts of inequitable policy resultants by employing their understanding of local situations, their stock of skills and experience, and their ability to mobilize residents.

Neighborhood governance also has the potential to play a *constitutive* role, fostering face-to-face debate and discussion about civic values. As MacIntyre (1984) has argued, one of the characteristics of twentieth century liberal politics is a lack of adherence to a set of core regime values, which has led contemporary moral debate to appear particularly shrill and interminable. In MacIntyre’s view, the “language of morality [has] passed from a state of order to a state of disorder,” such that contemporary ethical discourse is based on an “unharmonious melange of ill-assorted fragments” of earlier moral claims. One possibility is that dialogue among the diverse members of a community will increase trust, facilitate an understanding of value differences, and engage competing interests to arrive at shared values. In the words of Mary Parker Follett:

Many writers are laying stress on the possibilities of the collective will; what I wish to emphasize is the necessity of creating the collective will. Many people talk as if the collective will were lying around loose to be caught up whenever we like, but the fact is that we must go to our group and see that it is brought into existence.

Follett recognized that the two important venues for group discussion were the community and the workplace, which points, again, to the importance of neighborhood association in assisting individuals in “coming to judgment” regarding values.

Local civic associations are particularly important given the suburbanization which has replaced civic centers with sprawling suburban development, and removed collective action from public spaces. Such “edge cities” may lead citizens to be estranged from their governments, and public officials to closet themselves away from the public. Similar refrains about the need to revive neighborhood control as the way to build sustainable communities continue to be echoed in contemporary American cities. “I want a sense of community, said a young woman last year at a conference on the quality of life in Los Angeles. I can’t decide whether to stay in Los Angeles or move to Nashville.” While neighborhood governance appears to be an increasingly important component of contemporary American federalism,

it is not without its perils. The first potential problem is that neighborhood associations may *coopt* rather than *empower* local residents. For example, some urban scholars have argued that the community participation requirements of the Great Society programs were cosmetic at best, and at worst, cooptative. As such, they arguably diffused rather than focus political activism at the grass roots. Another potential problem is that associations will emerge only to address specific mobilizing issues, such as a locally undesirable land use, and will not develop any lasting organizational structure, or engage with issues that transcend local boundaries. Given the class segregation of most metropolitan areas, and the increasing popularity of gated communities, there is a potential for a metropolitan area to become balkanized. If competing divisions of the city do more than engage in a series of provincial squabbles over resource allocation and land use decisions, neighborhood governance is likely to divide the city and hamper policy formulation.

In sum, neighborhood associations are reasserting their needs to handle some aspects of governance themselves, or at least to play an influential role in local policy processes. While localized governance is not new to the United States, the context for participatory democracy in the late twentieth century is quite different from the agrarian political economy within which early covenantal communities developed. Neighborhood action is developing among diverse groups, in large urban settings, in which people at the grassroots feel disconnected from the public decision making process that impacts their lives rather directly. Scale confounds our long-standing assumptions about the efficacy of representative government in metropolitan regions like Los Angeles, which has a city council of 15 members for a highly diverse population of 3.6 million spread out over 466 square miles. The problem is how to provide for significant involvement in governance at a scale that is conducive to participation without creating unmanageable complexity of process and structure.

### ***Factors Contributing to Success***

A recent study of neighborhood organizations and governance highlights two issues central to the effectiveness of various arrangements for relating neighborhoods to local government, and illustrates five comprehensive efforts to address these issues. The first issue to be addressed is the nature of representation and issues of participation, legitimacy, and connection. This involves the manner in which

