Neighborhood Participation Project

The Neighborhood Participation Project (NPP) is a research initiative of the School of Policy, Planning, and Development at the University of Southern California. The Project is led by principal investigators Dr. Terry L. Cooper, Dr. Juliet Musso, and Dr. Christopher Weare. The Project is managed by Alicia Kitsuse, M.P.I., and is supported by a team of 12 student researchers. Marvin Braude, a former Los Angeles City Councilmember of 32 years and now a Distinguished Practitioner in Residence at USC, is an advisor to the Project.

Since 1996, the NPP team has been researching neighborhood political participation in Los Angeles and has been documenting the growing neighborhood council movement. The Project’s current activities are directed toward four main goals:

• understanding how Los Angeles City administrative agencies can support and include the newly established system of neighborhood councils in the production and delivery of city services;
• documenting and analyzing the design and implementation of the Los Angeles neighborhood council system;
• analyzing how the early notification system is designed and how it affects communications between neighborhood councils and the City; and
• identifying and disseminating findings on best practices in neighborhood council organization.

Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics

The Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California administers programs that motivate, encourage, and inspire students to become active in the world of politics. The Institute’s Director is Dr. Ann Crigler, Associate Professor of Political Science. The Assistant Director is Wendy Lopata, M.S.W., M.P.A.

The Institute aims to provide students with a direct link to the outside political world, to create an intellectual community that focuses on politics and current events, and to provide practical political exposure and experience for students. It does this through guest lectures, seminars, internships, and research. The Institute provides the following programs on an ongoing basis:

Unruh Institute Internship Program: The Institute’s internship program places over 100 USC students in government, advocacy, and media offices throughout Los Angeles, in Washington, DC, and in Sacramento each year.

Undergraduate and Graduate Research Scholars: Each semester, outstanding undergraduate and graduate students are selected to spend the semester as an Unruh Research Scholar.

Unruh Sponsored Courses: Each year, the Institute sponsors courses in USC’s Political Science Department that are taught by political practitioners.

Sacramento Legislative Seminar: Each year, the Institute leads a delegation of students to Sacramento to meet with California political leaders.

Distinguished Leadership Lecture Series: The Institute brings elected officials, community leaders and scholars to campus on a regular basis.
A Conference Report on

ENGAGING THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY:
Changing Civic Culture, Building Civic Capacity

April 2003

Presented by
The Neighborhood Participation Project
School of Policy, Planning, and Development
University of Southern California

The Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics
College of Letters, Arts & Sciences
University of Southern California

Photographs by
Mark Elliot

Sponsored by
The James Irvine Foundation
The Majestic Foundation
The USC Provost’s Urban Initiative Program
Conference Speakers and Facilitators

Bruce Bimber is Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for Information Technology and Society at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His research deals with the societal implications of information technology.

Roxyanne Cartier Burrus is Administrator of the Neighborhood Services Division for the City of Columbus, Ohio. She is currently in charge of the city’s Neighborhood Pride and Community Liaison programs, as well as the city’s Agency Services and Historic Preservation offices.

Terry L. Cooper is the Maria B. Crutcher Professor in Citizenship and Democratic Values in the School of Policy, Planning, and Development at the University of Southern California, and is co-Principal Investigator of the USC Neighborhood Participation Project. Professor Cooper’s research and writing has focused on public ethics, the role of the citizen in civil society, and public participation.

Ann Crigler is Associate Professor of Political Science and the Director of the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California. Her research examines how people understand and learn about politics from the news media. Her latest book is Rethinking the Vote: The Politics and Prospects of American Election Reform.

Archon Fung is Assistant Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. His research examines how public and private governance can be improved through civic participation, public deliberation, and transparency.

Pamela Green is a Neighborhood District Coordinator for the City of Seattle’s Department of Neighborhoods. In her role as a District Coordinator she works with business and community organizations to connect citizens with government and identify strategies for collaboration with local government.

Alicia Kitsuse is a Research Associate and Project Manager for the USC Neighborhood Participation Project. Her research interests center on social movements and community development.

William E. Loges is a Lecturer and Research Associate at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. Through his association with the Annenberg School’s Communication Technology and Community Program, he has joined the Neighborhood Participation Project to conduct research on the role of communication networks in the development of Los Angeles’ neighborhood councils.

Gary S. Marshall is Associate Professor of Public Administration at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Professor Marshall teaches and conducts research in the areas of public administration theory, organization theory and behavior, organization development, and public policy mediation.

Robert D. Miller is the Director of the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP) and has held this position since June 1992. Before joining NRP he was the Director of the Community and Resource Exchange Program and had served for 14 years as a Planning Supervisor and Senior Management Analyst for Hennepin County.

Robert C. Myrtle is Professor of Public Administration at the University of Southern California. He has been teaching, conducting research, and serving on the board of public and nonprofit organizations for more than 25 years, and is the author of over 70 books, articles, monographs, and research reports addressing management and public policy concerns.

Camilla Strivers is Professor of Public Administration in the Levin College of Urban Affairs, Cleveland State University. She is a co-author of Government & U.S. Public Administration in an Anti-government Era and has written two other books and numerous articles. Her research interests include citizen participation, civil society, and the role of gender in public administration.

Janelle Wong holds a joint appointment as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Tongji University in Shanghai, China. His research and teaching interests center on city management and community development in China.

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In an age of increasing political disaffection, the Los Angeles neighborhood council reform presents an important experiment in democratic governance. The reform is emblematic of attempts to increase citizen participation that are occurring in the United States and internationally, efforts to involve grassroots actors in policy deliberation and collaborative service delivery. The Los Angeles case is distinguished by both the scale of the reform and its self-organizing character. The city charter mandates an inclusive neighborhood council system within a city of 3.7 million people, and frames a process wherein citizens at the grassroots design and implement councils in a manner that fits the unique character of their communities.

On April 26th, 2003, the Neighborhood Participation Project and the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California convened a conference entitled “Engaging the Global City: Changing Civic Culture, Building Civic Capacity.” This conference used the current neighborhood council reforms in Los Angeles as a starting point for considering the challenges to participation in a global city. The conference was premised on the notion that citizen empowerment requires a transformation in the ability of citizens and government officials to address collective problems through reasoned discourse and investment in the resources and skills that support deliberative democracy.

Keynote speaker Archon Fung provided a conceptual framework for the conference. A professor at Harvard University, Fung presented a model of “empowered participation” that involves grassroots actors in deliberating over public problems. Neighborhood council organizers, academic experts, and city officials then convened in facilitated workshops designed to consider the crucial conditions for empowered participation:

- What political innovations are necessary to support meaningful involvement in policy formulation?
- How can such processes incorporate the tremendous diversity of culture, income, and interests found within a global city such as Los Angeles?
- What communication systems are needed to support the development of political networks, inform participants of city policy issues, and involve them in the governance process?
- How can changes in administrative culture make city departments more responsive to community needs?

A broader context for understanding Los Angeles was provided by a panel of speakers from other cities with neighborhood participation structures, including Shanghai, China; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Columbus, Ohio; and Seattle, Washington.
The Goals of Empowered Participation

Keynote speaker Archon Fung argued that empowered participation is emerging internationally in response to the deficiencies of professionalized city government. By engaging community members in deliberative problem solving, empowered participation moves decisions toward the grassroots, where the preferences and knowledge of community members can help solve complex urban problems.

Fung identified three potential shortcomings of community deliberation, and suggested means to overcome them:

Lack of integrity. Public deliberations risk being dominated by public officials, or degenerating into venting sessions. To avoid this, Fung recommended such measures as instituting formal training programs and using neutral facilitators in meetings.

Elite bias. To be effective, deliberative processes must be inclusive and provide opportunities for marginalized groups to become politically organized. Fung argued that deliberative processes should focus on issues of special concern to disadvantaged groups, such as public safety, education, and economic development.

Co-optation. Another danger is that those in political power will co-opt communities to support their vested interests. Fung suggested that preventing co-optation required a distinctive system of countervailing power that advocates grassroots involvement in public policy making.

Challenges to Empowerment

Workshops over the course of the day delved into the challenges confronting deliberative problem solving. “Structuring Participation: Political Innovations for Community Governance” explored the political innovations necessary to support civic participation. Participants concluded that deliberative processes must focus on “preferred futures” and create trust and a true understanding of the perspectives of others. There is a need for strong and collaborative leaders who can develop community linkages, disseminate accurate information to constituents, and work to involve and listen to all stakeholders.

As Fung noted, a core condition for participatory democracy is inclusive, deliberative problem solving. According to participants in the “Incorporating Diversity” workshop, elements of diversity are broader than simply race or culture; they include religion, class, immigration status, and citizenship status, as well as functional and institutional diversity. Workshop participants emphasized the importance of including diverse interests in order to make governance more flexible and adaptable, to improve problem solving and deliberation, and to legitimize the system. It was stressed that it is insufficient merely to designate a “seat at the table” for identifiable groups. Rather, leaders must (1) structure deliberative forums to be culturally open; (2) develop personal relationships with diverse groups and organizations; (3) consider differing values and interests of diverse groups in developing and acting upon agendas; and (4) invest in targeted outreach and organizing efforts.

Strong communication mechanisms also are necessary to support an inclusive and effective system of community deliberation. According to participants in the workshop entitled “Improving Communications: Connecting Stakeholders, Organizations, and the City,” the challenge is to provide information in a timely and organized fashion, provide opportunities for neighborhood councils to share information with each other, and extend the reach of the council to all stakeholders.

As Fung observed, it is not uncommon for community deliberative processes to encounter official resistance. In the workshop “Trust, Deliberation, and Changing Administrative Culture,” participants explored ways to make administrative culture more responsive to diverse community needs. Participants identified challenges related to bureaucratic organizational structure, leadership’s ability to focus on empowerment and customer service, and an administrative culture that emphasizes risk avoidance. To overcome these barriers, neighborhood councils must be educated in how to maneuver within the system, and must build credibility within the community by understanding community needs and building partnerships with the city.
Los Angeles in Context

An afternoon panel provided conference participants an opportunity to compare participatory reforms in Los Angeles to neighborhood governance efforts elsewhere. Invited guests from Shanghai, China; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Columbus, Ohio; and Seattle, Washington discussed the structure of their community participation systems, which are tremendously diverse:

In Columbus, 13 area commissions make recommendations to the City Council and participate in budget hearings;

The Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program has authorized 66 nonprofit neighborhood organizations responsible for developing and executing neighborhood improvement plans;

In Seattle, citizens participate in city decision making through a three-tiered system that includes Community Councils, District Councils, and a City Neighborhood Council;

In Shanghai, China, neighborhood councils affiliated with the Party structure assist in local service delivery, particularly to the elderly.

