

## Los Angeles Daily News

### 42 councils in search of a well-run city

By Kimit Muston

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I like redundancy in airplanes. I like extra engines and backup hydraulic systems. I would even support having a backup airplane shaped like a baseball mitt flying directly underneath my own plane, just in case the backups need a backup.

But most of the time redundancy is just redundant and gets in the way.

I'm talking about the neighborhood councils, part of the City Charter reform passed overwhelmingly by the voters back in 1999 and still approved of by a whopping 89 percent of you, according to a recent poll by the Public Policy Institute and the University of California.

OK, 89 percent is an almost unbelievably high percentage but, whatever the actual level of support, I'm sticking my neck out and telling you I disagree.

It's not that I'm against the idea of a system that allows local residents a voice in what happens in their neighborhoods; it's just that I thought we already had such an organization.

You remember the City Council, right? The gang of 15 with their \$160,000-a-year salaries, their staffs and all of the other accouterments of prestigious elected representatives?

We have created a new city department with a proposed budget next year of \$6 million and are creating 100 citywide elected neighborhood councils, each with a \$50,000 budget, all in an attempt to achieve representative government in Los Angeles. Is there any problem that can't be solved by just adding another layer of bureaucracy? Had City Hall created a Department of Democracy, that would have been too ironic so they simply redefined the problem.

The goal now is "empowerment," watched over by the new Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, or DONE for short, as in overdone and underdone. I say overdone, because many of the 42 councils that have held elections so far have proved to be real drama queens.

The 33 seats on the Chinatown Council, which stretches all the way to Little Tokyo, were filled by a mere 2,267 votes, and that was still 135 votes more than the "stakeholder" registered voters.

Inside the church polling place an observer told the L.A. Weekly, "It was a zoo."

There was shoving and shouting and swearing. The cops had to evict a couple of folks. When the losers filed protests, the election was undone by DONE and the League of Women Voters. They threw out five of the top six vote-getters.

They then requalified one disqualified candidate, Don Toy, because at the last minute he changed his version of where he lived -- his new reported home address being supported with two handwritten rent receipts from the Cathay Manor, a Chinatown nursing home.

In Hollywood it was claimed that the Church of Scientology bused in members to pack the polls.

In Van Nuys it was said the winners were soliciting voters within 100 feet of the polls, which is illegal. (Encino faced similar allegations.)

The Mid-Wilshire Council has been waiting two years for DONE to certify its election results.

Jim Leahy from the Van Nuys Council, which is also caught in certification limbo, expressed his frustration with City Hall red tape when he said, "We had one bad election and now a lot of people think they (City Hall) are trying to tell us what to do." Still, City Hall insists it will forge ahead and that by the end of this year all 100 councils will be elected, certified and ready to start work.

But what work?

This is the underdone part.

The councils have no statutory power. They can't tell anybody to do anything. And with the minuscule number of voters bothering to vote in the council elections, it's not clear just whose voice the final councils will speak with or if anybody will bother to listen to them when they do speak.

According to a 1998 City Hall review of similar neighborhood council systems in Birmingham, Ala.; Dayton, Ohio; Portland, Ore.; Seattle; and Santa Monica, there are 13 steps to ensure successful neighborhood councils.

The most crucial of these are: There must be good communication between the city and the neighborhoods; the city must provide early notification to the neighborhoods of issues affecting them; City Hall must support the neighborhood councils; the neighborhoods must be allowed to innovate and be encouraged to co-operate with the business community; and there must be regular reviews to see if the system is working. Heck, if we could get City Hall to do half of those things right now we wouldn't need the darn neighborhood councils.

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