

DAILY NEWS

City's spending plan shaped by neighborhood councils

By James Nash, Staff Writer

For the first time in city history, members of local advisory panels this year were given a say in how the Los Angeles city government spends its \$5.4 billion in revenue—an effort many say was historic but produced mixed results.

On Monday, the Los Angeles City Council will vote on a city budget shaped in part by many of the city's nearly 100 neighborhood councils, which were created in 1999 to bring government closer to the people and to discourage parts of the city from breaking away.

Almost universally, the neighborhood councils asked Mayor James Hahn to hire more police and spend more money on repairing damaged streets.

Hahn proposed hiring 30 police officers and spending about 3 percent more on street resurfacing.

The items are modest victories in a budget that envisions freezes or cuts in many other areas, say some neighborhood council leaders.

“The problem is, the wheels of this kind of change turn for a long time before you see any results,” said Mary Eike, a member of the Arleta Neighborhood Council who served as one of two North Valley representatives in the budget process.

“You can say you want more police, but will crime go down in Arleta? Did the streets get fixed?”

City officials hailed this year's budget process as a milestone in the evolution of neighborhood councils, many of which are still forming and some of which suffer from disorganization and infighting. Because the panels have no formal decision-making power, their input into the budget can be disregarded -- but Hahn and other elected officials say they took the groups seriously.

“It made my job a lot easier,” Councilman Greig Smith said in the middle of budget hearings. “I as a council member always thought I knew what the people wanted. Now I do know.”

Deputy Mayor Doane Liu, Hahn's budget liaison, said neighborhood council priorities were woven into the fabric of the spending plan, particularly in its emphasis on basic services. Several of the city's more specialized departments -- such as the Cultural Affairs Department and the Commission on the Status of Women faced the deepest cuts.

“I think it was abundantly clear that public safety, libraries, parks and streets were most important,” Liu said of input from neighborhood councils.