

Councils May Form an Umbrella Group

Neighborhood panel leaders move toward a citywide congress to weigh in on issues.

By Patrick McGreevy
Times Staff Writer

October 5, 2005

Hoping to increase their political muscle, leaders of Los Angeles' system of neighborhood councils are trying to create a citywide congress that would allow representatives of each panel to collectively weigh in on important issues.

The effort marks a milestone for the fledging neighborhood councils, which were created five years ago as part of the effort to reform city government and prevent a city breakup movement centered in the San Fernando Valley. The councils have given neighborhood activists more of a say in some city matters, though some organizers have long complained that their voices are still not being heard.

"Until neighborhood councils unite and forward their votes, however they come out, their influence remains negligible, in my opinion," said Steve Twining, president of the Bel-Air-Beverly Crest panel.

In recent weeks, five of the city's 86 neighborhood councils have voted to ratify a charter creating a Citywide Congress of Neighborhood Councils.

Backers envision the congress taking nonbinding positions on major issues facing the city, in hopes that their opinions would be considered when the City Council makes final decisions.

Their effort may well cause tensions at City Hall, where City Council members are used to wide latitude in making decision in their districts. But so far, the effort has yielded little public criticism.

Councilwoman Janice Hahn said the congress idea is a natural next step. "If different neighborhood councils all over the city network and weigh in on city issues," she said, "it will be a very powerful voice."

At the same time, politics observers say, the councils will have to prove that they can work together effectively. In the past, some of the neighborhood councils have found themselves mired in internal disputes and colorful antics that have forced community issues to the sidelines.

The Arroyo Seco Neighborhood Council gave its unanimous approval Monday night. The charter has also been approved by the Granada Hills North, Coastal San Pedro, Bel-Air-Beverly Crest and Tarzana councils.

"There is a feeling that we should have one voice rather than have some 80-odd voices that you have to herd like cats," said June Smith, a member of the San Pedro panel.

Los Angeles voters approved the creation of a system of neighborhood councils in a 1999 City Charter change aimed at giving residents more say at City Hall.

Since the councils began forming, 86 have been certified by the city as having elected boards. Once certified, the councils can take advisory votes on issues affecting their communities. The panels, which represent a combined 3 million people, mostly weigh in on local planning issues.

There is widespread dissatisfaction, however, among individual councils that feel their advice is often ignored by City Hall.

Currently, the city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment convenes an annual "congress," or meeting of the approximately 1,700 members of the councils. But the program is set by the city and tends toward workshops on organizing councils and obtaining city services for neighborhoods.

"The problem is it doesn't deal with issues. The agenda is set by" the department, said Joe Vitti, a member of the Granada Hills North Neighborhood Council.

Vitti and other backers of a citywide congress envision it as being made up of one representative from each participating neighborhood council. They believe that the congress' collective vote on issues would be potentially more influential than the actions of individual councils.

Proponents of the congress cite recent council votes to approve controversial pay raises for Department of Water and Power workers and provide up to \$270 million in subsidies and loans for a downtown hotel as the kind of issues on which neighborhood councils might have had an impact if a citywide congress had existed.

"There are a lot of people unhappy with the quarter-billion-dollar giveaway on the hotel, but they weren't heard," Vitti said.

Having a congress would also simplify fact-gathering, because city officials could go to one group rather than dozens of separate councils, said San Pedro council President Doug Epperhart.

Vitti said it is his intention that each representative to the congress vote only the position taken by his or her neighborhood council.

There is no question that such a congress is allowed by the City Charter and may be influential, said Terry L. Cooper, director of USC's Civic Engagement Initiative.

Last year, the City Council scaled back a proposed 18% water rate increase after 30

neighborhood councils individually voted to oppose it.

Mark Elliott, a USC researcher who has worked with neighborhood council leaders, said there is a "background tension" among some neighborhood council members, who worry that a citywide congress could usurp the role of the local councils. So far, that concern has not stopped groups from signing on.

The congress proposal has the backing of several city officials, including Greg Nelson, general manager of the neighborhood department.

The congress could be created only if the charter were ratified by 20%, or about 17, of the neighborhood councils.

"We are one-third of the way there," Vitti said.