

**University of Southern California  
Civic Engagement Initiative  
Collaborative Learning Project (CLP)**

***Purpose and Activity***

***Preamble***

Neighborhood councils and other similar bodies are developing in multiple cities around the nation and world. The purpose and activities of the Collaborative Learning Project (CLP) at the University of Southern California, as detailed in the body of this document, are oriented towards the achievement of two goals. First, we seek to contribute to the scholarly and practitioner literature on neighborhood governance around the nation and world. Second, we aim to inform and ultimately improve the neighborhood council system in the City of Los Angeles and similar systems elsewhere. Our particular focus is on the relationships between City agencies and neighborhood councils. We will accomplish these objectives in part through the expeditious and wide distribution of our findings to neighborhood councils, city officials, and other audiences interested in our work.

**The CLP, Neighborhood Councils, and MOUs**

Since the creation of neighborhood councils in Los Angeles, there have been numerous examples of councils working with or trying to work with city agencies to accomplish some objective for the neighborhood or city. Three such efforts of which we are aware have resulted in a Memorandum of understanding (MOU) between a city department and neighborhood councils. Two MOUs have been agreed to on a neighborhood level, by a subset of neighborhood councils. The first is between the Department of Public Works and four South Valley councils; the second, possibly on the verge of being finalized, is between the Department of Cultural Affairs and San Pedro area councils. The third MOU was agreed to on a citywide level with the Department of Water and Power. The two neighborhood-level MOUs are a result of a research program instituted by researchers with the CLP at the University of Southern California. This is part of our ongoing research project, which seeks to better understand and improve relationships between city agencies and neighborhood councils. The relationships we are facilitating focus on neighborhood-level issues and offer the opportunity for both agencies and neighborhood councils to learn from each other, develop trust, and work towards the betterment of neighborhoods and enhanced responsiveness of city agencies.

**Our perspective on MOUs**

We feel that MOUs of various forms--neighborhood-specific, areawide, and citywide--are needed depending on the service or service delivery issue. Each has a unique value and can contribute uniquely to the betterment of neighborhoods and the development of the neighborhood council system. The CLP was the first to initiate a process of developing an MOU between neighborhood councils and a City department with our completion of a written agreement between four neighborhood councils in the San Fernando Valley and the Department of Public Works, a process that began in September of 2003 and was signed on February 21, 2004. We did so in a manner that is completely consistent with the trend throughout the country, and indeed, throughout the world, of

attempting to disaggregate the way public services are delivered to specific groups of residents in order to be more responsive to the particular needs and preferences of diverse societies. This is a departure from the emphasis during the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on delivering the same services in the same way to everyone. During the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries that standardized approach had become increasingly problematic for increasingly diverse populations. The neighborhood-level MOU is also consistent with the foundation of the neighborhood council system in the City of Los Angeles. As the Charter, the ordinance, and the neighborhood council plan were being developed, people across the City resisted what were referred to as “cookie cutter” approaches to the structuring and functioning of neighborhood councils. The assumption behind this resistance to standardization was that Los Angeles is too diverse for single standard solutions for a lot of concerns we all share. However, that does not mean that *some* services might better be standardized. For example, it seems quite reasonable that we would want everyone in a service delivery area to have the same quality of water available to everyone, or the same rates charged for that water (unless there is sound justification for charging people different rates).

### **Our Process as Compared to Citywide MOU Processes**

The Collaborative Learning Project’s Learning and Design forums are systematically conducted over a period of three Saturday mornings with a trained facilitator who assigns homework and committee work in between. They are designed to create a process of deliberating toward the cultivation of collaborative relationships between neighborhood council leaders and department personnel at several levels of operation. The citywide process with the Department of Water and Power has been largely reactive (to undesirable developments such as the water rate hike taken without proper notification) and focused mainly on achieving a written MOU. These are different approaches for different situations and different service problems. However, it is important to recognize that our process can create the conditions for facilitating a citywide process that attempts to meet the needs of diverse areas. Our first MOU with the Department of Public Works was with four neighborhood councils and led to the development of annual service plans for those councils. The Bureau of Street Services within the department subsequently found that mechanism to be applicable citywide since infrastructure assessments could be developed for each different neighborhood council area without imposing some standard “cookie cutter” solution.

