

AUG. 25 - SEPT. 2, 2004
L.A. WEEKLY

Let the People Speak

What can save L.A.'s broken neighborhood councils?

by Robert Greene

The question before the house is whether to leave the tables as they are or come up with some new kind of arrangement.

Not the sort of issue you'd expect would rivet a crowd of neighborhood leaders at a dingy community center on a hot summer evening, but here they are. Should we line up the tables end to end? Cluster them in groups according to geographic area? Where should we seat the newly elected members? And who will swear them in? Simple-enough questions.



Mayor Hahn: One of the neighbors
(Photos by Ted Soqui)

But this is Lincoln Heights, where nothing is simple.

"I would definitely suggest that the city councilman swear me in," snarls Hugo Pacheco from the back row, toward Neighborhood Council President Oscar Garcia. "I would *not* like *you* to swear me in."

Oh, no. Here we go. Again.

Garcia stiffens visibly and tries to move on with the meeting, but it's too late. A man stands and shouts at Garcia. "There's been a petition to recall you on the agenda since last November over your dereliction of duty," he yells, as he demands to know the whereabouts of money from some rental arrangement. A couple of people who have been to plenty of these meetings and know trouble when they see it take off to look for the uniformed park ranger who was here earlier but now seems to have slipped away. Meanwhile, a man at the head table with Garcia rises and shouts back, and it becomes a free-for-all, with allegations about missing cash and charges of election fraud, fingers jabbed in the air, plastic water bottles held aloft. Then one bottle goes flying. And a woman with a bearing that suggests she is not to be trifled with strides into the middle of the fray.

"Okay," the woman declares. "I run this center, and I ask you to leave. Right now."

The room falls silent, and the grown men and women shuffle out, heads lowered, still muttering to each other. "You guys started it this time," one hisses.

And so ends another meeting of the Lincoln Heights Neighborhood Council, which has been unable to muster a quorum or deal with a single item on its agenda for nearly a year but continues to meet twice a month, every other Thursday at 6 p.m.

This official body of the city of Los Angeles, representing a down-at-the-heels but historic and mostly Latino community in the northeastern corner of the city, entitled to \$50,000 a year in taxpayer funds, displaying the city seal on letters and business cards, bound by meticulous standards for publishing agendas and posting meeting notices, resembles nothing so much as a junior high school student council where the substitute teacher forgot to show up.

Signs of success displayed to the outside world, like the street banners that brighten up North Broadway with the name of the council prominently displayed, are misleading. That's *another* Lincoln Heights Neighborhood Council, an ersatz group of the same name that Garcia and other founding council members started and incorporated, one that could get things done, one that didn't require election committees, city certification, bylaw sign-off, community outreach, Brown Act compliance, personal financial disclosure, or any of the other burdens of officialdom that are giving the city's nearly 90 official councils headaches and identity crises.

This Lincoln Heights mess began ostensibly with a dispute over whether to support a memorial wall dedicated to people who died of AIDS. But neighbors now spar over personality, culture, money, and, primarily, the right to define the community and speak for it.

Councils in dozens of neighborhoods around Los Angeles are struggling as well. In communities where once there was no open discord — because, to be sure, there were few opportunities to get involved and no choices to be made — neighbors are fighting.

In Van Nuys — the poster child for neighborhood councils during charter-reform discussions of the 1990s because it was divided among multiple City Council districts and never could coalesce to demand better services — so many people have resigned in anger that they left no quorum, and no one with authority to even call a new election to replenish the board. In Westchester, residents were so geared up over the possibility of outside takeover that they demanded (illegally) to see income-tax statements or property-tax bills before allowing stakeholders to vote.

In what was once known as the 8th District Empowerment Congress, South L.A.'s widely touted precursor to neighborhood councils, community leaders say they are lost without the guiding hand of organizer and ex-Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas, and neighbors rail at a raft of procedures and processes they never had to deal with in the congress's early days. In Cypress Park, a stone's

throw from Lincoln Heights, more than one meeting has ended with a call to the police.