neighborhood organizations are connected to residents, the arrangements for participation, and the extent to which residents perceive the associations to represent the interests of the community. Legitimacy requires that participation involves people who are viewed as acting in the interests of the neighborhood, and are clearly accountable to it. The second issue focuses on the kind of relationship that is created between neighborhood organizations and local government. Chaskin and Garg contend that legitimacy is not only related to representation and accountability, but also the auspices under which participation in governance is provided. They review four possible arrangements: 1) neighborhood governance structures as parallel to the local government, offering alternative ways of producing and providing goods and services also delivered by government; 2) separate, but complementary institutions intended to provide goods and services not provided by government; 3) structures integrated into local governments as official extensions of a city; and 4) independent advocacy organizations seeking to influence the policy process through opposition to local government. Chaskin and Garg identified, in all the organizations they studied, problems of defining membership and representation, together with providing for accountability mechanisms, and a resultant loss of perceived legitimacy. Similarly, they found that all five organizations had difficulty defining the roles to be played by citizens and professionals, because all participants did not bring the same kinds of skills and knowledge to the table. Finally, auspices, or sponsorship, as reflected in funding sources, representation, and decision making authority raised questions about the intended life span and perceived legitimacy of these organizations. As the authors point out, such neighborhood structures may be understood as permanent or ad hoc. If a neighborhood governance structure is intended for a short duration, specific purpose, such as adopting a redevelopment plan, independent sponsorship may be less important than if a permanent comprehensive system for city governance is desired. They conclude that the main areas for research and development are legitimacy and connection, organizational structure, and auspices and viability. Chaskin and Garg also draw attention to the importance of capacity building for neighborhood organizations at the individual, collective, and institutional levels; and the need to examine the problems they may create within local government with respect to the roles of elected officials and professional administrators. Concerning capacity building, a key question they raise is the extent to which technical capacity needs to

be developed by neighborhood organizations. Related to the potential problems within local government, they express concern over the extent to which neighborhood governance amounts to the full development of democratic values, and the degree to which it may just result in the undermining of representative government and its ability to function. The strength of this research by Chaskin and Garg is that it clearly calls attention to critical concerns that need to be addressed in relationship to neighborhood organizations and governance, and illustrates them effectively using the five projects. Its weakness is that it offers little in the way of systematic analysis of these problems and recommendations for addressing them. We are left with a research and development agenda which is edifying, but not very helpful to those dealing with neighborhood governance either at the policy or the operational level.

The work of Berry, Portney, and Thomson (1993) is more useful to those looking for practical implications of research. Their study is the most thorough and systematic study of official neighborhood structures as formal participants in the municipal policy process. Berry et al. focused on five cities: Portland, Oregon; St. Paul, Minnesota; Dayton, Ohio; Birmingham, Alabama; and San Antonio, Texas. These were matched with a control group of ten other cities similar in scale and demography, but without formal neighborhood councils. Public opinion surveys using samples of about one thousand each were conducted in all five cities, with follow-up interviews conducted 16-19 months later using samples of 700-800 in each city. These were done also in the 10 control cities, but with smaller samples and without follow-up interviews. Interviews were conducted also with certain elites in the five cities being researched, including: city councilors, leaders of independent citizens' groups, agency administrators, and leaders of the official neighborhood councils. In addition, a number of people knowledgeable about city politics were interviewed, including foundation executives, business association leaders, journalists, and one mayor of a neighboring town. The key findings of this extensive research by Berry and colleagues provide strong support for the creation of city-wide neighborhood councils as official participants in local governance. Such structures do not increase overall participation. However, they do improve its quality significantly; reduce destructive conflict among citizens, government, and the business community; reduce alienation and strengthen trust in government; increase tolerance among groups in the cities; cultivate a sense of community; strengthen citizens' internal and

external efficacy; and make government more responsive to its citizens. Concerning the ingredients of an effective neighborhood council system, Berry and associates found that three conditions are essential: First, some exclusive powers must be delegated to the councils; “they must have authority to allocate some significant goods and services in their communities.” Second, there must be an administrative plan that provides incentives and disincentives for municipal administrators who deal with the councils. Public administrators must have a stake in the success of council participation or they are likely to resist it. One key finding in the study was that councils were more effective in influencing the agendas of elected officials than those of the bureaucracy. Third, these systems must be city-wide with each community having a single association with clearly defined boundaries and official recognition. If they are just for low-income areas they do not work well. Their broad conclusions were:

If it is desirable to help create a political system in which people experience improved feelings of political efficacy, expanded sense of community, strengthened belief that the government can be responsive to them, and higher levels of knowledge about the political system, then encouraging face-to-face participation solely as an individual act will not suffice. Such encouragement must be accompanied by a system carrying official recognition of community participation as a desirable and legitimate form of political activity.

