

Neighborhood Governance and Community Development  
DRAFT February 4, 2006

**Community Engagement in Planning and Development:  
Neighborhood Councils in Los Angeles**

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper presents preliminary evidence of the manner in which neighborhood councils in Los Angeles are engaging in land use and planning. Charter reform in 1999 in Los Angeles authorized creation of a system of neighborhood councils charged with increasing participation in city governance and making local government more responsive to community concerns. Neighborhood councils were intended to place community members in a position to *act* rather than merely *react* to policies and decisions handed down from City Hall – what scholars of political engagement describe as *doing* politics, rather than merely being attentive to politics.<sup>1</sup> While NCs were endowed with advisory capacity only, the charter created several channels to facilitate their provision of input on city policy formation and administration:

- Provision that neighborhood councils would have an opportunity to provide budget input to the Mayor to be considered in development of the annual budget;
- Development of an early notification system to inform community members of matters before the city council and its boards and commissions; and
- Requirement that neighborhood councils monitor service delivery and meet regularly with departmental officials.

As implemented in Los Angeles, improved notification provides communities with a wealth of information upon which they may act; at the same time, community impact statements provide neighborhoods with a means of providing direct input with regard to changes in city policy. For the community, this represents an opportunity to move beyond reactionary opposition and instead engage constructively in matters of policy. Thus neighborhood councils are a new forum for representation and stakeholder input at the grassroots.

There exists perhaps no area of neighborhood council activity that reflects the evolving nature of the neighborhood council system as does local land use decision-making and development policy. Land use has been described as a contact sport in Los Angeles where control over significant projects is vested in elected decision-makers. Given the ‘hot-button’ nature of local land use decision making, authority concerning land use was considered but not granted to neighborhood councils in the new City Charter. There have been abiding concerns expressed by neighborhood council critics that NCs will function as obstacles to development and impede the placement of socially necessary uses such as schools or social service facilities. Many of these concerns reflect a more general focus in the planning literature regarding the extent to which neighborhood associations largely function to express NIMBY-type opposition in which individual interest is elevated above community interest.

This paper argues that the term NIMBY is outmoded given the wide array of motivations that can underlie stakeholder opposition to development proposals. Priorities regarding design, density, or land use can serve as a basis for project review that may actually reduce the costs of development for developers – and produce a more satisfactory outcome for the community. If field observations in neighborhoods across the City are

any indication, the discussion is already proceeding at the grassroots level, where neighborhood council stakeholders appear to be increasingly sophisticated about the tools and language of discretionary land use processes and planning policy. The pathway to achieving citywide consensus regarding larger planning issues is not entirely clear, however; priorities and values concerning the “highest and best” uses of the land, as planners say, vary from community to community and reflect the variety of circumstances as exist on the ground.

Generalizing is difficult, moreover, as approaches to land use by neighborhood councils and their volunteers vary with disparities in neighborhood affluence, character, and history. In addition, particular issues may vary from community to community to include concerns regarding height or density, specific industrial uses in prohibited zones, houses of worship in residential neighborhoods, and even variances for fence heights. Despite variation across councils with regard to capacity and local circumstance, evidence suggests a dynamic landscape of neighborhood council boards and committees within which community volunteers are self-organizing and self-educating with regard to land use and planning issues.

## **PARTICIPATION IN LAND USE: BEYOND NIMBY**

The enactment of charter reform to create a citywide system of neighborhood councils spoke to the tension emergent between a large and difficult-to-govern city of neighborhoods spreading across approximately 460 square miles, and the need to centralize governmental functions in and around City Hall. Against this background, a bid for secession by the San Fernando Valley, Hollywood, and the Harbor communities of San Pedro and Wilmington, from Los Angeles came to a boil the late 1990s. The new Charter enacted within this political environment devolved authority over sub-threshold land use decision-making to a newly formed system of seven area planning commissions (APCs) composed of appointed local officials. In addition, the charter created a new neighborhood council system based on successful systems in other cities, wherein some aspects of governance were decentralized to local communities without significant changes to existing formal-legal relationships or increases in the number of local political units (Box and Musso, 2004).

Currently 88 neighborhood councils have been certified by the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners; 87 have seated elected boards, which are composed of representatives from the neighborhood council area and, according to the council’s bylaws, may be elected at large and/or represent geographic areas or particular stakeholder categories. Despite their advisory character, there has remained concern that neighborhood councils might amplify “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) opposition – perhaps delaying development and/or inhibiting the achievement of socially desirable objectives. Community opposition, for example, is identified as a significant obstacle to achieving equitable outcomes at the local level, where community opposition has been successful in preventing the placement of needed community services (Dear, 1992). The NIMBY concern reflects the conventional wisdom that neighborhood groups such as homeowner

and residential associations are parochial and protectionist, with a dominant interest in protecting middle class privileges.

The negative perspective on the NIMBY movement is perhaps most vividly expressed by Mike Davis (1992), who posits that neighborhood associations have achieved a measure of success in the slow-growth movement despite unsupportable claims to represent the community and an inordinately parochial view of personal interests as paramount. Davis observes that Los Angeles homeowners associations are “dominated by cranky personalities, consorting in temporary coalitions and then, inevitably, remolecularizing around their own back yards” (210). Ferman (1996) also emphasizes the oppositional role of neighborhood organizations with respect to urban political regimes, though from a more sympathetic vantage. She argues that many city policy choices can be attributed to “the coalitional needs of the governing regime,” (4) an informal association of political and business elites whose coalescence is required to maintain state and corporate power in highly fragmented cities. Neighborhood associations in Ferman’s view work to place the perspective of neighborhood residents in opposition to downtown interests. The danger, as Ferman points out, is if neighborhood activists meld parochialism with an excessive focus on combating external threats, in which case they may ignore larger regional considerations and become “geographical islands of autonomy” (p. 14).

In contrast to this emphasis on the protectionist role of neighborhood associations, environmental case studies tend to reinforce the benefits of community involvement in the placement of sensitive facilities. Armour found that when the community is involved in the initial phase of siting a low-level radioactive (LLR) waste management facility, the process allowed for “more of an openness of learning about the problem and the process.” In the case of a high-level radioactive waste repository, Kraft and Clary similarly argue that “the nature and extent of participation” was a key factor for success.