In many areas already shaped by strong participation from a homeowners association, a chamber of commerce or an activist group, the new councils do appear to be thriving. For people in those neighborhoods, mostly on the Westside and in the San Fernando Valley, the virtual velvet rope that long separated residents from an insiders-only City Hall is being replaced, slowly, by a welcome mat and an open door. In newspaper headlines, councils are credited with rolling back water rates, blocking a Police Commission policy on burglar alarms, and gaining a voice into whether to spend city money to hire more police, for example, or pave more streets. The players — stakeholders, in L.A. parlance — have begun to develop a healthy lust for participation at the most fundamental level of democratic society.

Still, any survey of the city's neighborhood boards raises questions that are all the more troubling because they are not new. They are the very same questions bandied about by lawmakers and charter framers in the 1990s but left unanswered for a simple reason: They're just too hard.

Is it not an inherent contradiction, for example, for a city government to mandate grassroots organizing? How "independent," how "grassroots," can a neighborhood group remain when it is virtually on City Hall's payroll? How much of a challenge can activists mount against the bureaucracy if city laws, regulations and policies line up to make them part of that bureaucracy?

Persevering from one question and one crisis to another is the unflappable Department of Neighborhood Empowerment General Manager Greg Nelson, a true believer who calls up bottomless reserves of patience and humor in charting a Third Way.

Nelson sees community groups that are, incongruously, both entrenched and independent. That's impossible; except for maybe . . . There is a word that comes to mind, though Nelson stopped saying it aloud years ago after people in City Hall complained that it was unseemly. But he still believes it. To Nelson, neighborhood councils in Los Angeles could become — lobbyists. Lobbyists for the people.

"They can have the power and the access," Nelson asserts. "It's not like anywhere else. What we're doing has never been done before. By allowing neighborhoods to take for themselves the power that up to now has only been held by insiders, we are changing the political culture of a city."



(Illustrations by Chandler Wood)

Los Angeles thinkers, activists and political leaders, reeling from the deadly Rodney King riots of 1992, were grasping for some understanding of how so many thousands of people could feel so alienated from their city and their neighborhoods that they would so readily torch them. The San Fernando Valley was moving toward secession, as were San Pedro, Hollywood, even Eagle Rock and the Westside. Neighborhoods were being named, marked off and patrolled not by families or city officials but by gangs. The city was falling apart.

Some people sought an answer of sorts in what came to be called the neighborhood-councils movement. Advocates of a city government more closely in tune with the people it was supposed to serve pored through the 1993 book *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy*, which detailed successful neighborhood-based advisory panels in smaller cities like Birmingham, Alabama, and Dayton, Ohio.

Rebirth became the bible of the movement. USC professor and former neighborhood activist Terry Cooper read it, as did Greg Nelson, top staff aide to Councilman Joel Wachs. On Richard Riordan's election as mayor, a power struggle between him and the council turned into a drive for the first new city charter since 1925, and Cooper, Nelson, Wachs and a host of activists made sure neighborhood councils became part of the discussion.

While everyone could agree that the solution to the problems of city government was named "neighborhood councils," they never quite agreed on just what a Los Angeles neighborhood council was. Who would serve? What would they do? What would be their relationship to City Hall?

Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas set up an Empowerment Congress, where his mostly African-American constituents gathered, debated and, for the first time, learned the mechanisms of city governance. Mike Feuer set up two boards in his district and let residents pick their own leaders. Other council members appointed their own advisory groups. Wachs, who never created councils in his own district, wanted 103 of them in Los Angeles and expected that after they formed they would be free to raise money, incorporate, lobby politicians, and reinvent the civic structure of Los Angeles by getting together to discuss issues.

But the neighborhood-council discussion really got going only when it was taken up by two competing charter-reform commissions. An elected charter commission wanted elected councils, representing what were essentially boroughs or minicities, controlling their taxpayer-funded budgets, with formal elections. The plan drew high praise in the secessionist Valley, where leaders saw neighborhood councils as an avenue of escape from an oppressive City Hall.

But that plan would have dashed the hopes of reformers who saw at the very heart of the new democratic institution an unprecedented opportunity for noncitizen immigrants, who made up a growing percentage of Los Angeles residents, to participate in civic life.

Big business saw decision-making councils as *über*-homeowners groups with newfound power to kill any growth or development. Construction unions agreed. Nonprofit groups offered surprisingly harsh opposition based on their belief that they could never get proposals for an AIDS-care home, for example, or for subsidized housing, past strong neighbor-based boards.