### ***Neighborhood Organizations in an Edge City***

Neighborhood councils are most difficult to form where they are needed most, in the large American metropolis. In large cities, in particular, it is imperative to encourage democratic discourse *between* as well as *within* neighborhood groupings. This need is particularly sharp in the modern “edge city,” where there is no single civic center, where neighborhoods are isolated geographically from one another, and are sharply segregated by class or culture. Yet the very scope and scale of modern cities dramatically increases the cost and complexity of creating and maintaining a neighborhood council system, and raises serious issues about how to balance local needs against broader city-wide interests, within a jurisdiction that is almost incomprehensibly large. The City of Los Angeles is an excellent example of this dilemma, as its tremendous scale and cultural diversity challenge the ability of its governance system to balance regional concerns with local neighborhood needs.

In Los Angeles, the tension between centralized democratic decision making and a powerful professionalized bureaucracy, on the one hand, and local concerns, on the other, is most evident in the

recent proposal for secession of the San Fernando Valley from the City of Los Angeles, and in the heated debate regarding charter reform. Eric Schockman argues that inattention to neighborhoods hampers governance in Los Angeles, as “demonstrated continuously by social movements in Los Angeles’s neighborhood history to either secede from the city or to establish boroughs to obtain a degree of self-determination.” The threat of secession by the San Fernando Valley, likely to provoke other such efforts, has moved city officials to take some kind of neighborhood participation in governance seriously. During the last two years, neighborhood-based governance has emerged both formally and informally as a serious reform alternative under discussion in the City of Los Angeles. Formally, as part of the current city charter reform debate, proposals have been advanced by both the mayor and members of the city council to create some type of community planning boards where communities are given decision making authority on land use, planning, zoning and delivery of certain municipal services. Most specifically, Councilman Joel Wachs, inspired by the findings of Berry, Portney, and Thomson, has gained the support of six other members of the council for a broad legislative initiative to create a city-wide system of neighborhood councils (NBCs). Although the proposal is still broadly conceptual, it indicates that these NBCs would be designated official bodies that would channel citizen input from neighborhoods to city hall. They will have powers, as yet unspecified, to influence planning, zoning, and public service delivery. Informally, neighborhood empowerment proposals have also been advocated by independent grassroots organizations. Gerald Silver, president of the Homeowner Association of Encino, and Myrna Silver, community activist, reflecting on the recent formal proposals to create community planning councils as part of charter reform, recommend having the proposed community planning boards “made up of local residents” invested with “decision-making authority and not merely advisory [capabilities]...” They further argue, “Residents should be able to control their neighborhoods and live in a community in which they hold power without a special interest of a Mayor or a developer-driven City Council... [taking priority] over community plans.” More informal, bottom-up, neighborhood empowerment propositions have been articulated by grassroots groupings, such as the Valley Industry and Commerce Association (VICA). In an effort to keep San Fernando Valley sentiment for secession from growing, VICA called for the near-abolition of the City Council by “replacing [it] with a

new system of 'community councils' ...[which] should be given as much decision-making authority as possible, including the ability to decide localized planning, localized budgeting and the ability to collaborate with adjacent cities.” There is reason to believe that neighborhood participation in governance, with the necessary adaptations, may be attempted in the city of Los Angeles. Currently, two charter reform commissions are at work, one elected and one appointed by the Los Angeles City Council. Both have the establishment of neighborhood councils as major items on their agendas. The appointed commission has held hearings on this subject and heard numerous proposals for structuring a neighborhood council system. Through this process it has become increasingly clear that this is the one item on the charter reform agenda which has attracted significant interest among the citizenry.

