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April 23, 2024

Honorable Councilmember Bob Blumenfield, Chair
Members of the Budget, Finance and Innovation Committee
Office of the City Clerk
Room 395, City Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90012

**SUBJECT: COUNCIL FILE 24-0600 - DEPARTMENT OF NEIGHBORHOOD
EMPOWERMENT FISCAL YEAR 2024-2025 BUDGET REQUEST**

Honorable Members:

We express our sincere gratitude for your leadership during the current fiscal challenges facing the City. The Mayor's Office and our partners in the Office of the City Administrative Officer (CAO) have also been terrific to work with during the past year.

The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (EmpowerLA) has reviewed Mayor Bass's Proposed Budget for Fiscal Year 2024-2025. We are grateful that the Mayor recommended funding and support for the 2025 Neighborhood Council (NC) Election awareness and engagement cycle, regularization of a Project Assistant position, continued funding for two of the Department's six (6) current vacancies, and the continued funding of important events to foster local youth participation and to spotlight the resilience and dedication demonstrated by women in leadership positions.

We would also like to recognize and offer our gratitude for the Mayor's support of the City Clerk's Neighborhood Council Elections funding proposal.

I. Outcomes: The Impact of the Proposed Budget

- A. Resilience and delivery of core services:** The Department's role is multifaceted and always adapting to changes and needs of the Neighborhood Council system. With the proposed budget, we will continue to provide direct Neighborhood Council support to the 99 Neighborhood Councils by attending in-person and virtual board meetings, providing

training and support to board members, and planning for programming that promotes youth and women leadership. We are dedicated to upholding our support and facilitation of meetings with NC Homelessness Liaisons and other specialized groups. Furthermore, we will continue our endeavors to support the Congress of Neighborhoods Planning Committee and actively educate Neighborhood Councils in the City's budgeting procedures. We will oversee the Neighborhood Council grievances and Community Impact Statement (CIS) process, and actively collaborate with and support the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners in their efforts to establish policies that effectively address the needs of Neighborhood Councils. Our work will continue to embrace the diversity, range of experiences, perspectives, and opinions within the Neighborhood Council system.

B. Multi-tiered grassroots outreach engagement support of the 2025 NC election cycle:

The Department is requesting support to implement a public engagement election awareness campaign that builds on the Department's continuous civic engagement efforts and results in successful Neighborhood Council board elections. Our vision of a successful election is an increase in engagement that translates to more candidates, voters, and Neighborhood Council awareness.

The proposed \$225,000 in election outreach funding will help develop a campaign that empowers communities, and works with both community-based partners and City departments to promote participation in NC elections. The proposed funding for Election community-based organizations (\$90,000) will give us the opportunity to work with trusted partners, who are already doing great work in neighborhoods throughout our city. Many of these partners have a history of engagement and already provide programming and services that engage hard-to-reach populations, including non-English speakers, youth, and older adults. This will hopefully ameliorate our challenges with doing direct in-person engagement.

The Salaries, As-Needed funding (\$20,000) will support our grassroots community-level engagement that is amplified by our as-needed staff, who are the pillar of our year-long engagement efforts. This investment will empower us to do limited door-to-door canvassing and event table staffing. We will enhance our community-level engagement with a citywide awareness campaign that will invest in online and printed resources (\$30,000). In the past, this engagement has included materials for distribution at in-person presentations, printed resources, and ready-to-use election promotional materials for distribution at community events.

The Office and Administration funding (\$85,000) will support the development and distribution of promotional materials at community events. In the past, promotional materials have helped to subsidize the promotional needs of Neighborhood Councils and are shared with partnering city departments, who help us promote the NC system. This

funding will also support our candidate recruitment efforts across advertising and media placements on print and digital platforms.

C. Direct Neighborhood Council support services: EmpowerLA's front desk support team is made up of three administrative clerks, all filled through Targeted Local Hire (TLH), and are responsible for posting of NC agendas to the City's Early Notification System (ENS) system for their respectively assigned Neighborhood Councils. They provide data entry and database support to the Neighborhood Empowerment Advocates, ensuring that records and case notes are updated regularly for liability and consistency. They provide first level customer service for the Department and our NCs by handling phone calls and emails. They are able to document any issues made by the public and route them to the appropriate respondents.