There is no disputing that neighborhood-based organizations have transformed the local land use policy debate. Berry, Portney, and Thomson empirically studied the role of neighborhood associations in five cities – Birmingham, Dayton, Portland, San Antonio, and St. Paul – to question the role of citizen participation in the policy making processes. One of their findings is that major area that the neighborhood associations have impact is in land use (p. 63), although this influence is more powerful in small scale neighborhood developments. At the same time, neighborhood associations can be characterized as “multi-issue group” (p.169), and as such, their activities do not necessarily focus on land use on every occasion.

A potential merit of neighborhood associations is the “institutionalized role that the neighborhood associations play in transmitting the demands, preferences, and complaints of their constituents to various administrative agencies” (p.111). Especially, Berry et al. (1993) argue that through the planning processes neighborhood associations are influential over the agenda-building processes. For instance, in Portland, neighborhood associations are deeply involved in devising official neighborhood plan, which “specify what kind of development is acceptable in each area of the community” (p. 113).

Another benefit of neighborhood activism in land use conflicts can be not just in immediate change or success in opposing particular land uses but also in developing formal or informal rules or norms of participatory planning in a neighborhood. Martin conducted a case study of hospital expansion plan in Athens, GA and found that although the neighborhood associations activity did not impact greatly on the matter at hand but did influence subsequent hospital management processes (p. 607).

### *Alternative Views of the “NIMBY” Syndrome*

The terms, Not-In-My-Back-Yard (‘NIMBY’) and Locally-Undesirable-Land-Use (‘LULU’) are terms frequently used to describe the difficulty of placing facilities within a community where the proposed action engenders “oppositional behavior” among community members. While they are both concepts that place in relief the perceived tension between the self-interest of the local community and the public interest, NIMBY syndrome refers to the response to certain type of possible land-use plan. O’Looney (1995) observes that conceptually speaking, ‘NIMBY’ describes resistance to local land-use issues that are “experienced at the level of individual citizens and landowners,” while ‘LULU,’ “defines a broader area of the land-use field” (p.16). Other studies on the emergence of NIMBY behavior focus on particular triggers .

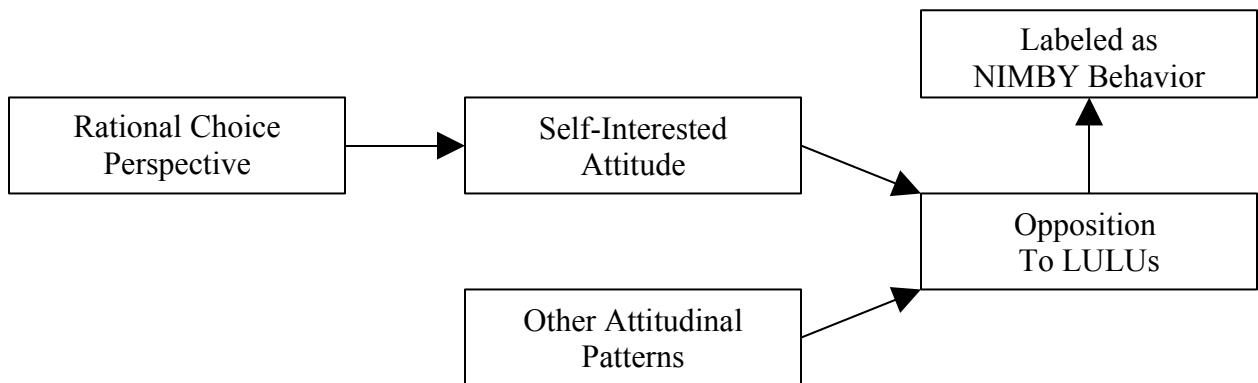
Where ‘NIMBY’ describes public opposition is different from more general opposition (Portney, 1990 p. 10), ‘LULU’ refers to a type of land use that would serve the overall region but have “specific and substantial negative spillover effects in the community where the facility or development is sited.” O’Looney (1995) points out hazardous waste dumps and prisons “are generally needed by the more encompassing political unit,” while a fast food restaurant, by contrast, makes an undesirable neighbor due to traffic and littering impacts but arguably does not fill a more encompassing social need. To be classified as a LULU, the proposed development should represent “strong non-local public need or private demand” wherein benefits broadly distributed, but where “most of the costs tend to be localized” (p. 16). Popper (1987) suggests that a LULU “always engenders a considerable, genuine local opposition” though opposition does not necessarily have to be a “majority” voice in its community

An important normative concern in considering land use opposition is the degree to which individual opposition to a facility places in opposition individual interests and social needs. For instance, hazardous waste facilities may serve the nation as a whole for treating high-level nuclear waste, but social and environmental costs are shifted to the local community, which consequently raises equity issues . From a rational choice perspective, the degree of protection for individual property rights becomes the critical issue because LULU opponents resist local impacts . Thus the crucial question raised by LULUs is the issue of property rights versus public good. “Should the right to private property, which in our political culture not only includes ownership but also the assumed right to realize a profit – the right to increasing property value – come before public good,” .

Another complexity is that to simplify community opposition as NIMBYism is to overlook the factors that underlie community opposition to a development. In addition to devaluation of property values, factors that incite opposition include a lack of confidence or trust in project or government administrators or even distrust of scientific claims. Information plays an important role in the mediation of land use conflicts. Leyden (1995) argues that we should differentiate oppositional behavior that is triggered by concern regarding health and safety risks, which should not be labeled as a NIMBY syndrome at all. Where limited information is provided about potential problems and/or attendant risks, local resistance is more likely. Health and safety issues and an emphasis on preserving aesthetic conditions prompt concern and engender public opposition.

Kraft and Clary (1991 p.304) conducted a content analysis of the public hearings in the East and Midwest on repository siting mandated by the Nuclear Waste Policy Act (NWPA) of 1982. Their findings suggest that the conventional conceptualization of NIMBY behavior as individually interested may not account for much of the expressed opposition to DOE's siting. As Mansbridge pointed out, there are a variety of attitudes that mitigate against NIMBY and LULU sentiment, including "fairness, sympathy, commitment, citizen duty, morality, and longstanding ideological beliefs".

**Figure 1 Various Perspectives on NIMBY Syndrome**



In Figure 1, attitudes *not* based on self-interest might trigger opposition to land uses characterized as 'LULU' but which may not in fact be so easily characterized. It may not be accurate to consider everything that appears to be 'NIMBY' or 'LULU' into one basket, though the rational choice perspective would argue that self-interest is the chief motivation – a perspective that may mischaracterize community opposition. For instance, Myers and Bridges distinguished three types of NIMBY-characterized protests and described them as follows:

- Type 1: Don't do it in my back yard but do it in someone else's;
- Type 2: Support the project in principle but oppose the specific site as not workable; and
- Type 3: Not-in-Anybody's-Backyard (NIABY)

The latter category could be characterized as opposition to a proposed project based on the feeling that the project is not in the public's "best interest," according to Myers and Bridges, which comports with Hunter & Leyden's argument that positive sentiment may indeed motivate individuals to act not necessarily in their own interest but with a community interest in mind.