The panel presentations, and active participation of the panel speakers in the four workshops, made evident some common themes characterizing these systems:

- All of the systems have been long to develop, some faced rocky beginnings, and all have continued to evolve over time. For example, in Minneapolis the relative inexperience of newly created neighborhood organizations made them unsure of their direction at the onset. This underscores the need for technical assistance and training.

- Many of these systems continue to confront issues of legitimacy and inclusiveness. The panelists identified outreach and organizing to underrepresented groups as one of the core challenges confronting their systems.

- None of the systems represented at our conference has an extensive communication or notification system. Although Los Angeles’ early notification system is still in early stages of development, it has the potential to be a national innovator in this regard.

- There is a tendency toward the development of entrenched leadership that may become less responsive over time to the changing needs of the communities they purport to represent. This suggests a clear need for systems to continue over time to invest in leadership development.

- All the cities represented provide resources or opportunities for involvement in public deliberation. For example, since 1991 Minneapolis has provided some $260 million to support neighborhood revitalization activities.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Out of the conference emerged several fundamental issues related to civic engagement that require additional research and technical assistance. These include:

1. There is a need to create structures for citizen participation that involve citizens in an informed and deliberative fashion. The question confronting Los Angeles is how to structure processes that help neighborhood councils and city officials work constructively together in “coming to public judgment.”

2. A crucial challenge to empowered participation is developing political networks that may be perceived as threatening to those in power. There is a need for the city and outside agencies to ensure that diverse interests are represented, that collective problems surface and are addressed, and that information is disseminated throughout the city and its neighborhoods.

3. It is clear that empowered participation requires strong leadership within communities, city government, and the private sector. The question is how to develop a new kind of leadership that is collaborative, facilitative, and takes particular responsibility for ensuring involvement of disenfranchised groups and individuals.

In addition to these broad issues, we identify several specific recommendations for the City of Los Angeles as it moves forward in development of the neighborhood council system. These include the following:

Participatory forums. We recommend that the City design future forums, such as Budget Day and the Congress of Neighborhoods, to involve neighborhood council representatives more actively in deliberative processes. The conditions required for such deliberation include delegation of authority over some policy issues, provision of information in advance, use of professional facilitators, and a focus on acknowledging and working through potential goal conflict in making decisions regarding public policy.

Information and notification. The City needs to continue developing its early notification system to be timely and user-friendly. Rather than attempting to notice every possible meeting, we recommend that the City prioritize the boards and commissions that are most relevant to neighborhood councils (e.g., Planning and Public Works), and involve them in developing a pilot early notification system that provides information well in advance of city actions, that is easily searchable and understandable by the lay person, and that places notices in the context of larger city planning efforts.

Administrative culture. Administrative responsiveness is the product of personal encounters between neighborhood and city actors. In the spirit of grassroots action that has characterized the development of the Los Angeles neighborhood council system, the City’s efforts to make administrative agencies more responsive to neighborhoods should focus on developing an ethic of listening, and on empowering lower-level administrators to work directly with neighborhoods to solve problems or effect desired changes.

Incorporating diversity. Overcoming the challenges of involving diverse groups in the civic arena will require dedicated efforts to organize disenfranchised groups, structure civic activities to promote broad participation, and share information about effective inclusionary practices. The City can facilitate the process of inclusion by supporting organizing efforts among the poor and disenfranchised, creating opportunities for collective action by diverse groups around cultural and other activities, and actively identifying and disseminating information on best practices for incorporating diversity at the neighborhood level.
Effective democracy relies on citizens to engage actively in the governance process by educating themselves about issues, voicing concerns, and holding government accountable for its actions. In the United States and internationally, citizen demands for involvement in policy-making, planning, and public service delivery have emerged as central elements of governmental reform. We see a shift away from government controlled by elected officials and administrators, and toward collaborative efforts involving grassroots actors. Yet changing demographics, declining involvement in traditional forms of civic participation, and seemingly unbounded new means of communication are redefining the members and modes of civil society and challenging our capacity for civic engagement.

These participatory reforms are occurring within an era in which citizen alienation from government is on the rise, demanding increased attention to civil society, community networks of voluntary and non-governmental associations, and citizens. As a recent National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) report (June 2002) noted, while Americans participate actively in voluntary associations, they also express “sour and often bitter attitudes toward government.” Indeed, neighborhood-oriented participatory reforms are one facet of a wide spectrum of participatory reforms oriented toward addressing citizen alienation. These include such diverse strategies as campaign finance reform, service learning, civic journalism, digital democracy, and the like.

This conference, “Engaging the Global City: Changing Civic Culture, Building Civic Capacity,” provided an opportunity for city officials and local neighborhood activists from Los Angeles to come together with nationally renowned scholars to discuss the complex issues surrounding citizen participation in the modern global city using the newly evolving Los Angeles neighborhood council system as a point of departure.

The Los Angeles neighborhood council system was created out of a charter reform movement that centered on increasing citizen participation and improving government responsiveness. In the City of Los Angeles, which is characterized by tremendous cultural diversity and a mutual mistrust between citizens and government, these goals present formidable challenges. Achieving the promise of the new charter requires dual actions to build civic capacity at the neighborhood level and change the culture of politics and administration.

Building Civic Capacity

Adapted from Chaskin’s (2001) notion of community capacity, civic capacity refers to community stakeholders’ ability to sustain participatory practices that establish legitimacy within the neighborhood as well as to “leverage resources” to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of a given community.” Civic capacity also refers to
a community’s ability to develop networks of individuals and organizations that can act collectively.

Building civic capacity requires leadership development, organizational development, communication, organizing, and organizational collaboration. A community’s ability to undertake these efforts is influenced by such characteristics as sense of community, level of commitment, problem-solving skills, and access to resources. In turn, these characteristics are conditioned by variables such as safety, density of acquaintances, race and class dynamics, and patterns of migration.

Given the large size and broad diversity of Los Angeles, it is not surprising that civic capacity varies across the city. Some areas have a strong sense of neighborhood and community attachment with well-developed community networks. In other areas, particularly in transitional neighborhoods with high turnover of the populace, or in historically cohesive neighborhoods that are experiencing rapid demographic change, these assets are less well developed. Thus, communities’ need for assistance with capacity building vary considerably across the city.

A common challenge created by the enormous racial/ethnic and socio-economic diversity of the city is that of creating inclusive civic arenas that offer all stakeholders a meaningful opportunity to participate in local governance. Yet the ability to include diverse groups and to incorporate attendant differences in language, values, and needs are essential to the legitimacy and efficacy of neighborhood councils.

Similarly, the diverse cultural and language backgrounds of neighborhood stakeholders as well as the large scale of the city strain residents’ capacity to communicate meaningfully with one another. Yet culturally sensitive and clear communications are fundamental to the ability to organize and collaborate.

In sum, community stakeholders must develop the capacity to work democratically within their own neighborhood council, to work collaboratively with other neighborhoods and the City, and, when necessary, to work effectively in opposition to the City in order to bring about desired changes. Neighborhood councils have shown remarkable sophistication and resourcefulness in organizing themselves; now they must begin the difficult work of practicing democratic collective action.

**Change will require new leaders who are able to communicate through word and action the values of participation and inclusion, communication and transparency.**

**Changing Civic Culture**

Yet, while community capacity is a necessary component of effective democracy, it is not sufficient to support broad governance reform. In addition, there must be institutional capacity to listen and respond. This will require fundamental changes in the culture of governance in Los Angeles: the norms, values, practices, and language of the City’s political and administrative institutions and its citizenry.

As evidenced by the City’s history of secession attempts by various areas, citizen discontent with government in Los Angeles is deep-seated and long-standing. Los Angeles is characterized by a historically individualistic political culture, in which City Hall is both physically removed from many parts of the city and culturally detached. Weak political institutions are coupled with a fragmented and hierarchical administrative apparatus rooted in progressive-era values that emphasize efficiency and professional expertise. The legacy of this governance culture is mutual mistrust on the part of both elected officials and citizens.

Change is essential if the institutions of Los Angeles governance are to become more responsive and flexible in serving the diverse and changing needs of communities. There is a need for participatory forums that are viewed as legitimate by city officials, and that can mediate between the interests of communities and the prerogatives of the larger city. Community groups must be able to recognize and use strategically an array of tactics, from collaboration and negotiation to political pressure and protest politics. Change will require new leaders who are able to communicate through word and action the values of participation and inclusion, communication and transparency. These leaders must mobilize diverse constituencies and learn how to cooperate without being co-opted.
These proceedings attempt to capture the specificity of the conference discussion about civic engagement in Los Angeles while exploring critical themes of civic engagement more generally. The proceedings unfold in three parts:

First, we present a piece adapted from Archon Fung’s keynote speech. Dr. Fung, from Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, studies how public deliberation can improve urban governance. Fung argues that new models must be developed to replace the efficiency-oriented, hierarchical agencies characteristic of bureaucratic government. He proposes “empowered citizen participation” as an alternative. This approach inverts the professional approach to decision-making by affirming the value of local knowledge and giving local actors real authority over decision-making. Fung points to a deliberative model in which structured forums for communication are used to transcend opposition and to create innovative solutions to difficult problems.

The second section presents a synopsis of each of the four workshops. Discussion within each of the workshops is woven together with interpretive comments from workshop commentators, and with contextual information on the larger issues at hand. The workshops focused on four topical themes:

Structuring Participation
Facilitated by the Neighborhood Participation Project’s Juliet Musso, with comments from Gary Marshall of the University of Nebraska and Camilla Strivers of Cleveland State University, this workshop focused on understanding the political innovations necessary to support community governance.

Incorporating Diversity
This workshop probed the motivations for and barriers to bringing diverse groups into the civic arena. Janelle Wong of the University of Southern California commented on discussion led by Alicia Kitsuse of NPP.

Improving Communications
Bruce Bimber of the University of California at Santa Barbara commented on this workshop facilitated by Bill Loges of NPP. Workshop participants discussed the communications disconnect between citizens and the City.

Changing Administrative Culture
Terry Cooper of NPP and Bob Myrtle of the University of Southern California headed this discussion of administrative leadership and the roots of resistance to change.

The third section presents recommendations aimed at facilitating the development of civic capacity to support effective neighborhood governance in Los Angeles. We also point to the broader institutional and cultural changes necessary to promote deliberative governance in Los Angeles and other global cities.

