

L.A. Inaugurates Era of Neighborhood Councils

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Call it L.A.'s grand experiment in local governance.

Nearly three years after L.A. voters first approved them as part of charter reform, neighborhood councils are now forming by the dozens throughout the city.

Fourteen neighborhood councils had been approved as of last week, including four in the harbor area, three in the San Fernando Valley and three in the mid-city area. Another five were scheduled for approval this past weekend. Applications for 32 more neighborhood councils have been submitted to the city and another 50 areas are in the early formation stages.

All told, about 100 neighborhood councils are in the works — the largest such effort ever mounted in the United States. And by the end of this calendar year, many, if not most, of these councils likely will have held elections for their governing boards and then be fully up and running.

The neighborhoods these councils represent range in size from the minimum requirement of 20,000 people in communities like Old Northridge to 40,000 people in Venice and all the way up to 74,000 people in Pacoima.

““What we’re seeing now is essentially the self-organizing of a city of 4 million people over 470 square miles,”” said Juliet Musso, associate professor of public policy at USC, who is studying the creation of neighborhood councils in L.A.

After the city certifies each of these neighborhood councils, they will organize elections to choose their governing board members (involving voting of residents in that council). The first of those elections will likely be held in late May or early June.

Hurdles to navigate

But there are stumbling blocks in the way of getting an effective neighborhood council program fully running in the city, the biggest one being money. There’s also the secession efforts in the San Fernando Valley, the harbor area and Hollywood that could render the entire structure of neighborhood councils moot across huge swaths of the city.

Ironically, it was because of secession pressures in these areas that neighborhood councils became a hot-button issue in the late 1990s. The councils were seen as a way of moving government closer to neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, now that the neighborhood councils are coalescing, there's uncertainty about exactly what they will be doing.

““The key issue now is how the councils will actually work,”” said Raphael Sonenshein, professor of political science at California State University Fullerton who was executive director of one of the charter reform commissions that drafted the laws regarding neighborhood councils.

““In the charter, we gave neighborhood councils the opportunity to weigh in on anything affecting the community,”” Sonenshein said. ““The question now is what these councils will choose to focus on and, just as importantly, how that input will be received at the City Council and among city staff.””

During the debate over charter reform, neighborhood activists waged an ultimately unsuccessful battle to grant the councils veto power over development proposals. Instead, the neighborhood councils are advisory; they can only make recommendations of support or opposition to these projects.

But the charter envisioned neighborhood councils taking on a host of other issues, from setting up neighborhood watch programs and street beautification projects to recommending to city staff which streets need repaving.

““The councils will pick their own issues,”” said Greg Nelson, general manager of the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment who was a longtime aide to former City Councilman Joel Wachs. Nelson has spent the past six months helping neighborhoods form their own councils.

Some councils are already focusing on key issues.

In Glassell Park, the interim group in charge of the council has set up committees on public safety and street beautification. They've sat down with representatives from McDonald's Corp. seeking to locate a restaurant in the community, according to L.A. City Councilman Eric Garcetti, who represents the area.

““We're seeing the birth of a new way of resolving land use disputes in this city,”” Garcetti said. ““That's exactly what the neighborhood councils were supposed to do.””

Start-up money

But ultimately, neighborhood councils are being threatened by a budget crunch that could constrain them just as they get up and running. Without tens of thousands of dollars for start-up costs, the fear is that the councils could deteriorate even more rapidly than they formed.

““These are critical growth years for neighborhood councils,”” said L.A. City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who chairs the council’s Neighborhoods and Education committee. ““They will either believe we are willing to put resources in or it will be seen as another raft of empty promises.””

The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment has proposed \$50,000 in start-up funding for each neighborhood council. But so far, only \$1 million has been budgeted for all the councils; at \$50,000 per council, that’s only enough for 20 councils.

Councilwoman Hahn said she will push for an additional \$1 million in funding for the next fiscal year, beginning July 1. However, with the city facing a projected budget deficit of \$250 million, getting \$1 million in new funds for any purpose will be a daunting task, let alone an additional \$2 million in start-up funds for 80 or 90 neighborhood councils.

Meanwhile, there’s been plenty of confusion and conflict in the neighborhoods themselves, especially over neighborhood council boundaries.

Prime properties

One such boundary dispute is in the West San Fernando Valley. Two neighborhood councils — Canoga Park/West Hills and Woodland Hills/Warner Center — are battling over which neighborhood council will get the area’s most lucrative shopping mall, the Westfield Shopping Town Topanga that sits on the border between Canoga Park and Woodland Hills.

Similar boundary disputes have cropped up all over the city, but most of them have been resolved thanks to mediation efforts by the city.

Other disputes have focused more on personalities. For example, in Echo Park, two factions are seeking to represent the same neighborhood.

In the end, will the councils be listened to at City Hall?

““Everybody has been asking me that, and what I tell them is that these neighborhood councils could be the most influential source over how decisions are made, but first, they will have to earn their influence,”” Nelson said.

To make their mark, Nelson said neighborhood councils must represent more than one segment of a community. They can’t just be groups of homeowners or chamber of commerce members, he said.

The councils must also be able to mobilize their members around certain issues and then have good working relationships with elected officials.

Key to this will be the ability of the city to get out the word about proposed projects that come into the city and measures being taken by various city agencies. Without this so-called ““early notification,”” it may be difficult for neighborhood council board members to weigh in before key city decisions are made.

Nelson said that setting up such an early notification system would be one of his top priorities after the neighborhood council certification process is complete.

But this takes time, effort and especially money.