The literature on the role of formal community councils (such as the Los Angeles system of neighborhood councils) in the planning process is limited, however. Berry, Portney, and Thomson provide a comparative analysis of five cities and find that rather than working in an obstructionist fashion, residents of cities with functioning neighborhood council systems tend to participate in more and express higher levels of both tolerance and political efficacy than residents in comparison cities. Neighborhood councils, they find, tend to reduce the conflict that arose between a vocal community and both the business community and City Hall (p.169). This paper seeks to further empirical understanding of the extent to which neighborhood council activities appear to encompass obstructionist or "NIMBYistic" activities.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Understanding how neighborhood councils participate in land use and planning is complicated by the very nature of the system: neighborhood councils are hybrid organizations that find their origin in grass roots organizing. Like many informal community organizations, neighborhood councils enjoy considerable autonomy. Yet they also must contend with municipal government constraints. Because the city Charter established the system, the City Attorney has ruled that neighborhood councils are entities of the city and as such subject to a variety of ethics rules including holding open public meetings and mandating financial disclosure by elected board members. As quasi-representative agencies, they must secure approval for significant changes to their operating procedures.

The relative autonomy that councils enjoy is in part a consequence of system design, but it is also a function a political environment that (for now) allows considerable space individual council experimentation. Reporting requirements are limited to quarterly budget statements, for example, and the timely collection of elected board members' names and contact information remains a work in progress. Thus tracking the interests, activities, and accomplishments of 88 currently certified neighborhood councils is a challenge, too, as not all councils have invested in websites; those that do may not view their website as a tool for stakeholder communication and may not update it frequently. Again, variation across councils is considerable.

Assessing the system then poses challenges. We undertake a variety of methods, both quantitative and qualitative, to assess how neighborhood councils are undertaking their responsibilities in accordance with the city Charter and the Plan for neighborhood councils. For a quantitative assessment of how council volunteers participate (and the resources and experience that they bring to the table) we conduct a periodic survey of neighborhood council elected board members across the city. Because it is important to

understand how neighborhood council boards *descriptively* represent the communities they are elected to serve, we compare each board's self-reported racial and ethnic characteristics to the census demographic profile for the community that they represent. To understand how boards *substantively* represent their neighborhoods, we compare elected board members' stated priorities with those gleaned from residents of the city as a whole (as reported in general citywide surveys).

This paper draws on responses to a survey of 894 neighborhood council board members, conducted between July and September of 2003, which achieved a response rate of 66 percent. We also used additional focused surveys to solicit the perspectives of participants who volunteer for citywide neighborhood council organizing activities, such as the Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Congress and the preliminary MOU drafting process currently underway that is focused on the Department of City Planning. To understand the activities of neighborhood councils, we drew upon an array of documentary sources and field work, including a content analysis of 243 newspaper articles from 2003 to 2004. Given that neighborhood council boards are engaged in a variety of endeavors, many not of interest to the media, we also analyzed for content the self-reported accomplishments (as compiled by DONE) for 47 neighborhood councils.

For a City perspective on how councils are conducting business, we used a structured, web-based survey of Department of Neighborhood Empowerment 'project coordinators,' city employees responsible for implementation of the system according to the Plan. Data from Coordinators' open-ended responses to a question about accomplishments for 38 neighborhood councils were coded and evaluated for neighborhood council activities with respect to local and citywide issues. As field liaisons between the Department and neighborhood councils, project coordinators assist with formation and certification and advise on matters from parliamentary procedure to compliance with requirements and indeed the council's own bylaws.) At the time of the survey, a total of 68 neighborhood councils were certified and had seated elected boards. We received responses for 58 of these neighborhood councils from 15 project coordinators – better than a 70% response rate. Coordinators serve more than one council.

To understand qualitatively how council boards identify community priorities and accomplish neighborhood objectives field staff attended approximately 100 meetings conducted by almost 50 neighborhood councils, as well as citywide neighborhood council events such as the semi-annual Department of Neighborhood Empowerment-sponsored Congress of Neighborhood Councils; the bi-monthly Alliance of Neighborhood Councils meetings; and the annual participatory budget events held at City Hall. Content analysis of meeting notes from 47 general or executive board meetings (representing 38 councils) suggests what the council boards attempted to achieve, though board actions may ultimately not result in expected outcomes.

Table 1 indicates the sources of text that were content coded using Atlas.ti Version 5.0. All coding was performed by a single assistant to obviate problems with inter-coder reliability. Our coding scheme (Appendix 1) illustrates the variety of neighborhood council efforts as suggested by media reports and meetings attendance. To understand



how neighborhood councils are participation in land use and planning, we developed a specific coding scheme that reflects land use activities (see line 6 – ‘Land Use’). Initially based on Dear’s (1992) typology, to the land use coding scheme we added other categories to reflect the breadth of council involvement in land use and other activities.

**Table 1: Sources and Description of Data**

Texts	Source	Period Covered	Number of NCs	Comments
Newspaper Articles	Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE) <sup>1</sup>	2003- 2004	48	Total of 243 Newspaper Analyzed
Neighborhood Council Performance Evaluation	Neighborhood Participation Project (NPP)	2004	38	DONE Project coordinator’s evaluation
Neighborhood Councils’ Accomplishments	Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE) <sup>2</sup>	Up to 2004	47	Neighborhood councils’ self-reported accomplishments
Neighborhood Council Meeting Notes	Neighborhood Participation Project (NPP)	2002-2004	38	Total of 47 Meeting Notes analyzed

In addition our argumentation relies on qualitative interpretation of a variety of events, including City Council meeting attendance. Education and Neighborhood Committee hearings lend an overall context to the administrative evolution of the system, while Planning and Land Use Management Committee hearings and Area Planning Commission hearings show a fuller picture of how elected board members and non-elected community volunteer participate in local affairs (beyond voting). We also have attended citywide neighborhood council-driven processes, including a self-organized Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Congress (now in formation) and memoranda-of-understanding initiatives such as one focused on the Department of City Planning (currently in progress, and noted above).

