

Lobbyist Rules OKd by Council

Those registered with the city will have to identify themselves to neighborhood panels when making contact.

By Jessica Garrison, Times Staff Writer
June 2, 2004

When Los Angeles' neighborhood councils pressured the City Council last year to intervene in a Police Department policy on burglar alarms, it was hailed as a triumph of grass-roots activism by the newly formed groups.

But some city officials also saw a disturbing new technique for political manipulation.

The turnout was more than a spontaneous outpouring of community feeling. It was instigated by a powerful lobbyist working for the burglar alarm industry.

The lobbyist, Howard Sunkin from Cerrell Associates Inc., did not formally disclose to the neighborhood panels that burglar alarm companies were paying for help in getting their message out, according to City Council members.

To prevent that from occurring again, the council, led by Councilman Tom LaBonge, passed a law Tuesday that will require the city's 165 registered lobbyists to identify themselves and their clients on all communications to the neighborhood groups.

"Information is knowledge is power," Councilwoman Janice Hahn said.

Neighborhood councils, she said, "need to know where it comes from, who sent it and the possible motive behind that kind of information."

The councils were created to empower local communities and quell their secessionist impulses. Since 2001, more than 80 of the panels have been established.

Increasingly they are making their voices heard on neighborhood issues and at the city level. Last month, city officials scaled back a water-rate increase after more than 30 of the councils expressed opposition.

In the case of the burglar alarm issue, panel members trooped en masse to City Council chambers after police officials decided that marked patrol cars would no longer respond to unverified burglar alarms. After council members got involved, officials studied the issue for months before adopting a compromise.

But as the neighborhood groups become more powerful, city officials said they want to make sure the panels know who is trying to influence them, and why.

The ordinance, which will go into effect this summer, was approved unanimously with

little discussion or comment.

Sunkin said he would abide by the new law. "I should be honored that the effectiveness of the lobbying campaign that my firm put together has forced a change in municipal reporting requirements."

Some members of the neighborhood panels agreed that the ordinance was a good idea.

"We need to know what we're getting into," said Joanne Valle, president of the Harbor City Neighborhood Council. "How else can we make decisions on things?"

After being lobbied by the burglar alarm industry last year, the Harbor City panel wrote letters to the area's councilwoman, Hahn, urging her to take action on the issue.

Valle said her group would have done that anyway, because it was an important issue to the community.