

## Los Angeles Daily News

L.A. neighborhood councils don't live up to politicians' promises

By Gerald A. Silver

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Back in 1999, when Los Angeles voters approved City Charter reform, they viewed neighborhood councils as the great hope for local control and a more responsive government.

Today, many L.A. community activists view the councils as one big disappointment -- another example of a failed big government that's too distant, too uncaring. Just more of the same.

Back then, hopes were high. City leaders assured voters that under the councils' new scheme of community input, residents would finally be heard.

"A new wind would blow through City Hall," one councilwoman said. Former Mayor Richard Riordan, then-City Attorney James Hahn and other politicians promised Angelenos a bigger voice in how their communities are represented, governed and developed.

Voters approved charter reform and neighborhood councils by a 2-1 margin. But even then, there were skeptics.

Many community leaders and homeowner associations opposed the change. The presidents of two of the Valley's largest and most influential homeowner associations, Richard Close of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association and Tony Lucente of the Studio City Residents Association, argued in a joint statement that "this charter distances our communities from City Hall and will make it increasingly difficult for residents to get the action they need from their local government." So, looking back with three years of hindsight, who was right?

In City Hall, they say it's too soon to make any final judgments about the neighborhood council system. Establishing hundreds of new councils is a complex task, one that's never been undertaken in such a broad scope as in Los Angeles.

Maybe, but three years should be enough time to gain a sense of direction. And after three years, neighborhood councils look like little more than just another layer of government bureaucracy.

The neighborhood council movement has spawned an entire new cadre of bureaucrats, city employees, attorneys and advisers to manage and control the councils. Charter reform created a new city department, the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, as well as a "citizen commission to develop a plan for a citywide system of advisory neighborhood councils."

Meanwhile, the city has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars, hired dozens of new staff members, set up offices, installed telephones, printed and mailed leaflets -- all to get the system going.

As a result, dozens of new councils have been formed and certified. Still others are in their formative stages. Thousands of well-meaning residents have joined the new councils, and many others have attended countless meetings. Residents have spent thousands of hours planning, organizing, writing bylaws and conducting elections. Today, many residents still hold out hope that these councils will serve as forums to aid in decision-making and community empowerment. They are optimistic and have not given up on the promises made to the voters.

But that seems more like wishful thinking than any real reflection on what neighborhood councils have become: vehicles for city residents to vent their frustration while taking the heat off City Hall.

As it stands, a community fighting to oppose an undesirable project must not only convince the planning commissions, City Council committees and the City Council itself; it also must use its limited resources to convince the neighborhood council of the merit of its position.

The result is that neighborhood councils serve as yet one more barricade between local communities and City Hall. And, while the panels may consist largely of hard-working community activists, they are entangled in a web of city-sponsored rules and regulations that consume an endless amount of time and energy -- with little or no real benefit.

Whatever enthusiasm exists for the councils seems to come, at least in part, from the *perception* of power and community visibility they bring, as opposed to a real voice in shaping the destiny of local communities. There are stories of some council boards preparing elaborate plastic lapel tags for their members, complete with photographs and possibly the city seal on them.

What next? Official logos for private vehicles, special parking spaces at City Hall, taxpayer-funded cell phones and paid assistants?

Then there's the question of who should be allowed to participate in neighborhood councils -- a topic left largely undiscussed back when city leaders were promoting charter reform.

Where once people who resided in a given community were the only ones allowed to vote there, under the new City Charter, anyone who "lives, works or owns property" in a community is deemed a "stakeholder" and can vote. This includes homeowners, renters, employees and any property owners.

The right to vote no longer belongs exclusively to residents. It's now shared by developers and representatives of businesses and high-rise buildings. Even schools,

churches, big-box retailers and landfills qualify as "stakeholders." Their representatives can sit on the board of a neighborhood council and vote.

This is changing the balance of power in a community, shifting it from the ordinary citizen -- rich or poor -- to any "stakeholder." That means a vote is available to just about anyone, be it the local Chamber of Commerce, 7-Eleven or Wal-Mart.

What does it mean when the owner of a local bar or dance hall, or a shopper passing through the neighborhood, has a voice on what goes on in the community? It means special interests and powerful forces for unbridled expansion are let loose.

For example, the Encino Chamber of Commerce has a voting seat on the Encino Community Council. The chamber voted to support the development of an oversized, dense, 146-unit apartment on Ventura Boulevard in one of the most congested stretches of the street -- over the voices of outraged local residents.

The Encino Chamber of Commerce president has claimed that "more than half of the Encino Neighborhood Council is pro-business."

Is this the new standard that will be applied to the community decision-making process? What is happening to the voices of ordinary residents, who have no influence?

In another instance, the manager of the Sun Valley landfill, who doesn't even live in the area, was voted overwhelmingly onto the local neighborhood council. With the help of his employer, he was able to provide car pools for several hundred landfill employees. They went to the polls, and together with the Chamber of Commerce and other pro-landfill votes, helped him to win his seat handily.

Elected officials need to be cautious about giving too much credence to councils that can easily represent special interests and, perhaps more importantly, place decisions in the hands of one-day-a-month community "activists" who lack the time, commitment and expertise for the task at hand.

After three years, it's been less than a promising start for neighborhood councils. At best, the panels are a useless but costly addition to an already bloated bureaucracy. And at worst, they have become a tool for the special interests.

Either way, neighborhood councils are a far cry from what city leaders promised back in 1999.

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