

Council reps get lesson in Budget 101

By Rick Orlov
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Saturday, July 26, 2003 - Neighborhood Council leaders were given a rare opportunity and a dose of reality on Saturday as Mayor James Hahn took the next step in bringing the advisory groups into the decision-making at City Hall.

With more than 200 representatives of the 75 certified councils on hand at a Convention Center briefing, Hahn set the stage for the groups to make recommendations on how they would like city money spent in next year's budget.

"One of the ways to make sure Neighborhood Councils are meaningful is to give you a voice in the budget process," Hahn said. "This is the test to see how well we do."

Under the plan, started last year with learning sessions, Hahn said the representatives will have to go back to their Neighborhood Councils for input, hold another meeting within their planning area with other Neighborhood Councils to develop proposals and then meet with Hahn and his staff next February -- just as department heads do -- to make their case.

"I must tell you we have limited resources," Hahn said. "And it's not going to get any better with the problems the state is having. Unfortunately, it looks like to solve their problem they are going to be taking money from local government."

"It isn't fair. It ain't right. But as a recovering lawyer, it's legal. That's why I am asking you to help us set priorities."

Hahn's remarks were welcomed politely, but also with a note of skepticism among those involved in the new Neighborhood Council system.

"I'm hopeful, but we'll see what happens," said Polly Ward of Studio City, who has been a longtime homeowner activist. "We are seeing a lot of new people getting involved and that's good, but there isn't a great understanding of what we're supposed to do."

"And while the city says they want to hear from us, we'll see if it has any impact."

Max Flehinger of Tarzana was slightly more optimistic, but also cautioned that the groups were still feeling their way along through government.

"We've had some, let's say, heated discussions," Flehinger said. "Everyone is learning, but I think in the end this will be better than what we had with the Tarzana Property Owners Association."

Greg Nelson, general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, said having a chance to make recommendations on the budget is a major step for the groups and their involvement with City Hall.

"We are asking them to do things they haven't had to do before," Nelson said. "They will be affecting decisions on where the city money is spent, whether it's more police officers, more books in libraries or more streets being repaired or getting speed bumps. It's an exciting time."

Councilmen Greig Smith and Dennis Zine, representing the West San Fernando Valley, appeared at the meetings to listen to the constituents from their districts.

"What I hope is that they are able to make some decisions that the city will follow," Smith said.

And, he said, he wants to go further by calling on the city Board of Public Works - which provides many of the basic services from trash collection to street repair - to work with the Neighborhood Councils to determine which projects should be funded.

"The city needs to allow Neighborhood Councils to decide for themselves their priorities for street paving, sidewalk repair and tree trimming."
