

Local Councils Are Less Than Neighborly

By Jean Merl

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First came the congratulations:

"This is a historic day," City Councilwoman Janice Hahn told the opening meeting of the recently formed Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Congress.

"You will be leading this city into the future," said Hahn, echoing remarks of two fellow council members and others who turned out Saturday for the four-hour inaugural session of the congress. Supporters hope the umbrella group will give the city's advisory neighborhood councils more clout at City Hall. There are 88 councils currently and more are being added.

Advocates have said the congress could give the councils a stronger, more unified voice in such matters as taxes, water and electricity rates and other issues of wide interest.

Then came the reality:

No sooner had Hahn wrapped up her keynote address that bickering broke out among the 25 representatives from the 32 neighborhood councils that have joined the congress.

Electing an interim leader, the first order of business during the meeting at the downtown headquarters of the city Department of Water and Power, took an hour and a half and two ballots. Members of the group, officially called the senate, argued about how long the interim chief should serve, who was eligible and whether the balloting should be by voice or paper vote.

One delegate wanted the vote kept secret. His motion failed, but its defeat, like everything else relating to that topic, took a while. Others debated — sometimes simultaneously — whether the interim leader could run for the job again after the senate's six-month start-up period. Organizers say they plan to hold a new election after a majority of the neighborhood councils join the congress.

Delegates were egged on through much of the unruly discussion by about three dozen audience members — many of whom opposed the congress or the way it was being formed. Some loudly objected when facilitator Pat Herrera Duran tried to keep things moving by limiting public comment to the end of the meeting. She relented, allowing a small parade of speakers to weigh in on the interim-leader procedure.

"This is chaos!" said one man in the audience. "These are the people who are going to lead us?" asked another.

Duran drew another round of audience complaints when she asked delegate Robert Lamishaw of the Winnetka Neighborhood Council to take over for her because of his

knowledge of Robert's Rules of Order.

"Who are *you*?" an audience member asked Lamishaw. "Why are you up there?"

"I asked him to be up here," Duran said.

When delegates finally elected Tarzana Neighborhood Council leader Leonard Shaffer as interim chairman, Duran, a former Board of Neighborhood Councils commissioner, said jokingly that she had never before been so happy to be relieved of a role.

"We just have to get over this process where we just shoot our mouths off," delegate Robert Gelfand of San Pedro commented as the group began to debate whether to choose a vice chair. It didn't.

Greg Nelson, general manager of the city department that works with the councils, said he was not discouraged by the group's rough start.

"I always expected the first attempt was going to be rocky," Nelson said. "It will evolve."

With their choice of a leader out of the way, delegates moved through the rest of their agenda relatively smoothly. They formed four ad hoc committees, picked leaders for them and set the next meeting date for March 4.

The formation of the congress has drawn opposition from some residents and business owners who fear it will dilute the hard-won power of the individual neighborhood groups. Some critics also say the process has been too hasty and has serious legal and other issues.

The Van Nuys Neighborhood Council voted in December against joining the congress, and many other councils are still debating its merits.

Norma Foster of the Hollywood United Neighborhood Council, which narrowly ratified the congress, attended Saturday's meeting with several other opponents of the congress. She said in an interview that they will launch a campaign against the umbrella group.

"There are so many unanswered questions," Foster said. "We're really scared of it."

Voters approved the system of neighborhood councils in 1999 to advise elected city officials on local matters.