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**RAQUEL BELTRÁN**  
GENERAL MANAGER

January 11, 2022

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

**SUBJECT: NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL 2021 ELECTION OUTREACH UPDATE**

**BACKGROUND:** In anticipation of the Fiscal Year 2020-2021 budgetary constraints, the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (Department/EmpowerLA) took action during May and June of 2020 to develop election outreach tools to support the transition of Neighborhood Councils to a virtual system of governance due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of the City Clerk designed an all VOTE-BY-MAIL (VBM) election system for the 2020-2021 Neighborhood Council elections.

On August 26, 2020, the City Council approved [Council File 20-0963](#), the Department's amended Election Strategy (ESP) for the 2020-2021 Neighborhood Council elections, which were already underway. The ESP was developed in less than 30 days, incorporating integrated methods for creating awareness and increasing engagement in

the NC elections. The Department's ESP was developed to address the election procedures unique to neighborhood councils and the additionally complicated requirements of VBM NC elections. The approach recognized the limitations of standard outreach approaches of prior years to fully address the needs of doing election outreach while pandemic social distancing restrictions were in place.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Note and file this report.

**SUMMARY:**

**2020-2021 Election Strategy Plan (ESP)**

The [2020-2021 Elections Strategic Plan](#) (ESP) was informed and shaped by our surveys and feedback sessions. We also looked at strategies that were successful for the 2019 elections. Neighborhood Councils were broadly surveyed for input on how to best engage stakeholders within their boundaries. Additionally, the Department held 71 one-on-one outreach strategy sessions with individual NCs and seven (7) regional outreach gatherings throughout the Neighborhood Council System to gather input from NCs regarding their outreach needs. We also met with the NC Homelessness Liaisons, to discuss how best to share election news with unhoused neighbors.

**FISCAL IMPACT:**

No fiscal impact with this report. In their proposed Fiscal Year 2022-2023 Proposed Budget, the Office of the City Clerk has requested resources for an at-polls and VOTE-BY-MAIL neighborhood council election.

EmpowerLA is currently not resourced to begin preparations for the 2022-2023 election cycle, which begins in nine (9) months. The 2020-2021 ESP included methods for engaging community-based partners, public relations, and media communications tools. A copy of our complete 2020-2021 Election Strategy Plan is detailed here: [2021 NC Elections \\$456,000 Justification detailed](#). The ESP has been revised for application to the 2022-2023 NC elections.

**CONCLUSION:**

The successful Election Strategy Plan for the 2021 Neighborhood Council elections demonstrated the effectiveness of using multilevel integrated approaches to this grassroots effort. Awareness and engagement in the Neighborhood Council elections requires the availability of resources in the “off year,” in order to plan and prepare for the administration of the ESP in the election year. *A minimum of 8 -10 months is needed to assemble the resources and partnerships described in the plan, before launching.* We have created a framework and a foundation for continuing this effort on an ongoing basis, with City Council approval.

Thank you for your review of this report. We are available to answer any questions at your convenience.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Raquel Beltran". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned to the left of a vertical line.

Raquel Beltran,

GMB

## EmpowerLA APHEN Report

### 2020-2021 Neighborhood Council Elections

#### OVERVIEW:

The EmpowerLA Neighborhood Council Elections Strategy Plan (ESP) involved five (5) components: 1) general awareness; 2) candidate recruitment, application, and engagement; 3) voter application and engagement; 4) mail ballot return and engagement; and 5) election day voting. Complete highlights of our elections outreach efforts are available in this slideshow: <http://tiny.cc/NCElectionOutreachReport>.

This graphic below features some of the 2020-21 election outreach successes. Additional summaries of the integrated components of the ESP and how they supported the overall engagement strategy follow.



#### Paid and organic press and media

NC elections had 25 press and media appearances during the 2020-21 season, including 23 organic appearances in outlets like ABC7, Telemundo, KCRW, LA Taco and La Opinión, and two paid placements promoting South LA elections in the LA Sentinel's e-blast newsletter and Harbor elections in the Daily Breeze.

LA OPINIÓN > LOS ANGELES

## Indocumentados hacen oír su voz en los consejos vecinales de LA

No importa la educación que tengan; y si hablan o no inglés; pueden participar



LA  
OPINIÓN



### **Direct email campaigns**

- 738 prospective South LA candidates who signed up for NC elections info at 2019 election tabling events in South LA were sent an invite to attend candidate info sessions this election season.
- 4 regional elections resources newsletters with region-specific cut/paste Get-Out-The-Vote messaging, social media graphics, and details on vote tallies and election results were sent to NC members and candidates in West LA, the Harbor, and both South LA election regions.

