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October 5, 2020

CF 20-0963

Honorable Members of the Health, Education,
Neighborhoods, Parks, Arts, and River Committee
c/o Office of the City Clerk
Room 395, City Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90012

**SUBJECT: REQUESTED JOINT REPORT BACK RELATIVE TO CONDUCT OF
NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL ELECTIONS DURING THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC – COUNCIL FILE 20-0963**

Honorable Members:

BACKGROUND

On August 26, 2020, the City Council approved Council File 20-0963, which included instructions to the Office of the City Clerk (City Clerk) and the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (EmpowerLA) to report back in 30 days on several items related to the all Vote-By-Mail (VBM) Elections for the 2021 Neighborhood Council (NC) Elections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the City Council:

1. Direct the Controller's Office to appropriate \$55,000 from the Unappropriated Balance (UB) 2020 General Municipal Election Line Item, 100/58/580310, to the City Clerk, Fund 100, Department 14, Election Expense Account 4170.
2. Direct the Controller's Office to appropriate \$456,975 from the UB 2020 General Municipal Election Line Item, 100/58/580310, to EmpowerLA, Fund 100, Department 47: \$123,074 to Salaries-As-Needed - Account 1070; \$32,331 to Printing and Binding - Account 2120; \$121,023 to Contractual Services - Account 3040; \$180,328 to Office and Admin. - Account 6010; and \$219 to Operating Supplies Account 6020.
3. Direct the City Administrative Officer to determine and report back if sufficient funds are available in the UB, General Municipal Election Line Item to exempt the Election staff from furloughs beginning January 1, 2021 through the end of the NC Elections, and a blanket unfreeze for hiring NC Elections as-needed staff.

FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Inasmuch as there are projected Municipal Election savings in the UB, as reported by the City Clerk, there is no fiscal impact in this report.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Statements have been filed previously on this Council File from Empowerment Congress West Area, Granada Hills North, Los Feliz, and Northridge East NCs.

SUMMARY

The City Council approved the Committee's amendments to the August 3, 2020 report filed by the City Clerk relative to the administration of NC Elections in 2021 as all VBM Elections. The following consolidated response provides an update on the development and implementation of VBM Elections; additional resources required to conduct outreach successfully; engage unhoused neighbors in NC Elections; and the cost of managing at-poll or online elections.

BACKGROUND

- The City Council instructed the City Clerk and EmpowerLA to develop a joint outreach plan to inform and educate stakeholders on the all VBM Elections using current resources.
- The City Council further instructed EmpowerLA, with the assistance of the City Clerk, to report back in 30 days with a status update on the development and implementation of a NC Election Outreach and Education Program, and a mechanism to receive input from NCs related to the conduct of the 2021 Elections.

Education and Outreach

EmpowerLA is customarily tasked with the responsibility of administering NC election outreach efforts in partnership with the NCs holding elections. However, given the challenges faced by the City resulting from the need to focus efforts on the City's COVID-19 response, EmpowerLA and the City Clerk have worked collaboratively to identify new and innovative ways we can conduct successful NC Elections using our existing resources. Every NC election season presents the built-in challenges of promoting what is really a series of granular events rather than a comprehensive whole. NC Elections happen on a dozen regional dates over a six-month period, and are conducted under 99 unique sets of rules, determined by NC bylaws that can create dramatically different participation experiences between individual NCs.

In response to the City Council's request, both departments developed a 30-day plan to consult with NC leaders about the 2021 NC Elections, as follows:

- A joint survey to NCs was released on August 27, 2020, with a due date of September 7, 2020. The survey included specific questions related to engaging our unhoused neighbors in the NC Elections, including a request to provide contact information for community-based organizations serving their residents. The results from these actions are incorporated in the synopsis of key findings.

- A presentation was made at the Homeless Alliance on August 29, 2020, to discuss a plan to ensure homeless stakeholders have equitable access to vote and also hear recommendations from homeless representatives throughout the City.
- Both departments made a presentation at the September 1, 2020, Board of Neighborhood Commissioners' meeting on the VBM process. Public comment was taken from stakeholders and members of the Commission.
- Four evening area feedback sessions were convened: the South Los Angeles area on Wednesday, September 9, 2020; the East/Central Los Angeles area on Thursday, September 10, 2020; the North/South Valley area on Monday, September 14, 2020; and the Harbor/West Los Angeles area on Thursday, September 17, 2020.

As referenced earlier, EmpowerLA had taken action during May and June of 2020 to develop outreach tools that NCs could use to promote their meetings and events in the community. Seven outreach gatherings were held to gather input from NCs regarding their outreach needs. One example of how EmpowerLA has strengthened the NCs' ability to promote their good work was by hosting a digital content webinar on September 30, 2020 to show NCs how to produce promotional videos highlighting NC activities. Two other outreach trainings for NCs are also planned before the 2021 Elections season opens: one on digital outreach and social media; the other on public relations and media relations.

