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## **Los Angeles: DONE general manager Greg Nelson resigns, will leave Los Angeles government in April**

BY VINCE ECHAVARIA

After more than four years of overseeing the Neighborhood Council system of the City of Los Angeles, Greg Nelson has announced that he will retire as general manager of the city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE).

Nelson, 59, who has been credited with creating the citywide system of Neighborhood Councils, announced his retirement at a city Board of Neighborhood Commissioners meeting Tuesday, March 21st.

He said he expects to step down at the end of April, after working for the city for 34 years.

"It's time," said Nelson, a Mission Viejo resident. "I've accomplished what I set out to do.

"Now I think I can be more effective working from the outside on my own terms."

City of Los Angeles voters approved a new city charter in 1999 that mandated the creation of the Neighborhood Council system to promote public participation in city government and make the government more responsive to local needs.

The Los Angeles City Council approved the plan for the Neighborhood Council system in May 2001, and 87 certified neighborhood councils have since been created. Each of the city's certified neighborhood councils receives \$50,000 in annual funding.

Nelson was appointed by former Los Angeles Mayor James Hahn as the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment general manager in September 2001.

Some local Neighborhood Council leaders, including Del Rey Neighborhood Council president Steve Knight, said they were surprised at the retirement announcement, but Nelson said he "had no intention of being here forever."

"He's the one who put together the basic plan (of Neighborhood Councils)," Knight said. "I wish him well. He will be missed."

When Nelson first took over as general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, he said he picked a "trigger point" for his time to leave, which would be when the system of elected Neighborhood Councils was in place and the "building stage" of the system was finished.

Nelson, who grew up in North Hollywood, served with the U.S. Army from 1967 to 1970 and

was awarded the Bronze Star for his service in the Vietnam War. After returning from the war, Nelson said he wanted to give something back to his city.

He began his career with the city in 1971 as an aide to former Los Angeles City Councilman Joel Wachs and eventually became the councilman's chief of staff.

While working for Wachs, Nelson composed City Charter provisions that eventually created the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment and the citywide system of Neighborhood Councils.

By serving with the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, Nelson said he was able to fulfill a dream of bringing the concept of Neighborhood Councils to reality.

"It's an absolute dream come true and it's an experience very few people will have — being able to take a new department and build it," he said.

Nelson said a major highlight during his service as general manager was being able to oversee the creation of 87 Neighborhood Councils "from scratch."

City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who serves on the City Council committee that oversees Neighborhood Councils, said Nelson has been the "shepherd of Neighborhood Councils since they were created."

"When he came into the position, he started a brand-new city department, which we hadn't done in years," Hahn said.

Some local Neighborhood Council leaders praised Nelson as the creator of the citywide system that made their Neighborhood Councils possible.

"He created the system," Knight said. "It was his vision."

Grass Roots Venice Neighborhood Council president DeDe Audet said Nelson's retirement is the "end of an era."

"Greg was with the program to bring Neighborhood Councils to Los Angeles from the very beginning," Audet said. "The councils are no longer a dream but a fact."

Audet acknowledged that it was not a smooth road to make the Neighborhood Council system possible.

"There were many problems, not the least of which was the duty to guide inexperienced, sometimes overeager councils to conform to the regulations, but Greg did it," she said.

Nelson said a major challenge for the department during his tenure was trying to help the newly established Neighborhood Councils learn how to function and conduct meetings.

But while the Neighborhood Council system has grown substantially from the beginning, there is "still more building to be done," Nelson said.

The current goal of Department of Neighborhood Empowerment officials is to work closer with the city Neighborhood Councils than they ever have before, he said.

Knight said Nelson's retirement may "leave a big void" in the department.

"I don't know of anyone who can step right into his shoes," Knight said. "I hope his replacement is up to the task and will command the respect of all the Neighborhood Council staff."

Assistant general manager Lisa Sarno is expected to serve as interim general manager of the department while a nationwide search is conducted for Nelson's successor, city officials said.

Nelson said he plans to stay involved with the Neighborhood Council effort after he leaves the department, but that he also looks forward to taking some time for himself.

"I want to travel and experience new people, cultures and places," he said. "I wanted to leave when I can still go out and enjoy life."