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The Top Five

Downtown Neighborhood Council to Weigh in on City Budget Priorities

By Kathryn Maese, Los Angeles Downtown News

The Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council (DLANC) is gathering community input to help determine five budget priorities for the area, which it will pitch by month's end to Mayor Jim Hahn as he finalizes the 2003-2004 city budget.

The neighborhood council has sent out more than 3,000 surveys to local stakeholders, and plans to present the results to the community at a Sept. 9 public hearing at the Department of Water and Power. The group needs to collect at least 200 surveys to be eligible for consideration.

"This helps the city and the neighborhood council on so many different levels," said Doug Wance, DLANC president. "It tells us where problems are that we probably don't see all the time, since we can sometimes be a pretty insular group. And it will help give our City Council representatives an idea of the problems their constituents are seeing."

Wance said some of the issues under consideration include filming problems, the need for more parks, small business development, historic preservation, streetscape improvements and community policing. Unlike most councils, DLANC has to address the unique problems facing an urban center.

"The broader issues, like homelessness, are harder to deal with," Wance said. "I don't know how you put that in a line item. If we were to address it, it would have to be something specific like a shelter. We also need more affordable housing, but that's more policy than a line item in a budget. Some of the problems that Downtown really needs help with are too hard [for this list]."

Once the priorities are vetted, the group will make a final decision at its governing board meeting Sept. 16.

The process is being undertaken by more than 60 neighborhood councils across the city, and could become contentious as neighborhood leaders compete for limited city funds. The councils are divided into regions, with Downtown joining 13 other entities as part of the Central Area region. On Sept. 30, the entities will present their proposals to Hahn's office.

"Some will make it into the mayor's budget as line items, others won't," Wance said.

The neighborhood council system was created a year ago as a way for city residents to influence



The Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council will determine five budget priorities by the end of the month. Photo by Gary Leonard.

policy and decisions affecting their neighborhoods. DLANC's 11 committees recruit residents, workers, business owners and other stakeholders to take part in discussions about Downtown-related issues from arts and culture to economic development to public health and safety. Downtown's neighborhood council is unique in that it has loose restrictions on who is considered a stakeholder - anyone with a library card at the Richard J. Riordan Central Library qualifies, for example.

Helping to determine the city's budget priorities is perhaps the councils' biggest test so far, allowing city leaders to tap a resource it rarely takes advantage of - residents, community groups, business leaders and non-profits.

"It's the first opportunity where they start getting feedback from neighborhood councils," Wance said. "These are not ideas from city operatives, but from regular folk who live, work and shop in the neighborhoods. It's good for the mayor because he can take information and know what's really going on."

The Sept. 9 public hearing takes place at the DWP (cafeteria level) at 6:30 p.m., 111 N. Hope St. For more information or to obtain a copy of the survey, call (323) 224-2314 or visit www.dlanc.com.