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**EMPOWER LA**  
Department of  
NEIGHBORHOOD EMPOWERMENT

20<sup>th</sup> FLOOR, CITY HALL  
200 NORTH SPRING STREET LOS  
ANGELES, CA 90012

TELEPHONE (213) 978-1551  
TOLL-FREE 3-1-1  
FAX: (213) 978-1751  
E-MAIL: [EmpowerLA@lacity.org](mailto:EmpowerLA@lacity.org)

VANESSA SERRANO  
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[www.EmpowerLA.org](http://www.EmpowerLA.org)

January 22, 2024

## Members of the Ad Hoc Committee on City Governance Reform

c/o Office of the City Clerk  
Room 395, City Hall  
Los Angeles, CA 90012

## DEPARTMENT OF NEIGHBORHOOD EMPOWERMENT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHARTER AMENDMENTS; CF 23-1027

On December 12, 2023 the Los Angeles City Council approved a motion requesting that the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, among other departments, report on recommendations for identifying and prioritizing sections in the Charter that would benefit from reform to modernize the City's organizational infrastructure and/or support more strategic Citywide policies.

### Background:

The history of Neighborhood Councils (NCs) in Los Angeles is rooted in the late 1990s when the City responded to residents' growing desire for increased community participation and reduced centralized control. This led to the establishment of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE) in 1999. The City Charter played a crucial role in creating a framework for the innovative Neighborhood Council system, introducing advisory councils in specific neighborhoods. The Charter recognized the importance of local empowerment and sought to decentralize decision-making,

allowing communities to have a direct say in local governance. The establishment of Neighborhood Councils marked a significant step towards fostering civic engagement, collaboration, and responsiveness to the diverse needs of Los Angeles neighborhoods, as outlined in the City Charter's commitment to empowering local communities.

Collaborating closely with the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners, DONE ensures inclusivity, transparency, and responsiveness to the unique needs of each neighborhood, remaining a key component of Los Angeles' innovative approach to local governance. In the present day, the collaboration between the Neighborhood Council system, the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, and the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners continues to evolve. These councils actively engage with communities, influence local policies, and contribute to tangible impacts. The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment remains dedicated to fostering active civic participation and empowering residents to directly impact their communities.

As we transition to the next phase of our Department, it is essential to consider recommendations that align with the current needs of the Neighborhood Council (NC) system. Notably, the City Charter has remained unchanged since its last amendment in 1999. Therefore, incorporating these recommendations becomes imperative to ensure that our Department evolves effectively and remains responsive to the dynamic requirements of the NC system in the present day.

### **Section 900 - Purpose**

**Recommendation:** Clarify and strengthen the language around the purpose of empowerment. Emphasize inclusivity, community engagement, and the promotion of local democracy. Align the purpose with contemporary challenges and opportunities.

**Justification:** *This recommendation advocates for clarifying and strengthening the language around the purpose of neighborhood empowerment, emphasizing inclusivity, community engagement, and the promotion of local democracy. By changing the term "citizen" participation to "civic" participation, the intention is to foster a more inclusive environment that recognizes and embraces the diversity of individuals contributing to community development. This adjustment acknowledges that participation in local governance extends beyond citizenship, ensuring that stakeholders, regardless of their status, are actively encouraged to engage in the democratic process. The call to align the purpose with contemporary challenges and opportunities reflects the dynamic nature of communities, emphasizing the need to address evolving needs and embrace innovative approaches to neighborhood empowerment. In essence, this recommendation seeks to*

*create a more inclusive, community-driven, and responsive framework for neighborhood empowerment that reflects the diverse and changing demographics of the city.*

### **Section 901 - Department of Neighborhood Empowerment**

**Recommendation:** Enhance the role and resources of the Department to better support neighborhood councils. This includes increased staffing, streamlined processes, and improved coordination with other city departments to facilitate smoother implementation of neighborhood empowerment initiatives.

**Justification:** *The recommendation aims to enhance the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment's support for neighborhood councils through various strategies. This includes increasing staffing, streamlining processes, and improving coordination with other city departments. Additionally, there is a focus on outreach and inclusivity, suggesting targeted strategies to engage underrepresented communities in the Neighborhood Council formation process. The proposal also includes expanding training programs, facilitating resource sharing, implementing regular assessment systems, exploring innovative communication channels, and conducting periodic reviews of duties to ensure relevance and effectiveness. These comprehensive recommendations aim to strengthen neighborhood empowerment initiatives and adapt to evolving community needs.*

### **Section 903 - General Manager**

**Recommendation:** Define the qualifications and expectations for the General Manager. Encourage the appointment of individuals with a strong background in community development, leadership, a demonstrated commitment to community empowerment, and a comprehensive understanding of the infrastructure and workings of the Neighborhood Council system. Consider mechanisms to involve community stakeholders in the selection process, such as seeking input from Neighborhood Councils, to enhance community representation and confidence.