Disappointed backers of powerful councils began referring, sardonically, to the “democracy scare.”

But the appointed charter commission also seemed less than keen on elected decision-making panels, and its skepticism reflected the feeling in South L.A., where people like those who joined Ridley-Thomas’ Empowerment Congress saw councils not as a step away from City Hall, as they did in the Valley, but as a long-sought giant leap inside of it. Advisory councils emerged as one possible solution, but not everyone signed on to the idea. “Student councils!” sniffed Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg.

Another plan, for which no charter amendment was needed, was simply to pay organizers to canvass the city, pull people together and get out of the way. The new groups might incorporate, or join with private firms, or do almost anything. No Brown Act, no financial disclosure. But to most charter reformers the plan did not require enough action from City Hall.

Nelson testified before both commissions, trying the patience of members with his philosophical meanderings. Charter reformers ended up so far apart on neighborhood councils that the elected commission nearly put a separate proposal on the ballot dealing only with formal, boroughlike elected boards.

Under a last-minute compromise, though, the 1999 reform charter included a vague notion of self-selected advisory groups, with the details to be filled in later.

Riordan never showed much enthusiasm for reinventing democracy and let councils drift as his opponents, such as Goldberg, demanded that the reins be handed over to professional community organizers. The new Department of Neighborhood Empowerment waffled between focusing on communities most in need of training and outreach, like Lincoln Heights, or the already organized neighborhoods in the Valley that were champing at the bit for a shot at city funding and a reason, maybe, to vote against secession. Neither DONE, as it became known, nor its supervising Board of Neighborhood Commissioners — labeled “BONC” or “bonkers” by frustrated activists — seemed to be accomplishing much.

A typical community orientation session consisted of interested but impatient neighbors asking, “What do we do?” and DONE employees responding, “What do you *want* to do?”



Jim Hahn changed everything on his election as mayor in 2001 by ousting the DONE leadership and appointing Nelson to lead the department, and by allocating \$50,000 for each certified council. Hahn vowed to listen to these citizen-lobbyists on budget decisions, and began meeting with neighborhood

leaders in City Hall and in libraries, school auditoriums and community centers around Los Angeles.

“Neighborhood councils were languishing,” Hahn explained. “It was an idea that wasn’t getting the support of City Hall. It appeared to me we were struggling to get started, and so I wanted to spend a lot of effort in the first few weeks and months of my administration seeing what we could do to kind of take something that had been a little bit moribund and put it more onto the front burner.”

The cash made council organizers feel they were working for something important. But it also cemented the notion that neighborhood councils are part of city government, operating under city auspices, even though they are officially only “advisory.”

City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo’s office, in one ruling after another, said neighborhood councils had to be as open and aboveboard as any city body. Members had to disclose personal financial data, filling out the official (and despised) state Form 700. Meeting locations had to comply with the Americans With Disabilities Act. Agendas had to be posted in five public places, 72 hours in advance. No discussions could take place that were not on the agenda, which means that a council that meets monthly could rarely do anything in less than 30 days. Councils could not incorporate, borrow money or encumber property. They could lease office space and hire employees — but only under the strictest rules, and only after enabling laws were debated and passed by the City Council. Delgadillo is looking for legal ways out of the morass, but the new charter and state law have painted him, and the councils, into a corner.

The price of crossing the velvet rope into City Hall was full immersion in the bureaucracy.

And councils bore an extra burden: They had to be “inclusive.” Any group that left out homeowners, renters, business owners, workers, houses of worship or members of several other categories would never get certified. But while the rules for posting agendas and the like were even stricter than for the City Council, election rules were amazingly lax. The only rule of eligibility for voting in a council election is that you be a “stakeholder” in the neighborhood.

The word is pure L.A. civic culture, simultaneously evoking a certain insiders-only exclusivity and ending up so broad that it takes in pretty much anyone. You just have to live there, or work there, or worship there, or shop there, or own property there, perhaps drive through or, in the words of Charles Brink of the Northridge Neighborhood Council (never certified by BONC), eat a hamburger there. When the City Council was debating the rules for starting up the new neighborhood panels, back in 1999, then-Councilwoman Ruth Galanter famously complained that the word *stakeholder* was almost meaningless, sounding instead like it meant a vampire, or maybe a hibachi.