Throughout the proceedings are excerpts of comments from our US/International panel on citizen participation. This panel featured guest speakers from cities in this country and abroad with active neighborhood participation programs. Bob Miller joined us from Minneapolis, Minnesota; Roxanne Cartier Burris from Columbus, Ohio; Pamela Green from Seattle, Washington; and Professor Rong Sun from Shanghai, China.

We thank our commentators, guest speakers, and all our conference participants for joining us for a stimulating day of discussion.

Terry Cooper, Juliet Musso, Christopher Weare
Neighborhood Participation Project
Ann Crigler
Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics
For most of this century the American city has separated residents from their public councils and agencies. Efficient city government and services, many thought, required highly trained experts and large, professional organizations. In the first part of this century, such organizational methods migrated from the military and corporations to public administration. Like armies and big businesses, however, professionalized public administrators had little use for bottom-up input, and still less for grassroots control. How, after all, could professionals do their jobs well if city residents meddled and lodged demands? For many “good government” reformers, furthermore, citizen participation meant incompetence or, still worse, the corruption of the urban political machines. The Progressive legacy consists of agencies, managers, and even councils that serve the city without being “of the people,” or even “by the people.” Democracy, in the sense of citizen participation and control, was sacrificed on the altar of effectiveness.

But big agencies built on professional expertise have failed to fulfill their promise. In many urban environments, the school systems have failed to teach children, the police to keep the streets safe, and in many areas even basic services are unreliable. Several decades of experience have taught us that large agencies face their own substantial challenges to acting “for the people.” Methods and procedures that work well may become ineffective when times change, and urban agencies can be slow to recognize this mismatch and even slower to develop more appropriate techniques. Chiefs at the tops of these organizations often lose touch with the realities faced by administrators on the front-lines, and these rifts can make agencies unmanageable.

For many urban problems, from filling potholes to educating children, officials need information from residents to do their jobs effectively, but this information often fails to breach the bulwark that insulates local government from citizens. These very same walls erode trust and lead some to suspect, sometimes with good reason, that city government favors powerful interests at the expense of the poor and weak, and so fester hostility that makes social cooperation difficult.

These urban governance problems are by now widely recognized, and many have proposed solutions. Some favor answers that are based upon economic principles and individual choice: dissolve the problems of big government with the acid of the market. This prescription has emerged most prominently in recommendations for school reform: replace unwholesome public school systems with private schools, or at least create competition between charter schools with choice. Others trace the failure of urban agencies not so much to their structure, but rather to weak leadership. Their solution is to invest mayors and agency heads with greater authority so that they can streamline and reform their organizations from the top-down. Many cities, for example, have sought to shift control over schools and other departments from elected boards and councils to mayors.
A third course of reform that is freshly democratic has emerged in cities across the country—cities like Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Rochester, and Chicago. Reversing the common wisdom, city government is made more effective by making it more open to resident participation, transparent, and popularly accountable. Some reformers have created structures of neighborhood councils to review zoning, development, revitalization projects, and even capital budgets. Others have created channels of participation within particular public agencies, such as school systems and police departments. These programs share a common belief that the problems of urban governance cannot be solved without closer, more cooperative relationships between public servants and citizens, between state and civil society.

Empowered Participation: A New Model?

There are few officials who publicly reject the proposition that residents should be more involved in government. There is hardly a police department in the country that doesn’t claim to be engaged in some kind of “community policing.” Even top-down education reforms such as the federal “No Child Left Behind” policy contain provisions for parental engagement and consultation. Yet, many of these programs merely append mechanisms of advice and information to otherwise unreformed public organizations.

The most ambitious, innovative, and promising of these efforts, however, fundamentally transform the ways in which city governments and agencies do their business. They invite ordinary citizens to join with line-level officials in the basic work of defining goals and problems, developing strategies to accomplish those ends, and even executing those strategies. They also reorient the authority of the central offices of agencies and city government to support the participatory problem-solving efforts of those who live and work closest to the problems themselves: citizens and public workers in the neighborhoods.

I call such programs “empowered participation.” They are participatory because they invite ordinary people to engage in the hard work of solving public problems. They are empowered in the sense that citizens do not merely provide advice or information but exercise authority over the disposition of public power.

For example, the public school system of Chicago was reorganized along these lines. In 1988, in the aftermath of a long teachers strike and blistering criticism of the quality of the Chicago public schools, the Illinois Assembly devolved control over many school decisions to site-based local school councils. Now, every public school in Chicago is governed by an elected Council composed of six parents, two teachers, two community representatives, and the principal. These councils are empowered to hire and fire the school’s principal and allocate discretionary funds in school budgets. They also develop medium-term school improvement plans that create individualized visions for each school, and establish strategies for utilizing capacities and overcoming liabilities.

Deliberative problem-solving is an alternative to traditional city policies based upon expertise, hierarchy, and insulation from the public and politics. It enables empowered participants to engage with officials to develop priorities and problem-solving strategies. Whereas traditional public agencies operate according to the rules of standardization, hierarchy, and expertise, these deliberations take much less for granted. They convene groups of participants—such as line officials, parents, and neighborhood residents—to discuss and prioritize specific needs, tailor strategies to suit idiosyncratic contexts and challenges, and knit together the perspectives and actions of different city departments, civic organizations, and groups of residents. In environments where complexity, diversity, and change limit the effectiveness of traditional urban agencies, deliberative problem-solving may offer distinctive advantages.

Street-level deliberations often bring diverse perspectives, new voices, and novel sources of information. They inject a kind of local knowledge that would be otherwise untapped. Often, because they are on the receiving end of official actions, residents and parents know more about what is working than the street-level administrators who serve...
them. As a result, problem-solving deliberations can produce innovations and novel strategies that depart from bureaucratic formulas and procedures. These decisions, furthermore, can often treat participants more fairly because deliberations allow their perspectives and preferences to be more easily heard.

Beyond producing innovative ideas for public action, the decisions that result from deliberative problem-solving may be more easily executed. Decisions can draw not only upon the resources of officials and their agencies, but also upon residents and civic organizations. We know, for example, that one of the most important determinants of students’ success is the involvement of their parents in homework and school life. Similarly, residents of neighborhoods can bring distinctive capacities to bear on issues such as public safety and neighborhood development. Furthermore, deliberative relationships between residents and officials make it possible for residents to monitor the implementation of public decisions. They can observe whether strategies achieve their intended effects, and then suggest course corrections when necessary.

The risk is that public discussions lose focus, degenerate into venting sessions, or are dominated by citizen-gadflies or imperious officials. Such low-quality deliberations are unlikely to deliver the benefits of deliberative problem-solving.

Who Participates?

One common difficulty with many forms of political participation is that they attract certain kinds of people while others participate less or not at all. Whether the mechanism is voting, donating money, attending public hearings, or contacting officials, participation is dominated by people who are wealthier and more educated. This bias may be greater for the kind of engagement in empowered participation. It requires more effort, time, and knowledge to participate in meetings about neighborhood development, school improvement, and local crime. If empowered participation attracts only better-off participants, or fails to attract groups such as racial or ethnic minorities and immigrants, it may simply reinforce urban inequality and social exclusion.

It is clearly possible to create forums for empowered participation in which the poor and disadvantaged participate in large numbers. In Chicago, for example, residents of poor neighborhoods are active participants in community policing meetings. Remarkably, this pattern of poor-people’s participation also appears in cases of empowered participatory reform in developing countries. In Porto Alegre, Brazil, the capital portion of the city budget is determined through a bottom-up process of participation that mobilizes the poorer sections of the city.

To mobilize the poor, empowered participation must allow participants to exercise meaningful influence over issues that are of special concern to socio-economically disadvantaged people. People from poor neighborhoods participate in community policing meetings, for example, because they face the real dangers of criminal victimization.

The recipe for civic engagement that overcomes socio-economic biases is straightforward: poor people will participate when political channels (i) give them real influence over elements of public power (ii) in exchange for their participation in deliberative problem solving procedures (iii) that address issues of special concern to the disadvantaged—for example, safety, education, economic development, and basic infrastructure.

Deliberating with Integrity

Several institutional and organizational measures can ensure that local deliberations possess integrity:

- Formal training programs—perhaps provided by city agencies or community organizations—can give participants the skills and knowledge that they need to deliberate wisely and effectively.
- Meetings can be conducted in ways that encourage thoughtful and inclusive participation. Neutral facilitators (representing neither the city nor factions of residents) can be particularly important where there is conflict and trust is low. Procedures that structure deliberation into orderly problem-solving steps—of agenda-setting, strategizing, and evaluation, for example—can sustain focused discussion and action.
- External mechanisms of monitoring, accountability, and intervention can correct deliberative breakdowns. Mechanisms of empowered participation ought to include provisions for central authorities, such as relevant city agencies or commissions, to review the processes and outcomes of deliberation in the neighborhoods.

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- Formal training programs—perhaps provided by city agencies or community organizations—can give participants the skills and knowledge that they need to deliberate wisely and effectively.
- Meetings can be conducted in ways that encourage thoughtful and inclusive participation. Neutral facilitators (representing neither the city nor factions of residents) can be particularly important where there is conflict and trust is low. Procedures that structure deliberation into orderly problem-solving steps—of agenda-setting, strategizing, and evaluation, for example—can sustain focused discussion and action.
- External mechanisms of monitoring, accountability, and intervention can correct deliberative breakdowns. Mechanisms of empowered participation ought to include provisions for central authorities, such as relevant city agencies or commissions, to review the processes and outcomes of deliberation in the neighborhoods.

The risk is that public discussions lose focus, degenerate into venting sessions, or are dominated by citizen-gadflies or imperious officials. Such low-quality deliberations are unlikely to deliver the benefits of deliberative problem-solving.
Power Problems: Advocacy and Empowered Participation

Suppose that empowered participatory reforms could render urban governments more fair and effective and also increase the opportunities for inclusive civic engagement and political participation. These reasons might not be enough for many elected officials and administrators to support empowered participation. Reinventing city agencies to incorporate the principles of participatory democracy not only requires entrepreneurial initiatives and political capital, but it also requires officials to share power and authority with residents who engage with them. Such partnership, in turn, entails fundamental reorientations of professional techniques, cultures, and attitudes that inevitably encounter official resistance.

Even when institutions of empowered participation take root, public officials and managers will often be tempted to retreat from sharing control. In the Chicago public schools, for example, central school administrators have fought hard battles with local school councils over jurisdictional disputes: who controls budgets, curriculum, and principal hiring decisions.

