

Neighborhood Councils See Problems

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They were the centerpiece of L.A.'s charter reform effort four years ago: a network of neighborhood councils to give people more of a voice in their communities.

Now, neighborhood councils are a reality in Los Angeles. As of last week, 64 of them had been officially recognized, with another 15 to 20 pending approval.

Elections for board members to these councils have been taking place all over the city in recent months and city funds have started flowing to some of them. But already there are problems. Competing groups have vied for power within several of the council zones, with the losers often quitting the entire process. Charges of packing elections to stack neighborhood council governing boards have emerged. And some councils have waited months to receive funding.

Most importantly, neighborhood councils so far have been unable to fulfill their central mission: allowing communities to weigh in at the front end of major policy and development decisions.

"This is a city that historically has not welcomed community involvement in government decisions," said Juliet Musso, associate professor of public policy at the School of Policy, Planning and Development at USC who is studying neighborhood councils. "The biggest problem right now is that the city

bureaucracy has been slow to adjust to these neighborhood councils and include them in the decision-making process.”

One city council aide working with local neighborhood councils said a recent flap over the lack of advance notification concerning changes to police responses to burglar alarms was only “the tip of the iceberg...There are scores of key decisions being made every week affecting various neighborhoods that these neighborhood councils simply aren’t finding out about in time to act,” the aide said.

City officials defend the progress, saying that the level of public interest in getting them off the ground exceeded expectations.

“I am really thrilled that at this point we’ve certified 64 neighborhood councils and held elections in more than half of them,” said L.A. City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who chairs the council’s Neighborhoods and Education committee. “When you think about all the problems that could have happened, I’m really pleased that we’ve only had a couple elections that were contested and a handful of boundary disputes that couldn’t be resolved by the players themselves.”

Nonetheless, Hahn conceded that her greatest concern is making sure the councils are clued into the city’s decision-making process. Following the recent burglar alarm flap, Hahn introduced an ordinance requiring more advance notice of city policy changes to neighborhood councils.

Certification Battles

Before the early notification issue sprang up, city officials had been mostly focused on getting neighborhood councils to form, receive city certification and hold elections.

In most cases, the certification process has gone smoothly. But in about a dozen cases, disputes have arisen. Half of those involved “where to draw the line” as two adjacent groups fight over a small area between them, according to Bill Christopher, one of seven members of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment Board of Commissioners. He said that the department first tries to broker a compromise. If that fails, “we then have to choose one party or the other.”

Other disputes are often more bitter and involve two competing groups in the same general area trying to gain recognition as a neighborhood council. These are often continuations of factions that previously existed in certain neighborhoods.

One area that went through such a dispute is the neighborhood around the Farmer’s Market and Grove shopping centers.

The long-established Beverly-Wilshire Homes Association group tried to win certification as the neighborhood council for the Miracle Mile/Farmer’s Market area. Another group centered on the Wilshire corridor also sought to win certification. The two groups could not reach a compromise and in the end, the DONE commission chose the Wilshire corridor group as the more diverse coalition.

That left Beverly-Wilshire Homes Association president Diana Plotkin disillusioned with the neighborhood council process.

“We are not a fan of neighborhood councils and will not participate in them,” Plotkin said. “Residential communities are not being fairly represented in the petition that was certified. That group is monopolized by big business and little

business.”

Other areas with long-established homeowner groups, such as Westwood and Pacific Palisades, have also opted out, saying they would dilute their influence on development proposals and other city policies.

“It’s the areas that have not had strong community-based representation in the past that stand to benefit the most from this, not areas like ours,” said Holmby-Westwood Property Owners Association president Sandy Brown.

Election Controversies

Homeowner/business splits are also playing out in the election process. According to the city charter, each neighborhood council must hold elections for its governing board and can pick the time and place. Most elections are held either on Saturday or on a Tuesday afternoon/evening.

Balloting must be open to all the “stakeholders” in that particular neighborhood. Besides the commonly expected homeowners, property owners and merchant groups, stakeholders include tenants, employees who work in the area (and unions that represent those workers), religious organizations and other non-profit groups.

In many areas, however, these groups are not well organized and have proven hard to reach.

“It hasn’t been easy trying to notify workers in some neighborhoods,” said DONE general manager Greg Nelson. “They are not used to taking notice of what’s going on in the neighborhoods surrounding their workplace.”

Nelson said that in the neighborhood with the highest percentage of workers – Downtown – DONE staff worked with organizers of the neighborhood council there to put inserts in the Downtown News. “It did help, but it was still difficult to get workers to vote.”

Complicating things is wording in the charter that left the size, length of terms and composition of the governing boards up to individual neighborhood councils. The only stipulation is that no single “stakeholder group” can hold more than 50 percent of the votes. So far, governing board sizes have ranged from as few as nine to as many as 51. Terms typically last one or two years, with some as long as three.

With such vague rules, the elections have been open to charges of “stakeholder stacking,” where one group mobilizes a large number of people to vote. Last year, the International Longshore Workers’ Union brought out scores of its members to vote for a slate of candidates for the Central San Pedro Neighborhood Council. Those candidates all won, coming just short of a majority of votes on the governing board. Other neighborhood groups, fearful their voice wouldn’t be heard, complained to the city. But the election results will stand until the one-year terms expire later this year.

A similar situation arose late last year in Hollywood, where the Church of Scientology bused in scores of its members to vote. Although the move was widely seen as the Church of Scientology trying to wrest control of the neighborhood council, the church members wound up voting as a block in only two cases.

“No question the Church of Scientology did a good job in getting a large number of supporters to the polls,” Christopher said. “But even though this attracted a huge amount of attention, they did not try to overrun the neighborhood council.”

