

Daily Breeze

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Councils flex muscles over security alarms

By David Zahniser
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If there was any question whether new neighborhood councils in Los Angeles are capable of wielding power, Tuesday's council vote on security alarms provided the first answer.

Ignored by the Police Commission last week, neighborhood council representatives from Wilmington to Tarzana persuaded the City Council to reconsider the LAPD's proposal to ignore most security alarms.

The vote gives the neighborhood panels — which technically only have advisory powers — their first serious taste of political clout.

"Today was a historic moment," said James O'Sullivan, who serves on the Mid City West Community Council. "It was . . . a first step toward a partnership with City Hall."

Neighborhood councils were mandated in 1999 as part of a voter-approved overhaul of the City Charter. Since then, the city has approved 59 neighborhood councils, including three in San Pedro, one in Wilmington, one in Harbor City, one in Harbor Gateway and one covering Westchester and Playa del Rey.

Councilwoman Janice Hahn, a representative of the Harbor Area and a longtime advocate of neighborhood councils, said Tuesday's vote should not be underestimated.

"The City Council heard loud and clear that we cannot ignore neighborhood councils," she said.

Still, Hahn admitted that the city has a long way to go before it has a system of informing neighborhood councils about major policy proposals. Even as she savored her victory, Hahn said the city's "Early Notification System" — a concept required in the city charter — is not working.

Greg Nelson, general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, said the system for alerting neighborhood councils about meetings and policy proposals will be strengthened in coming months.

Agendas should be written so the public can understand them and allow neighborhood councils to obtain backup reports that give the details of a policy proposal, Nelson said.

Still, neighborhood councils were largely unaware of the LAPD's alarm proposal until Hahn's office contacted them about it, said Leonard Shaffer, who is helping form a neighborhood council in Tarzana.

"It's a published list — it's not a secret," he said. "The Police Commission could do that also."

But while community activists continue to voice frustration, others at City Hall say the system is changing.

"The city has slowly — albeit very slowly — moved away from the close-to-the-vest decision-making process," said Councilwoman Wendy Greuel, an ally of Councilwoman Hahn.

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