

Prescription for change  
Neighborhood empowerment must top City Hall's agenda

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It's no small achievement that Alex Padilla is now the Los Angeles City Council's youngest member at age 32, and its longest-serving member, with six years in office. He's also council president, elected to a third two-year term by a unanimous vote.

With Councilwoman Wendy Greuel elected president pro tem of the council, the San Fernando Valley now has the two top leadership posts.

Both Padilla and Greuel are intelligent and energetic and have the opportunity with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to meet the public's rising expectations that City Hall will become more responsive to community needs and more supportive of expanding the role of neighborhood councils.

Those are issues felt most strongly in the Valley, but they are important to every part of Los Angeles.

The reason why city government has failed the public for so long is quite simply that it's held captive by special interests, a narrow insider culture that feeds itself at the taxpayers' expense.

There is only one cure for what's broken, and that's ending the failed system of council fiefdoms by sharing power with the neighborhood councils.

Though advisory, the councils can become the catalyst for change.

They need to have first crack at all developments within their areas instead of learning about new projects when the deals already have been negotiated. They need to be the conduit for making sure services are provided in their areas, which means assignment of staffers by each city department to serve as neighborhood council liaisons. They need training in how to organize and mobilize their communities.

In short, they need more funds and a real commitment to change from the city's leadership. The best measure of the success of the new mayor, Padilla and Greuel will be how rapidly they move to empower the city's neighborhoods so that the citizens of Los Angeles have at least as much a say as the contractors, consultants, unions and billionaires.