The challenges of participatory governance are particularly difficult in a sprawling metropolis such as Los Angeles, where citizen participation is extraordinarily costly for citizens in every way: time, money, information, and effort required to participate. However, it is in large cities such as Los Angeles that the need to forge genuine partnerships between citizens and city government is imperative. If the people of Los Angeles, both governors and governed, aspire to make their city a satisfying and fulfilling place to live, it is important that their neighborhoods are given a chance to participate in the municipal governance process.

Any formal attempt to create a city-wide system of neighborhood councils in Los Angeles, whether initiated from the grassroots or by established political bodies, will face major challenges. The most formidable problem is that Los Angeles is much larger both in area and population than the cities that have been found to have successful neighborhood participation structures. Cities such as Portland, St. Paul, Dayton, San Antonio, and Birmingham are not as populous and geographically disparate as Los Angeles. Furthermore, the complexity of governing Los Angeles is compounded by the diversity of its people. Nonetheless, the very nature of Los Angeles's demographic diversity, population size, and geographic complexity are creating an imperative to encourage grassroots participation governance. This may occur through a formal system of neighborhood councils established by charter, or by means of informal networks of neighborhood organizations.

The second significant impediment to developing neighborhood governance is the lack of

comprehensive, systematic and current information on the myriad of neighborhood organizations that already exist throughout the city of Los Angeles. The lack of information poses political obstacles as well as implementation concerns. In the absence of information about local associations, city hall officials may be tempted to consult only with their favored support groups rather than a broad range of grassroots associations. The danger, then, is that the neighborhood council will merely function as a political machine supporting the existing power structure. As such, information is a crucial requirement to the formulation and implementation of a neighborhood council system. It is necessary to identify existing neighborhood organizations, and systematically document their activities, as the foundation of any reform effort aiming to reconnect neighborhood organizations with city government.

#### *Role of the University in Assisting Neighborhood Council Development*

The purpose of this section is to discuss how action research in public administration can facilitate the development of neighborhood councils. It is our view that in a large-scale, complex, and politically fragmented city, a professional school of public administration can play a key role in developing a central source of accessible and reliable information, advising the policy formulation process, and facilitating discussion and debate regarding appropriate institutional structure. The discussion is based on our ongoing field work to foster neighborhood councils through a strategic initiative to develop a database of information on existing neighborhood associations.

The development of a database on existing neighborhood organizations is crucial to understand the neighborhood movement in the city of Los Angeles, document its evolution, and understand whether neighborhood councils are feasible reform approaches within a city of this scale. Moreover, the database serves a practical purpose, because accessible information will allow neighborhood organizations to communicate among themselves, and permit city officials to consult with these organizations through both formal and informal participatory processes.

The database is intended to establish a relatively comprehensive repository of information on neighborhood organizations oriented toward participation in the formation of public policy and the delivery of public goods and services. At a time when neighborhood organizations are said to be mushrooming in the City of Los Angeles, and across the nation, their number, geographic location and

distribution, field and scope of action, the extent of their relationship with city government and other private entities, as well as many other salient characteristics about their existence and operations, are not systematically documented. As these organizations grow, existing support for creating better linkages will also increase. Use of database technology can allow interested policy officials and academics to track the creation of these organizations, and allow organizational members to develop linkages with one another and with government.

