

Argonaut

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Area reaches milestone in Neighborhood Council formation with certification of Del Rey group

This area reached a milestone with the certification of the Del Rey Neighborhood Council — the last area to be included in the citywide Los Angeles Neighborhood Council system that voters approved with a new Los Angeles city charter in 1999.

It was not without more than a little Sturm und Drang that this milestone was reached.

The citywide system of Neighborhood Councils is supposed to link communities with Los Angeles City Hall, and, it was hoped, keep the city from breaking apart.

It is impossible to tell whether the still-forming Neighborhood Councils were in any way responsible for the fact that Angelenos did not permit the San Fernando Valley to split off last year.

Under the charter, every part of the City of Los Angeles is required to be represented by a certified Neighborhood Council.

Some areas that have been organized into local community councils for decades have said they do not wish to join the Neighborhood Council revolution, but what choice do they have when the venerable city charter itself mandates it?

Despite a few bumps in the road, the four Neighborhood Councils in The Argonaut's coverage area — Westchester/Playa del Rey; Mar Vista; Grass Roots Venice; and now Del Rey — have all now moved forward into this brave new world with energy and enthusiasm.

It has also made for fascinating news — and, we hope, good reading — as we watched the formation and re-formation of the various Neighborhood Councils.

Like the old adage about sausage, it has not always been a pretty sight.

But it's been fun.

RACE TO CERTIFY — Who could forget the race to become the first Neighborhood Council in our area?

You had Westchester people furiously holding meetings, while the Venice people were looking over their shoulders, trying to figure out who would be the first to get certified.

While Westchester/Playa del Rey beat out Grass Roots Venice in the race to submit an application — by one month— the City of Los Angeles Board of Neighborhood Empowerment (also known as the BONC) certified the two on the very same day, March 12th, 2002.

Now, remember when there were two Westchester/Playa del Rey Neighborhood Council groups?

First there was the Westchester/Playa del Rey Neighborhood Council.

When some members of that group splintered off to form their own more perfect union, they came up with a truly original name — the Neighborhood Council of Westchester/Playa del Rey.

VENICE HORSE RACE — Let's not overlook the spectacle of two groups vying to organize Venice, in which a real horse race ensued as to which one would get the gold ring of certification.

Grass Roots won the day.

Since then, of course, the group that won the Venice race has been knocked off their horses and Venice now has a new group in the saddle.

As I told you, it's a merry-go-round.

And what about those elections?

We've had one Neighborhood Council election canceled because too many people showed up and one election challenged after a candidate registered her dog and cast a "doggy" vote.

We've had one Neighborhood Council vote to not accept a certain neighborhood within its jurisdiction, while another Neighborhood Council claimed that very territory against the apparent will of the residents.

Like I said, it's been wild.

BICKERING — In some cases, it appears that the Neighborhood Councils — and not just those in this area — have become breeding grounds for sniping, name-calling and bad-mouthing.

Shocking news.

Perhaps the councils can eventually become like mini-City Halls, where one can find out what is going on in one's backyard and, hopefully, make one's feelings known on subjects of concern.

For now, though, the Neighborhood Councils are in — to put it gently — the squabbling stage.

It has apparently gotten so bad that the city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment — fondly known as the DONE — has now issued a draft Code of Civility for Neighborhood Council governing boards and members that need one.

The DONE is suggesting that some Neighborhood Council boards ought to sign an oath promising not to snicker, make that middle-finger gesture, cat-call, eye-roll, guffaw, make faces, stick out tongues, scream, whine, moan, talk over others, moon, or otherwise behave in an uncivil and oafish manner.

CODE OF CIVILITY — Seriously, the code calls for an agreement "to abide by a code of civility to ensure that business is conducted in a respectful and courteous manner, to treat others with dignity," etc. etc.

The code then goes on to list 17 points of civility to which a Neighborhood Council member must adhere, including:

n to communicate ideas clearly and allow others to do so without interruption;

n to not use language that is "abusive, threatening, obscene, or slanderous, including using profanities, insults, or other disparaging remarks or gestures";

n to "practice the art of being able to disagree without being disagreeable"; and, last but not least,

n to "do one's homework," that is, come to meetings prepared.

VICARIOUS ENJOYMENT — As a de facto stakeholder in the newly formed Del Rey Neighborhood Council, as well as a reporter, I'm concerned that this code of civility will take all the joy out of Neighborhood Council meetings.

The fact is, we all vicariously enjoy the bickering and sniping, and I'm certain that's why many people attend these meetings.

Anyone who has gone to a City Council meeting — in Los Angeles or Santa Monica — will know what I'm talking about.

What with all the niceness and adherence to rules of decorum, you could fall asleep.

In Santa Monica, City Council meeting attendees are repeatedly warned not to applaud or otherwise make their presence known until they are called upon to do so.

This is supposed to ensure "fairness," but it seems to me that something more sinister is at work.

It's the insidious muffling of the political will.

Whenever I listen to the English Parliament on the radio, I realize that American civility is the death of government.

That's the reason most voters in this country yawn at election time — unless an action movie hero is running for office, especially in a race to topple an incumbent who resembles Gumby.

The English — for all their pomposity and wig-wearing — know how to conduct a truly raucous public meeting.

It's a free-for-all, with members permitted to clap, snort, hoot, wheeze, screech, boo, hiss, and generally do everything that we're being urged not to do by the DONE.

To the DONE policy of civility, I say phooey.