

Bye-bye ‘Hood Councils?

As they seek more power, neighborhood councils get a cold official shoulder.
by Marc B. Haefele

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Campaigning for mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa always flaunted his love for neighborhoods. Shortly after he won office, he claimed to a large crowd that he'd visited all the 90 or so neighborhoods in the city—except, whoops, Harbor Gateway: that's the band of territory that connects Wilmington with Watts. (It used to be called, with more accuracy, Shoestring Strip). As we all can recall, our jaunty mayor seemed to be surrounded by cheering throngs whenever he visited a neighborhood. And most of these neighborhoods—particularly the poorer ones—came out for him in force as he trounced Jim Hahn.

So Antonio is for neighborhoods, right? Who could doubt it? He's a populist leader who likes to think that the neighborhoods like him.

But does it follow that because the mayor loves neighborhoods that he also likes neighborhood councils—those grassroots advisory organizations that have, since the new City Charter ordained them in 1999, caused a small revolution in city practice and policy? They were, in a sense, a consolation prize from big city government to the little guys out there—a kind of “Honorable Mention” for the secessionists who came in last in the 2002 citywide breakup election.

I am beginning to suspect the mayor may not like these little panels. To a strong, populist mayor, empowerment starts with him, not informally elected neighborhood advisors. But Deputy Mayor Larry Frank says, “There is a significant role for neighborhood councils.” It's just that, at this time, the administration is rethinking exactly what that role might be.

Let's look back at the progress of neighborhood councils as of earlier this year: There were 88 of them. They were on a fast track. Thousands had voted for their members. They scored a collective victory in the “big league” City Council by getting the council to

get the DWP to pull back on a major rate hike. They'd scored in specific areas on various important local issues, including stopping a local cable rate hike.

In areas with the better organized councils, members got into the habit of sharing their plans with their constituents via the councils. In October, the mayor consulted them formally on budget priorities. They had bi-annual Neighborhood Congress gatherings at the Convention Center, with workshops on things like how to organize, how to talk to officials, how to handle funds and the media, how to settle differences amicably—and they were in the process of forming a citywide over-council, a grass-roots shadow of the 15-member City Council. At one point last year, they even sought the power to file—in effect, to initiate—legislation in the City Council. That possibility (now stuck in council committee, perhaps forever) seemed to dampen their City Hall acceptance. So, City Council members began sharing angry anecdotes about how people got bussed in to vote, lax rules as to who could vote, a dog who supposedly voted, the council infested by gang members, and so on. Some council members stressed that it was they who spent all that money and effort to get legally elected district-wide and got paid more than \$135,000 a year to get things done in said district. It began to look like, apart from some ardent charter supporters like Councilwoman Janis Hahn, the City Council and the neighborhood councils were on the verge of squaring off.

Into this rhubarb gently stepped Antonio Villaraigosa. At first, all he did was shmooze, but the neighborhood council juggernaut, if it ever was that, perceptibly slowed even as it began to take strong positions on really serious things like campaign finance. For the past few months, the mayor mainly petted and hugged everyone. Then he did something about the neighborhood councils' presiding entity. He, with slight subtlety, put one of his own people in charge of it.

That presiding entity is the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE). It tells you how, and how not, to form a neighborhood council as well as why you should. Although the pertinent charter ordinance was passed under Dick Riordan, DONE, in its current form, was an innovation of the Hahn administration, maybe the only Jim Hahn innovation. That's probably because Hahn, under much urging from all sides, appointed as general manager the one L.A. official who seemed to care most about neighborhood empowerment. He also happened to be City Hall's only anarchist-bureaucrat.

If that sounds like a contradiction, you probably haven't met Greg Nelson. A blonde, strapping guy who's been working for the city since Mayor Sam Yorty's time, he wears a nice suit and a weird sense of humor. Back when he was Councilman Joel Wachs' chief of staff, his screensaver read: "Always apologize; never mean it." He is also a major believer in participatory democracy, by whatever means possible. When it comes to organizing neighborhood councils, he says, "I don't care if there are 88 different sets of rules for 88 different neighborhood councils. One size doesn't fit all—there is a big difference between Boyle Heights and Brentwood."

This attitude, which permeated DONE, resulted in a few spectacular fiascos and a broad citywide empowerment movement, sometimes unaccountable to City Hall. But there

seems now to be a new wariness in the council and the mayor's office to letting the neighborhood councils and their leadership define their own roles and aspirations.

This resistance, I think, compelled Nelson to step down as DONE's general manager three months before he was prepared to retire in June with a full 35-year city pension. He's not talking in public about why he's leaving, but those who work at DONE, not speaking for attribution, say it had to do with Villaraigosa's appointment of a longtime loyalist named Lisa Sarno as Nelson's assistant manager. They allege that, instead of passing along Nelson's instructions to staff, she would say, "The mayor wants this." Nelson became redundant, and acted accordingly.

Now DONE faces a seven-year review process mandated by the charter. The Council and the mayor have to create a panel to do this review. Beyond this, the charter instructions are unclear. But the panel must meet, and must produce proposals for the future of neighborhood councils. I would not bet that these suggestions will encourage greater empowerment.