

Topic: Planning MOU Process 4th meeting

Date/Location: 11/18/05 at Braude Center

Participants: Robert and Jacque Lamishaw, Ken Draper, Brady Westwater, Rusty Millar, and Gurdon Miller and Jon Perica of LA City Department of City Planning (for informal guidance).

Observer: Mark Elliot

This meeting is the fourth in the creation of a memorandum of understanding between Los Angeles neighborhood councils and the Department of City Planning. As of this meeting, more than 20 representatives had indicated interest in attending, and the meeting continues the review of the draft MOU language (beginning at section 5.1) to finalize it before presentation to all invited NC land use committee chairs and NC representatives at the larger meeting on December 3rd. The Dec. 3rd meeting was discussed as providing a “rough framework,” or a set of “talking points,” or a process overview that participants would then take home to mull over and provide feedback.

The major themes touched on here were balance of obligations between the Planning department and the NCs that could be articulated in the MOU; a need for greater education of NCs if they are to participate as advisory bodies, especially given their varying capacity at present; and process issues. At the center of the discussion and refinement of language was exactly what the department and NCs should be obligated to do, while recognizing the practical concerns of each party. Robert suggested that it be presented to NC people on Dec. 3rd as “What Planning had to do for us,” while then subsequently talking about “What NCs have to do.”

NC capacity was a primary concern. Rusty noted that his engaged land use and planning committee was fairly focused, and that each participant brought to the table a set of skills – including architecture and real estate experience, as well as political skills and persistence to achieve an outcome. But if other NCs may not have resources available, or the skills necessary to participate, how can they participate effectively? Robert Lamishaw identified the opportunity open to NCs as advisory bodies as “tweaking a case” to achieve a better result. But Robert said that NCs haven’t been good about getting back to applicants. Brady said that his committee gets so many applicants – “10 or 12 come to us weekly” – but they may not need to see applicants over small things. Brady instead asked what the task force could do to assist NCs “Say, ‘Here’s how we can help you deal with an unbelievable quagmire...’”

Robert said, “We need to establish a framework – and expectation of what the MOU is, then when they understand, what can be done. I doesn’t affect code; it doesn’t hand off power to NCs; it’s a way of dealing [with the department] within a framework.” Training was a central issue, yet mandating training for 87 NCs to give them “a base level of knowledge and training” in planning could be more than the department could provide. It was agreed that it would be up to NCs to come to a consensus on the training issue in the next sessions.

NC obligations came down to whether they would take a position, and, if not, what that meant for the ZA and decision-makers. Without rewriting the code, Robert said, what's needed is a consistent format for replies, but suggested that establishing procedures and timeframes for NC action is tricky given NCs' bylaws. "As soon as they know," Murph said. "As soon as is practical." Robert suggested establishing a suggested policy to deal with these cases, but stressed that the NC gives the applicant an "opportunity to present a case." Ken suggested setting up some general conditions, rather than performance standards for NCs. Brady suggested instead to have "discussion points" to move the Dec. 3rd conversation along.

It was decided to include a cover letter; a 1-page goals statement; and more detail. Politically, however, it was acknowledged that support from decision-makers would be crucial. "Approach it through the PLUM," Robert said. "Then the commission and the Mayor's office to establish the political will to encourage Planning to participate." There was a discussion over outreach – and how to reach NCs in communities of color. Brady suggested a special effort to get them to the table on Dec. 3rd. "They need to say, 'We need to be there.'"