

NEIGHBORHOOD FOUNDATION

MEMORANDUM #18

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WASHINGTON, D. C.

DATE: APRIL 1, 1967

SUBJECT: ASSEMBLY BASED NEIGHBORHOOD CORPORATION

The question has frequently been asked why the legal authority of the Neighborhood Corporation is based on the decision of its assembly of membership. This constitution differs from the ordinary community organization pattern which vests final lawmaking powers in the elected or appointed community boards. At issue here is the difference between direct democracy or representative government as the appropriate constitutional structure of neighborhood corporation. This paper will discuss the practical necessity of assembly government for the survival and developing strength of Neighborhood Corporation.

ECCO membership is open to all residents, age 16 or above, of the one square mile territory of ECCO. The residents become members upon signing the ECCO roster. The membership is the legal body of ECCO and exercises its legislative authority in assembly meetings.

The ECCO Assembly meets annually to elect the officers of the corporation, as well as once a year by law, for other business. It can also meet upon the call of 50 members or the decision of any of its four neighborhood districts. In addition to its authority to elect executive officers, the Assembly has authority to remove them for cause, approve or terminate all ECCO programs, amend the bylaws of the corporation, investigate neighborhood problems, and initiate new programs to meet its community needs. Last year the ECCO Assembly met four times with its required quorum of 10% and effectively conducted its legislative affairs. Currently operating a \$400,000 budget, ECCO runs a range of self-determined social service programs of common benefit to its citizens.

Its constitutional structure of authority can be called town meeting government, with the ECCO Assembly as only one expression of direct citizen decision. Popular decision also operates through the neighborhood clubs and executive committees of ECCO. It is important to understand these other ways in which the ECCO citizen exercises his direct decision in the legislative and judicial process of the ECCO organization.

The membership of ECCO is divided into four neighborhood clubs, which quadrate the territory of ECCO. While these clubs are independent organizations, they act also as districts of the ECCO membership. Each club annually elects three executive officers of the ECCO Council, with the Assembly electing the remaining eighteen members at large. A club can also convene the Assembly. The clubs are political districts of ECCO with distinct local interests and political attitudes. The direct decision of the membership of ECCO operates on a continuing political basis through the clubs, as districts of the Assembly. To the extent that the clubs are represented on the Council we may consider ECCO's constitution as direct democracy with a mixed element of representation. Yet the demos is the primary element in this mixed form.

A further constitutional element of direct democracy is reflected in the committee structure of the ECCO Executive Council. The committees are chaired by councilmen, but open to the membership, with equal vote. The importance of committee authority in ECCO program development and administration evidences the further extent of direct citizen decision in the ongoing affairs of ECCO.

Let us now examine the practice of these three constitutional expressions of direct citizen decision, and the structural importance of assembly government for the strength and survival of neighborhood corporation.

A. Assembly

Last year the ECCO Assembly had four meetings in which it authorized new service programs, passed five bylaws, rejected a housing rehabilitation plan developed by the housing committee and program director, confirmed the resignation of an executive director, and made numerous other legislative decisions. The Assembly has developed an effective procedure in settling its agenda of business. The political debate is rich and well ruled, under the chairmanship of the Assembly's independently appointed moderator.

Its lowest attendance was 14% of the membership, and on other occasions far exceeded that percentage, reaching almost 40% on the occasion of Senator Robert Kennedy's appearance and speech. It is important to recognize that the Athenian democracy never succeeded in bringing into the Assembly more than 6,000 of its 50,000 citizens. The early New England town meetings fulfilled ratios comparable to ECCO.

The level of Assembly attendance, above its quorum, is always an issue raised by advocates of representative government. They claim that 14% of the membership is not sufficient to truly 'represent' the interests of corporate membership for legislative purposes. They prefer that the lawmaking function be given to representatives whose electoral vote exceeds this percentage. It is incumbent upon the proponents of direct democracy to counter this argument. First of all, the numbers game is quite tricky. We find in many constituencies that representatives are elected by only as many, if even as many, voters as Assembly can convene for direct legislative decision. And if the wishful argument be made that at least it is possible for a representative to win 70% of the votes of all citizens in his district, we can also wishfully argue that at least it is possible for every citizen to attend the Assembly. On the occasion of certain political crises, the ratio of election or assembly attendance will probably rise in equal proportion. A more fundamental issue than the numbers game is at stake. In direct assembly, a quorum of members is sufficient to bring every political position of concern and interest to the forum for speech, deliberation and decision. It comprises the widest range of political argument, character and emotion on a problem that affects political action, and structures it for common decision.

