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City invites local councils to gathering

By Rick Orlov
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The city's experiment in getting neighborhoods involved in municipal government -- and keep the Valley from seceding -- will be celebrated this weekend with the inaugural Congress of Neighborhoods.

Mayor James Hahn will be joined Saturday by City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo, Controller Laura Chick and other officials at the Sheraton Universal Hotel in Universal City, where they will be speaking to the members of the city's 39 certified advisory neighborhood councils. The 350 council members expected to attend also will participate in workshops on how to gain and use their influence on the advisory panels.

"This is our first meeting of all neighborhood councils and it's important for them and the city to realize how much influence they will have," said Hahn spokeswoman Julie Wong.

"The mayor is committed to seeing that neighborhood councils work, that they have a say in decision making, from evaluating department heads to participating in budget priorities."

One of the topics Hahn is expected to discuss during the daylong session is how the upcoming budget will be reviewed by neighborhood councils, which will give input on their priorities.

Hahn has said he believes that even with only advisory powers, the neighborhood councils will be a force in future city decisions.

"The elected official who ignores the neighborhood councils does so at his or her own peril," Hahn said. "These are the community leaders who can influence what the city does, how it does it and when it does."

Hahn also has instructed department heads to meet with the councils at least every three months as he wants the groups involved in evaluating the general managers.

But Richard Close, head of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association and chairman of Valley Voters Organized Toward Empowerment, the group that led the drive to put Valley secession on the Nov. 5 ballot, is skeptical of the process.

"What I am hearing is there is a lot of frustration out there," Close said. "This was a good idea when people approved the charter three years ago, but nothing much has happened. The neighborhood councils have no real authority and no budget to do anything."

Close said he believes the problems he hears about the neighborhood councils will help the secession effort.

"If people want real change, they will have that opportunity on Nov. 5," Close said.

Hahn's operating budget for the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment -- the agency overseeing the councils and their formation -- was nearly doubled to \$4 million this year. Also,

DONE has an extra \$3 million in grants available to the neighborhood councils for various projects.

Another voice of criticism comes from a leader of a group that has seen its certification delayed for months.

"We were one of the first groups to submit an application and we still haven't been certified," said Kim Thompson of the proposed Granada Hills North Neighborhood Council and a longtime activist in the North Valley Coalition that has been fighting to keep closed the Sunshine Canyon landfill owned by Browning-Ferris Industries.

Thompson said the certification has been delayed because of arguments over those who should be considered stakeholders and a member of the council.

"We agreed to give BFI a seat on the board and other businesses as well," Thompson said. "We just want to get started. We think neighborhood councils are a good idea, whether the Valley secedes or it doesn't."

Bill Christopher, chairman of the DONE Commission, said part of the problem with the councils has been the raised expectations.

"This is not something you can judge in 12 months or 24," Christopher said. "This something that will evolve over five or 10 years as the neighborhood councils learn their way and City Hall adjusts to the councils."

After getting off to a slow start, the pace of certification has picked up. Christopher said the city hopes to have 70 neighborhood councils certified by December. Those would cover about half the city.

Councilman Dennis Zine, an advocate of the neighborhood groups when he served on the city's elected Charter Reform Commission, said he is moving to shift decision making by including the three certified neighborhood councils in his City Council district.

"I am sending them anything that could be controversial, like planning decisions, and telling them to let me know what they want," Zine said. "We had one issue with the location of a fire station and they resolved it."

"I am telling any developers that they had better deal with the neighborhood councils first. Developers and lobbyists may mean contributions, but neighborhood councils mean votes. I'm going to listen to the neighborhood councils."

Christopher said he believes the same will hold true for other officials and help overcome the skepticism many have.

"As you get more and more people involved, it will be hard for elected officials to ignore the advice that is coming their way," Christopher said. "It will be through their ability to communicate with officials and each other that will put the pressure on elected officials to follow their advice."

IF YOU GO:

The city's first Congress of Neighborhoods will be from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Saturday at the Sheraton Universal Hotel, 333 Universal Hollywood Drive in Universal City. For information, call toll-free: 1 (866) LA HELPS, or (213) 473-4890.