

Los Angeles Daily News

Calling all neighborhoods

Time to make a difference in the March election is running out

Sunday, November 21, 2004 - With nearly four months to go, the Los Angeles city elections in March may seem like a long way off.

They're not.

In fact, the city's neighborhoods are quickly running out of time to make their presence known in this election. And should they fail to play an active role, no matter which candidate collects the most votes, the winner will end up being L.A.'s most entrenched special interests -- once again.

Traditionally, the majority of L.A.'s electorate stays at home on election days when only local races are on the ballot. Four years ago, when Mayor James Hahn won the day, only 36 percent of those eligible to vote made the effort. And that's just great as far as the special interests are concerned.

From their point of view, the lower the turnout, the better. A small voting base can be easily targeted with deceitful mailers and phone-bank calls. Public-employee unions can significantly affect the election simply by getting their members out to the polls.

If traditional voting patterns hold, it's estimated that any of the five major mayoral candidates can secure a spot in May's runoff election with a piddly 160,000 votes -- in a city of 3.5 million.

When turnout is low, elections can essentially be bought, and that makes special interests beholden to those who bankroll their campaigns.

If neighborhoods are to ever stand a chance of getting a serious hearing in City Hall, they're going to need to get their people to vote.

In the next few months, neighborhood councils and other community groups must take the lead in energizing the city's residents. They must launch massive drives to register new voters, and educational efforts to inform and inspire old ones.

A large turnout could change the outcome of the election. More important, it would command City Hall's attention. Mindful that an engaged public is watching, city leaders would have little choice but to start paying heed to public interests and cleaning up their act.

But for that to happen, community groups need to get working, and fast. With less than four months to go, time's running out.