

## Neighborhood Councils Chief to Step Down

**Greg Nelson is credited with creating the system that helps residents of L.A.'s communities participate in decisions that affect them.**

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The man widely credited with creating the system of 87 neighborhood councils across Los Angeles announced Wednesday that he is retiring as general manager of the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

Greg Nelson, 59, who has become a fixture at City Hall during 34 years in local government, began his career as an aide to former Los Angeles Councilman Joel Wachs in 1971.

When he became general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment four years ago, Nelson said, he always intended to stay just long enough to put the system of elected neighborhood councils in place.

"The main purpose was to increase public participation in government and if you look at what's happening, we've really done that," Nelson said.

Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who serves on the committee that oversees neighborhood councils, said Nelson leaves behind an important mark on the city.

"Greg really shepherded the creation of a new department," Hahn said. "Under his leadership the city went from zero to 87 neighborhood councils and really ushered in a new way of doing business."

While working for Wachs, Nelson was known by colleagues as a "gentleman" who never lost his temper.

Nate Holden, a former council member who worked with Nelson, said he was "the guy who protected his boss at all times."

Under Wachs, Nelson helped streamline City Hall's office supply purchases, which saved the city thousands of dollars a year.

He also helped Wachs lead a successful campaign to reduce the level of public funding for building Staples Center downtown.

Los Angeles voters approved the creation of a system of neighborhood councils in 1999 after residents of the San Fernando Valley and Hollywood threatened to break away from the city. Secessionists said the city was too big and residents could not be heard at City Hall.

The system allows communities to elect a council to take stances on matters of local interest; the councils receive \$50,000 annually to spend on neighborhood projects.

Nelson leaves at a time when the neighborhood councils are organizing an umbrella group to weigh in on citywide issues.

But the councils have already demonstrated their clout, having played an instrumental role in shooting down an 18% water rate increase proposed by the Department of Water and Power.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa also held workshops with neighborhood council members to get their views as he prepared his proposed budget for the coming fiscal year.

"Greg Nelson has provided many decades of service to the city of Los Angeles," Villaraigosa said at a news conference at Los Angeles International Airport, upon his return from New York. "The city of Los Angeles is going to miss him."

Still, the road to creation of the system has been bumpy. Just Tuesday night, the Board of Neighborhood Empowerment decertified the Old Northridge Neighborhood Council, whose election was marred by irregularities, including votes cast by dogs.

In other cases, charges have been made that neighborhood councils were stacked with special interests, while some councils have accomplished little because their members are divided to the point of deadlock.

Nelson, who was appointed by then-Mayor James K. Hahn, said he was not pressured to step down by the new mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa. Some neighborhood council members suspect that a clash between Nelson and new neighborhood commissioners, named by Villaraigosa, contributed to his decision to retire.

Assistant General Manager Lisa Sarno will serve as interim general manager until Villaraigosa can appoint a successor to Nelson.

But finding a replacement as qualified as Nelson will be a nearly impossible task, neighborhood representatives said.

"There is nobody who has the institutional memory that he has," said Brady Westwater, president of the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council. "There is nobody that understands how the system works like he does. He was in the trenches with us, not looking down from up high."