<sup>1</sup> DONE Newsroom. Retrieved December 8, 2004 at Articles 2004 Archive at [http://www.lacity.org/done/page2.cfm?doc=articles\\_releases\\_2004](http://www.lacity.org/done/page2.cfm?doc=articles_releases_2004) and Articles 2003 Archive at [http://www.lacity.org/done/page2.cfm?doc=articles\\_releases\\_2003](http://www.lacity.org/done/page2.cfm?doc=articles_releases_2003)

<sup>2</sup> DONE (2004). Neighborhood councils’ accomplishments. Retrieved December 8, 2004 at [http://www.lacity.org/done/accomplishments/donenewsflash\\_c94014787\\_10222003.pdf](http://www.lacity.org/done/accomplishments/donenewsflash_c94014787_10222003.pdf)

## **FINDINGS**

Our findings suggest that there is a strong orientation toward planning type issues among neighborhood councils in the City. When compared to a randomly selected sample of City of Los Angeles residents, elected board members evidence an interest in land use more than three as often, and evidence an interest in transportation policy concerns two times more frequently.<sup>3</sup> Quantitative data from our 2003 survey of elected neighborhood council board members suggest that this is in part a reflection of the composition of the neighborhood council boards: of 45 certified neighborhood council boards surveyed, homeowners make up 63% of elected board members – a disproportionately high representation in comparison to the relatively low proportion of owner-occupied housing units in the city (38.6%). Homeowners have been the driving force behind contested land use politics since the 1970s in Los Angeles. Indeed, some neighborhood councils self-organized according to existing homeowners association boundaries, and their leaders quickly found seats on elected boards.

In terms of socio-economic status, too, elected board members, according to our survey, are older, more educated, and more affluent than City residents as a whole: one-third of elected board members reported household incomes in excess of \$100,000, which is nearly three times the median household income reported across the City. They are also more likely to be both U.S. citizens and native English speakers. Lastly, they appear to be stable residents in their communities, with 73 percent having lived there for more than 10 years.<sup>4</sup> Hence the socioeconomic status of many board members equips many board members with resources for participation in planning, while tenure in the neighborhood and prevalence of homeownership would appear to turn their interest and motivation toward land use issues.

### **Neighborhood Council Activities and Accomplishments**

To understand how neighborhood councils are targeting their limited resources, we report findings from our content analysis of news articles on neighborhood councils, self-reported activities, reports by project coordinators responsible for oversight of councils, and field notes from meetings (these sources are identified in Table 1, above). The system is still in an early stage of implementation, and councils' accomplishments overall suggest that getting up and running consumes much of neighborhood councils' time.

#### ***General Activities and Accomplishments***

According to self-reported council accomplishments, councils were overwhelmingly focused on local issues (see Figure 1); citywide accomplishments account for a scant 2% of all of those described. 'Assistance' constitutes the single largest share of self-reported accomplishments; our field work suggests that these assistance activities include

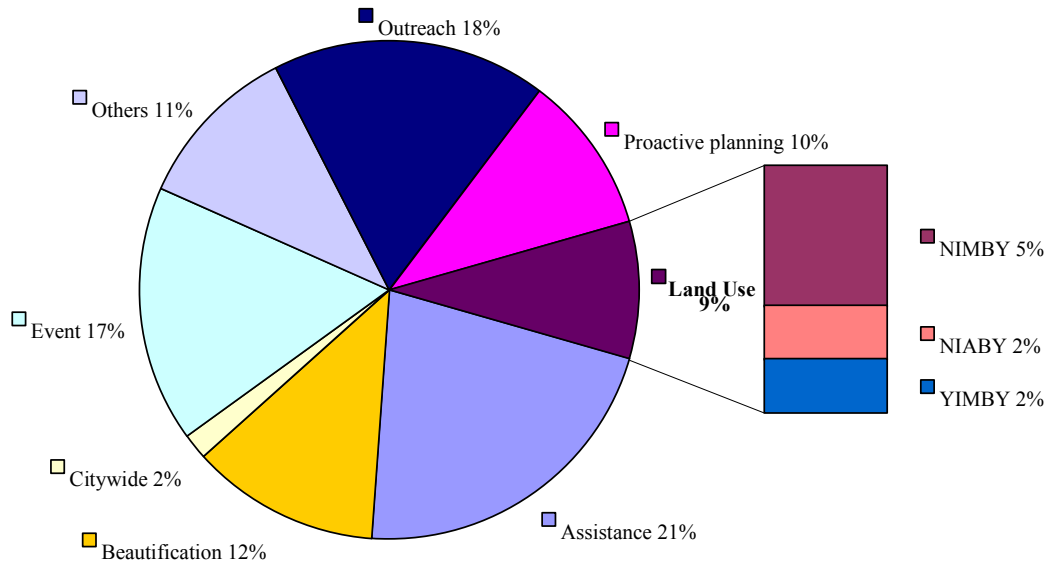
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<sup>3</sup> According to the USC-PPIC survey conducted in 2003 of Los Angeles County residents, which included responses from 799 Los Angeles City residents.

<sup>4</sup> The homeowner share reflects board members' stakeholder affiliation when they were allowed to select multiple stakeholder affiliations.

donations or volunteer work related to education such as after-school tutoring and reading programs, or support to community based organizations involved with targeted economic development and jobs training.

**Figure 2: Self-Reported Neighborhood Councils' Accomplishments**



(Source: Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, *Neighborhood Councils' Accomplishments*<sup>5</sup>)

The second-largest category concerns outreach. In our analysis, outreach comprises a full 18% of reported accomplishments. Outreach is critical to ensure public participation, and the proportion of council resources constitutes a significant investment of financial and human capital. Stakeholder involvement is critical to establishing the legitimacy of the council in the eyes of decision-makers, and quarterly budgetary reflect the cost and effort required: as much as 20% of their entire \$50,000 annual budget. The third largest category of self-reported accomplishments concerns support for community events (17%) such as street fairs or picnics, or non-profit or charity community functions. Participants view the partnership between resident stakeholders and business owners to be a productive path to community improvement, and councils are increasingly undertaking economic development initiatives.<sup>6</sup>

Targeted beautification efforts such as tree plantings and school landscaping were reported as the fourth largest category of accomplishments. A small number of councils are tapping resources from beyond the local area, including securing Neighborhood Matching Fund grants and attracting support from the Los Angeles Neighborhood

