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Councils to fight water hikes

Neighborhood panels rallying against DWP plan

By James Nash
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In a test of the clout of neighborhood activism in Los Angeles, leaders of advisory neighborhood councils Saturday mobilized for another fight against an already approved increase in city water rates.

Many of the estimated 600 neighborhood council members who attended a daylong conference at the Los Angeles Convention Center sported "Roll Back the Rate Increase" stickers provided by supporters of state Sen. Richard Alarcon, who has made the rate increase a key issue in his campaign for Los Angeles mayor.

They also signed petitions sponsored by Alarcon, D-Van Nuys, calling on City Council members to rescind the water rate hike, which took effect in June. Neighborhood council leaders won a partial victory earlier this year by persuading the city to scale back a proposed two-year, 18 percent water rate hike to one year and 11 percent.

But on Saturday at the city-sponsored Congress of Neighborhoods, an event that dealt with a variety of municipal issues, leaders of many neighborhood councils citywide said they were ready to take up the water issue again after several residents sued the city over the increase, alleging that it was a hidden tax. "Now that there's a lawsuit, I think it's revived the energy," said Porter Ranch Neighborhood Council President Ron Nagai.

The plaintiffs argue that because the DWP is transferring \$239 million to the city's general fund this year -- most of it from electricity revenue -- any rate increase amounts to an illegal tax.

Barbara Carroll, a Greater Toluca Lake Neighborhood Council board member, said the issue is one of a few that concern neighborhood councils citywide.

"I truly think that neighborhood councils have become more instrumental recently in getting issues out in front of the city that are of concern to the public," she said. "I think this could result in some additional rollbacks."

Neighborhood councils were formed under a 1999 City Charter amendment designed to increase local representation at City Hall. The panels have no formal

authority over land use or budget issues other than the ability to spend \$50,000 each in city funds.

Addressing the groups Saturday, Mayor James Hahn promised them greater freedom in how they can spend funds and reaffirmed his intent to have the councils take part in evaluating general managers of city departments. In addition to Hahn and Alarcon, 2005 mayoral candidates Robert Hertzberg, Antonio Villaraigosa, Bernard Parks and Walter Moore made appearances.