**Justification:** *The recommendations focus on optimizing the role of the General Manager within the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. They propose clearly defining qualifications, emphasizing community development, leadership, and commitment to empowerment. To ensure inclusivity, an open appointment process involving community input, especially from Neighborhood Councils, is encouraged. The suggestions include expanding the General Manager's responsibilities for community engagement through initiatives like town hall meetings and forums. Ongoing professional development and*

*training programs are recommended, emphasizing community development and collaboration with Neighborhood Councils. To enhance accountability, this recommendation advocates for clear performance metrics transparently shared with the public. Additional recommendations include encouraging staff diversity, fostering collaborative decision-making, engaging in strategic planning and innovation, establishing regular communication channels with Neighborhood Councils, emphasizing community-driven decision-making, and implementing a continuous improvement framework within DONE.*

### **Section 909 - Annual City Budget Priorities**

**Recommendation:** Enhance the involvement of Neighborhood Councils in the annual city budgeting process. Facilitate meaningful participation, prioritize community-driven projects, and establish mechanisms for transparent budget allocation. Further study of a possible Charter amendment is recommended to determine the best method to reach meaningful participation from all Neighborhood Councils, with an emphasis on Neighborhood Councils in communities of low civic-participation.

**Justification:** *This recommendation advocates for enhancing the involvement of Neighborhood Councils in the annual city budgeting process, reflecting a commitment to inclusivity, community-driven initiatives, and transparent governance. By facilitating meaningful participation, it aims to prioritize community-driven projects and ensure that budget allocation aligns with the diverse needs of neighborhoods. The call for a further study on a possible Charter amendment demonstrates a proactive approach to exploring mechanisms that would foster meaningful participation from all Neighborhood Councils, with a specific emphasis on those in communities of great need. This reflects an awareness of the unique challenges and needs in different communities, acknowledging the importance of tailoring strategies to ensure equitable representation and engagement. Overall, this recommendation seeks to strengthen the democratic process by actively involving Neighborhood Councils in budget decisions, fostering community-driven priorities, and promoting transparency in the allocation of resources.*

### **Section 910 - Monitoring of City Services**

**Recommendation:** Strengthen the role of Neighborhood Councils in monitoring city services. Establish mechanisms for regular feedback, reporting, and collaboration with relevant city departments to address service gaps and improve responsiveness.

**Justification:** *This recommendation underscores the importance of empowering Neighborhood Councils by enhancing their role in monitoring city services, reflecting a commitment to localized governance and community engagement. By establishing mechanisms for regular feedback, reporting, and collaboration with relevant city departments, the recommendation seeks to create a more responsive and accountable system. This approach not only allows Neighborhood Councils to actively participate in shaping local policies but also ensures that community needs are accurately identified and addressed. Strengthening the role of Neighborhood Councils in monitoring city services promotes transparency, encourages civic participation, and fosters a sense of community responsibility. Ultimately, this recommendation aligns with the principles of promoting collaboration between communities and city departments to enhance the quality and effectiveness of services tailored to the unique needs of each neighborhood.*

### **Section 911 - Appropriation**

**Recommendation:** Explore the feasibility of establishing an independent budgeting process for the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, as is currently being discussed for the Ethics Department under CF 23-1010. This proposition is rooted in the provisions outlined in sections 900 and 901 of the charter, which entrust the department with the crucial responsibility of aiding Neighborhood Councils in fostering greater responsiveness of local government to community needs.

**Justification:** *By developing an independent budgeting process for the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, the City Council can enhance the department's capacity to fulfill its mandate effectively and ensure that resources are allocated in a manner that prioritizes and addresses the unique requirements of diverse communities within Los Angeles. This initiative aligns with the spirit of community empowerment and collaborative governance, fostering a more responsive and inclusive local government.*

### **Section 1001.a. - Exemptions**

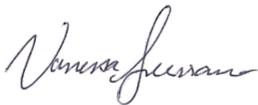
**Recommendation:** Recommend the inclusion of exempt, full-time positions within the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment as categorically exempt from Charter Section 1000 - Civil Service provisions. Currently, these positions (Project Assistants, Project Coordinators, Senior Project Coordinators, and Principal Project Coordinators) are designated as exempt under Section 1001.a.18 as Officers of Election, which is the most fitting category to describe the nature of their work in supporting the bi-annual Neighborhood Council elections.

**Justification:** *As part of a comprehensive review of the Charter, it would be highly advantageous to independently classify and categorize these positions based on the full scope of their responsibilities in supporting the Neighborhood Council System. These exempt positions play a crucial role in ensuring government accountability to the communities they serve. By categorizing them independently, the City Council can better acknowledge and address the unique functions these positions fulfill, fostering a more streamlined and efficient organizational structure that aligns with the department's overarching goals of empowerment and responsiveness.*

## **Conclusion**

While these are our recommendations, which we believe will bring the Charter into alignment with current needs, we feel it is beneficial to get Neighborhood Council feedback and have their opinions heard. Engaging Neighborhood Councils in the process ensures that their unique perspectives and insights are considered, enhancing the inclusivity and relevance of the proposed changes. These recommendations collectively aim to strengthen the framework of neighborhood empowerment, fostering a more collaborative, transparent, and impactful relationship between communities and local government. Implementation of these suggestions, with input from Neighborhood Councils, will contribute to the overall success of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment and enhance the vibrancy of Neighborhood Councils within the city. This collaborative approach reflects our commitment to democratic governance and active community participation, aligning with the principles of transparency and responsiveness in local decision-making.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Vanessa Serrano".

**Vanessa Serrano, Interim General Manager  
Department of Neighborhood Empowerment**