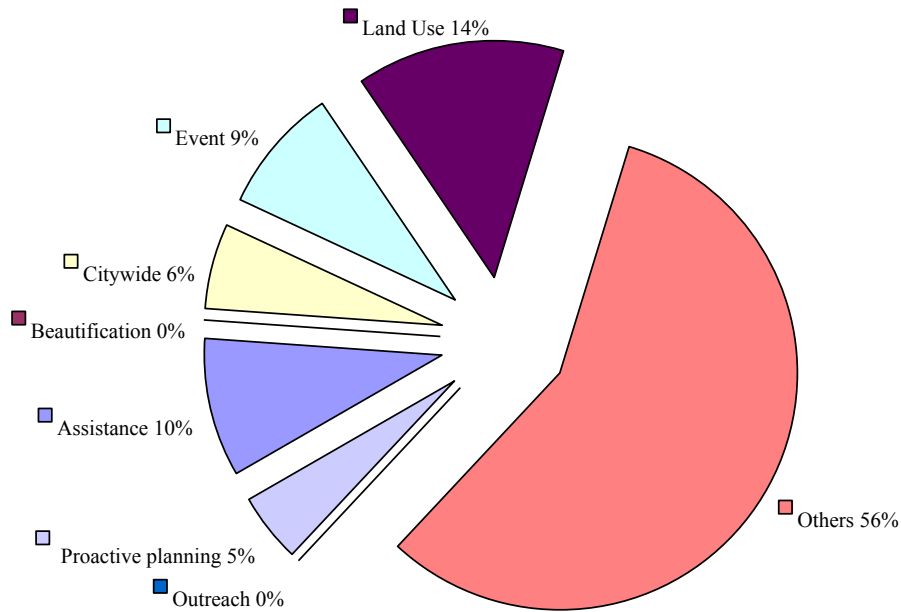
<sup>5</sup> Refer to footnote 1.

<sup>6</sup> (Mid City Washington Boulevard subcommittee meetings from September 25, 2004 to present; Valley Village website accessed 10/04.)

Initiative. Community beautification is a focus of neighborhood councils that link local improvements to a larger economic development strategy. The Sunland Tujunga neighborhood council, for example, has framed their approach to Foothill Boulevard corridor improvement explicitly as an economic initiative to stimulate the revitalization of the council area's Commerce Avenue. They have been able to secure participation from the developer of a proposed project to "find the balance" between the project and the local context. "We want to draw people down Commerce and allow the economic engine [of new development] to push up Commerce," the developer's consultant explained to the board. "Your [Sunland Tujunga] Plan 2020 plan gave us some real guidance."<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to self-reports, the media coverage has tended to emphasize the implementation difficulties experienced by neighborhood councils; between 2003 and 2004, more than half of all mentions of NCs in the media were related to neighborhood council organization, certification, elections, and operations (Figure 4). During this period the number of certified councils increased from 59 to 80, and the "growing pains" experienced by the new system tended to draw media attention.

**Figure 3: News Articles on Neighborhood Councils (2003-2004)**



(Source: Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, *News*<sup>8</sup>)

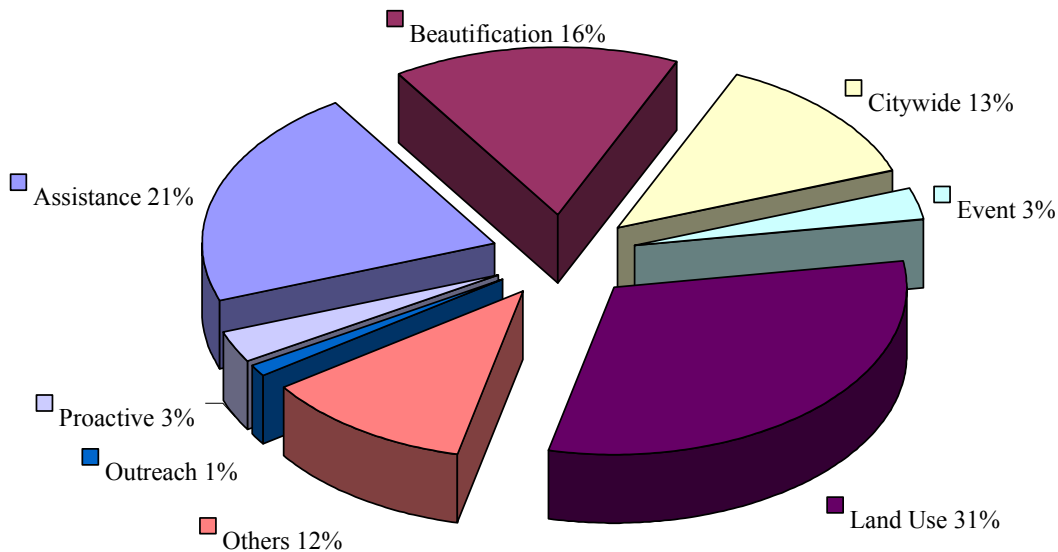
<sup>7</sup> Sunland Tujunga Neighborhood Council board meeting, August 11, 2004.  
<http://www.sunlandtujunga.org/council/> (accessed 1/06.)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.lacityneighborhoods.com/page2.cfm?doc=articles\\_releases\\_2004](http://www.lacityneighborhoods.com/page2.cfm?doc=articles_releases_2004)  
[http://www.lacityneighborhoods.com/page2.cfm?doc=articles\\_releases\\_2003](http://www.lacityneighborhoods.com/page2.cfm?doc=articles_releases_2003)

Land use represented the second-largest category of newspaper coverage (after implementation issues). Community beautification, which was one of the more important self-reported accomplishments by council board members, was not specifically cited by newspaper accounts, perhaps reflecting the tendency for the media to focus less on accomplishments and more on issues of controversy. Event- and assistance-related accomplishments received only half as many mentions when compared to NC-identified accomplishments. Instead, the most frequent mentioned issues were related to certification, election processes, and organizational difficulties.

DONE project coordinator responses to the question indicate that neighborhood councils (up to the time of the survey) had effected a greater impact with regard to land use issues than was reflected in either newspaper accounts or self-reported by NCOs themselves. Fully 31% of all specific issue mentions by coordinators at an individual council level cited a “significant impact” on land use issues (see Figure 4). Project coordinators indicate that neighborhood councils have been more effective engaging with land use than with regard to issues that comprise assistance, the second most often mentioned category. Interestingly, both council boards and Project Coordinators cited assistance issues as approximately 20% of council accomplishments. But as a matter of performance, land use, beautification, and proactive planning comprise greater than half (52%) of all Coordinator mentions of “significant impact.”