Allowing any stakeholder to vote opened councils to charges that they were being swept by organized blocs bused in for that very purpose. In Westchester, a winning slate did indeed bring in a host of voters from the Playa Vista project to sway the election, and, yes, the victors repaid them with pizza and beer (that council recently voted to approve the next phase of the controversial Playa Vista project). In downtown, a candidate enticed a high school class to come down and cast ballots. The Church of Scientology had an ample turnout of members for the Hollywood United council election, sparking scuttlebutt that Scientologists were plotting to take over the city. The Agape Church was rumored to be planning to move in on the Mar Vista council. And in Central L.A., south of the Santa Monica Freeway, Vernon-Main Neighborhood Council President Eddie Reyes has plans — according to the chief target of his ire, Councilwoman Jan Perry — to take over the board of every single other council in the district.

A slate of candidates aligned with the longshore-workers union unseated most of the founders of the Central San Pedro council. But the most notorious coup was in Venice, where the “progressive” slate defeated the founding Grass Roots Venice board. That was the election, famous in neighborhood-council circles, in which Marta Evry marked a ballot on behalf of her dog to try to show Nelson that voting procedures were unfair. Nelson was unimpressed.

The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment is less concerned about voting that’s too lax than it is about voting that’s too restrictive. Its biggest headaches included the election in Valley Glen, where the council banned anyone without a valid driver’s license, passport or green card from voting. Anyone claiming to be a resident had to prove it with a utility bill. Business stakeholders had to show a business license. The department struck down the council’s rules on the ground that they were meant to keep out illegal residents and to intimidate legal immigrants.

Meanwhile, the supposedly interim board members of some neighborhood councils that were certified months ago still haven’t scheduled their first election. The Foothill Trails council, the South Robertson group, Greater Cypress Park and West Adams all got hauled before the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners to explain just why they haven’t submitted their names to the people. Responses from councils like theirs sound disturbingly like the line uttered by caudillos in Third World countries: Our people are not ready for the vote.

But Greg Nelson, whose devotion to neighborhood councils erased the last tinge of blond from his now-gray hair, broke up his marriage, keeps him at BONC and neighborhood-council meetings past midnight, and spurs him to vocally defend the young institution at every opportunity, sees progress and empowerment. He pointed out that some council elections have drawn far more people than regular city votes. In Watts, for example, only 294 voters turned out for the May 2003

general election. But in voting for the Watts neighborhood council later that month, a whopping 1,104 people cast their ballots.

Take those numbers with a grain of salt. After all, there wasn't much on the city ballot for Watts residents to vote on in May 2003. Still — one voter for every 20 residents. Not history-making, but not a bad show for a community election.

The rumored Agape Church takeover at the Mar Vista council never materialized, by the way. And, as for the Scientologists, their sinister plot to control neighborhood councils can be relegated to the urban-myths file. Hundreds of church members did turn out to elect their one candidate to the single “business” seat on the Hollywood board, but that's it.

But there are those election rules. And disputes over who is a stakeholder. And with virtually anyone being a stakeholder anywhere, little can be done to block anyone from voting.

“To be honest with you, a lot of this rests on good faith,” Nelson said.



Earlier this year, USC professor Terry Cooper, the bearded guru of the neighborhood-councils movement, helped broker a pact between four neighborhood councils in the Valley and the city's Department of Public Works. It was a far cry from the 1970s, when Cooper worked to organize Pico-Union according to the teachings of legendary community activist Saul Alinsky.

“Alinsky was all about building grassroots power through an adversarial approach,” Cooper recalled. “He would say, ‘You always have to have a devil to fight against.’ You would raise latent anger to the surface, and you would direct it at the devil. And that might be City Hall.”

The Industrial Areas Foundation activists that Alinsky inspired six decades ago in Chicago adamantly opposed working inside the existing power structure. Following city-imposed election and open-meeting rules, and certainly taking city money, were unthinkable. So was quietly negotiating an agreement with the Department of Public Works.

But Cooper said he found Alinsky-based movements always ran out of steam. He was looking for a new way of organizing neighborhoods when Greg Nelson knocked on his door unannounced a decade ago and asked for help on an idea to reinvigorate urban government. He wound up starting the Neighborhood Participation Project, a sort of think tank at USC that monitors the progress and spreads the gospel of neighborhood democracy. Cooper organized conferences that brought together thinkers, elected leaders and neighbors who made sure that charter reform included a mandate for neighborhood councils.

