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Groups decline city's offer

By James Nash Staff Writer, Daily News

Two of Los Angeles' most influential community groups have refused to join the new network of advisory neighborhood councils, saying they would lose power by becoming official city agencies. The unanimous decision by the Pacific Palisades Community Council to remain independent of the city was in great part based on the possibility of forfeiting its right to appeal land-use decisions or to sue the city by formally becoming part of the government.

The Brentwood Community Council's membership also has so far refused to join the network of neighborhood councils for the same reason.

The concerns of the two neighborhoods echoed widespread San Fernando Valley complaints that the neighborhood councils lack any authority and won't be able to protect neighborhoods from city planning decisions.

But Mayor James Hahn's point man for neighborhood councils said he isn't worried.

"What we expect to happen is (Pacific Palisades and Brentwood) will sit and watch, and I predict they'll eventually join," said Greg Nelson, manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. "We have time to figure this out."

Under the 1999 reform of the City Charter that set up a network of local groups to advise the City Council on community concerns, 39 councils have been certified, and Hahn expects the number to reach 70 by the end of the year -- covering about half the city.

Pacific Palisades won't be among them, said leaders of the Pacific Palisades Community Council, which was formed in 1973 and, ironically, served as an inspiration for Los Angeles' budding network of neighborhood councils.

"They use the term 'Department of Neighborhood Empowerment,' but there's no power for these neighborhoods," said Jack Allen, a retired attorney and adviser to the Palisades council. "They threw up so many roadblocks that we found we could be far more effective as a community council, uncertified, than as a certified neighborhood council."

Neighborhood councils would lose the ability to file formal appeals or sue the city over planning decisions. The Palisades council, which successfully sued the city in 2000 to block an amphitheater at the Getty Villa, wants to keep the power to file lawsuits as a last resort, leaders said.

The group's board of directors voted 16-0 in March to remain on the sidelines of the city's neighborhood empowerment experiment.

The Brentwood Community Council also has misgivings about becoming a city-sanctioned neighborhood council, but members aren't ruling out the possibility. Flora Krisiloff, the Brentwood group's chairwoman and a member of the West Area Planning Commission, said land

use often is a hot-button issue on the Westside, and that residents need groups that can voice their concerns to city officials.

Members of the Pacific Palisades and Brentwood groups also expressed concerns that their personal finances would become a matter of public record under city disclosure rules, that their groups would surrender control of their finances to the city and that the city would require a new selection system that could oust some group leaders.

No community groups other than those in Pacific Palisades and Brentwood have declined to participate in the neighborhood councils, Nelson said, adding that those two communities worry him less than areas such as Panorama City, where there is no existing leadership to mold a neighborhood council.

Councilwoman Cindy Miscikowski is encouraging Pacific Palisades and Brentwood to form neighborhood councils because they then could tap into the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment's \$4 million annual budget, said Lisa Gritzner, Miscikowski's chief of staff. The neighborhood councils also would be able to provide input on the city budget and reviews of top city managers, Gritzner said.

But Pacific Palisades and Brentwood will continue to have influence whether they form neighborhood councils under the city's umbrella or keep their independent councils, Gritzner said.

"I don't think (their reluctance) signifies a flaw in the system," she said. "It signifies the beauty of free will."

Richard Close, who heads the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association and is chairman of Valley Voters Organized Toward Empowerment, said Pacific Palisades and Brentwood raise legitimate concerns about whether neighborhood councils are merely symbolic measures to appease neighborhoods that want to break away from Los Angeles.

And there's no guarantee that the councils would represent local residents since they include other "stakeholders" such as people who work or own property in the neighborhoods.

"A lot of people are frustrated because the community councils can't do anything," Close said.