The practical uses of this database more specifically are the following:

1. It will provide an unprecedented repository of information for community empowerment projects. It will inform and facilitate organizing efforts by city officials, grassroots organizers, independent policy groups and academic researchers. Most importantly, the proposed database will foster interest in grassroots participation by documenting the emerging neighborhood sector in the City of Los Angeles.
2. It will provide an instrument of *horizontal* empowerment (communication between residents and residents). It will allow neighborhood organizations to build horizontal alliances or coalitions for a more effective, collective use of common resources and collaborative strategies which will eventually allow them to influence the formal policy-making process more effectively. These horizontal relationships may also help reduce the competition and provincialism of isolated neighborhoods by involving them within a city-wide web of active citizens.
3. It will provide an instrument of *vertical* empowerment (communication between residents and city officials). The database will establish a base of information for city officials who might want to engage neighborhood organizations in a specific area or with a particular interest. It will assist neighborhood organizations in creating network activities among themselves in order to participate in the governance process more effectively. This kind of information could expedite the creation of formal councils by the city, and help municipal agencies identify constituent organizations. Establishing such vertical linkages and networking between city officials and neighborhood organizations will only be possible if information on these organizations is comprehensively and systematically collected by a non-partisan, independent source such as a university.

*Challenges in Conducting Action Research*

The first task associated with developing such information is to compile a comprehensive list of existing neighborhood organizations, such as neighborhood watch programs, homeowners' associations, block clubs, neighborhood beautification and clean-up projects, church-based voluntary activities, and voluntary youth programs in the city of Los Angeles. This immediately introduces the difficult question of how to define neighborhood organization. This project defined a neighborhood organizations to be a voluntary and self-governing entity with a geographic base, that purports to represent the people (residents and stakeholders) living in the area. Excluded are entities which are organized exclusively around leisure, recreational and sports activities (such as athletics clubs, bridge clubs, and dance clubs), as well as policy or single interest groups that are not geographically-based.

Because of the difficulty involved in defining neighborhood organizations, and the political complications that could arise from excluding key constituencies, a steering committee was created, and included a cross-section of representatives of various communities in the City of Los Angeles, government and academia. The group is intended to work toward consensus regarding the definition of *neighborhoods* in the city of Los Angeles. For example, an important question is how to demarcate a neighborhood, whether by street names, by geographic barriers such as rivers, or railway lines, or by proximity to amenities, such as libraries, parks, or shopping areas.

It is particularly difficult and labor-intensive to gather information regarding informal organizations, particularly given the decentralized nature of their activities. The approach to this task involved a thorough search of the 15 Los Angeles Council Districts' archives, as well as contacts with federal departments, the mayor's office, the Los Angeles Police Department, university and public libraries, public schools, non-profit organizations, foundations, and the Internet. Organizations identified in this way have been compiled into a single list of 1,031 "alleged" neighborhood organizations (excluding organizations that are defunct or do not have a neighborhood orientation). Each of these organizations is then called by telephone to verify preliminary references such as title of organization, address, additional phone numbers, geographic boundaries, and the focus and legal status of the organization. Once the first contact is established, letters are mailed to the identified organizations in which we brief them on the scope and value of our database project. We also inform them of our intention to interview them in

person at a later stage to gather more extensive information.

Although we do not yet have systematic data regarding these organizations, a tentative observation is that the sample over-represents middle and upper income communities. We will attempt to redress this imbalance as we continue to work on the list of organizations. A second observation is that at this point the single largest cluster of organizations is from the San Fernando Valley, the area of Los Angeles most likely to secede from Los Angeles.

It is clear to us that there are far more organizations of the kind we are seeking than we have yet discovered since we continue to receive leads as we contact organizations on our preliminary list. For example, the representative of one homeowners' association we contacted informed us of an alliance of such associations that meets regularly. One of our researchers then attended a meeting of the alliance to explain our project and ask for their cooperation. As we continue through the preliminary list, leads of this kind will continue to expand the number of organizations on our research list.

In the course of carrying out the first phase of this action research program, the following problems needed to be addressed:

- 1) Defining "neighborhood organization" and delimiting the scope of our research were our first problems. One consideration in action research of this kind is that any such definition must not only have conceptual integrity, but must be perceived as appropriate by a wide range of actors both within and outside of government if the database is to be viewed as legitimate and worthy of use. We began with many specific criteria, not only to indicate what we mean by the term, but to delineate which neighborhood organizations are of interest to us. The steering committee discussed this at length, and advised adoption of a brief but broad definition, and use of specifications as categories of data to be gathered. The definition of neighborhood councils will be refined as we work on the database and learn more about the phenomena we are studying.