The Project has found that crossing the velvet rope into the City Hall bureaucracy appears to be working fine for councils in the south Valley, where wealthy homeowners have most of the clout.

But several miles north, inside an area covered by the Sun Valley Neighborhood Council, sits the Bradley landfill, where some neighbors see the council as a snare and are opting instead for, of all things, the Alinsky approach.

“Frankly, I’m afraid,” explained Jerry Piro of his attitude toward the Sun Valley council. “The vast majority of the members are people from the Chamber of Commerce who oversaw things here for 40 years. There aren’t [as many] homeowners and renters on the council as the people who have a vested interest. The guy who got the most votes at the Neighborhood Council was the manager of Bradley.”

Landfill operators have requested permission to raise the height of their garbage mountain by another 43 feet. The Neighborhood Council is leaning toward approval.

That doesn’t sit well with Piro, or with other neighborhood stakeholders like Karen Jaye, principal of the Fernangeles Elementary School in Sun Valley.

“We already have 80 times more asthma than on other campuses” because of the monstrous garbage dump, Jaye asserts. If it is raised, “Kids in our play yard would not be able to see the mountains.”

Jaye and others in the area dismissed the neighborhood council as a shill for the Chamber of Commerce and turned instead to the L.A. Metro Alliance. In communities around the city, L.A. Metro, now called One L.A. IAF, is attempting to rekindle the fire once ignited in Los Angeles by the Industrial Areas Foundation — the organization founded many years ago by Alinsky.

In Pico-Union, in Watts, in Van Nuys, in Lincoln Heights, in Sun Valley, One L.A. IAF leaders are organizing neighbors to fight for their communities. There are no cumbersome elections, no paperwork requirements, no monetary enticements from City Hall, no charter or ordinance dictates that bar the groups from changing their form when the need arises.

“We don’t want government money, because this is *our* institution,” said One L.A. organizer Father Mike Montoya of Precious Blood Catholic Church near downtown. “We work to develop local leaders to become citizens in the fullest sense. We work to hold our public officials accountable. That’s democracy.”

Raphael Sonenshein, the Cal State Fullerton political-science professor who led one of two charter-reform commissions that put the idea of neighborhood councils to voters, said much of L.A., angry at its leadership and preparing to vote on secession, expected councils that would pose Alinsky-style confrontation. But the smaller cities documented in *Rebirth* had developed a more cooperative relationship between neighborhoods and government.

“I came to believe that neighborhood democracy and the Alinsky model are both great but they’re different,” Sonenshein said. “You can’t really get on the government payroll to dump garbage on the mayor’s lawn.”

But Sonenshein added that it was important not to go too far in the other direction. “You don’t want to have an arm of government that can’t breathe,” Sonenshein said. “You have to walk a line between confrontation and subservience.”

Some councils have no problem walking that line. The Tarzana council, for example, grew out of and is to a large extent run by the Tarzana Property Owners Association, one of a handful of homeowners groups that hold sway in the south end of the Valley. The TPOA long ago mastered the art and science of crossing the City Hall velvet rope and making the bureaucracy work for the well-to-do homeowners in the south Valley.

Leonard Shaffer, president of both groups, knows that developers will check in with him before trying to push a project through City Hall. The TPOA raised enough of a ruckus in years past that elected officials won’t talk to builders who haven’t first gone to the association. Shaffer likes the fact that with his new neighborhood-council title he now represents a broader spectrum of the

community, and he likes the extra courtesies he gets as a council leader. “They kind of treat you a little bit like staff,” Shaffer said. “That’s an advantage.”

But there are disadvantages too.

“You can’t act as fast,” he said. “You are subject to the Brown Act. That’s a hindrance. To do anything, you’ve got to get a quorum together, and you can’t just do it over the phone. And the way you have to hold elections — it’s a pain in the backside.”

Jill Banks Barad, a board member of the United Chambers of Commerce who helps lead the Sherman Oaks Neighborhood Council, agrees. Her group and Shaffer’s are often at odds because hers is dominated by business, Shaffer’s by homeowners. But their complaint is the same.

