

The art of government

Los Angeles, CA | Monday, July 15, 2002

Published: Sunday, July 14, 2002

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By Holly Edwards
Staff Writer

NORTHRIDGE -- Meeting in a courtyard filled with vibrant paintings and antique Chinese statuary, members of the Old Northridge Neighborhood Council gather around a large round table painted with tribal patterns and talk about anything that's on their minds -- an idea for a film, the progress on their latest painting or the pothole down the street. Basing their grass-roots government on freedom of thought and artistic expression, members of the group call themselves the Kapuna, a Hawaiian term for street leader, and the council itself is called the Gilgamesh, to symbolize a place with new ideas. "We're blending art and politics to bring people together, and the neighborhood council itself becomes a form of art," said Don Larson, 49, the head kapuna who organized the community council.

"It's like a sculpture or a painting. All these different colors and abstract shapes have to fit together in ways only an artist sees." Larson's novel approach to Los Angeles' new system of advisory neighborhood councils -- designed to give communities a voice at City Hall -- initially raised eyebrows among some city officials.

Even so the Department of Neighborhood Councils certified the group in March, even as others are struggling to get approval.

"My first reaction when I heard all this about the Gilgamesh and the kapuna was, is he serious?" said Greg Nelson, general manager of the city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

"But now I see this unique and different approach as one of the benefits. With grass-roots democracy, the one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work. What they're doing is colorful and creative, so let's give it a shot."

However, another effort to create a different form of neighborhood council in Northridge has been stalled for months. A group seeking to create a council based upon the town hall approach, in which everyone who attends

the meetings can vote, has been waiting since last November to be certified.

Nelson said he is trying to change the ordinance that prohibits town hall-style neighborhood councils.

"The town hall concept is ineffective, sloppy and slow, but if that's what they want, they should be able to try different things," he said.

Community leaders trying to organize the Northridge Neighborhood Council say the town hall concept is the most democratic form of government because everyone who is interested in a particular issue has a chance to vote on it.

"The town hall concept empowers all of the people, as opposed to empowering 20 people to make decisions for 80,000," said Walter Prince, who is heading up the effort to form the Northridge Neighborhood Council. Meanwhile, some city officials say that without any formal power, the neighborhood council system is ineffective by definition.

Critics point to the failure of the Old Northridge group's first project -- an effort to save a 500-year-old palm tree from a developer's plans to build an apartment complex -- as evidence of the inherent weaknesses of neighborhood councils that have a voice but no authority.

Members of the council lobbied City Councilman Hal Bernson's office to obtain grant money to purchase the property for use as a community pocket park. However, officials at Bernson's office say no such grant money is available.

Larson said he is trying to create more than a neighborhood council -- he is trying to create a neighborhood -- and he has never been one to wait for the city to fix community problems.

When parking lines fade on his street, Larson repaints them. When a pothole shows up on his block, he fixes it.

And if there's no city money to save the palm tree and create a park, the council will seek state money, he said.

Larson also didn't take no for an answer when he applied to create the neighborhood council with fewer than the minimum 20,000 population requirement for the council area.

Just more than 13,000 people live in the area served by the council, so Larson took a different path. Citing the area's historic and cultural significance, he obtained an exemption from the population requirement -- the first such exemption issued by the city.

Old Northridge -- bounded roughly by Nordhoff Street to the north, Roscoe Boulevard to the south, Lindley Avenue to the east, and Tampa Avenue to the west -- was one of the first parts of the Valley to be inhabited by ranchers seeking new territory to farm and raise livestock.

Nearly a century ago, Larson's great-grandparents and their 13 children arrived in the Valley and started a ranch, growing beets and walnut trees from Northridge to Van Nuys.

The cultural center of the neighborhood is Larson's art-filled apartment

building -- dubbed Das Bauhaus after an art movement that blended art and science.

Filled with Larson's sculpture, paintings and relics from his surfing days, the apartment building houses an eclectic mix of residents who speak seven languages among them.

Most of them are also members of the neighborhood council, which meets in the apartment house courtyard.

"It's really exciting to see this blending of government and art because I think it will make both more accessible to people," said Liz Antos, 27, a photographer who lives at Das Bauhaus. "Art is scary to the masses, but life is art, and that's what we're trying to get at here."