**Figure 4: Project Coordinator Identification of Neighborhood Council Achievements**



### *A Focus on Land Use*

Turning more specifically to neighborhood council land use activities, it is evident from reported accomplishments that planning-related issues are a priority. Fully 19% of total accomplishments reported by neighborhood councils concerned land use and planning exclusively. Almost half mentioned specific actions (e.g., project review), while the balance concerned proactive planning. Yet it is important to distinguish between the two. Land use action-related accomplishments (9%) merit examination because they comprise nearly half of all self-reported accomplishments in the land use and planning category. We identified and disaggregated three primary land use behaviors. ‘Not-in-my-backyard’ (NIMBY) reflexive opposition is a charge often leveled against neighborhoods, but less common are other efforts such as attracting specific land uses to the community (YIMBY) or opposition to a particular land use for any neighborhood (NIABY). The actual picture of community resistance with regard to land use is complex as opposition is neither monolithic nor reflexive.

The reflexive NIMBY category accounts for over half of self-reported land use-related accomplishments and suggests that neighborhoods may indeed view successful opposition as an achievement. Residents associations in certain areas of Los Angeles have secured a reputation as powerful representatives of local interests by successfully opposing unwanted development on the basis of anticipated aesthetic and traffic impacts. This perspective enjoys a long history in Los Angeles, where The Department of City Planning is generally perceived as ineffective or insensitive to local communities. Indeed, in our survey of neighborhood council land use activists, 45% of respondents said that they felt confident that 36% said that they had confidence that the department “almost never” or “never” incorporates neighborhood council input.<sup>9</sup>

Experience in the field suggests, however, that resistance to specific projects suggests more subtlety and nuanced debate than the charge of ‘NIMBY’ implies. Land use committee agendas and minutes suggest that they are approaching fact-finding, outreach, and deliberation as responsible participants, and recall over half of survey respondents themselves called their efforts toward interacting with applicants “proactive.” It is worth noting that neighborhood associations that may be more inclined to oppose development

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<sup>9</sup> According to our survey of the Planning Department MOU working group on December 3, 2005.

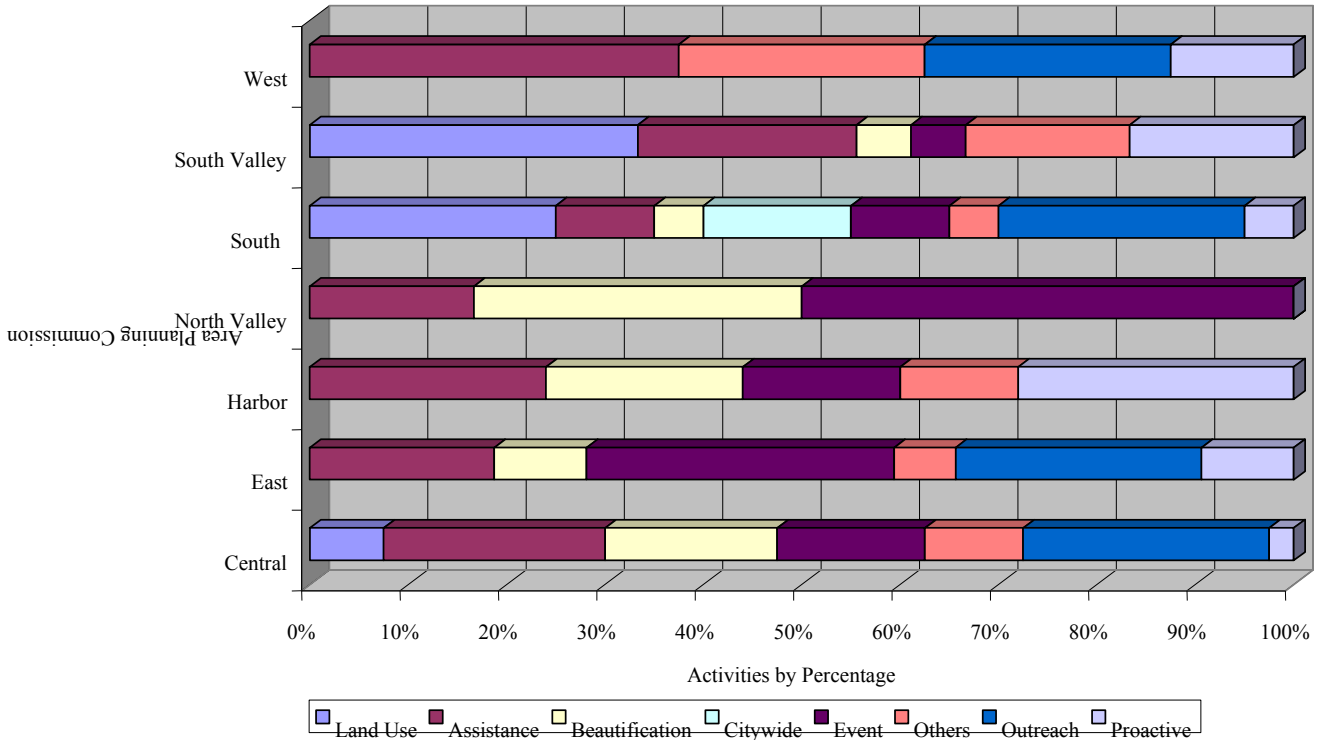
exhibit reluctance to work with neighborhood councils. Areas with influential associations (such as Pacific Palisades and Brentwood) evidently view councils as an inappropriate vehicle for effective opposition to development.

### ***Regional Variations in Land Use Activities***

In order to understand better the differences in the manner in which neighborhood councils approach land use, we disaggregated neighborhood council self-reports on land use across the seven Area Planning Commissions (APCs) in Figure 5. South Los Angeles and South San Fernando Valley areas are more likely to cite land use as among their achievements. In South Los Angeles, the Empowerment Congress Central Area Neighborhood Development Council reported successfully stopping an attempt to establish a homeless shelter in that area, which feels it has more than its ‘fair share’ of social services. Without regard to context, one could assume this to be a classic example of NIMBY behavior, yet this area of the city historically disenfranchised, and achieving influence over placement of a sensitive facility represents a significant achievement.

The data suggest a complex picture of engagement in planning. Neighborhood councils in the South Valley, for example, reported the highest number of land use-related accomplishments – perhaps a legacy of the region’s long history of engagement in land use – but also reported the second-highest number of proactive planning accomplishments (half of all reported accomplishments). While we would argue that the NC system may give the historically under-represented communities like South Los Angeles a voice in the policy making process, we would also suggest that historically well-represented areas may find an opportunity to move beyond merely an oppositional posture.