Representative government permits direct citizen decision only on the issue of election. Normally this involves a citizen action of preference between two candidates once every two years. We can choose only between their characters, arguments and emotions as they speak on all issues. This is the extent of our public decision. We hold no direct law-making power. Issues can hardly be illuminated by the thin interpretation which only two people give it rather than the many of the assembly. Further, we do not know how their character will apply to the issue, as it is argued and elaborated in the rich exchange of the legislative chamber. Hence we cannot comprehend the political character of the candidate. Can the debate of two candidates apprehend the range of argument, character, and emotions that suffuse the many sides of a public question? While they may be elected by more people than attend the Assembly, they contain in their person and can only express far less of the aspects of argument, character and emotion on any issues and problems of the community than can the speech and deliberation of an assembly. Thus it is that assembly, even at the 10% level of required quorum, better represents the political problems of the community. Its law-making can be more deliberative than the legislative decision of representatives.

This is not to say that representative government is not required at the national level to bring in harmony the diverse sectional interests of the nation. That is necessary. But this is not an argument for its greater capacity to express the interests of a political problem than a direct assembly. It is merely a scale requirement at the national level. Since neighborhood community is small, at the level of 6,500 people in ECCC, or upwards to 50,000, there is little

argument for its preference. At the local level of neighborhood community, the greater value of Assembly for legislation should prevail.

B. Neighborhood Clubs

The neighborhood clubs of ECCC existed before the ECCO corporation was developed. With the formation of ECCO, the clubs voted their confidence in the corporation and encouraged their members to join. Today the club members belong to ECCO, so that the clubs, while remaining independent organizations, are also political districts of the ECCO membership and Assembly.

Before ECCO, these clubs were social in nature, running some self-help projects without sufficient resources. Today, as political districts of ECCO, the clubs are far stronger, gaining resources for programs of local interest from the ECCO corporate structure. The program development of ECCO is initiated principally from the clubs. It is within the local areas of these clubs the dramatic events of community need occur in the fields of health, youth programming, housing, education and other problems. The clubs reflect upon this local occurrence and develop these events into programs of solution. The health, youth, and housing programs of ECCO were initiated by the neighborhood clubs, presented to the ECCO Council for Development, and authorized by the Assembly.

As matters stand today the clubs represent the sectional interests of the more intensive localities within ECCO territory. But it is important to note that such sectional interest is not simply served through representation on the Executive Council, but also through political organization of sectional power within the Assembly and of ECCO committees.

The neighborhood club organization within ECCO also serves the vital function of politically structuring the ECCO Assembly, for effective public deliberation and decision. An assembly without internal political organization has no motion or direction. It has no agenda, and the effective procedure of assembly is only possible when citizens come to assembly with political organization. The club quadrants through their own organization provide the internal structuring of issues and leadership within the Assembly.

A final function which the neighborhood clubs serve is the development of new political leadership within the Corporation. Their independent organization and local interests are the foundation for new popular leadership, which moves into the Assembly with district support, and eventuates in official position on the Council and staff of ECCO.

It is within the clubs that new leadership has its first taste of political practice. Since their speech in Assembly is projected on the basis of club support, the rhetoric of leadership is perfected. Political speech, after all, must have political confidence, and club support provides that support.

C. The Committees

The Committees of ECCO are open to the membership and equal vote of the citizens of ECCO. They meet more frequently than the Council and Assembly, and thereby provide the most intensive and regular form of direct citizen decision and deliberation in the affairs of ECCO.

During the past year the committee structure has grown from slow beginnings into effective structures of action. They develop basic program direction, report regularly to the Council for deliberation and authorization, and work with the ECCO staff.

The basic importance of open committee membership and equal decision is that program development in ECCO proceeds with direct responsiveness to the community. Through the open committee structure, program development can draw all interests of the community into the program issue. Nor is this interest only expressed by advice. It is political interest with the authority of decision on a one-man vote basis.

Through the open committee structure the Executive Director, Program Director and other staff of ECCO can be in direct relation to the citizens of the community. The Executive Council does not separate the staff from the people, as we find under representative government. Then administration becomes separated from the people, by executive dependence upon representatives for legislative and budgetary authority.

