

Councils may fight zoning plan
Idea for low-income housing draws fire
By Rick Orlov
Staff Writer

Pro-development interests opposed to "inclusionary" zoning -- a concept that would require low-income units to be built into most new housing projects in Los Angeles -- have tapped into the growing political clout of advisory neighborhood councils for support.

The zoning proposal from Councilmen Ed Reyes and Eric Garcetti is tentatively scheduled to be heard in the next few weeks, but opponents are pushing hard for a delay to give community groups -- particularly neighborhood councils -- more time to mobilize.

"The one thing we don't want is to see this pushed through without adequate debate," said Hallie Kemper, president of the Valley Glen Community Council. "We think the neighborhood councils should be given more time to discuss this and take a stand."

It is the third citywide issue on which neighborhood councils have played a role. The opposition of some neighborhood councils helped force City Hall to back down on ending police response to burglar alarms and led to a possible delay in the 7 percent water rate hike sought for next year, although the first-year 11 percent increase was enacted.

And, it appears the groups have had an impact.

Mayor James Hahn, who was never a big fan of the zoning policy, has come out more and more in opposition to it -- citing the opposition of neighborhood councils as part of his reason.

Also, Councilman Bernard Parks, who is running against Hahn for mayor, said the opposition from neighborhood councils has served to convince him to oppose the zoning when it does come before the council.

Carol Schatz, president of the Central City Association, said her downtown business organization recognized the potential of neighborhood councils to influence issues and reached out to them to fight the zoning policy.

Using the clout of the councils, the downtown business group worked to build support for its own proposal as an alternative to the zoning.

Under the plan advanced by Reyes and Garcetti, developers would be required to set aside a portion of all new developments for low-income and other affordable housing units. If they do so, they would be allowed a density bonus -- the ability to build more units on the same land to recover their costs.

Schatz said her organization does not believe the proposal will develop more housing of the type needed in the city.

"This proposal ends up being a tax on the middle class. If you have a developer who wants to build 100 units of housing and he has to set aside 20 percent for affordable housing, that means the 80 units remaining will have to make up the cost. No one except the very rich will be able to live there.

"So the rich can afford to live in these new units, the poor are being given subsidies and the family in the middle can't afford to live there. It doesn't make sense."

The new proposal from the Central City Association, which is being shopped around to neighborhood councils, would create overlay zones in each City Council district to target the type of development that would be allowed and include neighborhood input.

Schatz said members of her organization contacted leaders of neighborhood councils to press their case to oppose the measure.

"One of our points is to make sure everyone understands what this means."

Garcetti acknowledged the council will have to be willing to bend to some of the demands of the neighborhood councils as well as the business community.

"We have to take what they are saying into consideration and we do have to work with the neighborhood councils," Garcetti said.

He cited efforts with the Silver Lake Neighborhood Council, which endorsed the plan -- but with limits on its adoption in its area.

Other neighborhood councils said the city needs to take a different approach.

Charlotte Laws of the Valley Glen Community Council has suggested the city look at offering low-interest loans to increase housing opportunities for the poor and look at rezoning and reuse of commercial properties to expand the amount of housing available.

"Neighbors will accept this idea because it has the feel of a 'down zone' (of reduced use)," Laws said. "Neighbors will like the idea that more residential structures are being created. They will not mourn the loss of a few commercial buildings."