“Business people are used to moving quicker,” she said. “When you look at the City Council, it’s the staffs that do all of the work, and they aren’t under the Brown Act, so they can deliberate with one another. But whenever we do it, we have to call a public meeting.”

One former neighborhood-council organizer from the Westside who now works inside City Hall said that councils that lack a dual identity, like Tarzana’s, can quickly run aground on the rules and regulations that are heaped on them.

“The spirit and intent of neighborhood councils somehow went awry,” the staffer lamented. “They have become part of the city bureaucracy.”

That’s what separates the councils from the citizen-lobbyists that Nelson envisioned. Lobbyists know their way around City Hall, know which hands to shake, which bureaucrats to press for information, which campaigns to bolster with donations. But they don’t have to hold open meetings or process a flurry of paperwork, unless it’s of their own making.

Jason Lyon, of the Silver Lake council, acknowledged that conducting outreach, as the city’s rules require, and putting on elections, and posting adequate notice and running meetings take up a huge chunk of the group’s time and energy.

“We do have to create policies and rules and standards,” Lyon said. “We are creating our own red tape. I don’t see any way around that. For the co-chairs, it’s like another full-time job.”

Even Janice Hahn, the mayor’s sister, who as an elected charter-reform commissioner championed the idea of neighborhood councils, and now on the City Council remains the institution’s biggest cheerleader, said this was never what she had in mind. Under the Brown Act, a council that meets monthly may

have to take almost two months before there is a vote on an important issue — more, if board members want to hear from constituents.

And more and more councils seem to be voluntarily indulging in additional bureaucracy. For example, many councils have mirrored the City Council by setting up land-use committees and public-safety subcommittees. At a recent Central Area Planning Commission meeting, where appointed city officials were mulling whether to yank a bar's conditional use permit, the Mid-City West Community Council rep was there to offer guidance. But no guidance was forthcoming. "We have not been able to put this on the agenda and bring this in front of our planning and land-use committee yet," she told frustrated planning officials.

Instead of battling about ideas over the phone and meeting for quick action, councils are rolling out their own cumbersome procedures. Where some city residents used to urge City Hall to hurry up with services, reforms and information, they now are offering a surprising refrain: "Don't rush us."

The democracy scare has become the bureaucracy scare.

"This bureaucracy is tending to make them irrelevant on issues that are of major importance," Janice Hahn said. "I saw this as a sort of grassroots volunteer effort. I envisioned maybe a hot issue comes up, and everyone gets on a phone tree, and on Saturday they all show up and they vote. But the City Attorney's Office told us that was illegal."

There are apparent successes, of course, like the rollback of DWP rates. On a rainy day in early March, one of the top men at the Department of Water and Power was just finishing up his PowerPoint presentation to the Eagle Rock Neighborhood Council on the need for an 18 percent rate hike when Jim Alger pulled up to the library building, strode in, folded his arms across his chest and waited.

Gerald Gewe knew what he was in for. The business-suited but frumpy man from the utility had gone through this with Alger now at nearly two dozen meetings like this one around the city.

"It's nice to see that the DWP is changing their presentation as we learn more about the true reasons for the rate increase," Alger huffed. "But with all due respect to Gerry, he wouldn't be here but for this opposition."

Alger, an organizer of the Northridge West Neighborhood Council (in formation), was right. A young man with a grave demeanor and no qualms about lecturing city officials, he said later he couldn't decide what angered him more: the flimsy

and constantly shifting reasons the department was giving for raising rates or the contention by the water agency's brass that neighborhood councils "just aren't interested."

Gewe admitted he had been wrong about that latter point, but he told the dozen or so board members of the Eagle Rock Neighborhood Council that the water rates had to be jacked up anyway, and fast, to protect the DWP's bond rating. It was like throwing a bloody steak to the sharks. Why, Neighborhood Council board members demanded, do you think we care about the agency's bond rating?

One by one, the Eagle Rock board members took common cause with the man from Northridge West. More than 20 other councils did the same.

"This is the kind of thing we had in mind for neighborhood councils all along," enthused Janice Hahn, on the City Council floor. Newspaper editorials acknowledged the councils for showing "clout" and handing stakeholders a victory over City Hall arrogance, and for setting aside local concerns to join in citywide action for all neighborhoods.