### **Paid and organic digital engagement: Social media ads and Nextdoor**

Over \$69k was spent Citywide on social media ads, including 12 Facebook/Instagram campaigns and 19 Twitter campaigns. Ads were not able to be placed until well into the election season, due to ad moratoriums placed on all three platforms after the January 6, 2021 Capitol insurrection. However, ads on Facebook/Instagram still reached nearly 900,000 unique viewers, while Twitter ads reached over 250,000 unique viewers.



## SOCIAL MEDIA ADS

\$69,863.23 spent Citywide / Citywide cost per click: \$0.97

### FACEBOOK / INSTAGRAM

- 12 CAMPAIGNS
- 68 ADS FOR VOTERS CITYWIDE
- 69,116 TOTAL LINK CLICKS
- \$58,973.96 TOTAL SPEND
- \$0.85 COST PER CLICK
- 883,869 PEOPLE REACHED (UNIQUE VIEWERS)
- 4,108,375 TOTAL IMPRESSIONS (TOTAL # VIEWS)

### TWITTER

- 19 TOTAL CAMPAIGNS COMPLETED
- 38 ADS
- 2,985 TOTAL LINK CLICKS
- \$10,889.27 TOTAL SPEND
- \$3.65 COST PER CLICK
- 263,556 PEOPLE REACHED (UNIQUE VIEWERS)
- 971,416 TOTAL IMPRESSIONS (TOTAL # VIEWS)



In addition to paid advertising, organic digital engagement was done via EmpowerLA's Citywide Nextdoor Public Agency account, which reaches over 750,000 followers. Unlike other social media platforms, where organic posts cannot be targeted to followers by geography, EmpowerLA's Nextdoor account can be microtargeted to areas that match individual NC boundaries.

Being able to match elections messaging to relevant audiences was essential for keeping elections communications clear given the 12 regional timelines, which overlapped so that some regions were still enrolling candidates while others were already open for voter enrollment. Microtargeting elections messaging was done very effectively through Facebook and Instagram ads for the 2019 NC elections, but the political ads moratorium on those platforms limited the use of those ads this season.

A total of 411 Nextdoor posts were made for the 2021 elections - five per NC, promoting candidate recruitment and filing deadlines, vote-by-mail applications, and ballot return reminders. There were 11,051 clicks on the ballot request link used for Nextdoor.

### **Non-digital engagement strategy**

- 300,000 election postcards in 4 languages were distributed in 4 languages at City vaccination centers, thanks to an arrangement made by the City Clerk. QR codes on the cards connected readers to landing pages with Get Out the Vote overviews in their language of choice.

- Public agency partnerships helped us amplify our reach. We were fortunate to get outreach help from several agencies this election season. Support from LADWP and the LA County Registrar Recorder was especially well-timed for election timelines in the Central, Hollywood, East LA regions.



### **Digital outreach tools and election outreach graphic templates for NCs**

NCs were provided with digital outreach tools and resources, such as a social media best practices webinar held before the election season opened. Customizable election outreach graphics templates in English, Spanish, Korean, and Traditional Chinese were also shared through Canva Pro accounts paid for and administered by the Department for NCs. Templates included social media and newsletter graphics; posters; brochures; and outdoor ad graphics for use via the City’s bus bench/shelter ad placement program.

Customizable election outreach templates like these save valuable NC member time and help mitigate the challenge of navigating the variation in election rules and timelines between individual NCs. Outreach templates had been a strategy implemented in 2019 after it was popularly requested by NCs during feedback sessions after the 2016 elections, and continued for 2020-2021 due to strong positive feedback after the pilot season in 2019.

### **Other elections support for NCs**

Every one of the 91 NCs having an election this year were invited to a one-on-one outreach strategy session, prior to their candidate recruitment opening. Seventy-one (71) NCs attended these sessions; dozens more also attended the seven (7) regional election outreach gatherings held for NCs with overlapping election timelines.

### **Support for candidates**

Over 1,100 candidates enrolled in the (8) virtual candidate info sessions this season - more than triple the enrollment during the 2019 season. Sessions explained what NCs are and how they do their work, and offered free and low-cost tips for running a successful campaign for local elected office.

### **CHALLENGES:**

The 2020-21 NC Election season opened November 13, 2020 and closed June 15, 2021. The Department greatly appreciated the City Council outreach funds support. Approval was received in early November 2020, just days before the election cycle opened on November 13, which impacted our ability to do advance preparations. Strategies that are totally common sense and normal for regular elections are not possible in Neighborhood Council elections. Citywide outreach is difficult during the election season given the *12 different rolling deadlines and 91 different sets of election rules*. It is much more streamlined during non-election years.