### **Our Open and Public Process**

We began our work on the first MOU by holding a session at the Congress to explain our intentions and invite participation. In our current project the process has involved conversations with a large number of neighborhood councils across the City. Since we are conducting research in order to develop effective techniques for achieving collaborative agreements between neighborhood councils and City departments, we establish selection criteria for each stage of our work and arrive at a final choice of participants based on those criteria. If we are to identify methods that may be useful to all of the Los Angeles neighborhood councils, it will be necessary to proceed in this systematic fashion.

The Collaborative Learning Project (CLP) is currently working on another process with 4 neighborhood councils. Beginning in mid-July 2005, we contacted nineteen neighborhood councils across the City from all planning areas. In each planning area we contacted at least two neighborhood councils based on possible issues of interest in the area and expanded our search to three or four neighborhood councils in areas from which we typically receive less participation: East, North Valley, and Central planning areas. We not only wanted to draw from all areas of the City, but we wanted to include communities with a demographic profile that suggested racial, ethnic, and economic diversity. For selected neighborhood council representatives who did not respond to an initial email query, we followed up with a second email and ultimately a phone call before sending a query to a second identified representative. Ten neighborhood councils did not respond to our emails or return our phone calls. We received responses from nine representatives from all seven planning areas. Subsequently, we conducted telephone interviews with them or their suggested contact at the neighborhood council. We asked, "Can you describe any significant issues facing your neighborhood council area that you feel may have a bearing on a particular City department?" and also, "Has your neighborhood council had, or does it currently have, a working relationship with that or any City department?" We examined agendas and minutes that were available online to get an idea of relevant issues across councils. Most importantly, we asked, "Do you believe that your fellow board members will take an interest in a dialog with a City department to address issues of interest to your neighborhood council area?" All nine respondents indicated that they believed that their board would take an interest. We chose four neighborhood councils based on issues identified as important within their council area. We looked for issues that suggested a subset of the nine responding neighborhood councils. In an initial meeting with these councils, participants discussed the Department of Recreation and Parks but ultimately selected the Department of Transportation. Participants also suggested relevant other departments, including Planning, that enjoy a policy linkage with Transportation. It is not our intention to engage the Department of Planning in an MOU process, but we may call upon them to participate with technical input at key points in our work. Overall, our selection of neighborhood councils and City departments has emerged out of widespread interaction with neighborhood councils across the City based on our research concerns and criteria.

### **Our View of Neighborhood Council Autonomy**

It is our understanding of the neighborhood councils in Los Angeles, from having been involved in their emergence since 1996, that each council has the right to make its own decisions about what it will do within the boundaries of its own bylaws and City regulations and ordinances. We have been willing to work with neighborhood councils only after they have identified a city department, and their boards have approved participation and designated representatives to participate in our Learning and Design Forum process. While we believe collaboration among councils is essential to achieve real power (especially as they are advisory in nature), we also believe individual councils have the right to decide with whom they will collaborate and for what purpose.

4

The result of the Collaborative Learning Project's current process may be an MOU or similar agreement, if participants feel this is the optimal outcome of the process. Any lessons we learn from our processes, we will share through published reports and articles which will be made available on our website (<http://www.usc.edu/sppd/cei>). In the end, we are all learning together what works, how, and under what conditions in order to achieve better neighborhoods for all residents and a better city for all neighborhoods.

Citywide or Neighborhood MOUs: The Dialogue Continues

At least two Neighborhood Council MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) projects are currently underway in Los Angeles. One is under the auspices of the USC Collaborative Learning Project which intends to gather the LA Department of Transportation and four NCs together to see if there is a need and/or desire for some kind of MOU or agreement. This is being called a “neighborhood-level” MOU. Another effort involves a group of Neighborhood Councils hoping to craft an MOU, similar to the NC/DWP MOU, with the City’s Planning Department. This is referred to as a “citywide” MOU. There are differences of opinion about NC MOUs with city departments. About their value. About the process for their creation. This is the second of a two-part series on this subject.

