

## **Venice, Westchester/Playa del Rey: L.A. commission certifies two Neighborhood Councils**

*BY CINDY FRAZIER*

The City of Los Angeles Board of Neighborhood Commissioners (BONC) formally certified Neighborhood Councils for the Venice and Westchester/Playa del Rey areas Tuesday, March 12th.

The groups are the first to be certified in the local area under the Citywide System of Neighborhood Councils mandated by the new Los Angeles city charter, approved by voters in 2000.

**MAR VISTA APPLIES** — Also during the certification meeting, held at Daniel Webster Middle School in West Los Angeles, Mar Vista Community Council organizer Tom Ponton presented to the board an application for certification of the Mar Vista Neighborhood Council.

Boundaries of both the Venice and Westchester/Playa del Rey Councils generally conform to their respective community plan areas.

**VILLA MARINA** — The Grass Roots Venice boundaries that were approved do not include the Villa Marina/Glencoe Area, which had sought to be included in the Grass Roots Venice Neighborhood Council.

During an informal mediation between some Villa Marina residents and Grass Roots Venice, the Grass Roots Venice group agreed to "welcome" the Villa Marina area into its fold after certification, Grass Roots Venice president pro tem Tisha Bedrosian told the commission.

However, a number of Grass Roots Venice members opposed the inclusion during the hearing, claiming that the Villa Marina area had already been "disincluded" by a vote of the membership.

In addition, organizers of the Del Rey Neighborhood Council said they want Villa Marina to be included in their area.

**ELECTIONS NEXT** — The certified Neighborhood Councils will now be able to hold formal elections for their boards of directors, after which the Neighborhood Councils will be able to apply for \$50,000 in city grant money, set up offices and eventually lobby on behalf of neighborhood interests, according to Greg Nelson, general manager of the City of Los Angeles Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE).

"We are working on an election guidebook for the Neighborhood Councils because the charter requires fair and open elections and nobody's ever done elections like this before," Nelson said.

"We see the Neighborhood Councils as advocates for their areas in City Hall," he added.

Each council drafted its own set of bylaws and had to meet a set of criteria — including proof of broad outreach — and agree to abide by the city's Governmental Ethics ordinance.

In addition, the groups are required to present signatures from between 200 and 500 "stakeholders" — broadly defined as those who live, work or own property in the area.

The minimum size of such councils is an area comprising 20,000 "stakeholders," except by special dispensation of the board.

WESTCHESTER/PdR — The Board of Neighborhood Commissioners swiftly certified the Neighborhood Council of Westchester/Playa del Rey, after hearing from leaders of the organization about how two competing factions were brought together by a formal mediation process overseen by the DONE.

Organizers noted that, in more than two years of activities, more than 70 meetings were held and mailings were sent to 11,000 local households.

The boundaries of the Neighborhood Council conform to the Westchester/Playa del Rey Community Plan, which includes all of the Playa Vista development and the Ballona Wetlands.

Within that area there are about 54,000 residents and 23,000 households, according to an analysis by the DONE.

'COALITION-BUILDERS' — Supporters noted that Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) heavily impacts the Westchester-Playa del Rey area and that residents have worked together on many issues.

"They are coalition-builders," said Tony Ciancimino, who is active with the Westchester-LAX-Marina del Rey Chamber of Commerce. "This is a neighborhood of common interests."

Rex Frankel, an anti-Playa Vista activist, also spoke in support of the group and changes to the bylaws that allow the general membership to override the board of directors.

"This council has been controversial because of two huge development interests, Playa Vista and LAX, both of which want to control our neighborhood council," Frankel said.

"I'm pleased with the merger agreement, because this will be a democracy, not a republic," he said.

Board of Neighborhood Commissioners members expressed pleasure with the fact that the two groups were brought together, and approved the Neighborhood Council unanimously.

"I'm aware of your efforts and energy, and thank you," said commission chairman Bill Christopher. "I hope the council will serve you for a long time."