Establishing empowered participatory reforms almost always requires conflict as well as cooperation. For deliberation to be fair, participation to be inclusive, and civic political organizations provide a kind of deliberative countervailing power that can prevent cooptation. Absent such countervailing power, policy-makers and officials will be tempted to backslide from participatory commitments. Politics is full of examples of power organizations that counterbalance more easily organized or better-funded interests: Alinskyite community organizations, environmental lobbies, consumer organizations, and a host of pressure groups. These familiar countervailing power organizations mobilize around particular demands—fair housing, neighborhood development funds, equitable school financing, police review boards, for example—and typically use adversarial tactics to press those demands.

Empowered participation may require a distinctive kind of countervailing power, one that insists upon opportunities for residents to involve themselves in public decisions. Since they seek to empower residents to solve problems rather than aiming to enact particular policy solutions, they must possess the capacity train and mobilize residents for deeply deliberative engagement.

While many of those who favor citizen participation envision a more cooperative and civic city, fair deliberative governance is likely to involve increased conflict in addition to the collaboration that it promises. This conflict is necessary because many public leaders have understandable tendencies to expand authority and control. Empowered participation creates the conditions of fair cooperation between residents and local government, but doing that requires a balance of power between civil society organizations and the state.

The challenges of urban governance are likely to become still more daunting in the years ahead. An array of elixirs will be proposed—from conservative proposals to shrink the state in favor of reliance upon market mechanisms, to charismatic strong-men who promise to shake-up and reinvent government from city hall. In this coming debate, we should not forget the role of the public. Whether the problems involve improving schools, maintaining safety in the streets, revitalizing neighborhoods, or even developing urban spending priorities, the voices and insights of urban residents can make public action more legitimate, innovative, accountable, and wise.

Mustering the political will from both officials and community organizations to create the cooperative, deliberative institutions of empowered participation presents its own formidable challenges. The reward of meeting these challenges, however, is a form of urban government that is effective because it is deeply democratic. A form of government that works for the people because it is of the people and by the people is a worthy government indeed.

The neighborhood governance movement appears to be motivated by particular concerns that large-scale cities are disconnected from their constituent communities as they grapple with complex policy issues. Economic globalization and concomitant immigration trends, in combination with rapid technological change, have heightened tensions between the geographic scope of problems and the institutions of government established to address urban problems. Moreover, increased diversity within urban regions has made it most difficult for hierarchies to manage political demands and facilitate public service delivery from a central level.

In Los Angeles, neighborhood councils hold promise for increasing citizen access to what is a large and distant political structure, improve city services, and diffuse the dissatisfaction that has contributed to the emergence of various secession movements. It is hoped that neighborhood councils also will foster continuity and self-governance among residents of Los Angeles’ diverse neighborhoods, and that a semi-annual Congress of Neighborhoods will prevent parochialism and bring businesses, community-based organizations, and residents together to engage issues of citywide interest.

Given the burgeoning interest in self-governance and civic engagement, the experience of Los Angeles is likely to be an object lesson for civic reforms across the country and internationally. The scale and size of the city, the highly decentralized nature of the urban governance structure, and the diverse and class-divided character of its population require substantial investment in the civic capacity of community participants.

In cities with successful neighborhood governance, a key factor is the provision of access points through which neighborhoods can participate in city governance. Access to decision making in Los Angeles is made difficult by a variety of institutional factors, including daytime scheduling of City Council and commission hearings, lack of advance information about upcoming decisions, and a generally opaque, bureaucratized policy making process. As one example, City Council offices tend to differentiate functionally between policy-oriented legislative deputies, placed downtown, and field deputies, who focus primarily on constituent services.

This workshop considered what “political innovations” are necessary to support participation, focusing discussion around such questions as:

- In what areas is it important for neighborhood councils to participate in city affairs?
- What civic capacity is required for effective participation?
- What barriers are there to effective participation?
- Who needs to do what to overcome these barriers?

Gary Marshall, Camilla Stivers, and Juliet Musso
The formal history of neighborhood governance in China dates to the 1950s, when neighborhood councils were created as part of a larger change in the structure of municipalities and sub-districts. These councils have persisted, and are currently the focus of a national experiment in local governance. Although they are not officially a part of government, neighborhood councils have historically operated within a regimented system and as part and parcel of the government machinery, with very little emphasis on citizen participation. Sub-district offices provide funding to the councils and make staff appointments. However, in recent years the role of the neighborhood council has expanded as liberalization and demographic and societal changes have made the need for citizen participation more apparent. These changes include an increasing aging population that requires increased services, a growing private sector that includes increasing numbers of self-employed people, and increased rural-urban migration.

In the 1990s, the Chinese government began selecting cities to participate in a program in which neighborhood councils would play a mediating role in service delivery to local citizens. By 1999 there were 26 communities in eight cities that were fully implementing the neighborhood councils. The average size of neighborhood councils ranges from 600 to 2,000 households. Councils are involved in a range of service issues, including safety, health, and provision of services to disabled and/or elderly people; issues related to immigration; and child- and youth-related issues.

It is important to note that the Chinese neighborhood council model has evolved within a highly constrained political and administrative environment. Foremost among these constraints is the relationship of the neighborhood councils to the Communist Party. The Party is still very strong in China and can penetrate any level of society, down to the neighborhood. Neighborhood councils have Party committees represented within them. Currently, there are on-going discussions about limiting the role of the Party within the framework of the legal apparatus, as well as a debate about separating the Party from the daily functions of government, civic organizations, and non-profits.

In addition, the existing administrative setup has been not compatible with grassroots mechanisms. Neighborhood councils are viewed as an arm of the government’s administrative apparatus, and the approaches and methods employed are outdated, with no institutional mechanisms for cohesion and coherence of the effort. Both external and internal changes might make the system more effective, including election of council members and a reconsideration of the role of homeowner associations within the neighborhood councils.

Nonetheless, the neighborhood councils were a breakthrough development for participation in China. Neighborhood councils have raised awareness of grassroots participation, provided training for staff, and institutionalized legislative guarantees. These successes build hope and provide a good start for democratization at the neighborhood level, even though the foundation is weak. Progress is being made, and the experience here in Los Angeles can help to inform the future development of neighborhood councils in China.

Rong Sun is Director of Political Science and Public Administration at Tongji University in Shanghai.
The Complexity of Civic Engagement Goals

The complexity of goals and issues around which people become engaged within city affairs emerged as a clear theme from the workshop. Workshop participants argued that city officials and residents should “consider the terms of engagement,” and select the issues around which they engage based on neighborhood or community needs. Reflecting on her text on citizen engagement, Carol Baker Tharp identified four areas of goals around which people tend to get involved in community associations such as neighborhood councils. These included:

1. Prioritizing issues or service needs using a deliberative process to decide what the community needs or wants. This poses a need to gather ideas, engage discussion, and prioritize.
2. Organizing community members and empowering them to take on an agenda and lobby. This may involve mobilization and support for a particular political or service agenda.
3. Dividing up and doing tasks such as creating community murals or putting on a festival. This would involve direct “hands on” development activities.
4. Building community so as to have a “sense of spirit” within the community. This last goal involves developing relationships among community members and creating a sense of attachment to the physical and social spaces of the community.

The most important product of democracy is democracy itself.

Many participants agreed that from the community’s standpoint it is important to “focus on core activities that are quick wins and sustainable...”. However, political deliberation should not be considered simply as a zero-sum debate about problem-solving. Also important are the deeper social, psychological, and emotional values of civic engagement, which can construct civic values and contribute to development of the “virtuous citizen.” In short, the most important product of democracy is democracy itself.

The Varieties of Democracy

Yet workshop participants also stressed that it is important not to be “messianic” about civic engagement and deliberative democracy, but rather to understand participatory reforms within the larger system. Some argued that neighborhood councils who engage in friendly relationships with city council representatives are going to get things done more quickly, and are less likely to engage in conflict with city council members.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that a core issue with neighborhood councils was the extent to which they were likely to be co-opted by city institutions, whether city council members or administrative agencies. For example, participants questioned whether neighborhood councils engaged in friendly relationships with city council representatives were going to get things done more quickly, and are less likely to engage in conflict with city council members.

Discussants questioned whether neighborhood councils could become an alternative forum for resolving issues, providing greater access to participatory reforms such as neighborhood councils, and more traditional democratic forms such as city council politics and the workings of the bureaucracy.
to democratic decision making, or whether they might simply become another layer of administration in a largely undemocratic city.

**Developing Civic Capacity**

Workshop participants identified three core areas of civic capacity that were required for effective civic engagement: deliberative processes, leadership, and networks among and between neighborhood councils.

**Deliberative Processes.** Participants stressed the need to develop processes at the community level that promote learning and that keep “the entire system in the room.” In order to organize the community around core activities, it is important to “elevate the terms of conversation,” to move away from problem solving toward a notion of “preferred futures.” This would seem to point to a need for community visioning or planning processes that focus community stakeholders in identifying positive, attainable, actionable goals around which the community can organize. These civic engagement processes can function as arenas for community conversation that is aimed toward building trust and establishing common ground. There is a tension between taking the time to build trust and develop relationships on the one hand, and on the other identifying goals to get things done and build organizational legitimacy. Civic engagement often involves debate oriented toward getting things done, and such debate may not develop the social relationships that build trust within a community. Workshop participants also agreed about the importance and the difficulty of involving community members who often do not make it to the table, such as poorer individuals, youth, and small-business owners.

Deliberative processes need to create trust and “intersubjective agreement,” which means hearing the perspectives of others and jointly agreeing on the meaning of key concepts, ideas, and issues. This can be particularly challenging when the process requires participants to confront intercultural differences. The structure of deliberative forums needs to be responsive to variants of culture within the city, as different cultural communities may create or respond to different structures.

**Leadership.** Workshop participants also stressed the importance of leadership and of providing development and support for emerging leaders. Within this context, participants identified several qualities of effective leadership: strategic management, effective communication, and inclusiveness.

First, it is important for leaders to understand limitations on organizational capacity and identify small things that are achievable early in the process. Rather than “reinventing the wheel,” leaders might work with structures that are already in place, such as block clubs or neighborhood associations, to collaborate in meeting community goals.

Second, leaders need to work on overcoming one of the core barriers to effectiveness, lack of information. Obtaining accurate information about community needs will require experimenting with different community forums to gather information. Leaders then need to bring that information to the larger group, and link with other neighborhood councils to obtain and share information.

