

UP FRONT

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Problems Frustrate Local Councils in Test of New Roles

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More than two years after neighborhood councils first started forming in L.A., the experiment has bogged down amid bureaucratic and legal red tape, causing widespread frustration and a handful of resignations from the advisory bodies.

Many of the city's 81 neighborhood councils still have no place to meet, have had difficulties hiring staff and are still trying to figure out how to conduct proper elections for their boards. At the same time, they are grappling with a complex series of state laws requiring open meetings and financial disclosure statements.

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"It has been very surprising and frustrating," said L.A. City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who served on the charter reform commission that crafted the concept of neighborhood councils. "It certainly was not our vision when we drew up neighborhood councils."

Hahn, who is chairwoman of the council's neighborhoods committee, said the groups were supposed to empower neighborhoods. Activists say there has been a lack of clear guidance from the city.

"We can't make decisions on the key pro-

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jects and policies in our neighborhood because we're so wrapped up in all this paperwork," said Chuck Gremer, who quit his post as president of the West Hills Neighborhood Council last August. "I expected some problems, but I expected the city to live up to what was promised in the charter."

Averting issues

Some neighborhood councils have found ways around these problems and seem to function smoothly. Among them: the Mid-City West and Silver Lake neighborhood councils, both of which have weighed in on numerous projects and issues affecting their communities.

And some aspects of the experiment are working better than expected, most notably communications between different neighborhood councils. Dozens of them have mobilized through e-mail networks around two issues in recent months: regulation of news racks and opposition to a proposed water-rate increase.

Nonetheless, the procedural problems confronting most of the neighborhood councils remain daunting, whether it's elections, spending money or setting up offices.

"Everyone was looking at certification and forgetting that the neighborhood councils would be operating entities and needed some guidance," said Juliet Musso, associate professor with the School of Policy Planning and Development at USC.

City officials say certain problems stem from a pair of rulings in 1999 and 2000 from then-City Attorney James Hahn. In those rul-

ings, Hahn concluded that neighborhood councils are city entities subject to the rules and regulations that govern other city departments, including the state's Brown Act and Political Records Act. The rulings are widely regarded as solid, since neighborhood councils were set up by the city and receive city funds.

Unintended consequences

But they have resulted in problems that the architects of neighborhood councils did not foresee. Many citizen activists, for example, now find that they have to disclose all their financial and property holdings. "There are several people in our organization who say they will not serve on the board if they have to fill out these (forms)," Gremer said.

On Feb. 3, City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo asked the City Council for the go-ahead to conduct a top-to-bottom review of legal and procedural issues. "Neighborhood councils have been hamstrung by the very system they were intended to change," Delgadillo wrote in the memo making the request.

In response, Janice Hahn's council committee ordered Delgadillo to reconsider the issue of whether neighborhood councils are, in fact, city entities.

"I'm not sure my brother as city attorney foresaw what would happen as a result of that ruling. It has distracted from what neighborhood councils are intended to do," she said.

Janice Hahn added that city officials might seek a change in state law so that neighborhood councils are exempted from many requirements of the Brown Act and the Political Records Act, which establish procedures for

open meetings and financial disclosure, respectively.

Two years ago, the boards of business improvement districts were exempted from these laws.

Meanwhile, some neighborhood councils are still mired in election controversies, mostly involving factions fighting for control. In many instances, long-existing homeowner associations tried to assert control and met resistance from other interest groups; in other cases, two or more homeowner associations clashed over the makeup of the boards.

One of the most notable election flaps took place last summer in Venice, where one resident registered "Raku the Voting Dog" as a protest to show how little accountability there was in the election process. Ultimately, the dog's vote was disallowed, but not before grabbing some headlines in local media outlets.

With 66 of the 81 neighborhood councils having elected their boards, attention now shifts to operational issues — chiefly obtaining their \$50,000 in annual funds, hiring staff and leasing office space.

On the funding side, there is concern about cutbacks cascading down from the state's budget crisis, particularly staffing at the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. There is also concern that the \$50,000 annual allotment to the neighborhood councils could be scaled back, although such a move could have disastrous political consequences for city council members and Mayor James Hahn.

Slow progress

Meanwhile, city officials have streamlined

some operational procedures. Last year, the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment set up a system where councils can hire staff through a temporary agency on contract with the city (relieving the councils of liability and having to fill out tax and payroll forms). The department also is setting up a standardized lease agreement that neighborhood councils can use to rent office space.

Even with these improvements, critics say the city's response has been too slow and that valuable momentum has been lost in the effort to get neighborhood councils to fulfill their mission of providing input on projects and priorities in their districts.

Janice Hahn noted that the lease issue itself has been on the table for the past 18 months. "I realize there are legitimate concerns about liability," she said. "But that's an awful long time for the neighborhood councils to wait and I can see why it's frustrating for them."

Those who have gone through the process say it has been a roller coaster, with high hopes often blocked by one obstacle or another.

The success of the endeavor depends on removing some of the roadblocks.

"A lot of the neighborhood councils are so focused on operational stuff right now that they have yet to establish a sense of direction," Musso said. "The danger here is that people spend so much effort trying to deal with internal operations and elections that they get burnt out and either quit or just become increasingly bitter and frustrated. On a larger scale, the whole movement risks losing steam if these operational issues aren't sorted out soon."