By the time an ECCO program is developed, the community already knows what it is about. Assembly judgment begins forming in the program development process itself. Thus, authorization or rejection by the Assembly can be deliberated and decided with care and good argument. When programs begin operation, the program already has the confidence of the people. It begins as a strong program. Its political strength enables the program to meet the many problems and difficulties any new program faces. Assembly authority is essential to the very survival of self-governing neighborhood corporations. Ultimate legal authority in the demos is not simply an ideal of political constitution, but a constitutional necessity for neighborhood corporations in poor communities in view of the external opposition to neighborhood self-government. There is little interest among the existing structure of welfare and social service administration, public and private, to transfer some of its authority and resources to local self-governing neighborhood communities.

The professional monopoly of social service authority, as in the case of any bureaucratic administration, gives its primary allegiance to its own survival. That survival rests upon increasing centralized authority and resources. The more authority and resources it gives away, the less power it has for its own benefit. Since it holds no political power, it cannot serve the adjustment of established political authority to new political power. It lives outside the power adjustments essential for good government.

The administrator's career depends upon the bureaucratic structure rather than on popular power. He depends on the plenitude of bureaucracy authorized by existing law, and will not favor transferring law-making power to the people. The opposition of centralized social service administration to transfer of social service authority and resources to independent neighborhood corporations comes in many ways.

Most typically the method of obstructing the development of neighborhood corporate authority is the simple procedure of coopting indigenous leadership from the poor communities into the welfare and social service bureaucracies. Once hired, the leaders can be fired without repercussion since in the very cooption they lose their popular power.

Another method is for social service administration to terrorize political and civic leadership about the anarchy and violence that would ensue upon the grant of self-governing authority to the poor. They claim theft, criminality, stupidity and assorted depravities to establish the shame of such transfer. More often they argue the consequent waste and inefficiency of such local self-determination of community programs. Their abundant rhetoric is enough to terrify political leadership, since these arguments would seem to be the campaign charges of the opposing political party. However, these ascriptions collapse in the face of transfer of authority to legally structured neighborhood corporations, and therefore need not be taken seriously. The greatest obstruction of administration to neighborhood corporation will be their delaying of coordination on applications and general administrative abuse.

It is because of this fact of opposition and its possibilities of obstructing the transfer of authority to local neighborhood organization that direct assembly organization is of crucial importance as a practical political necessity. Insofar as the ECCO authority, legislative and judicial, is based on direct assembly, each citizen of the ECCO community, now numbering 6,500, has a direct decision in the law and operation of that organization. Leadership is open to all. That very direct role in its political process brings into the organization the total human power and spirit of the citizens in the community. The citizens watch and interact with their leadership on the day-by-day

basis of Assembly, clubs, and committees, making it difficult for the leadership to sell out the organization to the bureaucratic interests. Such action can be easily seen. The Assembly can mobilize to remove him. Official and staff incompetence is also similarly checked.

Attack upon the corporation is a direct attack upon the corporate collectivity of the membership. In response to the opposition, the total collectivity of electoral votes can be collected for corporate defense. By bringing the people into assembly and decision, the corporate organized strength of individuals is brought to increase the political power of that corporation. It is in this sense that the organization of the local poor community requires direct assembly.

In a politically educative sense, the continuing meetings of the Assembly and their decision on political issues of the community increases the political knowledge, judgment and practice of each citizen. As they watch leadership with judgment, their decision insures the strongest leadership. The people are constantly informed of the political situation facing the organization and how its opposition is moving. This political education adds intelligence to corporate power of organization based on Assembly authority.

of assembly, initiative, and referendum, and so gives sufficient political authority and resources to govern matters of essential local concern.

In considering these factors, we should understand that the beginning of new political development is crucial. There are other factors which neighborhood development can actually control. Because of a national government and other cities, local government is delayed development. Let us face the right city for a long time coming. The understanding of local issues will be my neighborhood cooperation development into more difficult places.

Neighborhood governmentality as a general principle of municipal constitution, applying to all cities of the United States. Local city issues of political environment may require variations in the basic structure of neighborhood self-governing authority, yet the practical question is where first to place the new form which is expanding will spread by example. Not all places are equally amenable to political innovation.

A caveat is warranted. Do not mistake the concept of neighborhood cooperation for the rights of New York or Chicago. The lack of neighborhood authority is not whether it has not worked in the most difficult places, but whether it has worked at all. If you find success will occur in simpler cities. There we may gain a basic understanding of the structure of neighborhood authority and learn the techniques necessary to confront New York and Chicago.