

## Neighborhood Councils May Get \$100,000 Each

*by Chris Coates*

Mayor Jim Hahn last week announced plans to give each of the city's nearly 90 neighborhood councils \$100,000 for street repairs and maintenance. While some cheered the decision as a means to benefit districts, others questioned the timing: Hahn's announcement came shortly before a debate between the five major candidates for mayor that was sponsored by the community-based councils.

The funds would come from gas tax revenues and amount to at least \$7.5 million of the city's \$51 million street repair budget. If approved by City Council, the proposal would allow the neighborhood advisory panels power to direct the city on what street repair projects to work on in their districts. The funds are limited to street repairs. The neighborhood councils currently receive \$50,000 each for community events, cleanups and operational costs.

In a statement released Monday, Hahn said the move is part of his long-standing plan to take the decision-making out of City Hall and into the communities. "Nobody knows what neighborhoods need more than the neighborhood councils that represent them," he said.

Hahn's announcement comes less than a year after the councils identified street repairs and public safety as top priorities in the city's 2005 budget.

Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council President Brady Westwater said his organization will move quickly to get community feedback about what streets need fixes. Streets such as Alameda, for example, became rife with potholes after last month's rains. "This gives us an excellent chance to reach out to Downtown to get the public involved," Westwater said. "It's gratifying to see the powers-that-be are recognizing the neighborhood councils."

Greg Nelson, the general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which oversees the councils, said Hahn's move could be the first step in making city budget issues part of the public dialogue. "This could be the beginning of a new way of doing business in government," Nelson said. "It will be very interesting because, just like everything else, there's not enough money to do everything."

Hahn's timing, however, provoked allegations he was playing politics. Some 600 neighborhood council members attended the Monday evening debate, which was held in anticipation of the March 8 election. "This is a political world and we're in an election," observed Tim Keating, a member of the Historic Cultural Neighborhood Council representing the Arts District.

Keating also questioned whether \$100,000 is enough. "It looks good on paper," he said. "I'm not sure it's enough money to do it right."

Nelson, who was appointed by Hahn in 2001, rejected the charge that the announcement was politically motivated. "Ideas come up when ideas come up," he said. "You don't stop being the mayor because you're a candidate for office."