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City asking for meeting conduct code

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Prompted by angry debates that have led to personal threats against city officials and each other, the city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment is proposing a code of civility for neighborhood councils.

"We aren't trying to stifle debate," insisted Greg Nelson, general manager of the department. "But we want to make sure it stays within the boundaries of debate and doesn't spill over to where people feel threatened."

Nelson said there had been a problem in Lincoln Heights, where a proposal to create an AIDS memorial generated conflict among neighborhood council members.

"There are people there who strongly oppose the project, those who are strongly in favor of it and a third group who doesn't want to get involved at all," Nelson said. "We just want to see the debate limited to debate and not physical threats."

Efforts to contact members of the Lincoln Heights Neighborhood Council were unsuccessful, but Councilman Ed Reyes said he hoped the new code would deal with the issue.

"We are seeing some inappropriate behavior, and I would like to see something in place to prevent the threats from occurring," Reyes said.

Under the proposal, members of a neighborhood council would sign a pledge to conduct themselves in a "respectful and courteous manner and in a way that will generate respect and credibility for our neighborhood council."

The pledge notes that freedom of expression is the cornerstone of democracy, but that exchanges should be done in a polite manner.

And, while there is no strict provisions to determine violations, the code would allow a board to remove people who consistently violate it and make threats.

"The problem becomes that everyone is screaming and yelling so much, that no work gets done," Nelson said. "People who really want to see neighborhood councils work don't come to the meetings because they feel threatened by what they see and hear."

The proposal comes as the department prepares for a conference of the various neighborhood councils Saturday at the Los Angeles Convention Center. The half-day event is designed to help the councils in their organizational activities.