“How do we stand in that awkward tension between relevance and co-optation? If you are relevant, then politicians might attempt to co-opt the neighborhood council.”
Third, it is important for leaders to "create ownership for those who are not at the table." Leaders should ask themselves what is done to involve stakeholders, broadly defined to include representatives from key community associations, such as faith organizations and businesses. There is a need for leaders to do "marketing," to emphasize the importance of linkages with civic engagement associations. It is also important to have realistic expectations; for example, a participant observed that the organizational model of businesses does not usually involve attending three-hour community meetings, particularly if those meetings are held in the evening.

Community linkages. Ultimately it will be important to build linkages within and between communities. Within the community it is important to develop networks that include a broad range of community stakeholders. Across communities, it is important to identify communities of interest that may transcend geography. Hence, rather than trying to build better communities by working within smaller geographic areas, neighborhood stakeholders can network to address cross-cutting issues such as pollution or traffic. This networking will require deliberative forums that transcend a particular community or region and build an understanding of the broader problems and possibilities of the region. The need to foster such linkages points to the importance of developing strong communications networks, as discussed in more detail later in these proceedings.

In sum, there appeared to be a general acknowledgement that achieving the promise of empowered participation required considerable attention to the structure of deliberative processes. As such, the session emphasized the need for Los Angeles to design participatory forums, such as Budget Day and the Congress of Neighborhoods, to facilitate structured and informed deliberation on the part of neighborhood council representatives. There has been a tendency for these events to involve too much presentation of material and political advertising, and too little structured community deliberation.

Participants had less to say as to what structures might be most effective, particularly at the community level. Daniel Yankelovich (1991) discusses the importance of moving beyond reactive and unstable opinions, those tapped by modern pollsters, to "public judgment" that works through the potentially conflicting values at stake and makes a responsible moral judgment. A question for Los Angeles is how to structure processes that help neighborhood councils and city officials "come to public judgment." A related issue that received considerable attention was how to ensure that neighborhood councils could work within the City to achieve their goals without being politically co-opted by city officials.

Finally, participants agreed that there was a need for investment in the development of community-based leaders who could take responsibility for involving diverse groups and ensuring that all voices would be heard. In particular, participants expressed interest in leadership activities oriented toward getting youth involved at the community level.
The continued success of American democracy is premised on our ability to unite an increasingly diverse populace. A boom in immigration has contributed to dramatic demographic change throughout the United States not seen since the end of the 18th century. Fewer than 70% of the nation’s residents identified themselves as White in the 2000 census, and the percentage of residents born outside of the United States is higher than at any time since 1930.

While this diversity has been a source of economic strength and dynamism for the United States, it also creates significant political challenges. Rapid demographic change stresses our common stores of social capital and sense of community, each of which is fundamental to our capacity for self-government. The building blocks of political activity—organizing, working with others, compromise—depend on high levels of trust and tolerance, norms of reciprocity, and a commitment to one’s community. These traits, in turn, are built through repeated interactions with others in social networks.

Recent immigration trends also raise issues of enfranchisement and citizenship. How will new populations be incorporated into political and economic systems? What are the most important barriers to full political empowerment? Minorities and foreign-born citizens are less likely to vote, to participate in other political forums, and to be interested in politics. However, these differences do not necessarily indicate a fundamental divergence in political values. For example, the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute has found that the Hispanic community supports the principle that community members must work together to address common problems, though this support does not translate into concrete participatory actions. Consequently, understanding the mechanisms by which democratic attitudes may be nurtured and translated into action is becoming increasingly important.

This workshop engaged discussion of the challenges of engaging diverse constituents in civic action within the context of the developing Los Angeles neighborhood council system. Although the Los Angeles charter reform sought to empower previously excluded populations, the ideal of incorporating diversity within neighborhood councils has proven elusive. Specific questions for discussion during the workshop included:

- What does diversity mean to you?
- Why is diversity important?
- What challenges does diversity pose?
- How might these challenges be overcome?

Definitions of Diversity

As the workshop discussion underscored, one of the difficulties of incorporating diversity within civic forums is the very expansiveness of the concept.
Minneapolis' Neighborhood Revitalization Program started in the late 1980s as concerns were raised about inner-city flight. The program was spearheaded by the state, and created 81 individual neighborhoods that served over 380,000 people, with each neighborhood serving on average 5,000 residents. In the last 12 years Minneapolis has spent over $230 million to fund the program.

The fundamental building block for neighborhood communities in Minneapolis is a neighborhood non-profit model. To qualify, a community has to meet certain criteria, and must have a five-year plan, a vision statement, goals, objectives, and strategies that are developed by community members themselves. At that point they can qualify for either a 501c3 or 501c4 status.

The earliest groups that formed didn’t have much guidance, and did not know how to get started working within their communities. Early provision of training and education might have helped them to get running without the initial start-up problems they experienced. For example, neighborhoods need to learn to focus on easy goals to build credibility, respect, trust, and a sense of accomplishment. People need to see concrete results of the labor they invest.

A successful system requires that the City acknowledge that different neighborhoods have distinct interests and needs. Minneapolis has recognized that neighborhoods are not government, and that the City need not treat them all the same way or provide the same amount of resources to each. Dedicating a funding source that is untouchable with the exception of the neighborhood group is key. True empowerment means having control of resources in addition to the ability to make your own choices.

Robert Miller is the Director of the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program in Minnesota.
Workshop participants agreed that diversity can mean different things in different neighborhoods, and need not always constitute cultural diversity. Indeed, the most salient elements of diversity in many neighborhoods are religion, class, immigration status, and citizenship status. As such, incorporating diversity is not simply a question of attracting members of minority groups to participate, but requires that we address which members of those minority groups are represented. Incorporating diversity should not stop at whether Latinos, blacks, Native Americans, and Asian Americans have a voice, but whether the least well-off or most politically marginalized within these groups—non-citizens, those who don’t speak English, the poorest, gays and lesbians of color, multiracial people—have a voice as well.

The issue of diversity is particularly perplexing in the context of neighborhood councils, where the need to incorporate functional and institutional diversity yields another layer of complexity. The city charter mandates that neighborhood councils include all neighborhood stakeholders, defined as anyone who lives, works, or owns property in the area. This definition was elaborated by the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment’s neighborhood council Plan to include a broad array of organizational types, such as schools, non-profits, faith organizations, and the like.

For neighborhood council organizers, the drive for diversity has at times proven overwhelming. As one workshop participant who has been active in developing his neighborhood council’s board structure remarked, “You have to set aside seats for the business community, the religious community, the education community, tenants—what happens is that the city is so diverse that you can’t have enough seats for everybody.”

### Importance of Diversity

Despite the difficulties of defining diversity, workshop participants agreed that within the context of global urban governance, diversity is not a luxury but a necessity. The group identified three key reasons that diversity is important to neighborhood governance. First, it will improve the flexibility and adaptability of city governance. If the same individuals participate in all decisions, they will tend to generate uniform ideas based on their necessarily limited experience, rather than producing the innovation that is the key to successful governance. The group hypothesized that new and different people are one of the best sources of new and different ideas. One participant put it succinctly: “If we don’t have different interests then things get missed; we can’t take them to a higher level. You really need diversity of thought, culture, and language to deal with problem solving.”

Second, because civic participation is an approach to problem solving, it is important to involve different segments of the community to develop a full understanding of the problems that affect them. One workshop participant provided an example underscoring this point. There is considerable interest in developing a parcel of land near LA’s Chinatown known as the Cornfields. Many groups entered the discussion about the land parcel with the idea that the land was symbolically and historically tied to their own community’s history in Los Angeles. However, once a range of groups were in the same room together, it became clear that the land had multiple meanings and multiple histories. As the participant commented, “Once they all started hearing about each others’ histories they recognized that the land was everybody’s struggle.” Deliberation among the diverse groups with interests in the land led to a solution addressing diverse community needs—a solution would not have been possible otherwise.

Finally, diversity matters for the legitimacy of government. If government institutions do not look like the population or do not appear to address the needs of a population, their legitimacy will be undermined, further contributing to widespread disenfranchisement, exit, or, as witnessed in Los Angeles and other cities, civil unrest.

One of the difficulties confronting civic bodies such as neighborhood councils is the issue of rep-
representative legitimacy. This problem frequently is expressed through the tendency to reduce the experience of a particular group to a "seat at the table." As a workshop participant with long experience in city governance observed, "I've been to many a meeting in my career where you have a lone Hispanic person or a lone black person to represent their community, and hence we will turn and ask them to tell us what Latinos or African Americans are saying." Thus, simply diversifying the group sitting around the table is not sufficient to insure legitimacy of the institutions of governance. Rather, there is a need to develop networks of communication that link cultural communities and interest groups throughout the community. This will help to build a continuing conversation that disseminates information and supports a better understanding of the needs, values, and interests of diverse community members.

Challenges of Diversity

Discussion of the challenges of diversity focused around three main themes: the challenge of relevance, the challenge of communication, and the challenge of creating civic spaces.

Relevance. Echoing Archon Fung's point, workshop participants noted that members of disenfranchised communities are likely to participate in neighborhood governance efforts only if they have a compelling reason to do so. For some discussants, this means choosing small projects that are easily tackled, so that people see results and stay involved. "In some areas [you] can't sell civic engagement as a philosophy, but [you] can sell what neighborhood councils have done for the area." Others suggested that relevance would hinge on the willingness to engage substantive issues of inequality and redistribution, as well as on the design of participatory forums. "What kind of power should newcomers, transients, etc., have? The extent to which they participate is important, especially if they do not see tangible benefits."

"The question of relevance raised discussion of whether neighborhood councils are in fact a vehicle for incorporating diverse groups. Some discussants felt that neighborhood councils would likely remain focused primarily on service delivery issues, and thus may not appear compelling to disenfranchised groups. Others suggested that neighborhood councils had the potential to be liaisons on education and economic development issues, which could draw more interest. Still others asserted that encouraging civic engagement required multiple avenues of access to governance. One participant stated, "Neighborhood councils aren't catch-alls. There are other ways [to participate]. We need to recognize the old community organizers. Where do they fit into this new system?"

Communication. Underlying much of the workshop discussion was an emphasis on the importance of communication as a way of both incorporating and benefiting from diversity. On a practical level, communication refers to tactics and strategies for reaching out to diverse groups and inviting their participation. Workshop participants suggested that bringing a greater diversity into the civic realm will require rethinking communication strategies along culturally and class-sensitive lines. For example, official forms of government communications, such as fliers, may be perceived as elitist and intimidating. Reaching out through friendlier forms of communications, such as the colorful foto-novellas that are popular in some Latino communities, can help make local governance more accessible.