### **Timeline:**

Effective administration of a comprehensive election engagement strategy in the elections requires a two-year timeline, with a planning and prep year in between election years. A two-year timeline would allow the Department to secure adequate resources and partnership contracts in a timely manner.

### **Staffing:**

Due to the hiring moratorium, the Department was unable to hire election staff to administer the election (this may not have been the case for the Office of the City Clerk). Election tasks were absorbed by the staff providing direct neighborhood council support to NCs thereby reducing their ability to properly serve the NC System. Our base staffing was further limited by our inability to fill vacancies. Due to the hiring moratorium staffing was reduced by over 25%.

### **Social distancing and the digital divide:**

The elections took place while social distancing protocols due to the pandemic were in place. As a result, engaging those with limited internet access was challenging. The in-person engagement strategies that had been most successful for us in previous election seasons, such as holding rallies or taking flyers door-to-door, were not options this year due to social distancing.

This season, we hoped SMS outreach could help us reach across the digital divide without face-to-face contact. Pew Research reports that in 2021, about 15% of Americans surveyed were [dependent on their smartphones for internet access](#).

SMS messaging can be an important way to reach underserved populations. People who are [younger, lower income, or who have less education](#) were more likely to report relying on their phones for internet access. While [97% of Americans have a mobile phone](#), 11% of them do not have a smartphone, so SMS is also able to reach these individuals.

Unfortunately, we were precluded from implementing methods most effective to reach under-engaged populations. However, we are continuing to explore how to get approval for what is needed to most effectively embrace these methods in the 2022-2023 elections.

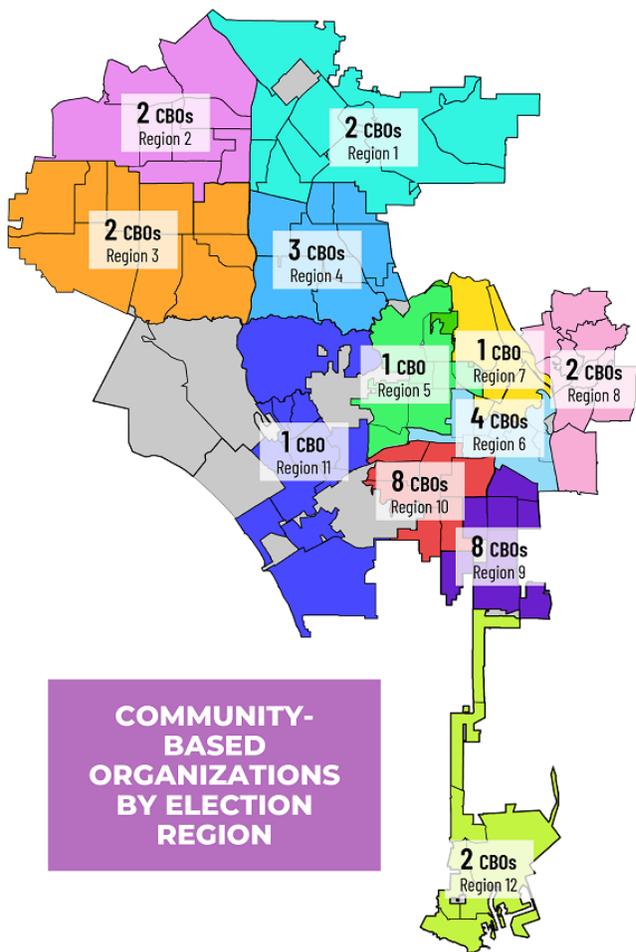
### **Development and design of outreach templates for NCs:**

Neighborhood councils need tools like the customizable election outreach graphics templates to be available at least 4 months before their election cycle begins, so they can begin building awareness before their election opens. Department staff also need time to administer the outdoor ads ordering and placement process, which utilizes these graphics templates. This season, the production cycle for these items was pushed back due to budget delays, so that the outreach templates were not able to be produced until after candidate recruitment had already opened in some areas.

## **Social media political ads moratorium:**

Digital communications, particularly social media ads, were the most cost-effective way of reaching voters and candidates during the last elections in 2019, and they had the best engagement rates of all our outreach that season, as shown in this [2019 election outreach infographic](#).