**VENICE BOUNDARIES** — The Grass Roots Venice Neighborhood Council was also approved unanimously, with some changes to its proposed boundaries.

The group had sought to share a portion of Mar Vista adjacent to local public schools, and allow residents to belong to both neighborhood councils, but the DONE said that residential areas may not overlap.

Instead, the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners approved a plan whereby the Venice and Mar Vista groups each "share" the four public school properties that serve the areas, but not residential areas.

In addition, the board turned down a request by the Venice group to "represent" the Ballona Wetlands, noting that the area is not contiguous with Venice and had already been included in the just-approved Neighborhood Council of Westchester-Playa del Rey.

In addition, the Venice group had inadvertently left Penmar Park out of its area and that area was included by the board.

**VILLA MARINA IN LIMBO** — Commissioners quizzed Venice organizer Bedrosian on efforts to mediate between Grass Roots Venice and the rival Venice/Coastal Area Neighborhood Council, which proposed to include the Villa Marina/Glencoe Avenue area as well as all other areas of Venice.

The Venice/Coastal group did not submit a formal application, but opted to submit a letter of intent under DONE rules, hoping to trigger a formal mediation between itself and Grass Roots Venice, according to organizer Terry Conner.

Bedrosian acknowledged that she declined a formal mediation because she "didn't feel comfortable" with the process but met with Conner and other members of the rival group on several occasions.

The two groups met Thursday, March 7th, a week before the certification hearing, at a meeting facilitated by a member of the Los Angeles Human Relations Commission.

Bedrosian told the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners that the Venice/Coastal group had agreed to support Grass Roots Venice in exchange for "our welcoming them into our group" and a future consideration of adding the Villa Marina area to its boundaries.

Conner, who did not speak at the hearing, said later that he was told by a DONE representative at the March 7th meeting that his group would be able to apply for inclusion following certification and board elections of Grass Roots Venice.

However, under the Neighborhood Council plan, areas may apply for membership to a certified Neighborhood Council only if the area is bounded by "at least two certified Neighborhood Councils."

This means that Villa Marina/Glencoe may have to wait to apply to join the Venice council until after neighboring Del Rey is certified, unless Grass Roots Venice votes the area into its Neighborhood Council.

Bedrosian told the commission that she agreed to "put the issue to a vote within two months."

During the hearing, John Davis, who serves as Grass Roots Venice secretary, countered that no agreement had been reached with the Villa Marina group.

"There was no formal agreement to reconsider our boundaries," Davis said.

'DILUTE VENICE' — Some Grass Roots Venice members said they would not support such a vote unless Villa Marina first conducted a referendum on joining with Venice.

"There should not be an assumption that the [Villa Marina] community will join Grass Roots Venice," said tenant activist Sheila Bernard.

James Smith, another Grass Roots Venice organizer, protested that including the Villa Marina area "would dilute the diversity of Venice."

"People in the Marina don't want to be in Venice," Smith said.

'GHETTOIZATION' — Del Rey neighborhood organizers also argued that the Villa Marina area belongs within their boundaries.

Villa Marina is located in the Del Rey Community Planning Area.

"If the [Villa Marina] group is allowed to annex Venice, it will change the socioeconomics of Del Rey," said Sal Grammatico, a Del Rey community member.

One Del Rey area man argued that Villa Marina was needed in the Del Rey council to avoid "ghettoization."

"There are 45 percent Latinos in Del Rey and the whites are all on one side" [of the neighborhood], he said. "If there is an annexation, we [Del Rey] will lose whites, and it will be the ghettoization of Del Rey."

'SHINING STARS' — Commissioners praised Grass Roots Venice for its outreach efforts and enthusiastically approved its application.

"This is an honest example of real neighborhood empowerment," said commission chairman Christopher.

"They [Grass Roots Venice] are shining stars for the Neighborhood Council process," said commissioner Ronald Stone, adding, "We can adjust boundaries later."