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Otis White's Urban Notebook

A New Grassroots Power Structure

Noisy Neighborhoods

A few years ago, when **Los Angeles** leaders were desperately trying to keep the San Fernando Valley from breaking away and forming its own municipality, they drafted a new city charter. The charter gave a modest boost to the mayor's powers but added a new wrinkle: the establishment of "neighborhood councils."

The councils' powers were undefined — some thought they might decide some small-scale rezonings; others believed they might have their own budgets and staffs and take over some city services, such as street cleaning. These things still aren't decided, but one role is becoming clearer: L.A.'s neighborhood councils are a political force, a rare example of grassroots power in a city without a tradition of effective neighborhood activism. This role became obvious recently when L.A.'s municipal utility, the Department of Water and Power, asked for an 18 percent hike in water rates to pay for security and quality improvements. The DWP board quickly said yes, as did the mayor, and the rate hike seemed destined to sail through the city council. But that was before the neighborhood councils swung into action. Thirty of the councils formally opposed the rate hike, demanding to see DWP's books, and that was enough to cool the city council's enthusiasm for the rate hike. It approved an increase of only 11 percent.

Afterwards, nearly everyone gave credit (or blame) to the neighborhood councils for thwarting the powerful utility. This, said Mayor James Hahn, "is significant. Now that we have over 80 neighborhood councils, their voice is going to be increasingly important at city hall." Even DWP officials acknowledged that they blundered when they didn't consult with the neighborhood councils before going to the city council. "There were definitely lessons learned," one utility executive said. "We've got to not take them for granted, and we have to reach out in a coordinated fashion so they understand what we are proposing."

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