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Why Neighborhood Councils Don't Work, and How to Fix Them

BOB GELFAND / 14 MARCH 2016

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GELFAND'S WORLD--This is the 15th year of the neighborhood council system, and is therefore the year that people will be asking, "Are the neighborhood councils a failure? If so, why? If they are at least partial successes, then why?"

15

UE, MAR

I offer the beginnings of an answer. It has to do with a specific error that makes it impossible for many of our so-called leaders to exert leadership. Coincidentally, my answer applies to other groups outside of the neighborhood council system.

In the early days, visionaries thinking about a neighborhood council system spoke of *participatory democracy*. It's kind of a 1960s phrase that referred to an open public forum which wasn't really controlled by anyone in particular. The gavel, if there was one, was passed along from one person to another over the course of a long evening. Everyone got to talk. There weren't much in the way of ground rules, except that all the people there would be given their say.

In other words, it was equality, taken about as far as a group of people could manage to take it. Such gatherings did come to decisions, wrote policy statements, and organized public demonstrations. It was a time-intensive way of doing things, but it had the advantage that there was buy-in by the vast majority of participants. That's because all the participants were offered the chance to be equals in the decision making process.

This is not the way to design and build a bridge or a real estate development, but these gatherings were not held to design bridges. They were overtly political and the politics was of protest. What they did accomplish was to make clear to the public, the press, and to elected leaders that government would have to recognize the existence of their concerns.

Interestingly, the brief period of participatory democracy brought out some optimistic ideals. Expressions like "peace and love" come across as a bit hackneyed -- they did then, too -- but there was a more serious undercurrent to the rhetorical excess, a deeper message that spoke of a fairer democracy with less racial injustice and gender bias, and less impulsiveness about jumping into foreign wars. Just like today, there was an undercurrent that spoke of the undue influence of money in our politics and government.

Compare that one-time system of wide open discussion to most of our present day neighborhood

councils, and the contrast becomes clear. The current system is less participatory, and approaches being stultifying.



CITYWATCH

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Let's start at the top. I'd like to open a multipart discussion by commenting on how our neighborhood council presidents so often are inept in serving the democratic process. In order to develop this thought, I'd like to offer four points of leadership. The first pair are characteristics that presidents should have. The second pair are duties that competent presidents should fulfill.

The characteristics:

Over the years, I've watched lots of panel chairs and council presidents in action, and out of that experience, I've noticed these two characteristics of effective presidents:

- 1) The president enjoys the idea of politics and the political process.
- 2) The president believes in democracy and upholds a fair and honest democratic process.

A word on these points: Politics, as I've said so often, is the way we make decisions without killing each other. It's necessarily a messy process, because it deals in disagreements that can be serious. But short of mass hypnosis or fascism, it's the only thing we have. If you hate the idea of working through compromises, then you don't belong in the president's chair. People who insist on having their way all the time, and winning every argument, don't fit into the democratic process all that well. That's because in order to win all the time, such people become dictators rather than leaders. There is a huge difference, and it is defined by point 2.

Point 2, that the person holding the gavel should believe in democracy, is the difference between the tyrant who loses grudgingly once in a while and the spirited leader who is dedicated to helping the community find its voice, whatever that voice may be. I paraphrase this idea with my advice to the person holding the gavel -- if you would like the group to do something your way, *always ask, never tell*. Inviting the group to make a decision brings them into the process and makes you trustworthy as the leader of the discussion. That's very different from the president unilaterally telling the participants, "We have a long agenda, and I'm going to limit your speaking time to one minute each." That approach isn't very different from telling the board and the public that they are second and third class citizens, respectively.

The duties:

When you read *Roberts' Rules of Order* carefully, you will absorb a couple of important messages about leadership:

3) The first duty of the chair or president is to protect the rights of all participants. Friends and opponents alike have rights, and they all have to be treated as equals. ([/index.php](#))

4) Given the assertion of point 3, the president or chair is to help the meeting to move along efficiently. This includes helping fellow participants frame their motions and helping participants understand how to approach any given question. "I believe that you are attempting to move to postpone to a later time rather than to table the resolution. If that is the case, we can entertain that as a motion."

What the president should never be is a dictator. The president is, at best, first among equals. The president exists to expedite democracy, not to throttle it.

This does not mean that presidents shouldn't have ideas. It is perfectly fine to champion grand notions, but you have to recognize when your idea doesn't have the votes.

Unfortunately, we don't have enough truly capable chairs and presidents to go around. The result is that board members and the public are frustrated. Tempers flare because people feel that they are not being heard and not being respected.

The other problem is that we present boring programs.

In a fairly typical neighborhood council that is near my own, the meeting starts promptly at 6:30 pm with official activities which include the reading of the minutes (including a tedious and, might I say, irrelevant argument over some triviality) followed by communications from representatives of the local elected officials, committee reports, and a few more arguments among members of the board.

Only then does the elected board allow for some comment, however slight, from the public. In this neighborhood council, the first public comment period is limited to 8 speakers at 2 minutes per speaker, for a total of 16 minutes. (I didn't make this up.) Only much later in the meeting are other members of the public invited to speak.

When you think about it, this system personifies the authoritarian tone that neighborhood councils were supposed to get rid of. Instead of a wide open public process that we once enjoyed in those participatory democracy sessions, the room is rigidly divided between the privileged -- board members -- and the peasantry, which is the rest of us.

The items up for discussion are limited. Mostly they consist of reports and suggested policy statements brought by subcommittees. And those subcommittees are run by members of the board. It's all a self-aggrandizing system.

The frustrating tenor of these meetings is explainable by the way we choose and train our leaders. Whether he be called the Chair or the President, the typical neighborhood council leader understands little about the purpose of the neighborhood council, and worse yet, fails to achieve anything approaching that original purpose.

If you look at the city's Charter amendment that produced the neighborhood council system, you will find an optimistic, almost utopian sensibility. Admittedly the wording is naive and contradictory, but the direct appeal to diversity, openness, and democracy through participation are there. It's still possible to approach that ideal, but we would have to decide to do so.

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-CW


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Ennnne • 13 hours ago

"The items up for discussion are limited. Mostly they consist of reports and suggested policy statements brought by subcommittees. And those subcommittees are run by members of the board. It's all a self-aggrandizing system."

What exactly are you suggesting should be done differently? Your article does not in any way correspond to my experiences with my NC. For the record, I abhor going to pointless meetings and would not attend any meeting run as a "participatory democracy," which from this article I gather means, a meeting without an agenda and without any point. If I wanted to be an anarchist, I'd just become one and I wouldn't need an NC to do it, now would I?

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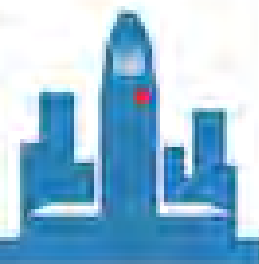
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