As mentioned above, EmpowerLA and the City Clerk invited NC leaders and stakeholders to provide their feedback through a survey on the administration of, and related outreach of the 2021 NC Elections. This survey started with questions about how the City Clerk might administer VBM ballots for NC Elections, followed by a section on how outreach should be conducted by the NCs. A special focus of the survey included questions on how to best accommodate VBM-specific education, and outreach, in the current virtual environment. Quantitative results of this survey are public and available here:

<https://lahub.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bce0b5af854744a0a9c37353f00b9a66>

EmpowerLA has assembled the responses received from these various sources of feedback sessions.

- The City Council instructed the City Clerk, with the assistance of EmpowerLA, to report back in 30 days with a plan to ensure residents experiencing homelessness, as well as those without a physical mailing address and/or internet access, are included in the Department's outreach efforts and able to vote.

Engaging Unhoused Neighbors

- In 2019, EmpowerLA recruited NC leaders to serve as Homelessness Liaisons (HLs). The HLs have been actively leading NC efforts to assist the unhoused populations in their communities. EmpowerLA convened a special meeting of the HLs on Saturday, August 29, 2020. Participants received a presentation from the City Clerk on the VBM process. Participants provided feedback and input on methods that could be embraced to engage the unhoused in NC Elections.

- EmpowerLA has also been in contact with the Mayor's Office and the Los Angeles Housing Services Authority for additional information and strategies to conduct outreach to unsheltered neighbors regarding NC Elections.
- The Mayor's Office has prioritized addressing the homeless crisis in the City of Los Angeles as seen through City-wide efforts with the [Coordinated Entry System](#) (CES), the [Homeless Count](#), and [Proposition HHH](#). The Mayor's Office also provided suggestions on effective VBM outreach, specifically citing strategic partnerships with Project Roomkey and City-owned shelters such as A Bridge Home sites (bridge housing). They also indicated a need for targeted and tailored efforts when conducting outreach to unsheltered stakeholders living in encampments, and stakeholders in interim housing.
- There were frequent mentions of partnering with existing City services, programs, and agencies such as Project Roomkey and the CES critical for impactful outreach and voting. While these services are transitioning, both departments will monitor programs to ensure information is provided to these, or their successor programs.
- In addition, the NC, along with the City Clerk, found a few key patterns and themes in the suggestions and input provided by the HLs.
- There were also suggestions to use permanent ballot pick-up areas and drop boxes at various accessible institutions and City-owned, or operated, locations in the neighborhood (churches, libraries, parks, recreation centers, shelters, etc.). In addition, there is a need to partner with service providers for outreach, application/ballot pick-up and drop-off, and more, as these providers have a wealth of knowledge about the communities they work with and direct relationships with unhoused individuals.
- The City Clerk is working to partner with service providers to serve as hosts where the unhoused can apply for and receive their VBM ballot using the provider's mailing address. Also, the City Clerk is working with NC leaders to identify locations that can serve as NC-specific drop box locations for voters who are unable to mail their ballot using postal services.
- Participants also stressed the importance of beginning outreach as early as possible and offering early voter registration so that unhoused individuals have sufficient access and assistance during the candidacy and voting process. Some also wanted to work directly with unhoused communities for "inreach" as they would have the lived experience and relationships to offer micro-targeted support.
- There were varying perspectives on options available for those without internet access. Encouraging those with mobile devices to participate was the most common suggestion, although cautions were provided about the cost-prohibitive nature of this option, as individuals may experience charges from their carriers, or may not have access to charging stations.
- The City Council instructed the City Clerk and EmpowerLA to report back in 30 days with a report of any additional resources needed to effectively conduct outreach, education, and a successful VBM Election.

EmpowerLA's Resource Requirements

In response to Council's instructions regarding additional resource requirements to effectively conduct outreach, education, and a successful VBM NC Election, EmpowerLA has developed a 2021 Elections Strategic Plan, integrating elements from the 2019 Election outreach efforts, and feedback from regional outreach sessions, a survey of NC leaders in collaboration with the City Clerk.

EmpowerLA is proposing a different strategy than that which was administered in 2019. NCs have always been limited in their ability to carry out election outreach in their service areas. During the outreach meetings completed to date, and the survey of over 335 respondents, they express concern about having the entire responsibility of getting 4 million Angelenos involved in the NC Elections being placed on their shoulders. Our 2021 Election Plan considers these and other factors.

The Election Plan "engagement strategy" embraces the core values of partnerships, relationships, and connectedness. Partnerships, including trusted voices, will help us raise awareness about the NC system, and drive increased participation in our system, both in terms of having more Angelenos run for their NC seats, and having more Angelenos civically engaged with their NC. Additionally, EmpowerLA has created a database of multi-ethnic language journalists and community partners who serve under-participating segments of the community.

EmpowerLA's desire is to create a series of localized outreach strategies (i.e. mini Election marketing plans). This approach enables the Department to co-strategize with the NCs and develop micro-targeting efforts, within reasonable resource considerations.

EmpowerLA is tasked with the responsibility to administer NC election outreach efforts in partnership with the NCs holding elections. The City Clerk has identified savings in the UB for funding set aside in the 2020 Municipal Elections that can be utilized for NC election outreach.

