

Hahn Plan Would Shift Control of Repair Funds

Neighborhood councils would have control over \$7.5 million to fix streets. Rivals criticize the announcement's timing, just hours before a debate.

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Hours before a televised mayoral debate organized by members of the city's neighborhood councils, Mayor James K. Hahn went to North Hollywood to announce plans to give the councils authority over at least \$7.5 million to repair city streets.

"What we've understood is that taxpayers like to be in control of their own money," Hahn said Monday, proclaiming his desire to let each of L.A.'s neighborhood councils decide how to spend \$100,000 in city funds. The city currently allocates \$50,000 to each council for operating costs and community projects.

Hahn, who is in the midst of a tough reelection campaign, has made support for the councils and improving basic services for residents central features of his pitch for a second term.

But within hours of his announcement, the mayor was attacked by his opponents for playing politics with city services before the debate, which took place before an audience invited by members of the neighborhood councils.

"Why didn't he do this two years ago?" asked state Sen. Richard Alarcon (D-Sun Valley), noting that Hahn also held a news conference on the environment just before a recent mayoral debate sponsored by the Los Angeles League of Conservation Voters.

"Maybe we should have more televised debates, and he'd get more things done," Alarcon quipped.

Two days before the environmental debate in December, Hahn went to a city yard to highlight city government's growing fleet of alternative-fuel vehicles.

The mayoral campaigns of former Assembly Speaker Bob Hertzberg and Councilman Antonio Villaraigosa also criticized the timing of the mayor's announcement.

Hahn spokeswoman Sahar Moridani said Monday the mayor's office worked out the plan to give additional authority over city funds to the neighborhood councils in recent weeks after budget planners realized the city would probably receive more gasoline tax money from the state this year and next.

A \$7-million to \$9-million windfall would allow the city to give control over \$100,000 to at least 75 neighborhood councils in the city, according to the mayor's office.

Several neighborhood leaders who came to Hahn's news conference Monday morning said they appreciated the mayor's gesture, which still must be approved by the City Council.

"We're happy that the mayor realized that street services are so crucial to each of our neighborhood councils," said Eric Rueveni, vice president of the Mid-Town North Hollywood Neighborhood Council.

But \$100,000 would not deliver many miles of resurfaced streets to the local councils, which have become an increasingly vocal force in city government and even in this year's mayoral election.

Several of the councils — created in large part to empower local communities when areas of the city were trying to secede — have been grouching that their \$50,000-a-year budgets are too small to pay for more than the smallest community-improvement projects.

Given the high cost of street repairs, the additional money Hahn announced Monday would pay to reconstruct about a quarter-mile of street or reseal about four miles for each neighborhood council, said Bill Robertson, director of the city's Bureau of Street Services.

That wouldn't make much of a dent in the huge backlog of repairs in the city's 6,500-mile local street system, the largest municipal network in the nation. This year, the city will spend \$43 million to resurface about 135 miles of streets and reseal another 300 miles. That is about a third of the resurfacing the city should be doing annually, Robertson said.

A task force convened by the mayor concluded in 2003 that decades of neglect had left Los Angeles streets in miserable condition. The task force gave the system a C-minus grade. It also recommended that Los Angeles raise an additional \$340 million to reconstruct nearly 1,000 miles of "failed streets."

Robertson said street repairs have been handicapped in recent years by drops in state funding.

But he said new sources of funding would be required to meet the demand for the hundreds of millions of dollars of needed repairs.

Hahn has not proposed a plan to do that, though he has recently put forward other plans to raise new funds.

The mayor is backing a half-cent city sales tax increase this spring to boost staffing at the Los Angeles Police Department; that proposal is still pending before the City Council.

And last month, Hahn said he wanted to put a \$500-million affordable-housing bond

before voters next year. The mayor has convened a task force to work on that plan.