**Figure 5: Self-Reported Neighborhood Councils’ Accomplishments by Area Planning Commission**



(Source: Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, *Neighborhood Councils' Accomplishments*<sup>10</sup>)

The challenge for neighborhood councils is not only to provide public input during the plan-making process, but to sustain engagement over the longer term – an organizational resources issue. Participation in proactive planning efforts may return ancillary benefits, too. In the case of the Harbor area, which reported the most accomplishments related to proactive planning by region and as a share of all accomplishments, an examination of reported accomplishments reflects an ongoing engagement with community advisory committees. They participate in meetings related to the Bridge to Breakwater project and, by keeping themselves apprized, become credible participants able to offer constructive input.

The West area of the city reported the third largest number of proactive planning accomplishments. Proposed developments such as Playa Vista and LAX expansion have awakened stakeholders by threatening to increase density. The Mar Vista Community Council co-sponsored with the neighboring Grass Roots Venice and Westchester/Playa Del Rey neighborhood councils a community meeting to determine stakeholder views on Playa Vista; it was attended by an estimated 1200 people. The Neighborhood Council of Westchester/Playa Del Rey itself conducted (with council office support) a charette to envision Lincoln Boulevard as a mixed-use corridor. Westchester Neighborhood Council also has undertaken efforts to beautify the Sepulveda corridor in its area, but enjoys limited control over incoming development. “We can only encourage [developers] to come see us,” one Westchester volunteer said. “But if we had a design review board....”

<sup>10</sup> Refer to footnote 1.



He added, “There’s no power in ‘Just say no.’ Instead, just say ‘what.’ The community has the resources.”<sup>11</sup>

These regional differences in NC orientation also emerge from the Project Coordinator data. East area’s singular proactive engagement, according to a Coordinator, included providing input into the Silver Lake-Echo Park community plan as well as “building a sense of community” by securing an additional DASH bus route and planting trees. In the South Valley area, concerns regarding undesirable uses are emphasized in Coordinators’ responses. A proposed meat processing facility and a dump site were rejected by the community, while opposition to alcohol resale permits, a fast food restaurant, and a motel reflected concerns about community impacts. In two council areas, proposed homeless shelters encountered opposition. In the North Valley area, council activities tended to focus on community beautification and improvement, such as the installation of public art and replacing playground equipment, as well as street paving and tree trimming. Larger-scale impacts were also engaged, such as the proposed contract extension for Sunshine Canyon landfill.

The Central area was the most actively engaged in land use, according to project coordinators. This may be a result of increased development activity downtown and in the immediate periphery. But it is also a testament to the activity of the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council, which a DONE coordinator recognized for “infrastructure policies and procedures” in the Land Use Committee that could serve as best practices. The Hollywood United Neighborhood Council was also cited for proactive participation in the placement of a fire station to minimize resident dislocation.

Neighborhood councils in South Los Angeles were active in opposing unwanted land uses including a homeless shelter, motel, slaughterhouse, and a proposed dump site. They also blocked additional liquor permitting – a particular issue that finds resonance in that region of the city. Coordinators also reported that South Los Angeles councils worked to attract desirable businesses and identified a community beautification agenda. In South Los Angeles, the prevailing attitude appears to involve feelings of frustration that the community is a social services provider of last resort. At an August 3, 2004 Area Planning Commission meeting convened by the city to present a proposed inclusionary zoning ordinance, Dorothy Fuller, Secretary of the 8<sup>th</sup> District Empowerment Congress, articulated community sentiment:

The 8<sup>th</sup> district has endured a downward spiral. The NIMBY syndrome, things that people don’t want in the city of LA, find their way into the 8<sup>th</sup> district. We understand the need for affordable housing – and the lowest cost housing is in this area...Exclude the 8<sup>th</sup> district – we’ve been the brunt – and we don’t want it anymore.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with a land use committee volunteer with the Neighborhood Council of Westchester/Playa del Rey, January 23, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> South Los Angeles Area Planning Commission hearing, August 3, 2004.

In sum, participation in land use actions and planning policy discussions is indicated by elected board members as one of the most important functions that the neighborhood council may play. At the same time, the various sources of data regarding neighborhood council activities suggest that the characterization of their stance as one of NIMBY opposition needs to be qualified. Neighborhood councils engage in a variety of activities that are complementary to development, including community events, beautification, and outreach. The character and orientation of land use involvement appears to vary regionally due to differences in capacity, historical relationships to the City, and community attitudes toward development.

## **Overcoming Challenges to Effective Participation**

Our qualitative fieldwork suggests that there are significant obstacles that limit the effectiveness of local volunteers in what is a technical and time-intensive process. A brief assessment of the capacity of community members to engage as lay people in planning at the neighborhood level must also address their *ability* to participate. We know that both time and planning expertise are in short supply.

A survey of designated representatives to a self-organized MOU-drafting process with the Department of City Planning suggests that the primary challenges to effective involvement in land use relate to the resource constraints experienced by participants, and the need for better notification and increased staff attention from the department. Time is identified in the participation literature as a crucial resource necessary for participation. When asked how much time they have volunteered per week during the past 12 months (exclusive of their neighborhood council meetings), 60% of respondents indicated more than five hours per week with more than a third of the total devoting more than 10 hours to volunteering. Clearly time is already limited for these participants, who complain of already being overcommitted. Increasingly they speak anecdotally about ‘burnout’ and the risks of losing experienced people to other pursuits.<sup>13</sup>

The other issue is finding the supportive environment and technical resources necessary to accomplish the task. Land use and planning committee chairs and community volunteers feel that they bring significant experience to their task: a majority (57%) claim to have “professional expertise of value” to offer, while more than a third (37%) report that they already had “prior experience in planning.” Yet when asked about having sufficient technical expertise to participate effectively, nearly two-thirds (67%) agreed with this statement: “We need additional technical expertise to advise responsibly on proposed projects or planning policies.” Almost three-quarters (70%) of respondents who answered agreed that they needed intra-council additional resources such as “volunteer time and/or full board support” to advise responsibly.

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<sup>13</sup> Two invited neighborhood council land use committee chairs to a recent meeting between design professionals and City Council staff stressed this above all other issues as a threat to continued institutional participation in land use and planning at the neighborhood level – a view with which council staffers agreed. AIA Urban Design Committee meeting, January 30, 2006.

