

September 18, 2007

The Honorable Mayor and City Council
200 E. Santa Clara Street
San Jose, CA 95113

RE: PROPOSED NEIGHBORHOODS COMMISSION

AGENDA ITEM: CITY COUNCIL: SEPTEMBER 25, 2007.

Dear Mayor and City Council:

RECOMMENDATION: At its September 13, 2007, regular meeting, the Housing and Community Development Advisory Commission (HCDC) expressed the following concerns about the proposed neighborhoods commission:

1. The proposed Neighborhoods Commission appears to be a solution in search of a problem. Neighborhood issues, by their very nature, are usually particular to their localities rather than general; they reflect the social, land-use, transportation and infrastructural peculiarities of disparate places within the city, and as such, are unlikely to be amenable to one-size-fits-all solutions that sit comfortably under the rubric of "neighborhood policy."
2. The proposed Neighborhoods Commission appears redundant. Neighborhood problems are well addressed by existing commissions, the city council, and city departments; in addition, neighborhood associations provide an effective means for mobilizing residents to advocate for locality-level solutions. It is not clear how the collective voice of citizens as expressed through elections, stakeholder advocacy, neighborhood association interactions with city council members and departments, and participation in city council and commission meetings differs from "the voice of neighborhoods" invoked by the proposal as a special category of the citizenry.
3. The Neighborhoods Commission structure embodies conflicting governance impulses. While commissioners will be selected by City Council district in order to ensure equal representation of localities, the scope of their work is explicitly city-wide rather than local. Given the sometimes narrow or limited focus of neighborhood organizations, it is not clear that commission deliberations would truly have the universalist flavor of the proposal; the hazard is that the commission - carrying within its members the political pressure to deliver for constituents - would become a forum for pursuit of more local interests, including competition for scarce city resources.

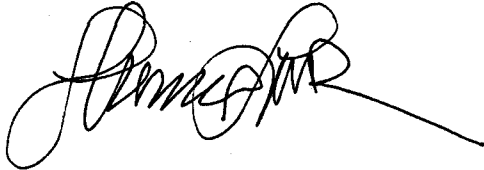
4. The Neighborhoods Commission might become a platform for organizing opposition to the city's affordable housing dispersal policy. Some neighborhoods do not want affordable housing, and to the extent that the proposed commission had a majority expression of such an exclusionary will, we would be faced with yet another obstacle to providing the safe, healthy, affordable housing for residents of all income levels that has become such an important part of San Jose's vision.
5. The Neighborhoods Commission composition might not be representative of the neighborhood groups. The commission is to be composed of three members from each city council district, who are self-selected by the neighborhood groups in the district, for a total of thirty commissioners. However, some districts have more neighborhood groups than others and within a district, some neighborhood groups might be stronger than others. While the self-selection process seeks to ensure equal representation, it is not clear that all neighborhoods groups would be truly represented.

BACKGROUND: In January 2002, the Strong Neighborhoods Initiative (SNI) Project Area Committee was established to serve as an advisory body for the Strong Neighborhoods Initiative process. In 2005, the Council voted to establish the Strong Neighborhoods Initiative Project Advisory Committee (PAC) to continue providing input to the Council and staff on policy and issues of interest to SNI neighborhoods. The proposed Neighborhoods Commission is intended to allow for this formal communication to continue.

While the SNI PAC focused on issues concerning SNI neighborhoods, the Neighborhoods Commission seeks to expand its boundaries city-wide to support all San José neighborhoods. The intent is to assure that the views of all neighborhoods are considered on issues related to community quality of life.

Advocates for the establishment of a Neighborhood Commission have appeared on February 8, April 12, and September 13, 2007 before the Housing and Community Development Advisory Commission providing updates and seeking support. The HCDC clearly recognized that the Strong Neighborhoods Initiative Project Advisory Committee generated a great deal of enthusiasm for civic engagement among its participants. And while our Commission supports participatory democracy and community involvement, it is not clear that a Neighborhoods Commission is necessarily the best way to bring them about. Thank you for considering our serious reservations about this matter.

Sincerely,



Tom Fink
Housing & Community Development Advisory Commission, Chair