

Champion of city's neighborhood councils retiring

By Rick Orlov, Staff Writer
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At a time of transition for the city's experiment with neighborhood councils, the official who oversaw its growth during the past four years announced Wednesday he is retiring.

Greg Nelson, 59, general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, said he hopes to retire at the end of April to take some time for himself after working for the city for 34 years.

"I'm proud of what we have accomplished and I think we are at a point that it is a good time to leave and let the mayor bring in someone new," Nelson said. "I want to go out and enjoy life while I'm still healthy."

Nelson, who drew an annual salary of \$136,000, is expected to be eligible for a pension of about \$97,000 a year.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa offered praise for Nelson's work and said he will launch a nationwide search for a successor.

"What Greg Nelson did was take a vision and see it implemented," Villaraigosa said. "What I want to do is make sure that this is more than an experiment and that neighborhood councils become an institutional voice at City Hall."

So far, Villaraigosa has held two sessions with the neighborhood councils on his proposed budget and also involved them in selecting new Planning Director S. Gale Goldberg.

But it was Nelson, as chief deputy to former Councilman Joel Wachs, who helped champion the concept of neighborhood councils in the new City Charter. After Wachs retired, Nelson was selected to enact the broad vision of increasing public participation in government.

The week after he started in 2001, the first neighborhood council was created. Since then, 87 panels have been formed, resulting in a series of initiatives to help neighborhood groups flex their political influence on issues from water rates to burglar-alarm fees.

A review of the program is under way, and a separate congress of neighborhood councils has been formed to determine how well the program is operating and what can be done to improve it.

Nelson's tenure also had not been without controversy as he became a lightning rod for criticism among some neighborhood councils that had problems complying with city regulations, wanted to develop their own procedures or felt they were hamstrung by some city rules.

"We all had problems with the department, particularly when it came to the finances for the neighborhood councils, and a lot of people took it out on Greg," said Charles Gremer of the West Hills Neighborhood Council.

"Some of the city's regulations are like they're trying to straitjacket us. But when you think about how this never had been done before, he did a remarkable job."

Ken Draper, editor of City Watch, a newsletter that covers neighborhood councils, said Nelson became the subject of criticism primarily from those unfamiliar with city government.

"He took a department that wasn't sure where it was going, was understaffed and underfunded and brought it to the point where it is now," Draper said. "It's really quite an accomplishment. As for critics, I don't think there is a city department around that doesn't have some criticism."

Councilman Dennis Zine, who served on the Elected Charter Reform Commission and was an advocate for the councils, said Nelson had a tough job.

"In some ways, it was a no-win job," Zine said. "He took a concept of neighborhood councils and was able to make it work. ... Any time you try something new like this, it's going to be difficult."

A Vietnam veteran, Nelson began working for former Mayor Sam Yorty in 1970 as a student intern. The following year he went to work for Wachs' upstart campaign against an incumbent councilman and stayed on with that council office for a number of years.

But the neighborhood councils were his crowning achievement.

"Each neighborhood council is unique and has to be treated somewhat differently," Nelson said. "But it's been exciting to watch it develop and grow to what it is."

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