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THE CASE FOR UNITY

An Era of Neighborhoods

Editorial

Juliet Musso, an associate professor of public policy at USC, describes herself as the world's biggest cynic. When she set out three years ago to document Los Angeles' attempt to organize itself into neighborhood councils, she assumed she'd be telling a story of failure. To her astonishment, she found herself witnessing a revolution.

Almost unnoticed in the din of the Hollywood and San Fernando Valley secession campaigns, residents of neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles have been quietly mobilizing. Two years after voters approved City Charter reforms creating neighborhood councils, 37 areas have councils in place, and dozens more are in the works, from San Pedro to Pacoima, Venice to Glassell Park.

The idea behind neighborhood councils was to give ordinary Angelenos a greater voice in government, foster community and generally counter the sense of alienation fueling the long-simmering secession movement. The councils were to go beyond homeowners' or business associations, although such groups would be included, to reach out to all "stakeholders" of a neighborhood, including renters, employees, churches, schools and nonprofit groups. Even as some boundary disputes and personality clashes have inevitably occurred, successes outnumber failures.

"For a city that's stereotyped as not having neighborhoods and not being community-oriented, with everybody driving around in cars and not talking to each other," Musso notes, "it's just amazing."

Take Doug Epperhart, 46, who works from home producing local newsletters. He offered to do one for the fledgling Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council and soon found himself president of a governing board whose members range in age from late 20s to 70s and include apartment renters and owners of expensive homes, longshoremen and waitresses, parents and business owners.

Epperhart's council recently alerted city officials to a playground in ramshackle condition and snagged a \$12,000 city grant to refit it with spanking new swings and slides. While politicians and pundits weigh the hypothetical merits and pitfalls of breaking up Los Angeles, he and thousands like him are making the city work, one playground at a time.

Epperhart is optimistic that, in these days of term-limited City Council members and closely contested elections, neighborhood councils able to mobilize their members will have real clout at City Hall, either as the councils are now or as part of a semiautonomous borough system. Valley secession leaders remain cynics, dismissing the councils as powerless even before voters overwhelmingly approved them two years ago this month.

With Hollywood and Valley secession up for a citywide vote in November, it's time to

recognize not only what neighborhood councils can do but what they already are doing to unite rather than divide Los Angeles.