

## Community Panels Vote to Link Up

A coalition of L.A. neighborhood councils hopes a new congress will wield more clout with city government on broader issues.

By Patrick McGreevy  
Times Staff Writer

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Aspiring to be much more than pothole police, 22 neighborhood councils throughout Los Angeles have voted to create a congress of the panels that will give them more clout by allowing them to collectively weigh in on citywide issues.

The decision ushers in a new era in the evolution of the city's system of 86 advisory neighborhood councils, providing individual panels an opportunity to exercise more influence by speaking with a united voice, said Leonard Shaffer, chairman of a working group on the congress.

"The average citizen who is not a developer or someone who can afford to hire a lobbyist needs to have a voice in city government," said Shaffer, a leader of the Tarzana Neighborhood Council. "There are too many areas that are still struggling to be heard because they are just one neighborhood council."

City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who serves on a panel overseeing the neighborhood council system, called the congress "the next logical step."

Raphael Sonenshein, a political scientist at Cal State Fullerton who specializes in L.A. politics, said the move "definitely brings another player to the table."

"Obviously, they could have a significant impact on a wider range of issues that cross neighborhood boundaries," he said of the councils. But he also warned there could be a downside if they become so caught up in citywide issues that they lose sight of local matters.

Los Angeles voters approved the system of neighborhood councils in 1999, creating the groups, whose purpose is to advise elected city officials on local issues, as an antidote to widespread discontent with how decision makers at City Hall dealt with communities.

Under a charter drafted to organize the congress, a citywide body would be created within 60 days of the charter's being ratified by 20% of the neighborhood councils, or 18 panels. That threshold was recently reached.

Organizers have set the first meeting of the Congress of Neighborhood Councils for Feb. 4 at the downtown headquarters of the Department of Water and Power.

Joe Vitti, another organizer, said that in addition to agreeing on ground rules, the new congress would attempt to bring in other neighborhood councils.

Under the proposed bylaws, the congress would include a board of directors with one representative from each neighborhood council that joins. The board would determine which issues should be considered by the congress and collect and tally votes of neighborhood councils before conveying them to the mayor and City Council.

The city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment already convenes an annual "congress," or meeting of the approximately 1,700 members of the councils. But the city has the final say on the agenda, and the city-sponsored meeting has not led to votes on positions regarding a citywide issue.

Robert Gelfand, a member of the Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council, said that a unified position by the new congress might carry more weight with elected officials than the positions of individual panels. He said some city officials see the panels as little more than groups that report potholes or other local problems.

"The neighborhood councils are a possible counterbalance to the power of big money in city government," Gelfand said. "They are the people's lobby."

"The government sees us as the pothole police. But if enough neighborhood councils get together on an issue, they will be a lot more powerful."

Not everyone agrees.

The Van Nuys Neighborhood Council voted Wednesday against joining the congress. Some members felt that it would not be representative, with just 22 of 86 neighborhood councils involved. But there was also concern that the congress would usurp the power of the individual neighborhood councils.

"I see it as possibly diffusing the influence of local councils," said Arlene Feld, a member of the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council. "All my instincts say this would be counter to our original purpose, which is to represent an area's position to the mayor and council on local issues. It's a complication we don't need."

Feld said her council has already had an effect on local issues. The developer of a large apartment complex on Van Nuys Boulevard changed the project to condominiums after the neighborhood council objected to the original plan, she said.

However, Shaffer said the neighborhood panels have not been able to consistently sway the City Council on big citywide issues.

The congress could choose to weigh in on issues such as the expansion of Los Angeles International Airport, pollution control at the city's port, trash dumping at the Sunshine Canyon Landfill in Granada Hills and campaign finance reform. Some campaign reform

measures have languished in City Council committees for months, in part because there has been no major organization to push for their approval.

A loose affiliation of 30 neighborhood councils did succeed in scaling back a water-rate increase last year, but a similar campaign fell short last week in trying to scuttle a new rule that will make it easier to install bus benches, kiosks and other so-called street furniture. The council passed the measure.

Hahn, who supports the congress, chided her colleagues during the debate for deciding not to give neighborhood councils an automatic review of proposals for street furniture. Instead, City Council members must ask for such proposals to be sent to neighborhood panels to give them an opportunity for review.

"If the congress had been in place," Shaffer said, "it might well have changed what happened."