

LOCAL

Local council activity varies

By James Nash
Staff Writer

While most of the 33 advisory neighborhood councils in the San Fernando Valley remain works in progress, a handful have taken baby steps toward influencing residents' quality of life — from telling people about street-sweeping times to weighing in on the city budget.

Four years after voters passed an amendment to the city charter to create about 100 advisory councils across Los Angeles, most of the panels are busy electing officers, forming committees and handling other internal affairs. A few remain mired in internal politicking and other disputes.

But others — five in the Valley and 16 in other parts of the city — have progressed far enough to receive \$50,000 in city funding for projects in their communities, according to the Los Angeles Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which oversees neighborhood councils.

Several of those have begun to flex their political muscle on neighborhood issues such as whether to allow dancing at a West Hills restaurant, getting a pediatric trauma center built in Woodland Hills, and improving the aesthetics of a proposed restaurant in Canoga Park.

But some critics say the input is largely symbolic and money spent on neighborhood councils and the city department that administers them could be better spent on city services.

Although they can spend their \$50,000 annual allocations on

33 neighborhood panels showing uneven progress

COUNCIL / From Page 3

community projects, several Valley neighborhood council leaders said their role is more to give local residents, workers and property owners more clout in city decisions, not to sponsor major initiatives.

"I think that's the big accomplishment of a neighborhood council — to give people a voice," said Sandy Enfield, who chairs the Woodland Hills-Warner Center Neighborhood Council, one of the Valley's most active. "We're a pretty reputable group. Everybody knows they need to come to us first and do their homework."

Four of the Valley's money-eligible neighborhood councils are in the southwestern quadrant: Reseda, West Hills, Canoga Park and Woodland Hills-Warner Center. The other is in Toluca Lake. Because the councils are concentrated in relatively well-off, politically connected communities, some critics say they've done little to empower poorer areas that need attention from City Hall the most.

And, say critics, the neighborhood councils have been relegated to the sidelines of major, citywide issues such as ending police response to most burglar alarms and creating the municipal budget.

"So far, neighborhood councils have been paper tigers, disregarded by the powers at City Hall," said Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association President Richard Close. "They will have meaningful impact on minor matters, but for anything major affecting the entire city, the 16 people (City Council members and the mayor) downtown are the only ones that matter."

Mayor James Hahn is serious about putting more power in the hands of neighborhood councils, said Deputy Mayor Matt Middlebrook. But most of the panels weren't developed enough to have a major impact on Hahn's draft budget for 2003-04, which was introduced in April and triggered a heated City Council debate.

About 35 of the 100 neighborhood councils in Los Angeles have elected boards. Middlebrook said that by next year's budget cycle,

about 60 of the panels will have elected boards, giving them proportionately more influence over how the city spends money.

"I think this is an evolving process where neighborhood councils will have more and more influence over the budgets," Middlebrook said.

For now, however, the Valley neighborhood councils are thinking small. Canoga Park Neighborhood Council members are discussing decorative murals and entrance signs to the community. The council also weighed in on the design of a McDonald's restaurant and Starbucks coffee shop, and its members joined community activists in opposing the expansion of a dance club on Sherman Way.

"It's interesting that people might think we'd have built the Eiffel Tower in six months," said Ronald Clary, the Canoga Park Neighborhood Council president. "If you're going to do something important, it takes time to set it up."

A former Canoga Park Neighborhood Council organizer, Don Evans, said he's pessimistic about the ability of neighborhood councils to make much of a difference. Evans said he left the neighborhood council after realizing that its limited powers relegated it to symbolic status.

"My personal opinion is that the City Council is spending a lot of money on neighborhood councils that could easily go for paving Shoup Avenue or fixing sidewalks," Evans said.

Panorama City Neighborhood Council organizer Leticia Muniz-Guevara said neighborhood councils actually have clout — but they aren't always using it the right way. Muniz-Guevara, an advocate for senior citizens, disabled people and the homeless, said neighborhood councils are functioning as obstacles to low-income and developmental housing.

"I hear people sitting in on these meetings saying, 'Me! Me! Me!'" Muniz-Guevara said. "The perspectives of low-income and disabled people are not being represented."

Some neighborhood councils remain stuck in their setting-up phase. The Van Nuys

Neighborhood Council has been paralyzed by a dispute over its February board election. The Greater Toluca Lake Neighborhood Council has been partially consumed by the question of how much financial information its board members must disclose under the law.

Some neighborhood council members remain critical of the role of the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, saying they would accomplish more without bureaucratic interference from the city agency.

For example, upon hearing the Daily News was gathering information for this newspaper story, DONE project coordinator Manuel Durazo sent an e-mail to Canoga Park Neighborhood Council members — coaching them on what to tell the media — which some took as an example of heavy-handedness from DONE.

The department's general manager, Greg Nelson, said Durazo erred and that DONE has no desire to control neighborhood councils, in their statements to reporters or in any other way.

Leaders from several neighborhood councils said their groups will play their most important roles on land-use issues that affect neighborhoods, even though the councils can only advise City Council members, not make decisions.

West Hills Neighborhood Council President Charles Gremer said his group already influenced the facade design of a planned Wal-Mart store at the Fallbrook Mall and persuaded city officials to impose restrictions on dancing at a popular restaurant.

Gremer, like leaders of other neighborhood councils, said developers would be foolish to proceed with major projects before consulting the neighborhood council.

"I think it would be nice if we had more authority, but right now our authority really rests with the council member and what he wants to do," said Gremer, whose neighborhood council includes parts of Dennis Zine's and Hal Bernson's council districts.