On a deeper level, communication refers to building understanding and trust across divides presented by language, culture, and class. Workshop participants suggested that Los Angeles must strive to replace a historical legacy of fear and mistrust with a new civic culture that takes diversity as a point of departure while celebrating commonality. From an institutional perspective, this may mean bringing diversity into the foreground of governmental activities. For example, one workshop participant suggested incorporating the Department of Cultural Affairs within the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. Similarly, Parks and
Recreation programs provide an opportunity to build positive experiences of interaction among people of diverse backgrounds.

Creating Civic Spaces. Related to the issue of communication is the need to create civic spaces that recognize diversity while encouraging participants to find common ground. These might be physical places that engage community members in collective pursuits. For example, the City of Seattle has created “Pot Patches,” community gardens in which neighbors can cooperate in growing and sharing produce. Farmers markets, common in Los Angeles, also encourage people to gather and share cultural practices.

Civic spaces also can include deliberative forums, such as neighborhood councils, in which conversation about community issues creates collective understanding across diverse organizations or cultures. From this perspective, it is important to consider the cultural basis of the rules and practices that structure neighborhood discourse, such as the parliamentary procedures on which neighborhood councils rely.

Achieving the goal of a diverse civic realm will require more than simply an open-door policy or a designated “seat at the table.” Rather, it will require both a fundamental shift in our orientation toward participation and the development of concrete strategies to engage diverse actors. Our approach to civic engagement must proceed from the recognition that strong democracy is premised upon the political expression and contributions of all groups and individuals. Only by placing the issue of diversity at the center of our thinking will the civic realm—and in turn, political and administrative policy—begin to reflect the rich multiplicity of interests and viewpoints among constituents of the global city.

At the community level, placing diversity at the center of our thinking means experimenting with varying types of public forums, rather than embracing any single model of participation as authoritative. On the part of the City, it may mean investing in ambitious community organizing efforts to enfranchise the poor, and actively structuring administrative activities around points of linkages between diverse groups, as in the example above of combining neighborhood empowerment with cultural and recreational activities.

On a more practical level, community leaders require strategies to assist them in attracting diverse constituents to participate in community affairs. The daunting challenges as well as the attendant rewards of incorporating diversity highlight the need to develop and disseminate best practices on this topic. Workshop participants identified reaching out through culturally sensitive communications, and ensuring that neighborhood council activities reflect issues that are salient to marginalized groups as two vital approaches. However, the City and other mediating organizations can greatly assist neighborhoods by identifying and communicating examples of other effective practices from Los Angeles, other US cities, and abroad.
Neighborhood governance reforms are an attempt to redress the lack of community “voice” in debates about policy formulation and service delivery. For this “voice” to be heard requires that neighborhood groups have access to accurate information and are able to communicate with their stakeholders, with one another, and with city representatives.

The challenges of communication are particularly difficult in a city of the size, structure, and diversity of Los Angeles. Los Angeles is particularly large both in area (466 square miles) and population (over 3.75 million). Access to decision making is impeded by generally opaque, bureau-cratized political structures. Historically the City Council has held meetings during the day, making it difficult for citizens to provide direct input. Many community members argue that state open meeting act provisions are inadequate; by the time issues have come to City Council, it is too late to influence the process.

The status of Los Angeles as an immigration hub also raises important issues about communications. For example, Los Angeles has an extraordinarily high proportion of residents who do not speak English well, 19% in 1990. Language differences are likely to limit the ability of residents to talk both within and across neighborhoods, particularly given the growing reliance on technology for political communications. Neighborhoods that contain more than one language group are also more likely to be poor, to have limited understanding of American political traditions, and limited resources, suggesting that limited language skills will exacerbate other obstacles to political participation.

Communications play a central and formal role in the Los Angeles neighborhood council reform. For example, one of the key innovations is creation of an “Early Notification System” that will provide notification by electronic mail of city policies likely to affect particular communities. In addition, neighborhood councils are required to establish systems for communication with local stakeholders, and the City is required to implement a communication system linking neighborhood councils with one another and with city departments. Given rapidly increasing reliance on the Internet and the scale of the city, it is understandable that the communication system introduced by Los Angeles has relied heavily on advanced communications technologies.

This workshop considered how citizens and the City may better connect with one another using all of the means available for communication. Specific questions addressed include:

- What do various actors within the city need and want to know?
- With whom do actors want to communicate and why?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of current communications channels?
- What are the barriers to effective communication?
Columbus is the largest city in Ohio, and the 15th largest city in the nation. It has had a formal neighborhood participation program since 1972, but the program has recently been reinvigorated by a series of changes. One of these was the election of the city’s first African-American mayor, who is very proactive at the community level. Another was a large demographic shift. Until recently, Columbus had been a fairly homogenous city, but now is more diverse, with a large number of immigrants from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Russia.

Formalized neighborhood groups are organized and codified as area commissions. The Neighborhood Services Division assists the area commissions with boundary issues and other relevant needs. Currently there are 13 codified area commissions. These make recommendations to the City Council and participate at budget hearings. There are also close to 250 civic associations and groups that are part of the neighborhood governance process.

The Mayor and Neighborhood Services Division sponsor a series of programs to engage the community. One of these is the Neighborhood Pride Program, similar to Los Angeles’ Targeted Neighborhood initiative, in which areas are designated and targeted with city services to complete some of the projects and repairs that are needed. Another is Community Night, in which the residents report to the City on the progress that was made during the Pride program. There is also a Community Liaison Program, which designates a city staff member as a liaison to each area in an effort to maintain the relationship between the City and community.

One of the biggest challenges the area commissions have experienced is a lack of fresh leadership. They are starting to see people who have been involved in the communities for 25 to 30 years, some of whom represent their own self-interests rather than the broader interests of the neighborhoods. Establishing term limits on elected offices, as in Los Angeles, would help remedy this problem.

Roxyanne Cartier Burrus is an Administrator in the Neighborhood Services Division, City of Columbus, Ohio.
• Who needs to do what to overcome these barriers?
• What role can and should technology play in providing solutions to communications problems?

The workshop addressed three distinct kinds of connections: (1) communication between the City and neighborhood councils, (2) communication between neighborhood councils, and (3) communication between neighborhood councils and their stakeholders. Participants recognized that these are not separate issues. In fact, the success of neighborhood councils rests in no small part on their ability to establish all three kinds of connections simultaneously, thus becoming important bridges between the City and stakeholders.

Neighborhood councils have the potential to act as important mediating organizations that link city government and neighborhood stakeholders. Workshop participants expressed enthusiasm and interest in communicating with the City, and informing and mobilizing stakeholders. At the same time, they shared frustration about a number of constraints, including the problems of information overload, uncertainties over the issues in which they should become involved, and the difficulties of connecting with stakeholders in a media-rich and multicultural city.

Communication Between the City and Neighborhood Councils

Communication between the City of Los Angeles and neighborhood councils was discussed in terms of four general issues: (1) the amount of information the councils receive, (2) the way that this information is organized (or not organized), (3) the technical form in which information is received, and (4) the opportunities neighborhood councils have to use the information they receive.

The City’s Early Notification System (ENS) exemplifies the problems associated with two-way communication between neighborhoods and the City. The new city charter mandates that the City alert neighborhood councils of upcoming decisions of importance by the City Council, boards, and commissions. It also requires that the City provide neighborhood councils a reasonable opportunity to provide feedback on these decisions. During the development of the charter, many advocates of the ENS claimed that it was the most important element of charter reform in that it would level the playing field by increasing the political influence expressed by neighborhoods. In the first phase of the implementation of the ENS, the City has created an e-mail server through which individuals may subscribe to receive agendas for meetings of the City Council, Council committees, boards, and commissions.

Neighborhood council members who were receiving ENS notices were generally pleased with the valuable information they find there. Not everyone, though, was aware of the system, and one council member expressed dismay that he had been unaware of its potential for keeping his council up to date.

The first point that several members of neighborhood councils raised was that the sheer volume of information they receive from the ENS is overwhelming. Several neighborhood council members spend over 20 hours per week sorting through the information trying to find the information that is relevant to their neighborhood. Others were concerned about the relevance of information contained in meeting agendas. A member of a Hollywood-area neighborhood council noted several times that the ENS information tends to be very focused on specific details of decisions and policies, and that too little “big picture” information is provided. He and several others expressed interest in knowing the larger issues underlying the City’s agenda items.

Finding relevant information in the mass of city documents was a significant issue that was complicated by the arcane language in which issues are sometimes described. Workshop participants noted that they would like information to be accessible by region, at least, or by neighborhood council at best. City Council districts were offered as a middle-ground way to organize early notification.

Another issue had to do with the difficulty of recognizing priority items. Priority is a matter of
both the importance of the issue and the time frame in which action is called for. (That is, a relatively mundane issue can become a priority when action is needed right away.) At the same time, participants expressed reservations over allowing the City to edit down the information, fearing that some important items would be lost.

Some of the organizational issues could be addressed if the City developed a technical format that was easier for community members to use. While the current approach (Adobe's PDF format) is simple for city offices with little technological experience and allows uniformity across departments, these files cannot be altered or easily searched by community members. Moreover, the fact that the ENS is entirely Internet-based is clearly a problem for those who lack Internet connections, requiring community organizers to monitor electronic postings on behalf of those who are not connected. There was general agreement that the City should develop a form of electronic distribution that was easily searchable and that produced documents that could be edited before being printed and otherwise distributed.

Finally, the timeliness of information provision is a crucial concern, as some workshop participants expressed frustration that they learned about issues too late to act on them, and long after more important issues had been decided. For instance, one participant complained that the notices did not provide sufficient time for a neighborhood council to formulate a response. The Hollywood-area neighborhood council member pointed out that he can learn details about improvements proposed for his neighborhood, but he remains unsure of how those proposals fit into a larger plan for the future of Hollywood. It would be easier to respond to these specific plans if he knew where those plans fit in a larger agenda.

A workshop participant employed within the Los Angeles Department of Public Works noted that since the ENS and the neighborhood council system are still in their infancy, it is important that everyone be patient and find ways to voice their concerns so that improvements can be made. He pointed out that his department encourages neighborhood councils to be in touch on a regular basis and to get involved in project planning as early as possible.

