

Working to Empower L.A. Neighborhoods

By Thomas De Simone
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The candidates lining up to run for mayor of Los Angeles are throwing around words like "empowerment" and "local control." They have criticized the city's emerging system of neighborhood councils, but the political rhetoric ignores the city's record of empowering the councils.

Since Los Angeles voters approved a new City Charter and created the neighborhood councils in 1999, a notoriously insular City Hall has begun to open the governmental process to involve neighborhoods in the crafting of public policy. Most important, nearly every neighborhood council feels that the city is genuinely working to empower it.

For nearly a year, I studied the councils' evolution and the city's efforts to make them effective. My research included surveying leaders from more than 75% of the councils.

Across the board, the neighborhood councils say they feel empowered by the city. The vast majority of councils have been able to easily access city officials, bureaucrats and facilities. Ninety-two percent of councils say their City Council member has been responsive; 69% say the same about the mayor. A city-sponsored training program has helped the councils get started. The mayor has included the councils in the drafting of the city's budget, and city departments have worked with them.

In May, the City Council approved a water rate increase lower than originally planned after dozens of councils forced the issue into public discussion. Although the councils are only "advisory," this showed they could have a major effect. Almost 78% of the councils feel that their community has greater influence in local decisions now than before their council formed. These positive signs do not mean that the neighborhood council system is flawless. The city needs to better notify the councils of upcoming issues. This was not done last year, for instance, when the Police Department changed its burglar alarm response policy, leaving most councils blindsided.

The neighborhood councils say their biggest challenges are tension within their community and elected boards, and difficulty in getting more people involved. The city needs to help councils work through their conflicts and make a stronger effort to broaden council publicity and participation.

Finally, the city and the councils must begin to address the future of the neighborhood council system. Greater local control and protections against parochial-mindedness must be balanced. The city and the councils would probably best be served by a system in which planning and policymaking included the councils at an early stage but reserved most bureaucratic issues for trained experts to carry out, with input from the councils. The neighborhood councils must make city government more responsive and

representative, not replace it.

The city has largely shown that it wants to see change in local government but must continue to reach out to a disengaged citizenry and alienated communities. If the councils and the city fail to continue working together, then Los Angeles may pass up a rare opportunity to find its civic identity.