- 2) Suspicion about the "real" purposes behind the gathering of data on neighborhood organizations has presented another impediment. In our initial telephone screening contacts, the hostility toward government has been quite evident in the reluctance to give out information on the part of many organization leaders. Until they could confirm that the project was, indeed, being conducted by a respected

university, and that the information would be widely accessible, they refused to respond to the questions. We have handled that by mailing a letter on university letterhead, explaining the project and offering to answer questions. For most this has been sufficient to assure them of our constructive intent.

3) Similarly, it has been difficult in many instances to secure lists of neighborhood organizations from the Los Angeles City Council offices. Council members and their deputies view these lists as political property that could be used against them by potential candidates for their offices. Democratizing the political process in Los Angeles is not nearly as high on their list of priorities as getting re-elected. (Is anyone surprised?) We have dealt with this by discussing the project at length, sending printed information and including them in the research process. The assistance of former Councilman Marvin Braude, working through the chief deputies, has helped with this problem.

4) A further problem has been discovering organizations that do not exist on anyone established list. In some cases this is because they are very new; in others, it is simply that they are not large enough to have attracted anyone's sustained attention. This has required a lot of time-consuming networking. Routinely, when making screening calls our researchers ask about the contacts' knowledge of other similar organizations and/or coalitions of organizations. Through this process our index of organizations continues to grow steadily.

### *Next Steps*

The next step in this action research project will be to construct a database in which we develop information that describes the profile of each single neighborhood organization. This will include the name of the organization, key contacts, addresses, telephone, and fax numbers, e-mail addresses, legal status, year established, mission, geographical domain, field of action, issue orientation, approach to advocacy, form of governance, sources of revenue, membership size, rate of attendance, and other such categories of information.

Data gathering for this phase will be done through face-to-face interviews with a representative of each organization. Prior to each interview a letter will be mailed to the key contact person reminding them of our previous telephone contact and telling them that one of our researchers will be calling again

to set up an interview. A copy of the questionnaire to be filled out by the interview will be mailed with this letter. Written permission to include information in the publicly accessible database will be secured at the time of the interview. Interviewees will be assured that any information they wish to have withheld from public access will be maintained in confidence.

*Information maintenance and dissemination:* When the database is constructed and ready to be operational, it will be integrated into a university digital archive, which aims to collect Los Angeles materials in multiple information formats linked through a thesaurus-based subject/space/time index for research, teaching, and public access. Its scope includes varied historical information (e.g. texts, photographs, maps, demographic, economic, and scientific data). We believe that integrating our database into this sophisticated electronic archive will constitute a valuable contribution both to the archive itself, but also to the development of neighborhood participation in the governance of Los Angeles. Once the database is constructed, a hard copy will be distributed to all those neighborhood organizations who participated in the survey research, and to grassroots organizers, City officials, various departments, and other key stakeholders.

In order to keep our database up-dated on a permanent basis and to avoid the hit-and-run syndrome typically associated with database projects, the web-page containing the information will make available an e-mail address for our project. This will enable neighborhood organizations to inform us about any change regarding their location, activities, membership, or any other relevant information they want us to insert in the database. This will also provide a means for new organizations to be included in the database. Periodically, we will also mail out update forms to all organizations in the database.

After the database is developed, it will be necessary to conduct training workshops directed toward neighborhood organization members, city officials and other users to provide them with training in its use. Simply constructing a database and making it available through the Internet is not enough to make this information truly accessible to those who need to use it if neighborhoods are to participate in governance. Familiarizing key people with its use is essential.

