

GuestWords - Neighborhood Councils have Grown Up!



By Daniel N. Shrader



In response to Jeff Jacobberger's recent opinion entitled "The View from Here - Advice to NCs: Grow Up," (CityWatch-October 5) I hope concerned citizens will give consideration to a different activist's view.

Jacobberger argues that now is not the time for the Neighborhood Council Department of Water and Power Oversight Committee (DWP OSC) activists to oppose the Department of Water and Power's most recent rate hike. DWP OSC should be seen but not heard because the City is in dire fiscal straits. Specifically, the Mayor's budget forecasts a deficit in excess of \$200 million, the telephone tax amounting to \$270 million may be struck down by the courts or not supported by the voters, and the DWP OSC is asking that the \$200 million transfer to city coffers be stopped... Pardon me but, who is being childish? As much as the Mayor, the Council, and the Board of Water and Power Commissioners would like you to think otherwise, we can not spend ourselves out of the fiscal deficit we are in.

Contrary to Jacobberger's view, it seems it is City officials who are acting childishly - siphoning questionable money streams to feed visions of green grandeur. It seems the Neighborhood Councils have grown up. They are making cost-effective recommendations in light of real priorities and limited resources. The citizens of Los Angeles are repeatedly suffering outages and seeing first hand that the infrastructure is not what it is purported to be. The politician's shell game of "selling what is hot and delivering what is not," is wearing thin. If the DWP is going to fix the infrastructure, let's establish where we are exactly, set goals and objectives, and accurately report on its costs and how long it took to accomplish them. Once we have legitimately established a level of affordable prioritized cost-effective performance, then, and only then, can we consider politically lucrative green contracts. What good is green power generation without a sound infrastructure to deliver it, anyway?

Jacobberger asserts the three most important city services are Police, Fire, and Sanitation. He claims these departments take up \$2 billion of the \$3.4 billion allotted for all budgetary departments. Jacobberger contends that cutting these \$670 million questionable money streams (\$200M from the DWP, \$270M from the Telephone Tax, and \$200M from deficit spending) would mean a cut in funding for other City services such as: street paving, lighting, transportation, planning, and housing. If Jacobberger stopped and really considered his position, he would find that he is advocating a Mayor's folly - that we overlook cost-ineffective performance, spend irresponsibly, and surcharge one critical city service to pay for another.



Neither the Neighborhood Council nor the DWP OSC wants to cut city services. It is the DWP OSC's position that the citizens are best served if they know how much things cost - free from political obfuscations and surcharges. Citizen's and businesses alike want to budget and anticipate future needs and they can't do that if the city is conducting a shell game.

Jacobberger suggests that in better economic times the Mayor and City Council would be more receptive to curtailing the DWP transfers and surcharges. He asks the DWP OSC rhetorically, "Do they think that City Council members who made those kinds of cuts would have a prayer of getting reelected? Don't be too long in denial my friends. More and more citizens are finding Neighborhood Councils, writing in weblogs, and pursuing independent advocates to ensure proper citizen representation and government accountability.

Many employers who bring about sustainable "better economic times" have been driven out of Los Angeles as

a result of the city management here. According to the Kosmont-Rose Institute "Cost of Doing Business Survey" released in July of 2006, Los Angeles has the ninth highest business license tax aggregate index (versus the tenth highest in 2005) among the 398 cities tallied. Los Angeles' business license taxes are 7.4 times higher than the Survey's national average of the 302 communities that have business taxes. No matter how effective the political shell game, we are going in the wrong direction and eventually, like the housing market, we very well may have overtaxed our local economy and it may be too expensive for the few that remain.

Most would agree with Jacobberger in as far as "part of being grown up is doing the things you have to do, not just the things you want to do." But the conclusions and characterizations of NC's being wise-cracking sarcastic teenagers at the Thanksgiving table are absurd. The DWP OSC position simply recognizes the fact that the competition-based wage increases justified for linemen were incorrectly attributed toward increasing the wages of all DWP classifications.

In the early 1900's, civil service was developed to ensure steady service and put an end to the spoils system. Civil service was never meant to: cause wage disparity among city workers, compete with private industry, or drive wages higher. It seems civil service has been undermined and we are again succumbing to the effects of political patronage. Moreover, and outside of the scope of Jacobberger's article, the recent negotiated increase in wages across the rest of the city was triggered and fueled by the inequity caused by DWP/City management inability to act prudently in the citizens' best interests. All they needed to do then, and what is needed now, is to politely but resolutely say "No." - like responsible parents who care.

From my point of view, the Neighborhood Councils have indeed grown up. The DWP OSC members have studied a broadly-held citizen concern, articulated a straightforward position, and are acting quite responsibly. Support them, thank them, and join them in their prudent, straight-forward, fiscally-responsible efforts. (Daniel N. Shrader is a Los Angeles stakeholder and a candidate for the Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council board.) _

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