Yet just as the election season opened in mid-November 2020, major social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter put a moratorium on all political ads, to prevent the spread of misinformation about the Presidential elections. We were unable to place any social media ads prior to the season opening, because our outreach funding was not received until the moratorium was already in place. Facebook and Instagram extended their moratorium till March 2021 - after all candidate cycles had closed - because of the January 6, 2021 insurrection in the U.S. Capitol. We lost a total of five (5) months of vital elections engagement time, on our best engagement channels, due to this moratorium.



## **Community-based engagement through CBOs**

One successful non-digital strategy this season was forming outreach partnerships with 13 community-based organizations (CBOs) in every NC election region. Partnerships with CBOs were very effective wherever the contracts could be executed in time to educate and activate the partners. But in 2020-21, delay in establishing contracts with CBOs affected the impact of outreach via these partners.

These CBO partnerships resulted in deeper and more meaningful awareness and engagement of stakeholders in the NC election. However, a pre-education campaign for the CBOs was necessary.

## **Challenges with candidate and voter tools and processes**

- Separate City Clerk and EmpowerLA elections webpages: Participants must currently check both Department websites to gather all the information they need to run or vote in NC elections.
- Ballot tracking: There was a challenge with voters being unable to check on the processing of their mailed ballots unless they phoned the City Clerk's office.
- Email opt-ins: There was also some uncertainty about email opt-ins during candidate and voter registration this season.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

### **NC election participation: 2019 vs. 2021**

Citywide, voter participation in 2021 increased over the 2019 season. The [number of ballots requested at the polls in 2019](#) - including both ballots successfully cast and provisional ballots - was 22,795, as compared to the 29,707 ballot applications received by the City Clerk in 2021. That means almost 7,000 more people tried to participate in the NC elections in 2021 than in 2019 - an increase of about 32%.

However, 9,000 ballots that were mailed out to applicants never came back to City Clerk in 2021. By contrast, [in 2019](#) the number of unfulfilled ballots - provisional ballots, in this case - was much smaller, only 612, while 22,183 ballots were successfully cast. This may be due to 2019's at-polls (no VBM) electoral system, where help with voter documentation or other questions was readily available.

Having the resources to do a stronger outreach campaign is vital to educating voters on how to participate in NC elections, which work differently than other elections and which have rules and timelines that vary between individual NCs. With a stronger outreach campaign, we could have recouped perhaps 50% of the 9,000 ballots that were not returned in 2021. If at least half (50%) of those ballots could have been recovered, the election results might have yielded an additional 4,500 ballots. That would have brought the total number of ballots successfully cast in 2021 over the total cast in 2019.

### **Regional differences in 2020-21 election participation**

Neighborhood council elections are held every two years, but each NC is able to set their own election rules, so not every NC holds an election every season. Some only have

elections every four years, for example. Other NCs may not have an election because they did not get enough candidates in competitive races to trigger one that season.

Because of that, the best way to compare results from the 2021 and 2019 NC election cycles is to compare data for those NCs who had elections in both seasons.

[This data dashboard compares the 76 neighborhood councils who had elections in both 2019 and 2021.](#) The NC election cycle is held over a six-month cycle. NCs are organized into 12 election regions; each region has its own election timeline, which is shared by all NCs in that region. The dashboard shows significant regional variation in 2021 vs. 2019 voter turnout:

- **3 regions had increased voter turnout**
  - Region 3 / Southwest Valley +120.5%
  - Region 5 (Central/Hollywood) +19.2%
  - Region 11 / (West LA) +25.1%
  
- **Voter turnout in 5 other regions went down by more than 35%**
  - Region 1 / Northeast Valley -43.5%
  - Region 2 / Northwest Valley -38.4%
  - Region 6 / Central City -58.9%
  - Region 7 / Northeast -43.4%
  - Region 9 / South LA -73.4%
  - Region 10 / South LA -59.2%

There are a few different factors that may have negatively impacted voter turnout in the six (6) regions where turnout fell by more than 35%:

- **The impact of the digital divide.** The digital divide magnified the adverse impact of the pandemic on some LA neighborhoods. According to LA County's [Delete the Divide](#) initiative, over 53% of South and East LA residents have NO internet service. Two of the six regions where turnout fell by over 35% were the two South LA regions, Regions 9 and 10, where lack of internet access likely hampered election outreach and ballot applications. Without internet access, in a vote-by-mail system, requesting ballots through an online portal is a clear disadvantage for those communities.
  
- **The impact of having some NC candidate application periods scheduled during the holidays.** Four of the six regions where voter turnout fell by 35% or more [Regions 1 (NE Valley), 2 (NW Valley), 6 (Central City), and 7 (NE)] had

timelines where all or part of their candidate enrollment period occurred [during the Thanksgiving through New Year holidays](#).