D. Continued promotion of Women's Leadership and Youth Engagement events: Continued funding for these events will ensure that Empower LA can carry on its annual programming aimed to encourage more women to join their Neighborhood Council and to run for executive positions on boards. We look forward to creating spaces for women to connect and support each other by sharing their experience and organically developing mentor-mentee relationships. We received positive reviews from our latest Women's Leadership event where over 100 women serving on Neighborhood Councils came together to hear from a series of speakers, including Councilmember Heather Hutt and Mayor Karen Bass, on the importance of authentic leadership approaches.

This funding will also allow us to bring youth together again to teach them about local government and the Neighborhood Council system. We hope to expand our program by collaborating with other City Departments and community partners to encourage more civic participation and representation of youth in the City.

While budget and space constraints limited participation to 60 applicants, the 2024 EmpowerLA Youth Conference garnered 133 applications from youth across the City of Los Angeles. Participants spent the day learning about ways to get involved in their community through civic engagement thanks to presentations from EmpowerLA, Youth Development Department, and City Clerk. Students left the conference excited to apply what they learned: when asked in a post-conference survey if they would be interested in joining their Neighborhood Council, 97% of Youth Conference participants said yes.

E. Dispute Resolution Program Development: With an increase in Neighborhood Council system participation, a wider variety of community members who are passionate about the issues and causes they support, are increasingly getting into disputes with one another. If left unattended, the disputes can escalate into bullying and harassment, causing safety concerns, and potential liability against the City.

With the Senior Management Analyst I, we will be able to plan, develop, and implement our efforts to support Neighborhood Councils through dispute resolution activities. Our

approach will aim to build common ground, open lines of communication, and build sustainable resolutions to get Neighborhood Councils back on track so they may continue to use their time and energy in discussing and taking action on the issues that matter most to their communities.

The work of the NC Dispute Resolution position will be supported through collaboration with the Personnel Department, the City Attorney's Office, and the Civil and Human Rights and Equity Department.

II. Request for Supplemental Funding and Support

While we express gratitude for the proposed funding, we find it imperative to address our concerns regarding keeping up with the ever growing needs of the Neighborhood Council system while achieving our core objectives. We acknowledge the financial challenges faced by the City as presented by the CAO and are open to the discussion of eliminating certain vacant positions. However, we are respectfully requesting reconsideration regarding the elimination of two class-specific positions as proposed.

In addition, we have summarized items for which we seek further support to better advance our mission *To promote citizen participation to make government more responsive to local needs* in the Neighborhood Council System. The combined total for these supplemental requests is \$283,931.

A. Reconsideration of Vacant Positions Proposed for Elimination

1. Executive Administrative Assistant III (\$68,716 - 9 months salary)

Justification: This position provides executive administrative support for the General Manager, manages the clerical front desk staff, is the custodian of records, and handles any facility service requests. These duties are currently delegated between the General Manager, and both Management Analysts. This is a unique position in the Department as there is no other classification available that can both support the General Manager's Office and supervise without working another staff member out of class.

The position was only recently vacated in December 2023 due to a promotional opportunity for the incumbent.

Impact if Not Funded: Without this position, the General Manager expends a significant amount of time managing a complex and busy calendar, planning and preparing for meeting logistics, conducting research, and overseeing report preparation. The responsibility of managing our customer service team, often the initial point of contact for the public with our department, is currently delegated to other staff

members already handling a full workload. The same applies to managing our facilities' needs and records management, including responding to Public Records Act requests (PRAs).

2. Systems Analyst (\$75,215 - 9 months salary)

Justification: This position provides complex technological support for the Department and the Neighborhood Council System, in particular the development of applications and portals that allow board members to take mandatory training courses, and innovative updates to our website to improve accessibility and user experience. We strive to improve accessibility within the Neighborhood Council system in regards to our digital products and to innovate on our Department's delivery of digital services. The position will support the entire Department and all 99 Neighborhood Councils' IT/systems needs, including website development and maintenance, email support, case tracking databases, other application support, hardware procurement and installation, A/V support, podcast audio services, ENS, and CIS platform support. This position will help mitigate cybersecurity risks for the Department and the NCs.

