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Hahn: Councils antidote to secession

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Celebrating his first year in office with an old-fashioned picnic, Mayor James Hahn on Monday touted the creation of 37 advisory neighborhood councils and promised nearly 40 more as a way to reform city government and counter secession.

"I want these to have a real impact on city government," Hahn said. "I want them involved in the budget process. I want them to help evaluate general managers. I want them to tell departments what their community needs."

Hahn said he has been in contact with a number of the neighborhood councils and has agreed to many of their wishes.

In one case, he cited the opposition of the West Hills Neighborhood Council to the proposed Ahmanson Ranch project in Ventura County.

"They were upset that Ventura County would derive all the benefits and Los Angeles would pay the penalty," Hahn said. "They wanted me to come out against it, and I did."

Hahn said he wants to see 70 advisory councils in operation over the next year and also will be pushing for an item on City Council agendas to require neighborhood impact statements for projects to be cleared by neighborhood councils.

The mayor has cited the neighborhood councils as an alternative to secession, although critics say the panels are of limited value since they have no authority.

The event, held on the South Lawn of City Hall where Hahn took the oath of office one year ago, was held for some 200 neighborhood council members from around the city. They were treated to pie, cotton candy and grilled hot dogs as they were given hats and red, white, and blue balloons bearing the words "Neighborhoods are L.A."

Former Los Angeles Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda was on hand with Hahn to administer the pledge of office to the neighborhood council members.

"I think these are the answer to secession," said Richard Gallegos of the recently certified Pacoima Neighborhood Council. "We haven't even had our election and we're already seeing some impact. We are talking to city departments about our needs and what we want to see.

"And we want to see that Pacoima gets the same treatment as the rest of the city."

Gallegos said residents have complained for years about illegal dumping in alleys and about seeing that streets and sidewalks are repaired.

The mayor said he has increased the budget for the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment to \$4.1 million, in addition to \$3 million set aside for grants to neighborhood councils to use for programs in their areas.

A special meeting for all the neighborhood councils is being planned for Aug. 3 at the Sheraton Universal to provide information and training to the organizations.

Council President Alex Padilla said he also sees the neighborhood councils as a way to revolutionize city government.

"I was raised that we should try to repair things rather than break things up," Padilla told the council members. "It is up to you to help us repair things."