A complaint that finds universal resonance among those volunteering their time to participate is not getting enough support from the Department of City Planning. When asked how responsive the Department of City Planning has been “to your council’s requests for information or guidance from Department planners,” 43% say that the department's response to requests has been “less-than-satisfactory.” Fully 94% of respondents who answered agreed that they needed “additional technical guidance and/or attention” from the department. Only one respondent of 43 felt that his council received “sufficient technical guidance and/or attention” from the department. By the same token, the Department has offered occasional training sessions at DONE-organized Neighborhood Council Congress events, and even in some communities, but only 25% of respondents said that they received training from Department planners or staffers in the past six months.

The experiences of two neighborhood councils in land use illustrate how they have overcome the challenges related to capacity and lack of effective forums for involvement. These neighborhood councils appear to treat engagement in land use as a proactive force to shape the evolution of the physical environment. This effectively refutes claims of NIMBYism and opens an opportunity to work with local elected officials to realize a community vision for the neighborhood. Atwater Village neighborhood council, for example, has established a robust Planning and Land Use committee that inventories proposed projects on its website, and introduces stakeholders to two important planning tools: planning-related ordinances and a tool for community input, the impact statement.<sup>14</sup> Atwater Village has successfully lobbied for the creation of an Atwater Village Overlay District which would “encourage people in the surrounding neighborhoods to walk and shop” along commercial Los Feliz and Glendale boulevards. They then codified their broader planning objectives in a Streetscape Master Plan detailing undesirable uses and features that the community wishes to see enhanced.<sup>15</sup>

The Master Plan calls for adding 136 trees and undertaking a long-term program to widen sidewalks, narrow Glendale Boulevard from 6 to 4 travel lanes, widen corners and install decorative paving to slow traffic, and install benches, bike racks, and bus shelters. At a cost of \$5.8 million it is an ambitious plan, but the scope of ambition is really reflected in Atwater’s engagement with City officials, departments, and elected representatives. In conjunction with their City Council (district 13) office, four publicly noticed meetings were held with members of the Atwater Village residential and business communities between October 2002 and February 2003. According to the committee website, stakeholder priorities were elicited and continually revised to formulate transportation and safety improvements.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> As quasi-judicial agencies, Area Planning Commissions hear Zoning Administrator appeals, recommended zone changes, and appeals concerning conditional use permits (Section 552 of the City Charter)

<sup>15</sup> The Atwater Village Neighborhood Council’s Beautification and Streetscape Committee webpage appears to be an excellent example of how a robust communication tool can introduce planning concepts and proposed projects to the community. <http://www.atwatervillage.org/> (Accessed 10/04.)

<sup>16</sup> Atwater Village Pedestrian Oriented District, Ordinance 173,676, Effective January 14, 2001.

The Sunland Tujunga neighborhood council experience also suggests what is possible when a community works proactively. The Design Advisory Committee (DAC) has generated considerable community interest in planning; it is the venue for developer presentations as well as long-term community visioning. At an August 2004 general meeting, Julianne Maurseth, a community volunteer leading the visioning process, described the importance of project review procedures. “We’re wanting to have an open dialog – not adversarial,” she said. “We’re setting up a structure: a steering committee and guidelines for participation to work with our community and to listen to our community.” Board member Cindy Cleghorn described a vacant K-Mart under consideration for a new Home Depot. “We’d love to hear from you,” she said as she handed out a flier and a stakeholder survey on the issue. “This is your opportunity.”

Through a series of meetings, general and issue-specific surveys, and town halls, the Sunland Tujunga DAC has developed a picture-based ‘style guide’ illustrating (Cindy Cleghorn said) “the kinds of buildings, materials, colors, and landscaping we want more of - and what we don’t want any more of.” The council has retained a land use planning consultant at considerable cost to advise on redevelopment of the Foothill Boulevard corridor. Stakeholder priorities are expressed in a broad, long-range document called the Sunland Tujunga Vision 2020 plan that focuses on the preservation of open space in addition to economic development priorities.<sup>17</sup>

The Atwater and Sunland Tujunga neighborhood council examples underscore how varied are council efforts to make change happen in their communities. What is also clear is the importance of gaining City Council staff participation to earn credibility. Again we can turn to the December data from participating land use chairs and volunteers. Almost half (48%) of respondents say that their City Council office “almost always” or “occasionally” works with their committee; whereas more than a third (37%) say their Council office “almost never” works or “does not” yet work constructively with them on land use issues. Because neighborhood councils are advisory only, political influence is critical to exacting tangible benefits at the local level. Land use participants on balance thought that their city council office(s) had sufficiently considered community’s concerns regarding land use in the past, with 63% saying that they were very satisfied, satisfied, or somewhat satisfied. Yet fully a third (33%) said that they were “not at all satisfied” that their City Council office(s) had sufficiently considered community concerns in the past.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our findings suggest that neighborhood councils are emerging as an important forum for engaging community stakeholders in planning and development activities. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that land use involvement is only one of a complex array of activities engaged by neighborhood councils. Indeed many neighborhood councils have been heavily involved in self-organization activities, particularly those related to elections and governance procedures. Other activities include an array of community oriented works, many of which are oriented toward general community

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<sup>17</sup> Sunland Tujunga Neighborhood Council board meeting, August 11, 2004.

development, such as streetscape improvement, community events, and assistance to community organizations. Thus neighborhood councils would appear to offer an opportunity for complementarity between two actors often considered at odds: neighborhood associations and real estate development community.

With respect to land use, Board member self-reported accomplishments, as well as print media accounts and qualitative non-participant observations at council board and committee meetings, indicate that neighborhood councils are addressing substantive development issues in both reactive and proactive fashion. These factors suggest that elected board members disproportionately possess two of the three preconditions for participation identified by Verba et. al.: motivation and resources. Whereas voting behaviors are ambiguous with regard to expressing policy preferences (Verba et al. 1995), the “ability to turn up the political heat” on policy-makers to achieve a desired outcome demands a different kind of participation that is often concomitant with the resources and motivation available disproportionately to volunteers in the neighborhood council system. What appears slower to emerge is invitation, the creation of meaningful forums within city governance for neighborhood councils to engage in land use planning.

Framing neighborhood council involvement in land use as characteristic of the NIMBY movement appears overly simplistic. Many neighborhood councils appear interested in participating to in project review in order to achieve an optimal outcome. Neighborhood councils that join a strong interest in land use with high community capacity appear to have dedicated land use committees that interact closely with developers and City Council staff. Creating an environment for project review and deliberative debate that “enhances participant views” and encourages tolerance of other viewpoints (Halvorsen, 2003 p. 541) would appear to be key to enhancing neighborhood council credibility in project review, and reducing the potential for reactionary opposition on the part of neighborhood councils.

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DRAFT February 4, 2006

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