But it may not have been as sweeping a rout for neighborhood councils as it first appeared. DWP rate hikes have been stopped before due to the outrage and action of the people who were most affected: ratepayers. The same thing happened more than a decade ago, without neighborhood councils, when ratepayers responded to a crippling drought by saving water and the DWP prepared to jack up rates to make up for lost revenues. Tenants don't generally pay for water, but ratepayers — homeowners and businesses — had the ability to mobilize and pressure the City Council to make the DWP drop its plan.

A June report by USC professor Juliet Musso of the Neighborhood Participation Project showed that 63 percent of neighborhood-council participants are homeowners, in a city where more than 70 percent of residents rent. It is that 70 percent, without clout at City Hall, that neighborhood councils were meant to empower but have yet to include. This time out, the councils — not all of them, mind you, but just about two dozen from places with high rates of homeownership and business participation — stood up for stakeholders who already had access through homeowners associations and chambers of commerce.

A similar "victory" was scored last year when the big topic in City Hall was a Police Commission plan to no longer have officers respond to unverified burglar alarms. The reversal of this program, too, was saluted on the City Council floor as a victory for neighborhood councils. But in this case it was actually a victory for the alarm companies, for their supporters on the City Council, and for the lobbying firm of Cerrell Associates Inc., which had the sense and creativity to make its pitch to the local councils and their boards full of homeowners and

business leaders. Did the 70 percent of Angelenos who rent really care about police response to unverified burglar alarms?

Today, though, a new debate could well provide the biggest test for the young councils. Groups in Los Angeles that have long advocated for the disenfranchised — groups like ACORN, which activist leaders wistfully hoped would be the model for L.A.'s neighborhood councils — have joined forces with low-cost housing developers and a City Council core led by Ed Reyes to demand a housing program called “inclusionary zoning.”

“IZ,” as some call it, is a wonkish term for a mandate that homebuilders forgo market-rate profits on one unit of every five to 10 they erect in the city, creating subsidized homes to slow the advance of the city's severe housing shortage and to encourage a mix of all economic groups within any given neighborhood.

It doesn't sound like such a big deal until you hear some advocates exult that Brentwood, at last, will be required to bear the burden of low-income housing and that gardeners will now live next door to plastic surgeons. Real estate agents have been accused of spreading false rumors to scare people away from considering IZ. There is a need for some frank talk and soul-searching about Los Angeles, its character and its future. Such talks usually have been held in corporate suites or university classrooms, but the city now has a chance, perhaps, through neighborhood councils, to bring everyone in on the conversation.

If the strong influence of homeowners associations and chambers of commerce in neighborhood councils persists, though, inclusionary zoning may be doomed. Rarely do homeowners voluntarily take steps to change the character and feel of their residential communities, especially if the change means added density, more traffic and bringing in residents of a lower economic status.

But there have been some surprises. In Venice, where the council is run by a “progressive” slate, inclusionary zoning was endorsed unequivocally. In Silver Lake, a community already densely packed with multifamily dwellings, the council crafted a well-thought-out and nuanced response that calls for preserving the character of neighborhoods that are already built out while endorsing the idea of subsidized housing mandates — elsewhere.

“The point of neighborhood councils was to create venues for dialogue, dialogue about who we are and what we want and where we are going,” said a former council staffer. “They should be a place to ask and answer the big questions. But the level of discourse has been disappointing. The city hasn't figured out whether it is there to serve neighborhood councils or vice versa. We were looking for civic engagement, but have we just created another level of bureaucracy, this time of council boards, while the rest of us still don't know what's going on in the city.”

In the Mayor's Office, Jim Hahn touts the new access that community leaders have in formulating the city budget. Neighborhood-board members hobnob with elected officials, enjoy free parking in City Hall and are called by their first names when they walk into the Board of Public Works hearing room. Cynics wonder whether Hahn and the City Council haven't ingeniously come up with a system that allows them to put their own ideas into the mouths of their neighborhood-board members and win political cover for the hard decisions they must still make.

"This is great for me," Hahn acknowledges, "because I don't have to do all the work now. I can have some other eyes and ears out there. You tell me how this general manager's doing and how effective this general manager is."

Many activists who are still clinging to the process are starting to complain that neighborhood councils have become City Hall's system for training them, taming them, to become model, quiescent constituents.