As the Department and NCs continue to innovate, especially with the passing of SB411 (virtual meetings made available for all 99 NCs), we face a challenge of providing increasing maintenance and support for an ever growing list of applications and technology.

The Department has no Analyst available for this role as it requires specific knowledge of systems hardware and software applications.

Impact if Not Funded: The Department's goal to enhance digital services, both on mobile devices and our website, hinges significantly on this position. Without it, we will face substantial setbacks in implementing necessary improvements that enhance accessibility for all stakeholders interacting with our department. Additionally, the absence of this role will hinder our ability to deliver both internal and external technological support, thereby affecting overall workflow and efficiency. Maintaining this position is crucial for the continuous development and deployment of user-focused services and for ensuring comprehensive support throughout the department and the neighborhood council system.

B. Neighborhood Council Elections Outreach

1. Multi-tiered Grassroots Engagement Support of the 2025 NC election cycle (\$140,000)

- a) As-Needed (\$50,000): As-needed staff is at the heart of our grassroots level civic engagement. It is critical to fund additional as-needed staff to ensure that we are optimizing direct in-person engagement across communities that have limited broadband access, and live in communities with low levels of civic engagement. This past year our as-needed staff participated in over 100 events on behalf of our department and helped distribute thousands of resources to hard-to-reach communities. Our as-needed staff is instrumental in direct service support in neighborhoods through the development of personalized election materials across the 99 neighborhood councils.
- b) Office and Admin (\$25,000): The most frequent concern we have received from Neighborhood Council leaders and stakeholders is that most Angelenos do not know about the Neighborhood Council system. As a result, the problem we seek to address is the low participation of eligible stakeholders in NC elections. This includes having too few candidates and low to no voter turnout during an election cycle. Additional funding to invest in strategic digital and broadcast advertising will ensure that we reach a larger sector of the City, including young adults who have low levels of participation in the NC system. This is key to promote vote-by-mail ballots and promote election deadlines that vary across the 12 regions in the NC system. Strategic efforts will be made to engage students across university and college campuses through established channels of school communication.
- c) Contractual Services (\$65,000): Continuing our partnership with the Bureau of Street Lighting via the Street Banner Light Program by funding (\$25,000) banners across 11 regions throughout our city. This program promotes our 99NCs.com website that connects individuals to NCs, the elections process and city services. In order to engage in an effective election awareness campaign, while utilizing an inclusive framework, we need to bridge meaningful connections with populations and communities in our city that have historically under-participated in NC elections. Language accessibility funding (\$40,000) introduces individuals to Neighborhood Councils, connects them to City resources, strengthens their voice and connects them to municipal government. Being able to translate all of our communications is fundamental to the deliberate inclusion of all in the public engagement process.

Impact if Not Funded: Without a strategically inclusive, multi-level and robust investment in engagement, the Department will be limited in its ability to build a relationship with eligible stakeholders, which is the first step required to inspire civic participation.

An additional example of the opportunity lost without an engagement strategy was evidenced in 2021 where approximately 22,000 (rounded) Angelenos requested mail ballots, but over 7,000 of these did not mail back their ballots and vote. In 2023, we saw lower engagement with the lasting impact of limited in-person engagement due to COVID. Even then, 1,800 (rounded) prospective voters did not mail back their requested ballots. With engagement, those that request ballots could be targeted to encourage participation and mitigate the barriers they are experiencing to casting their ballots.

Based on the 2020 5-Year ACS Census Data, in Los Angeles only 41% of the population speaks English, with 52% speaking predominantly Spanish and Asian-Pacific Island languages. Additionally, about 47 of the 99 Neighborhood Councils are in communities with a high or very high equity score in the City Administrative Officers' M.A.D.E Equity Index Tool, meaning that they need a prioritization of resources due to high needs, a severe lack of opportunity, a legacy of inequities, higher density, language barriers and housing instability. Without critical funding to utilize language interpretation services across our engagement efforts, linguistic communities that are already hard-to-reach will go unrepresented in our election engagement. Furthermore, our Department will not reach areas of our city with low levels of civic participation, representation and resource equity.

