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Hahn opens conference for councils
L.A. neighborhood panels meet at Convention Center

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Now that they have their first year under their belt, Neighborhood Council members from the San Fernando Valley expressed optimism Saturday that they could be a force for change in the city.

"The whole concept of neighborhood councils is fabulous," said Sue Flynn of the Sherman Oaks Neighborhood Council. "It gets people who would otherwise not pay attention to what's happening in the city involved. It's basic democracy."

About 600 people attended the Congress of Neighborhood Councils' Empowerment Academy held Saturday morning at the Los Angeles Convention Center.

Attendees said it was an excellent way for them to network with other councils, learn about issues in other parts of the city and swap successful procedures. Several expressed some frustration with the system, but most stressed that they believe the movement is just experiencing growing pains.

There were workshops to attend, with subjects like "Consensus Building," "Financial Disclosure," "Effectively Communicating Your Message" and "Running the Best Elections."

One room that generated an overflow crowd featured a discussion on how to get businesses more involved in neighborhood councils, said Greg Nelson, general manager of the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

"What I'm seeing today is more and more people understanding that government truly does want them to be part of the process," Nelson said. "This definitely is a fundamental change in the way government operates."

The Sherman Oaks council has spent most of its time laying the foundations this year, Flynn said, but it also has begun to identify some key concerns including beautification, keeping the crime rate low and managing traffic.

Kim Thompson of the Granada Hills North Neighborhood Council said her group had secured a new bus route for their area and arranged a traffic forum with transportation officials. But land-use issues were a big concern in the area, and

some members said they were not convinced their city councilman is sensitive to their concerns.

For the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council, it was quality-of-life issues, including public safety, revitalizing Van Nuys Boulevard and graffiti cleanup.

"People are apathetic because they don't think anyone is listening to them," said George Hernandez of the Van Nuys council. "The more people get involved in the process, the less apathy there will be."

One frustration Sy Feerst says he has with the Woodland Hills-Warner Center Neighborhood Council is residents who do come to meetings tend to focus only on their pet issues.

Once those issues are no longer on the agenda, they disappear. But the group's members think City Councilman Dennis Zine is responsive to their concerns and the council is off to a good start, he said.

"I think the noble experiment in grass-roots, town-hall democracy needs to go on," Feerst said.

At the neighborhood council assembly Los Angeles Mayor James Hahn gave a brief introductory speech, praising the groups for their hard work. Cautioning that California's financial woes also mean budget problems for Los Angeles, Hahn said it's important for the councils to communicate what elements -- such as public safety -- are most important to their neighborhoods.

"We want to hear your priorities," the mayor said.