



February 8, 2003

EDITORIAL

Neighborhood Muscle

■ Many of L.A.'s new councils made their voices heard on the burglar alarm issue.

No matter where you come down on the Police Commission's new burglar alarm policy (we support it), City Council hearings on the issue put to rest skeptics' claims that Los Angeles' fledgling neighborhood councils would never have any real clout. Now the question is: How will they use it?

Representatives of some of the city's 61-and-counting neighborhood councils flooded the City Council with phone calls and e-mails, complaining not just about the policy itself but that they didn't know about it in time to try to influence the Police Commission's decision.

A quick synopsis: The new policy is an attempt to keep cops from answering, on average, 340 false alarms a day. It calls for police to respond to a burglar alarm only after signs of a break-in are confirmed by a private patrol, a video camera inspection or other means, shifting the responsibility for verifying whether an alarm is real from taxpayer-supported police officers to the private companies that install the alarms.

Not surprisingly, private alarm companies, at least those that don't already send out their own patrols, objected. When the Police Commission approved the policy anyway, they made sure their customers objected too, urging them to ask the City Council to overturn the commission's decision.

The City Council didn't do that -- and by that measure, skeptics can go on saying that neighborhood councils, which are advisory only, have no influence. The neighborhood groups do have influence, but that influence should not guarantee a result.

The hearings, besides giving voice to the neighborhood councils' concerns, also led to the creation of a task force to consider alternatives to the new policy -- including, we hope, a renewed effort to get information on important issues out to neighborhoods.

Neighborhood councils, for their part, need to make sure they don't become clones of existing homeowner groups, with the same bad habit of rallying against everything rather than for anything.

There are hopeful signs. The Greater Echo Park/Elysian Park Neighborhood Council, for one, conducted a thoughtful e-mail discussion of the new burglar alarm policy that went beyond the scare tactics put out by alarm companies. Members suggested ways

neighborhood councils could work with established neighborhood watch groups and police community advisory boards to watch out for each other and make their neighborhoods safer for everyone.

That's real neighborhood empowerment.