

Mayor Chuck Reed
City of San José
200 E. Santa Clara Street
San José, CA 95113-1905

cc: Councilmembers
Dennis Hawkins, San José City Clerk

re: Restructuring City Commissions

Dear Mayor Reed,

When you consider the forthcoming recommendations on city commissions, I urge you to adopt those measures that will preserve or enhance the public's engagement in our city.

About two years ago, San José initiated an innovative experiment, the Neighborhoods Commission, to better involve the residents in the shaping of our city. We on the Commission were selected by the communities themselves and were tasked to serve as a conduit of the public's interests and concerns to the city leaders, and also as a way for the City to communicate with its residents. As one of the Commissioners representing District 6, I have passed along to the various neighborhood leaders your concerns and recommendations on the city's budget, and I have told you of their concerns and the need to preserve a balance between neighborhood services – community centers and local libraries – and the fire and police.

The Neighborhoods Commission is in a trial period and is to be evaluated at the end of two years. The City Clerk has been directed to review it, and to review the other city commissions at the same time. A set of recommendations have been developed that you and the City Council will soon be reviewing. A number of these recommendations are quite reasonable and ones I support: finding commonality in agenda formats and bylaws, introductory training for new commissioners, and possibly eliminating those commissions that haven't found the need to meet in a number of years. However, there are two major points to which, speaking for myself, I have strong objections: (1) the sunseting of the Neighborhoods Commission, and (2) the consolidation of other commissions.

The Neighborhoods Commission:

The chart package publicly presented lists the commissions that are recommended for preservation, consolidation, or elimination, but the Neighborhoods Commission isn't even mentioned. When pressed on this omission, the explanation given was that the point was moot since the Neighborhoods Commission, after its two-year run, was to "sunset". That is not the case. I have been on the Neighborhoods Commission since the beginning, and have worked with the community activists who worked for years beforehand to bring the Neighborhoods Commission into reality: after two years there is to be a revisiting of the Commission's format and charter, but not an end to its very existence.

I personally feel that the Neighborhoods Commission has not been as useful as it could be. We have helped inform the communities about the budget issues, we have served as a

“sounding board” for city departments wishing to gauge the community response to proposals such as community notification policies, tree maintenance, and community policing, and we have written to you and the Council about issues such as the need to maintain community-support services. But I feel we could do more. When I served on the Board of the Willow Glen Neighborhood Association, we helped bring a number of issues to the City’s attention, resulting in the “Flag Lot” policy, policies to stop unpermitted tree removal and drive-through businesses in residential neighborhoods, the “24 Hour” policy, and the “Monster House” policy. There remain many issues that affect neighborhoods across the city, and the Neighborhoods Commission would be a perfect forum at which to discuss them: the implementing and enforcing of the city’s Riparian (“streamside”) Corridor Setback Policy, developing design guidelines for the interface between high-density/commercial “Main Street” developments and the surrounding neighbors, discussions on Bus Rapid Transit and “Grand Boulevards”, and more. But we on the Neighborhoods Commission have been hobbled: our charter precludes us from discussing topics that even might fall under the purview of other Commissions. Thus, even though the Parks and the Planning Commissions are principally involved in specific issues such as whether a given project is appropriate for its parcel rather than the more global issues like the definitions of setbacks and development interfaces, we can’t discuss those topics because they conceivably might.

Perhaps the structure of the Neighborhoods Commission could be improved: with thirty Commissioners, it can sometimes get a little unwieldy. Additionally, the process of calling a district-wide neighborhood caucus each time there’s a Commission vacancy could be streamlined, and a procedure to train and recruit community activists willing to serve on commissions would help as well. But, overall, the Neighborhoods Commission is well worth preserving and improving.

Commission Consolidation

The second matter of concern is even more important: it doesn’t affect me personally as a commissioner, but instead it affects us all as residents of San José.

The recommendations you will receive call for consolidating the commissions, the most egregious case being the lumping together of the following into a single conglomerate: Arts, Early Care & Education, Library (including Parcel Tax Oversight), Parks & Rec, and several Bond Oversight Committees (Libraries, Parks & Rec, and Public Safety). These consolidations are “to save money”. I have asked how much money this could save, but have only been told that it takes time to post agendas and take minutes. Yet it appears that financial benefits to the city, such as several significant revenue enhancements the commissions have identified, haven’t been included in the analysis.

Prior to serving on the City’s Neighborhoods Commission, I served two terms on the County’s Parks & Rec Commission. My fellow commissioners and I all immersed ourselves in our subject: we “ate, slept, and breathed parks” for the duration of our terms. We assisted the County’s Parks & Rec Department by reviewing EIRs and other CEQA documentation, we reviewed the design plans and recommendations of department staff and consultants alike, and we received and considered public comment. The latter was especially important: we could take the time to learn about the local issues relevant to planned projects, and we could listen to and

understand the concerns of the nearby residents who might be affected by those projects, and then we rephrased those concerns into the language of EIRs, CEQA, and the department's planners.

From the other side of the table, I have also attended quite a few Planning, Parks & Rec, and other City Commissions over the years: it was the means by which we in the community were able to work with developers and city planners to find design adjustments so that the new projects better fit in with the surrounding neighborhoods. But if the various commissions are consolidated, there probably would be little time (if any) on the overcrowded agenda for public comment, and the commissioners themselves quite likely won't be able to become immersed in, and well-versed on, the various issues at hand.

Mr. Mayor, I am justifiably proud of you and the City for adopting the award-winning Envision 2040 General Plan update, based upon your "Green Vision for San José". It is an exemplary public collaboration, with a Task Force that was comprised of developers, planners, community activists, and the public. Envision 2040 includes a section (CE 1.7) on "Community Engagement" to "ensure the work of government is inclusive": it instructs the City to "[provide] adequate time and opportunities for early engagement so community members may have impact" and "provide support for increased community participation." However, if the various commissions are consolidated as recommended, it will make a sham of these worthy goals.

I personally urge you to consider the various recommendations on city commissions, and to adopt those measures which improve efficiency and effectiveness. I urge you to renew, unshackle, and reinvigorate the Neighborhoods Commission. And I urge you to reject those recommendations that could possibly limit the public's engagement in our city.

I would welcome the opportunity to answer any questions or to talk more about the Neighborhoods Commission and community involvement.

Dr. Lawrence Ames,
San José Neighborhoods Commission, Dist. 6
past President, Willow Glen Neighborhood Assoc.
past Commissioner, Santa Clara Co. Parks & Rec.