

EDITORIAL

New Force at City Hall

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Los Angeles' evolving neighborhood councils may not have a seat at the City Council's horseshoe-shaped table, but they are finding ways to influence decisions made there. Like term limits, they could radically transform the way the city works — for better or worse.

The neighborhood council movement, born four years ago when voters rewrote the City Charter, has not yet had as dramatic an effect as the decade-old term limits. With the four newly elected City Council members sworn in Tuesday, term limits have now completely remade the 15-member body, once dominated by 20- and 30-year veterans.

Last month's final meeting of the old City Council provided a snapshot of how the two reforms intersect. Outgoing 16-year Councilman Nate Holden tried to rush through a motion to rename Crenshaw Boulevard for the late Mayor Tom Bradley. But neighborhood councils complained that they had not been consulted. Holden's colleagues postponed action for more public debate. Holden was bitterly disappointed. In the good old days, he grouched, the all-powerful City Council could do what it wanted, when it wanted. "There was no debate, there was no dispute, nobody talked about process," he said. "They just did it."

Exactly. What the old guard intended as scorn the new guard embraces as its mantra. An all-powerful council, after all, too often made neighborhoods feel powerless, fueling the kind of alienation and discontent that led the San Fernando Valley to try to secede — and voters citywide to pass term limits.

That said, there is also some truth to Holden's lament. Yes, the "process" matters if citizens are to be engaged and governments made more responsive. But at some point, City Council members will still have to make tough calls and not merely respond to the loudest, best organized voices. They won't be able to just poll neighborhood councils.

Take the Police Commission's recent decree that officers would respond to burglar alarm calls only after signs of a problem had been verified by an alarm company or others. Neighborhood councils erupted in protest. Was the process flawed? Yes. The commission should have spent more time educating alarm owners about the new policy and preparing alarm companies to actually do the job for which they are paid: responding to alarms. The old rules gave alarm companies a benefit at taxpayers' expense and sent officers on 340 false alarms a day. That policy was wrong — but wildly popular with well-organized homeowner groups.

Term limits have an upside, apparent in Tuesday's enthusiastic new members. Its downside can be seen in Sacramento's paralysis over the state budget, attributable at least in part to inexperienced legislators. Neighborhood councils can energize or paralyze city government. This

City Council's challenge will be to find the right balance.