In meetings all over the city, boards often play to empty houses as they struggle with process. The crowds balloon when Hahn plans a visit, or the City Council member, or Police Chief William Bratton. But when the city official walks out the door, so do most of the neighbors. The wide gulf that separated City Hall from the people may simply have moved over a bit, to now take in the vocal neighborhood activists and the student-government types that thrive on Robert's Rules of Order.

In one sign of creeping co-option, neighborhood-council leaders have begun to get invitations to DWP tours of the agency's historic Eastern Sierra waterworks. Jokesters often said that these Owens Valley jaunts for elected officials and moneyed opinion makers who formerly criticized the DWP seemed a little like a working wife and mother taking a quick weekend trip to the town of Stepford.

No word yet on whether Jim Alger, the man who went toe-to-toe with the DWP over a rate increase, is taking the tour. But it was a little jolting to see him earlier this summer walking down the First Street steps alongside several DWP reps and Mayor Hahn for a press event announcing the creation of an environmental panel. Hahn appointed Alger, and another neighborhood-council leader, to his "green ribbon" commission.

Like a seasoned City Hall insider, Alger thanked Hahn and the City Council, then said he had a message not for neighborhood councils, but for DWP ratepayers. "You will be in the forefront of my and everyone else's mind here," Alger said. It was as though he were running for office.

In Lincoln Heights, an hour or so after the Neighborhood Council was thrown out of the community hall for behaving like children, Meg Barclay reflected on the tumultuous year she spent as the council's vice president. She gave up the post late last year due to the demands of her master's program at USC, where she was a student of Terry Cooper.

"There is just so much that could be done," Barclay lamented. "There is just so much potential. I had never been part of a community effort before. But we were an elected neighborhood council, and it was like, because we said so, we should all know what to do. But we didn't."

The latest election is under dispute, and the council, unable without a quorum to act on much more than new table arrangements, is sitting on \$100,000 of taxpayer money — two years' worth of city allocations — that it cannot spend.

The Lincoln Heights meetings go on, though, to one extent or another, and that may be a victory in itself. Some boards are spending their city money on playground equipment or street trees, while communities that already have mastered the art of making City Hall work for them — like Pacific Palisades — have decided to not even bother with forming a council. But Lincoln Heights may be more like Pacoima, where Neighborhood Council leader Edwin Ramirez said his community takes a giant step forward every time members have a meeting and no one gets mad at anyone.

"We're getting to know each other," Ramirez said. "We're coming to understand our differences. We have a place to meet each other and talk to each other. Just having an election and getting through a meeting — that's something new. Something important, I think."

Greg Nelson calls Pacoima his favorite council, because of the angst involved in just reaching out to various segments of the community, pulling them in and getting them to acknowledge each other's existence. On paper, Pacoima has done nothing. But it has begun its encounter, its conversation.

To some thinkers, Pacoima is what neighborhood councils were always supposed to be about. Not buying playground equipment, but talking, listening, learning. Slowly changing the city's political culture and giving up our presumed birthright (being left alone by City Hall). In that case, there are some steps that could help.

Get the Legislature to modify the Brown Act to give neighborhood councils a little breathing room. Ask BONC to reconsider its edict against caucus or town-hall-type meetings. Encourage DONE, which already operates an excellent leadership-training program, to pry the Robert's Rules of Order out of the local leaders' hands and focus instead on talking about the city, what it is and where it is headed. Set councils free, letting them become the lobbyists for the people

that Nelson envisioned. Or do nothing at all, and see if One L.A. and similar groups can do the job.

For more-sweeping solutions, it may be too late. Hundreds of new neighborhood leaders now have a vested interest in keeping their new institution intact and would be loath to give up their \$50,000, for example, or their yearlong process of reviewing city-budget decisions, even if it means more independence. The councils themselves may be in charge of their future, but instead of becoming nimble grassroots groups ready to turn on a dime, they are becoming part of a calcified City Hall bureaucracy.

Not everyone thinks that's a bad thing. Several members of Alger's Northridge West Neighborhood Council were mulling recently whether to accept the DWP trip to the Eastern Sierra. One man, a former secession advocate who was leaning toward taking the trip, said not to worry about Alger walking down the steps of City Hall at the mayor's side.

"You don't understand about neighborhood councils," he declared. "We're not being co-opted.

"We're taking over."