Strategies for Effective Communications

While Los Angeles’ Early Notification System provides valuable information, the City needs to implement the following improvements:

• Present notices with links to background documents that describe the larger policy context of the given issue
• Translate arcane political language to be understandable by lay people
• Provide notification in a format that can be searched electronically and that allows documents to be edited prior to distribution
• Most importantly, provide information considerably in advance of the 72 hours currently required by the Brown Act.

Communication Between Neighborhood Councils

Ann Crigler pointed out that neighborhood councils should look for ways to share information with one another. As councils encounter and solve problems, their ability to alert others to effective and ineffective strategies can save other councils time and energy. Councils’ ability to form coalitions to address issues of common concern would also increase their influence with the City. Sharing minutes of meetings and attending one another’s meetings from time to time were suggested as ways of sharing knowledge. One participant suggested a Yahoo! discussion group for the neighborhood councils, allowing reasonably open discussion.

Participants also discussed the role of the Alliance of Neighborhood Councils in facilitating inter-council communication. The Alliance, which meets every two months, has provided a forum for discussion of a variety of common concerns, and has sponsored workshops to help councils through such common experiences as the certification process and offering feedback on the City’s budget. Several council members specified the certification process as particularly frustrating and spoke in support of any communication method that would simplify that process for those still struggling with it.

Effective communication among neighborhood councils could mitigate some of the problems noted above regarding communication with the City, to the complete exclusion of personal contacts. In contrast, the Public Works representative explicitly invited neighborhood councils to forge personal relationships with his department.
by a city proposal, a lively network of inter-
council communication could allow the first neigh-
borhood council to notice the proposal to save the
others the time needed to decipher complex agen-
das or download enormous documents. Another
suggestion was to pool resources to hire a person to
monitor city communication for a group of neigh-
borhood councils.

Communication Between Neighborhood
Councils and Stakeholders

Participants agreed on the importance of neigh-
borhood council outreach to their stakeholders,
but cited several significant hurdles: (1) the pro-
hibitive expense of some preferred methods,
(2) language barriers, (3) reluctance on the part
of local businesses to display information, and
(4) the difficulty of reaching some populations,
particularly undocumented immigrants who pre-
fer not to be officially recognized. Workshop par-
ticipants are experimenting with a variety of
approaches, and it appeared that members were
learning from one another about opportunities to
use media.

Councils need to be as creative as possible to
address issues of stakeholder outreach in order to
maximize their effectiveness in their neighborhoods
and, more importantly, to gain the collective knowl-
edge of the stakeholders. Local cable TV access
channels are an inexpensive means of publicizing
the activities of neighborhood councils, not neces-
sarily by producing long programs but by produc-
ing brief announcements and summaries of recent
activity. In poor communities, and those where
English is not the primary language, the penetra-
tion of cable television is higher than Internet
penetration.

A participant described a newsletter that his
neighborhood council had developed, which
included English and Spanish versions of each arti-
cle. The newsletter was distributed in banks, shops,
and libraries, and made available online. Mention of
displaying information in businesses sparked an
observation by two neighborhood council members
that in their neighborhood some businesses were
reluctant to allow the neighborhood councils to post
announcements of their meetings or agendas for fear
that the businesses would be deluged with requests
from other organizations for similar opportunities.
It was suggested that neighborhood councils remind
reluctant businesses that they are official stakehold-
ers of the neighborhood council.

The complications posed by multiple lan-
guages and diverse cultural norms are daunting.
Encouraging diverse stakeholder groups to par-
ticipate in neighborhood council activities can
involve publishing material in many languages.
Several participants reported trying to work with
existing local organizations, such as Neighbor-
hood Watch groups, in order to gain visibility and
form coalitions. Building connections between
local organizations is a powerful strategy because
it increases people’s feelings of belonging to their
neighborhoods. One difficulty associated with
this strategy is that there may be friction because
pre-existing organizations fear being co-opted by
the newer neighborhood councils. This barrier
can be overcome by taking a humble approach to
existing organizations, casting the interaction as
an opportunity for the neighborhood council to
learn from the experience of local organizations
rather than an official summons to a new govern-
mental body.

One neighborhood council member advocated
using standard marketing techniques and a variety
of media, including billboards, in order to keep the
neighborhood councils visible to stakeholders. He
emphasized that stakeholders won’t automatically
recognize their interests in the activity of the neigh-
borhood council; rather the neighborhood council
should take responsibility for communicating the
significance of what they do to the stakeholders as
consistently as possible in a variety of formats. Use
of local media was encouraged because the dis-
semination of local issues on local media is likely to
build a sense of belonging within the community.

In sum, two themes emerged from this session.
The first involved the importance of developing
social and political networks throughout the city.
Such networks can increase a sense of “belonging
within neighborhoods; they can help to ensure that
diverse interests are represented; they can help col-
lective problems to surface and engage people in
working on them; and they can assist in dissemi-
nating information throughout the City and its
communities. Given the importance of developing
networks that transcend a single neighborhood or
community, and the incentives for neighborhood
leaders to become information gatekeepers, outside
actors are required to facilitate network develop-
ment through investment in communications tech-
nology and community events.

Second, the City needs to continue developing
its early notification system to provide earlier notice,
and to be more manageable on the part of neigh-
borhood councils. Rather than attempting to notice
every possible meeting in the city, we recommend
that the City prioritize the boards and commissions
that are most relevant to neighborhood councils
(e.g., Planning and Public Works), and involve
them in developing a pilot early notification system
that is timely, easily searchable, understandable by
the lay person, and placed in the context of larger
City planning efforts.
American pluralism is challenging the Progressive approach to the rationalized governing of highly diverse communities. The Progressive movement was premised on the separation of administration and politics, and on scientific management approaches to service delivery. The Progressive vision was that of a centralized authority managing largely standardized policies to achieve efficiency and economy in service delivery. From an ethical standpoint, it was assumed that government should treat everyone the same (equally) in order to treat everyone fairly (equitably). Efficiency was understood narrowly as achievement of maximum output for a given input through centralized bureaucratic organization and standardized rules, regulations, and priorities.

Neighborhood governance reforms are one response to the growing tension between the homogenizing legacy of Progressive-era institutions 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. In contrast to the limited “cost-effectiveness” norms of the former, the latter calls for decentralization, differentiation, and flexibility. Efficiency is understood more broadly as adaptability of the political and social system to diverse needs within 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 and at other times calling for differentiation of services to redress differing needs or injustices experienced by certain groups. Neighborhood governance requires that cities find ways to adapt the rationalism of their administrative structures to the demands emanating from diverse communities.

This workshop considered how the city can change the culture of its administrative agencies so that departments can work together constructively with their constituents. Public administrators act within a culture dominated by the norms of efficiency, control, and the primacy of professional knowledge. These cultural norms tend to create resistance to the involvement of citizens, a lack of responsiveness to citizens’ expressed needs and preferences, and an inability to restructure agencies appropriately to accommodate more engaged participation from neighborhoods. Questions for this workshop included:

• What does it mean for the city to be responsive in service delivery?
• What are the barriers to responsiveness?
• Who needs to do what to overcome these barriers?
Seattle established a system of District Councils following a 1987 resolution that created a partnership between the City and neighborhoods to better provide services and identify needs. There are 13 districts within Seattle, each of which has a "miniature city hall" that provides all the services that normally would be provided at a main city hall. Residents are able to take their issues to the District Councils through a network of Community Councils that are recognized but not certified by the City. District Councils are the forum for hearing Community Council’s applications for neighborhood matching funds from the City and for establishing district priorities for the city budget. They also work with small businesses and have found that healthy small businesses create good neighborhoods. District Council officers are elected in an at-large format.

In addition, Seattle has a City Neighborhood Council, which is made up of representatives from each of the 13 District Councils. The City Neighborhood Council makes recommendations to the Mayor and City Council on proposed neighborhood matching fund projects and helps to implement the neighborhood planning assistance program. This program was started in 1996, when the Department of Neighborhoods designated 38 neighborhood areas, which provided the foundation for neighborhood group plans. The neighborhood groups would design plans for the community and go through a process of certification by the City Council. Once certified, the planning groups would be entitled to $50,000 in early implementation money. The City Neighborhood Council also has the responsibility of advising the City on budget priorities. In this respect, the City Neighborhood Council plays the coordinating role that in Los Angeles was intended to be the responsibility of the Congress of Neighborhoods.

The mission of the Department of Neighborhoods is to engage civic participation and create government responsibility in these neighborhoods through a variety of programs and funding sources. The Department offers a Matching Fund Program in which neighborhoods can apply for funds between $250 and $150,000 to complete neighborhood improvement projects such as playgrounds, green space, and art houses. The community matches the funds with labor, time, and materials. There have been close to 3,500 projects completed in the last 14 years.

The Department also offers a Pea Patch Program, which has had tremendous social value to the communities. Neighborhoods can take over a parcel of land and convert it into a small community garden. Over 1,600 lots have been donated for this purpose. Produce grown in the Pea Patches can be sold at small community Farmer’s Markets, which help bring people of diverse groups together.

Pamela Green is a Neighborhood District Coordinator for the Southeast Neighborhood, Department of Neighborhoods, City of Seattle, Washington.
Defining Responsiveness

Responsiveness, to the workshop participants, had to do with the attitudes and perspectives of the people at the top levels of administration. When government effectiveness is questioned, business and the private sector often are looked to for answers. These tendencies have been widely described and discussed in the “reinventing government” movement, where the inclination is to make government more efficient, cost-effective, and even customer driven. However, the danger is that neighborhood residents may be overlooked. It is the “personal” side of responsiveness in addition to the “organizational” side of responsiveness that was emphasized throughout the session.

Participants identified three types of responsiveness: political, organizational, and community responsiveness:

*Political responsiveness* is the act of being heard by policy makers. As one participant stated, when discussing a local community issue with neighborhood council members, “the neighborhood people said that they wanted administrators to have the courtesy of listening to me.”

*Organizational responsiveness* relates to a public administrator’s ability to adapt to community needs and expectations. A workshop attendee shared an experience from his agency: “We have been working with neighborhoods for 30 years and have a lot of experience. We hear complaints that are related to services that are offered by the City. For example, residents might say ‘Fix this for us, or don’t transfer me five times, or why can’t you change your schedule?’ There may be places that need trash picked up twice a week instead of once. I make it a point to respond to that person.”

*Community-based responsiveness* involves empowering people in neighborhoods to resolve issues without “going downtown.”

In short, workshop participants defined responsiveness as listening, acting, and being connected in order to get things done.

Barriers to Effectiveness

The workshop discussion focused on three general barriers to responsiveness: organizational structure, lack of leadership, and administrative “culture.”