Staffing issues

With governing boards now in place at 38 neighborhood councils, the focus is turning to funding and staffing. The city ordinance drawing up the neighborhood council network authorized \$50,000 for the first year for each neighborhood council. But since neighborhood councils cannot receive funds prior to the convening of the governing board, most have had to rely on volunteer work to get up and running.

As a result, the city didn't tackle the funding issues until late last year, leaving a handful of neighborhood councils that held elections earlier in the year without funds for months at a time.

"No question that for many of the neighborhood councils, the slow pace of the city getting its funding together proved very, very frustrating," Musso said.

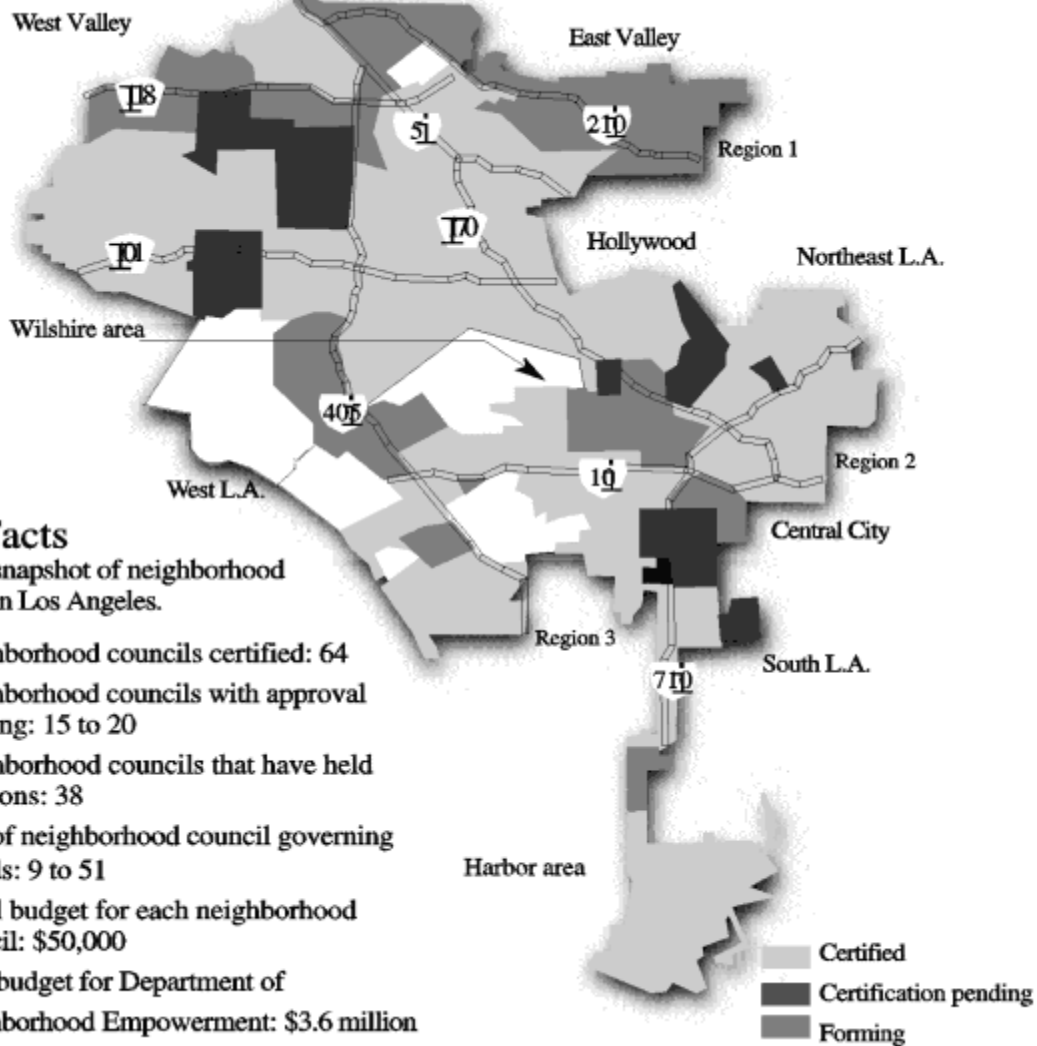
One of the biggest issues was how to ensure that the neighborhood councils did not go on spending sprees or expensive trips and then charge those to the city. Rather than set up bank accounts, the city settled on "smart debit cards" where all expenditures could be tracked by computer. Also, the cards could not be used at travel agencies or airline ticketing operations to ensure no one was taking any long trips.

The biggest need has been for staffing to send out meeting notices and other administrative chores. But here, too, the councils have been stymied. The reason: city concerns about liability. Because neighborhood councils are city entities, they are subject to workers' compensation and other liabilities, city hiring

policies and even, possibly, union contracts. How this affects any hiring made by the neighborhood councils is a subject of much debate between the City Attorney, the DONE staff, unions and the City Council.

As an interim solution, Nelson said the city is trying to make it possible for neighborhood councils to hire from a temporary agency on contract to the city. For now, though, neighborhood councils are not allowed to have staff, which limits their ability to provide many of the services and functions they were set up to do.

"It's emblematic of how scant the support has been from the city for these neighborhood councils," Musso said.



Fast Facts

Here's a snapshot of neighborhood councils in Los Angeles.

- Neighborhood councils certified: 64
- Neighborhood councils with approval pending: 15 to 20
- Neighborhood councils that have held elections: 38
- Size of neighborhood council governing boards: 9 to 51
- Initial budget for each neighborhood council: \$50,000
- Total budget for Department of Neighborhood Empowerment: \$3.6 million

Source: Department of Neighborhood Empowerment