- **The social media ad moratorium also had an impact.** Timelines for earlier NC election regions also intersected with the moratorium on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter political ads, which went into effect during the November 2020 national elections - right when the NC election season opened - and was not lifted until March 2021. The loss of this cost-effective tool was especially impactful because of the constraints social distancing placed on using alternative election engagement strategies during the pandemic, such as rallies. Almost certainly this contributed to turnout falling 35% or more in Regions 1 (NE Valley), 2 (NW Valley), 6 (Central City), and 7 (NE), which all had these earlier timelines, leaving them little to no time to advertise on social media.

In 2019, social media ads - particularly ads on Facebook and Instagram - were far and away the [most cost-effective and productive means](#) of reaching prospective candidates and voters. The loss of access to these tools during 50% of the 2021 election season - particularly during a pandemic, when digital tools were even more vital due to social distancing - had a strong negative impact on outreach results this season.

Having access to a social media advertising budget during the planning and prep year will help lay the groundwork for elections the following year. Offseason ads also have the advantage of being cheaper and easier to manage because are not time-sensitive, and do not have to be microtargeted as they must when the variations in election dates and NC election rules are an issue.

### **The unexpected silver lining of social distancing**

Social distancing requirements in place throughout the 2020-2021 election season meant having to move all our engagement events and workshops online. As was seen in the tripling of candidate info session enrollment this season, the ease for many people of attending a meeting online or by phone rather than commuting to City Hall dramatically increased participation. The virtual environment also allowed us to easily meet with every NC who wanted an outreach strategy session. Based on these results, whatever the trajectory of the pandemic, we will continue to offer many virtual events and workshops in future elections.

## **Citywide NC Awareness and Engagement**

There were many aspects of the Election Strategy Plan that were effective. They are the foundation of the plan that has been developed for the 2022-2023 NC Elections, which begin only nine (9) months from now.

Citywide efforts are an important element to support deeper grassroots efforts. Results from our NC Awareness and Engagement Survey which closed December 31, 2021, provide useful insights to the challenges we face increasing participation in the Neighborhood Council System. Over 6,800 residents were surveyed via email to poll their awareness and engagement with the System. 46% of respondents identified as white, while 45% identified as BIPOC (Black, indigenous, or persons of color).

Over one-quarter of respondents have never heard of NCs, while one-third have heard of NCs, but never participated with them. And even among those who have participated in their NC, one-third of them had not heard that NCs were meeting virtually, though they have been doing so since May 2020. On a scale of 1-7, respondents who have attended NC meetings rated their experience with a mean score of 4.13.

Awareness of Neighborhood Councils has to happen first, to pave the way for more engaging elections. More time is needed to set up contracts and then utilize these contracts to establish awareness, before embarking on election outreach. To address this, the Department has laid out a plan for Citywide NC awareness marketing and engagement efforts with simple, introductory-level messaging about NCs and how to get involved, to be carried out during the prepping and planning year.

### **Development and design of outreach templates for NCs:**

Customizable election outreach templates need to be developed and designed during the prepping and planning year, so that there is time to train NC members on how to get the best use out of these tools, and they can use them in time to build awareness prior to the season opening.

### **CBOs: Building stronger partnerships**

Before these organizations launch election outreach campaigns with their stakeholders, we need at least 2-3 months to work with their staff first, to get them educated on how NCs work and how they intersect with the needs and interests of the communities their organization serves.

### **Development of tools and processes for candidates and voters**

- Creating a shared NC elections website between the Office of the City Clerk and EmpowerLA would reduce any confusion caused by breaking election info across different department websites, and would improve access to needed information as expressed during the post-election feedback sessions.
- Ballot tracking: A ballot-tracking system, tool, or app would increase transparency and make the process of checking on one's ballot more self-service.
- Email opt-ins: Confusion experienced this season can be resolved by improving the language and process used for email opt-ins during candidate and voter registration in future seasons.

### **CLOSING:**

The Department has determined there is no such thing as an “off-year” as it relates to planning and preparing for Neighborhood Council elections. Allocating a budget for NC awareness and engagement efforts to be carried out during “off years” - and especially during the summer leading up to an election cycle - will help ensure that these efforts are bearing fruit by the time the elections open in the fall.

A planning and prep year is also needed. For example, City Clerk's NC Elections team are shortly starting feedback sessions to plan for the 2022-23 season, and their staff is currently reaching out to NCs to work on elections bylaws. This means that getting 25%-30% of the election-related awareness and engagement budget is needed in the planning and prepping year to effectively execute the ESP.