USC CLP Responds

USC System is Open; Aims for Trust, Responsiveness

By Thomas Bryer

The Collaborative Learning Project (CLP) uses an open process to select neighborhood councils to participate in collaboration with a city agency to develop trust and enhance responsiveness. Results are still being realized. For instance, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Department of Public Works (DPW) and four South Valley Neighborhood

Councils instituted the process of the department providing to each of the four councils an Annual Service Plan (ASP), comprised of neighborhood-specific information from each of the bureaus of the department. Since this time, the Bureau of Street Services has taken its piece of the ASP and replicated it citywide. Under the leadership of Bill Robertson, the bureau is engaging in conversation with any neighborhood council that expresses an interest.

Mr. Jacobberger observes that the MOU with DPW has not been expanded beyond the four councils that signed it. It is not the intention of the CLP process to generate an agreement based on collaboration with a subset of councils that would be automatically applicable to all other councils. If other councils wish to forge an agreement with DPW, the Department of Cultural Affairs, or any other agency, those councils need to take the initiative, as several have demonstrated already.

Finally, Mr. Jacobberger suggested that the process we facilitate is not open to anybody who wishes to participate. In an open process, we solicit neighborhood councils to join a collaborative undertaking, but we ultimately choose a subset of neighborhood councils to participate. We do this because we recognize that every neighborhood will have a unique set of issues to bring to the table, and the resolution of such issues might require a specialized rather than citywide response. As Mr. Jacobberger observed, if the agreement that results from the CLP process does not meet the interests of his or any other neighborhood council, the neighborhood council will just demand something different. That is exactly right.

On behalf of my fellow researchers on the Collaborative Learning Project, we invite you to visit our website: <http://www.usc.edu/sppd/npp/>.

Perspective-USC & MOUs

The Problem: Researchers Become the Researched

By Ken Draper

The problem I have with the USC Collaborative Learning Project's efforts to create MOU's between Neighborhood Councils and City departments ... local or citywide ... is that it makes the researcher and the researched one and the same. It puts USC in a position where decisions made by them can actually alter ... in some cases it could be argued, negatively ... the success of the process they are researching.

The folks at USC, under the most capable direction of Doctors Cooper, Musso and Weare, have been involved with civic engagement and Neighborhood Councils since long before the Charter mandated councils for LA. I respect their experience, skills and good intentions. But, on the subject of MOUs, I disagree with them on three issues: 1) Altering the process they are researching; 2) Their obligations ... such as good and honest communication ... to NCs as a body whole; and, 3) Their interpretation of MOU success.

Some of my conclusions are probably colored by what is perhaps a misunderstanding. I have always viewed the Neighborhood Participation Project, and its various mutations, as a research effort. Their goals, as posted on their website ... to paraphrase ... are three fold: To document and analyze the implementation of the LA NC system, to analyze the Early Notification System's affect on NC and City communications and disseminate findings on NC best practices. No mention of becoming a part of the subject process here.

See Page 7. "Perspective"

Cont from previous column

There you will find a Statement of Purpose and Activity of the project. This statement outlines our views of the neighborhood council system, the open process we use to solicit participants in the process, and our objectives in facilitating these processes. (Thomas Bryer is with the USC Neighborhood Participation Project and the Collaborative Learning Project. He can be reached at: [bryer@usc.edu](mailto:bryer@usc.edu) or 213.740.0202. You can also visit the NPP website at: [www.usc.edu/sppd/npp](http://www.usc.edu/sppd/npp).) ■

As more and more neighborhoods take up this issue, it might very well come to the forefront citywide. According to Sharon Mayer of the LA Planning Department, the department has had some preliminary discussions about a city-wide anti-massing ordinance, but has no firm plans to move forward at the present time. Stay tuned. (Jeff Jacobberger is an attorney and member of Mid City WEST Community Council Board. He was the principal drafter of the NC/DWP MOU and is an occasional contributor to CityWatch. He is currently engaged in an analysis of the mansionization issue.) ■

We know you will keep that in mind whenever you are in need of their services or products.