*Organizational structure*. Agencies or governments that attempt to assist neighborhoods often assume that neighborhoods should conform to their particular procedures (reporting, budgeting, decision-making), rules, and requirements. One workshop attendee shared his experience with leaders and bureaucracies: “The structure of the bureaucracy is critical. For example, the General Manager of the Department of Parks and Recreation, is reorganizing the department and eliminating two layers of management. This lessens scapegoating and makes people less insulated. The previous structure did not allow for accountability.”

In addition, participants commented on the need for clear communication channels and structured opportunities to share information. One
attendee noted the importance of communication: “People need to talk to one another and get educated [if there is to be change].”

There appeared to be concern about the effects of administrators approaching communities in a rule-bound fashion. As one participant put it, “The deeper problem is the maze of rules that we have to work under, especially in administrative services (personnel). Customer service (citizen service) could help the problem, but unfortunately people don’t have time.” A danger of a rule-bound approach to neighborhood governance is that participatory organizations will have to recreate themselves in the image of city agencies, and hence will be driven away from their grassroots bases. This can be avoided if government at all levels is aware of the need to adapt themselves to the diversity of community organizations.

Leadership. Participants suggested that to change administrative culture it is important also to consider how organizational leadership may empower local organization members to address community or neighborhood needs. The leader plays a critical role in establishing the agency’s vision as well as articulating the expectation for staff to be attentive and responsive to the community, thereby building trust with constituents. In addition, it is important for the leader to cultivate a broad vision that values involving citizens and neighborhoods in creating their futures or deliberating to solve local problems. Leadership can become problematic when there is a lack of emphasis on empowerment, customer service, or encouraging citizen involvement.

One participant shared his community’s many encounters with city administrators, which he characterized as inconsistent. “Our history has been mixed with City departments: DWP, good; the LA Port, okay; and Cultural Affairs, not great.

“We [his neighborhood council] sat with upper-level Cultural Affairs people at a meeting that we called to discuss fund raising for refurbishing a local theater. We had some money and lots of ideas for programming, and nothing happened. On the other hand, Parks and Rec has been wonderful—really visionary.” When probed about the difference he found with the Department of Parks and Recreation, this attendee noted that the General Manager is taking a “real” interest in the area and is building a vision that includes community members.

One participant noted that building vision is not always an easy task. “It is all about the attitude and saying, I just want this to have the outcome that you want.” This is the challenge of government, cultivating a positive atmosphere for change and collaboration.

In sum, the leader’s role can be defined as one of interacting with others in an inter-organizational network through collective bargaining, negotiation, and political maneuvering. The public manager must function as steward, servant, broker, and social entrepreneur while designing a culture and an organizational structure to ensure that his or her organization can interface dynamically with its environment.

Administrative culture. Cultural barriers refer to risk avoidance, organizational autonomy, “turfism,” and the notion that public participation is time-consuming and that “administrators may know best.” One workshop attendee shared his experience with bureaucracies. “I have worked for years in bureaucracies. We talked about empowerment, but many people at lower levels can’t do much. This isn’t so in other places like hotels, where the people at the counter can do something. People need to feel that they can do something—it is a mentality. But it isn’t easy for some to give up power. The whole concept of deliberation and dialogue is important to get buy-in.”

Another attendee noted, “Administrative mentality is a serious problem—some people just don’t care. There are a thousand different rules. The General Manager can play a big role in changing the mentality. Sometimes the administrative mentality is overwhelming.”

All too often, government and other community outreach workers make weak, superficial, or symbolic efforts to obtain community input. This tendency seems rooted in a belief that professionals are better at defining and solving problems than citizens or lay people, a perspective that reflects the Progressive Movement’s emphasis on the development of technical expertise that separated politics from administration to more efficiently manage
the government’s business. If government is to become more flexible and responsive to its diverse communities, it must take more seriously information, preferences, and judgments provided by the citizenry.

Overcoming Administrative Barriers

Participants identified several strategies for holding public agencies accountable, including identifying neighborhood needs and priorities and engaging departments in a priority-setting dialogue, and measuring and reporting “departmental scorecards.” In considering the importance of dialogue, one attendee shared her perspective of working with both public administrators and neighborhood residents. “It is important that association meetings and other meetings become a forum for education and information sharing. My philosophy is ‘take the time to talk.’ I stress education and communication. It only takes a minute to issue a ticket to someone, it takes a little more effort to step outside the box.”

Education was identified as a key strategy for empowering neighborhood councils to overcome structural barriers to responsiveness. As one participant argued, “We need to educate people about how to get things done. We have ‘empowered’ all these neighborhoods and they don’t even know it. So education and organizing are critical.”

In order to develop civic capacity and the ability to work effectively with the City, neighborhood council organizers need to ask themselves where they are in the “empowerment life cycle.”

At the formation stage, where many neighborhood councils currently are found, it is critical to develop a vision for the council and to structure plans and priorities. The goal is to build credibility by knowing what the community needs; developing knowledge, skills, and competencies; and building partnerships for change.

As neighborhood associations begin to mature, the challenge is to develop a record of accomplishments. It is important to do what is doable, and what matters to the community. At this stage, organizations will need to consider the extent to which they wish to take a more confrontational approach to change, risking building resistance among city officials by pressuring the City.

Fully mature organizations must consider how they can become learning organizations and build a community of leaders to develop long-term sustainability. The challenge of relevance is to ensure that the organization continues to evolve, and to remain open to and reflective of the community.
A rchon Fung proposes a "freshly democratic" model for neighborhood "empowered participation," in which central authority is reoriented toward the grass roots. The City of Los Angeles presents the conditions that Fung contends can be addressed through empowered participation: a highly bureaucratized city apparatus that is increasingly stressed by the necessity to solve complex urban problems involving diverse populations.

In Los Angeles, the question emerging is whether the City can change its way of doing business to involve neighborhood councils as empowered actors engaged in decision making within city institutions without investing in community civic capacity or refashioning administrative and political decision processes. The likely outcome of business-as-usual will be a system of "neighborhood lobbyists," whose political influence works in the "public interest" of a community without being fully representative of its diverse constituents or fully cognizant of stakeholder needs and preferences.

Time will tell whether city services can be made more effective, and resource allocation more fair, by welding the street-level intelligence and entrepreneurial energy of community stakeholders to the technical expertise provided by the City’s administrative corps. The conference workshops identified many of the impediments to empowered participation: weak political and administrative channels for participation; a diversity of language, culture, and interest that makes it difficult to mobilize around common goals; and a rule-bound administrative culture that often impedes creative city leadership.

Nonetheless, many participants expressed considerable optimism that these challenges could be overcome given strong leadership and commitment on the part of community members and the city’s political and administrative leadership.

Out of the conference emerged several fundamental questions that require additional research and technical assistance on civic engagement. These include:

1. While there is a general acknowledgement that it is important to structure deliberative processes carefully, there was less agreement as to what structures might be most effective. Daniel Yankelovich (1991) discusses the importance of moving beyond reactive and unstable opinions, those tapped by modern pollsters, to "public judgment" that works through the potentially conflicting values at stake and makes a responsible moral judgment. A question for Los Angeles is how to structure processes that help neighborhood councils and city officials "come to public judgment." Given the increasing reliance on advanced communications technology, a related question is whether there is a...
possibility to create such structured deliberative forums “on-line.”

(2) All of the sessions identified the importance of developing social and political networks among communities throughout the city. Community networks can help to ensure that diverse interests are represented; they can help collective problems to surface and engage people in working on them, and can assist in disseminating information throughout the city and its neighborhoods. Given the importance of developing networks that transcend a single neighborhood or community, and the incentives for neighborhood leaders to become information gatekeepers, outside actors are required to facilitate network development through investment in communications technology and community events. Some of these networks may develop into sources of the “counter-vailing power” discussed by Archon Fung, and as such, may threaten the political status quo. Hence we would argue that leaders not merely by what they accomplished, but also by the process they used to accomplish it. Leaders within an empowered participatory system need to listen and facilitate, rather than impose, and they need to take particular responsibility for ensuring involvement of disenfranchised groups and individuals. This responsibility requires more than simply an open-door policy or a designated “seat at the table.” It may require refashioning community forums to be more welcoming of diverse viewpoints, rethinking community goals to ensure the organization is relevant to all members, and investing in ambitious community organizing efforts.

In addition to these broad issues, we identify several specific recommendations for the City of Los Angeles as it moves forward in development of the neighborhood council system. These include the following:

Participatory forums. We recommend that the City design future participatory forms, such as Budget Day and the Congress of Neighborhoods, to facilitate structured and informed deliberation on the part of neighborhood council representatives. To date, there has been a tendency for these events to involve too much presentation of material and political advertising, and too little opportunity for meaningful community deliberation.

Information and notification. The City needs to continue developing its early notification system to provide earlier notice of city actions, and to be more manageable on the part of neighborhood councils. Rather than attempting to notice every possible meeting in the city, we recommend that the City prioritize the boards and commissions that are most relevant to neighborhood councils (e.g., Planning and Public Works), and involve them in developing a pilot early notification system that is timely, easily searchable, understandable by the lay person, and placed in the context of larger city planning efforts.

Administrative culture. Administrative responsiveness is the product of personal encounters between neighborhood and city actors. In the spirit of grassroots action that has characterized the development of the Los Angeles neighborhood council system, the City’s efforts to make administrative agencies more responsive to neighborhoods should focus on developing an ethic of listening, and on empowering lower-level administrators to work directly with neighborhoods to solve problems or effect desired changes.

Incorporating diversity. Overcoming the challenges of involving diverse groups in the civic arena will require dedicated efforts to organize disenfranchised groups, structure civic activities to promote broad participation, and share information about effective inclusionary practices. The City can facilitate the process of inclusion by supporting organizing efforts among the poor and disenfranchised, creating opportunities for collective action by diverse groups around cultural and other activities, and identifying and disseminating information on best practices for incorporating diversity at the neighborhood level.
The USC Neighborhood Participation Project and the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics gratefully acknowledges the support of the organizations and individuals that helped to make this conference possible:

- The James Irvine Foundation
- The Majestic Foundation
- The USC Provost’s Urban Initiative Program
- The Marvin Braude Fellowship

We also thank USC Provost Lloyd Armstrong, the Urban Deans Council, Dean Dan Mazmanian, and Dean Joseph Aoun for facilitating the collaboration between the Neighborhood Participation Project and the Unruh Institute.

In addition, the Neighborhood Participation Project wishes to thank the National Science Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation for their support of our ongoing research.