

## Panels' Political Clout Grows

Los Angeles mayoral candidates turn to the biannual convention of neighborhood councils to woo voters.

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The topics on the agenda include zoning, sales taxes and faltering hospitals, but today's biannual convention of neighborhood councils will feature a sideshow: At least four of the five top mayoral candidates will be there wooing voters.

The strong showing underscores how the councils, which will send hundreds of representatives to the Los Angeles Convention Center, have grown in political clout. More than 80 of the city-funded panels are working on neighborhood projects and advising elected officials on local issues.

"This is going to be a hunting party for the mayoral candidates, that's for sure," said Greg Nelson, the general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which is charged with helping the councils. "It is a temptation no mayoral candidate can avoid."

Mayor James K. Hahn is scheduled to make the opening remarks.

State Sen. Richard Alarcon (D-Sylmar) plans to talk about the proposal to close Martin Luther King Jr./Drew Medical Center's trauma unit and seek signatures for a petition to urge city officials to repeal an 11% hike in water rates.

Former Assembly Speaker Bob Hertzberg and Councilman Antonio Villaraigosa also plan to drop by. The fifth major candidate in the race, Councilman Bernard C. Parks, was not sure Friday whether he would attend. Twice each year, all the councils meet to network and discuss citywide issues, such as the proposed closure of the trauma unit at King/Drew Medical Center.

To keep the focus on the local panels, the neighborhood councils decided two years ago that politicians could not address the assembly.

But as he does at each gathering, the mayor will make welcoming remarks. Alarcon plans to address a smaller group in the afternoon.

"If everyone who wanted to get to speak, we'd have to add two hours to the program," Nelson said. But he added that it was "a good thing" that so many mayoral hopefuls were planning to attend. "If neighborhood councils and the people in it were irrelevant, the candidates wouldn't show up."

Jim Alger, a leader of the Northridge West Neighborhood Council, predicted the councils would become more powerful. Alger banded together with members of other councils earlier this year and convinced city officials to scuttle a proposed 18% hike in water rates. Instead, the council voted for an 11% increase.

At a Friday news conference organized by Alarcon to call on the Department of Water and Power to eliminate the water rate increase, Alger said, "There's a new sheriff in town and they are called neighborhood councils."