... Say thank you.

Make Contact!

To Reach CityWatch

Email

[Editor@CityWatchLA.com](mailto:Editor@CityWatchLA.com)

Download/Read

[www.lancissues.org](http://www.lancissues.org)

Call

323.937.0504

City

Hall:  
We've  
Gotcha  
Covered !!  
Make  
Sure  
You're  
on  
the  
City  
Watch  
Network

Send your name and e-address to:  
Editor@CityWatchLA.com

Volume 3 Issue 14 October 13, 2005 Page 7

Perspective-From Page 3.

Even in the Collaborative Learning Project posting, spelling out its purpose, "...we aim to inform and ultimately improve the neighborhood council system ...in LA ..." there is no indication that they mean to insert themselves into the process in a way that could actually change its dynamic.

But back to my issues: Affecting the outcome, communication and determining success.

#### Impact on Councils

It is simply not possible for USC to decide to facilitate an agreement between some Councils and a city department ... local or citywide ... and not have it affect the NC system as a whole. The success or failure of the project impacts all Neighborhood Councils. As with the Public Works MOU, it can create divisiveness, both among the involved Councils themselves and among the participants and the have-nots.

It sets precedent ... good and bad ... that affects the way other Councils, or groups of Councils, approach and negotiate with any department that has already participated in an MOU.

#### Involved in the Outcome

In short, USC becomes involved in the success or failure of the LA NC system that it is researching. And then, attempts to objectively analyze a project and a system on which it has had ... perhaps a negative ... impact.

Which leads us to the matter of interpreting success. CLP has facilitated two MOUs to date. One with four Valley NCs and the Department of Public Works and one with the Cultural Affairs Department and the Central San Pedro Neighborhood Council.

#### Area Level MOU

The NC/DPW MOU is called, by USC, an area-level MOU. However, the one page agreement itself, which was signed in January, 2004, deals with notification, education, policy and delivery of services. Hardly local or area only issues.

I was told emphatically, by one of the major crafters of the document, that once the kinks had been worked out, the results of their work would be rolled out to all other NCs across the city at the projected rate of two per month. That was never done. In fact, other Neighborhood Councils got zero information on this project. And, the claim by USC, that

this pilot MOU was a success because the Bureau of Street Services has replicated citywide, some portion of the Annual Service Plan for the benefit of NCs, is an incredible stretch in an attempt to make a failure appear to be a success.

And, the claim that the Bureau of Streets is “engaging in conversation with any Neighborhood Council that expresses an interest” would hold more weight if NCs knew that the information was available. Speaking of research, I submit that a check of Councils would tell us that most don’t know what an ASP is, that most don’t know how to retrieve it and that most didn’t even know it was available.

The Cultural Affairs MOU never got off of the ground. Last I checked the Council and the Department are not talking. And, the project alienated at least one sister San Pedro NC because they could not be included in the process. I take issue with calling these successes. And their failure impacts the participating Councils and the entire citywide NC system.

Early on, in the LA NC process, experts were warning that there is very little, if anything, more important to Councils than communication. To the stakeholders. To the City. To each other. NPP and CLP projects are hatched and facilitated by USC with little or no communication with citywide NCs. The current effort to help create a DOT agreement is a case in point. There was no general announcement to NCs. They were left to find out about the project through the inevitable NC grapevine, absent the rationale and the facts.

There was no information, provided by USC, on the progress ... or lack thereof ... on the DPW MOU. They have told me that that’s the responsibility of the NC participants. I contend that if USC is going to inject itself into the NC system, in a way that affects outcome, they have a communications responsibility. Perhaps, the primary responsibility for getting info to Councils. Letting all of the Neighborhood Councils know the basis and purpose of the project, how it will affect them, when/if they will be involved, would go a long way toward diminishing some of the animosity that results from being ignored and/or left out of the project. In addition, and equally important, it demonstrates some respect for Neighborhood Councils that make the system tick ... and, provide USC with a subject for their work.

I don’t think it’s about area-level vs. citywide MOUs. It’s about researchers intruding in the process they are analyzing, respect and communications and objective determination of what is successful and what is not. ■