When Neighborhood Councils do not get enough candidates to have competitive races for at least one of their board seats, the new members are simply sworn in via a board affirmation process, and the Office of the City Clerk does not host polls for those NCs. Members are therefore self-anointed rather than chosen by the voting public.

C. Technical Corrections to Proposal: The proposed budget identifies two (2) Administrative Clerks as continued for funding and resolution authority under the Dispute Resolution program, however these positions were originally approved to provide direct Neighborhood Council support services and work as members of the front desk customer service team. Only the Senior Management Analyst I has been approved to implement the Dispute Resolution program for the department.

The combined total for these supplemental requests is \$283,931.

III. Restructuring Current Positions to Fill Critical Needs

An assessment of the Department's current structure reveals that many positions within our divisions serve a specific and crucial function tailored to our operational needs. While repurposing or restructuring positions may be feasible in larger departments with more flexible roles and a wider selection of classifications to work with, our department's small size and unique classifications limit the potential for such adjustments without compromising efficiency

or working current employees out of class, and risking potential grievances. This is most apparent when considering the option of restructuring or repurposing the Systems Analyst and Executive Administrative Assistant III's core responsibilities, as we do not have remaining classifications similar enough to allow for such repurposing. Therefore, while we continuously evaluate our staffing needs and organizational dynamics, at present, there are critically needed positions that cannot be repurposed or restructured by existing staff roles.

IV. The Equity Lens

We are committed to advancing equity principles in alignment with the Mayor's goals of enhancing services, expanding opportunities, and promoting employment pathways for Angelenos through the Targeted Local Hire program.

Through data-driven practices and engagement with Neighborhood Councils, we work to strengthen civic engagement, social justice, and resource equity. This includes supporting racial and gender equity plans, addressing systemic inequities, and empowering Neighborhood Councils in underserved areas. Key initiatives include conducting racial equity baseline studies, creating support groups for women in leadership, providing anti-bias training, developing conflict resolution procedures, and promoting workplace equity policies. Additionally, efforts are underway to enhance language inclusion, address digital inequality, and ensure equitable access to resources and tools for all Neighborhood Council members.

The Department's racial and gender equity plans support Mayoral Executive Directives #11 on Gender Equity in City Operations and #27 on Racial Equity in City Government. EmpowerLA approaches its work from a framework that recognizes our government has played a role in creating and maintaining racial inequity. Per the equity map, there are 47 NC's that represent neighborhoods in great need. These Neighborhood Councils are challenged with supporting and retaining Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) board members and committee members. Our work plans implement programs that allow for meaningful education with Neighborhood Council leaders and the communities they serve, with the goal of recruiting and retaining diverse members ready to serve and represent the needs of their neighborhoods.

Department staff completed Results Based Accountability (RBA) training to further develop their skills and plans to implement RBA training for Neighborhood Councils. In partnership with the University of Southern California and Civil + Human Rights and Equity Department, the Department has issued a Gender Identity and Gender Expression training that will be required for all department staff and Neighborhood Council board members.

The Department views providing essential required trainings to be an equity issue. The Department regularly includes funding requests to deliver these trainings in core languages (English, Spanish, traditional Chinese, Korean, Armenian and Farsi).

The Dispute Resolution position will develop procedures for administering and enforcing the City of Los Angeles and Board of Neighborhood Commissioners (BONC) policies about racism, bias, bullying, and civil and human rights. This process will include potential amendments to ensure NCs have the necessary support to comply with expectations and standards individually. We will develop workshops to support Neighborhood Council implementation of the Workplace Equity Policy, which is embedded in the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners Code of Conduct Policy amendments.

Respectfully Submitted,

Vanessa Serrano

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INTERIM GENERAL MANAGER