

Window of opportunity

Chance for real neighborhood empowerment

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The resignation of Greg Nelson, who oversaw the tumultuous birth of Los Angeles' network of neighborhood councils, is likely to be greeted with both dismay and relief among community activists.

During his 4 1/2 years as general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, Nelson was praised as the courageous leader of the city's grass-roots political movement by some, and cursed by others as a bureaucratic tyrant blocking true empowerment. But no one can deny that under Nelson's leadership, the neighborhood council movement grew from a motley collection of a few disorganized groups to 87 certified councils with their own budgets, bylaws and a taste of political influence.

It was no easy endeavor, and Nelson deserves credit. He faced constant resistance from City Hall forces who were not interested in the dilution of their power - and certainly not to those pesky, demanding yokels out in the San Fernando Valley.

But Nelson's departure in April opens a rare window of opportunity for Los Angeles to build even more meaningful, more empowered neighborhoods.

Much of that depends on Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who will choose Nelson's successor. So far, the biggest success of the mayor's time in office has been his replacing entrenched bureaucrats with competent administrators to head municipal departments.

To lead DONE and the city's many neighborhood councils to the next stage of development will take a visionary with true commitment to furthering community empowerment. The mayor and City Council ought to demand the department take real steps to empower NCs even more.

First, NCs should have the first say on issues of development and planning in their neighborhoods. Who knows better the problems affecting Chatsworth or Panorama City than the people who live there and drive the streets daily?

Second, the City Council ought to divert some of its own staff to work for the NCs directly, not just selectively answer their calls.

Third, the neighborhood councils ought to have more say in directing city services. The people who live in the community know better than distant

bureaucrats at City Hall where the trash is piled up, what streets have the biggest, car-eating potholes, and which park is the unfortunate first choice for illegal trash dumpers.

This is major turning point for the city's still-new neighborhood council movement. And now, more than ever, NC members from all corners of the city must use the little foothold they've gain in five years to insist that the city's leaders make the right choice for the future empowerment of the community.

This is a test of whether the mayor and the council are democrats in the truest sense, or just Democrats in the political sense.