*Needs assessment and capacity building.* Another role for the university is to establish a

research and technical center to assess the needs of neighborhood organizations and provide them with technical assistance required for effective participation in municipal governance. Knowledge of the governance structure and processes of Los Angeles, development of advocacy skills, management of financial, human and physical resources, and technology utilization are all required in order for neighborhood organizations to participate effectively in the municipal public policy process.

*Conferences.* University sponsored conferences can also foster development of neighborhood councils, to allow neighborhood representatives and city officials to discuss and develop ways of working together more actively and directly. The main objective of this initiative is to involve the university in community dialogue, and in strategic partnerships to guide future growth of the City of Los Angeles with respect to participatory governance issues. We also propose to organize an invitational symposium which will bring together key actors in city governance, namely, neighborhood organizations and city officials. The purpose will be to discuss and explore avenues of genuine and effective participation of neighborhood organizations in the governance process. Present in the symposium will be Los Angeles city officials, civic leaders from the city of Los Angeles and, if feasible, their counterparts from the cities studied by Berry and colleagues. The purpose of this symposium is to inform and educate the various actors about neighborhood governance.

### ***Conclusions***

A substantial empirical literature suggests that whereas neighborhood organizations are burgeoning throughout the United States, they experience varying political efficacy. In some instances associations have been formally included in the local governance process, generally with positive results in connecting social capital to public decision making. The form of neighborhood council structures have necessarily differed from city to city. Some have degrees of formal authority while others are largely advisory in nature. Some are entirely dependent on their own resources; others receive subsidies from the city government. Some were initiated by local governments and some through coalitions of grassroots organizations. In short, neighborhood council governance systems are feasible despite the challenges that face them. There is no optimal generic structure; rather, the system must be tailored to respond to local political and cultural conditions.

Our ongoing field research in the development of a neighborhood organization database in Los Angeles highlights the complexity of providing the necessary information to foster the development of an institutional structure that “fits.” It is tremendously difficult to define neighborhood organizations, to find them, and to collect good information about them. The literature provides no generic definition of “neighborhood organization,” nor even of “neighborhood.” Neighborhood is effectively defined by the people who live in a given area that has taken on a collective identity as a place over time, thus there is great variance in size, population, and social characteristics. Our finding is that from a practical standpoint, one must accept the subjectivity of self-definition, and define these organizations by their most compelling political features: geography and advocacy. Because the neighborhood council system is intended to connect street-level social capital into the larger political system, it appears important to focus on associations that advocate for a *broad range* of issues, and represent a *geographically defined* group.

Identifying all of the neighborhood organizations fitting these criteria is extraordinarily difficult. The main reason for developing a database is the lack of comprehensive information which can aid in the development of a more formal system for involving neighborhood associations in Los Angeles city government. This lack of information is in a large part the result of the small size, the lack of formal incorporation status for most, and the fact that there is usually no paid staff to publicize the existence of the group and maintain telephones. Moreover, ongoing policy concerns and activities tend to drive out information dissemination as a priority. Consequently, identifying neighborhood associations requires patience and time-consuming detective work, to piece together fragmentary information and follow up leads. Elected representatives and government agencies often have lists of organizations with which they do business, but these are typically only the ones that are viewed as supporters. However, it is not easy to pry even these from the clutches of government officials since they are usually viewed as proprietary.

Contacting the organizations once one knows they exist also requires considerable patience and persistence. Because most have neither offices nor paid staff, the key contacts are usually residents of the neighborhood who work, or are otherwise busy with their lives, and do not linger near the telephone. Screening the list of organizations against the established criteria has taken far more time than

was estimated at the outset. Numerous call-backs at various times of day, and sometimes mail, are required to reach them. This is costly and time-consuming.

Is the task worthy? If we are to create neighborhood level governance systems in large metropolitan area like Los Angeles it is worthy and necessary. Without connecting citizen organizations to one another, and to the policy formulation and service delivery processes, there will likely be a continued erosion of public trust, and a continued loss of government legitimacy in the eyes of the people it is established to serve.