EmpowerLA is requesting \$456,000 in order to expand efforts in partnering with community organizations to help raise awareness about the NC System in Los Angeles, and drive increased participation in our system-both in terms of having more Angelenos run for their NC seats and having more Angelenos civically engaged with their NC. Additionally, Election Assistants can be hired to assist with NC presentations and assisting NC outreach and election chairs in creating an outreach plan tailored for each NC. Digital Ads may also be purchased to help promote NC Elections via social media. Digital Ads was one of the most successful outreach tools used in the 2019 NC Elections.

City Clerk's Resource Requirements

The City Clerk is currently developing a VBM Election Plan that provides for a 60-day voter registration period, up to a 29-day voting period, as well as regional drop box locations for stakeholders who cannot access the post office. As mentioned previously, stakeholders surveyed regarding our model expressed a desire to expand the registration period from 60 days to up to 120 days to allow NCs to lengthen the outreach and voter registration period in hopes of increasing participation, and to provide locations where City Clerk staff will provide paper applications for those without internet or computer access. Further, surveyed individuals requested that the drop box option increase to 99 in order to provide, at minimum, one drop box location per NC, versus the original plan of 12 regionally placed drop boxes.

In response, the City Clerk has identified additional resources necessary to supplement the existing election model. While we cannot accommodate an earlier online VBM application portal period, we will be able to accept paper applications as early as 90 days before each regional Election Day. This will require additional staff to manually verify and enter the data into our online VBM registration portal once it becomes available, and make weekly paper application delivery and collections throughout the City. In addition, staff will need to work with NC leaders to identify up to 87 additional drop box locations optional for each NC. In total, the City Clerk is requesting an additional \$55,000 for as-needed staff.

Outreach Considerations without Additional Resources

The 2021 Elections Strategic Plan referenced above was designed to advance EmpowerLA's efforts to further these goals. EmpowerLA has downsized our combined efforts from initial strategies, and are now focused on the following possibilities until such time as additional resources become available:

- NC Information Session webinars.
- NC Information Session live presentations.
- Repurposing 2019 outreach templates by simply changing the date to 2021.
- Develop partnerships with non-profits and community based organizations that work with a broad array of stakeholders. Community based organizations are a great resources for recruiting candidates, voters and promoting elections in their networks.
- Partnering with City Clerk and their election outreach efforts.
- Activate EmpowerLA's *IgniteLA* women's leadership and *Civic Youth LA* alumni network to engage women and youth in NC Election.
- Partnering with Elected Officials and City Departments to help promote the 2021 NC Elections via their databases, newsletters, websites, and social media. As it relates to partnering with other City Departments, we will need to research what is available given the budget cuts they are also experiencing.
- Regional candidate workshops on how to register and run for office.
- The City Council instructed the City Clerk and EmpowerLA to report back in 30 days on the process, cost, and feasibility of in-person voting as well as online voting.

In-Person and Online Voting

As instructed by the Committee, the City Clerk was also asked to assess the viability of providing in-person/at-poll NC Elections, in addition to an all VBM model. In order to accomplish this, the City Clerk must recruit polling locations and poll workers for each NC Election. Consideration must be given to recruiting locations that are not only Americans with Disabilities Act-accessible, but also with sufficient space to enforce social distancing as well as other existing COVID-19 public health protocols. An increase in poll workers would be needed to enforce social distancing while at the polling place. Community poll workers would also need to be trained on individualized

NC bylaw procedures. Additionally, an increase in staff would be required to assemble NC-specific polling place signage and supplies for Election Day.

As a result of moving to an all VBM model, the City Clerk changed all regional Election Days to Tuesdays, to maximize postal service's days of operation. If the City Clerk is asked to provide at-poll voting, Election Days would have to revert back to weekend dates previously in place during the 2019 Elections to accommodate each NC's on-going request. The current funding allocation will not be enough to conduct in-person Elections under a COVID-19 model while also providing the all VBM option. Adding at-polls to the VBM model would require an additional \$430,000 to staff weekend Election Days, hire and train poll workers, and supply polling locations.

In terms of online voting, Everyone Counts, the vendor who rendered services in 2016, is no longer operational. As of now, the City Clerk has not researched vendors who could provide the customization required for NC Elections, nor would a contract be procured in a timely manner to maintain the current election schedule for 2021. If directed, City Clerk staff will work to identify viable vendors for future online elections.

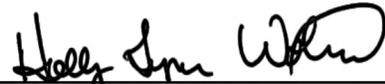
CONCLUSION

This report provides a summary of our current efforts to educate the public about the upcoming all VBM 2021 NC Elections. We have shared information related to outreach strategies that are underway to engage the public, targeted segments of the community, and unhoused residents of Los Angeles in the NC Elections. Thank you for the opportunity to share our work. We are available to answer questions at any time.

Respectfully,



Raquel Beltran
General Manager
Department of Neighborhood Empowerment



Holly L. Wolcott
City Clerk