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## D-Day for neighborhoods

Public's lobbyists to deal with new department head, 5-year review

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With new leadership coming to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, tensions are rising between neighborhood council insiders and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa over control of the city's system of grass-roots democracy.

The mayor has tried to reassure neighborhood councils that they will have a role in his administration, but some members fear that Villaraigosa may be working behind the scenes to diminish the growing power of organized neighborhood councils.

And there is speculation that the mayor's next appointee could be less of a neighborhood-councils advocate than Greg Nelson, longtime head of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, has been. Tuesday will be Nelson's last official day on the job.

"The perception is that the replacement would be more concerned with the mayor's agenda than the neighborhood councils' agenda," said Ken Draper, who writes CityWatch, a newsletter about neighborhood councils and City Hall politics. "There's an opportunity for the mayor to demonstrate now that that perception is wrong."

Villaraigosa spokesman Darryl Ryan said the mayor wants a partnership with neighborhood councils, with the local panels acting as a bridge between residents and policy makers. However, the mayor is not planning to consult neighborhood councils in the selection of the new DONE chief, as he did about the choice of a new Planning Department director.

"It's important that the mayor, as chief executive of the city, make these independent decisions," Ryan said.

"In this particular instance, it's basically the mayor looking to act independently in the best interest of the city but keep neighborhood councils as a high priority as the decision is being made."

A new director is not the only issue facing the neighborhood council system, which is at a crossroads five years after L.A.'s first neighborhood council was created in San Pedro.

### **Reviewing system**

The mayor and City Council are putting together a commission to review the whole neighborhood council system.

The City Charter requires the evaluation of the effectiveness of the councils, their funding, their accountability and the department that oversees them. Councilman Alex Padilla helped craft a

proposal for the commission last week that would allow neighborhood councils to select seven of the 29 members of the commission.

That, he said, would guarantee a strong, independent neighborhood council voice in the review that could reshape the system.

"The commission needs to look at the last five years and ask what's working and what's not working" Padilla said, "and make specific recommendations on how neighborhood councils can work better."

Many community leaders hope the commission can address longstanding issues that scare off some potential neighborhood council participants \_ bureaucracy, infighting and, depending on who is commenting, too few or too many rules.

"In my honest opinion, the system is working about 40 to 45 percent of the time," said Albert Piantanida, who heads the Arleta Neighborhood Council.

"I think this commission could help if they put the right kind of people in there, people who are open-minded and not afraid to say what's wrong."

Neighborhood councils for Los Angeles were a brainchild of Nelson when he was mountain biking back in 1992. The idea later became the centerpiece of a bid for mayor by Joel Wachs, then a L.A. city councilman and Nelson's boss.

When Wachs lost to Richard Riordan, Nelson and Wachs took the idea to the city's Charter Reform Commission, which ultimately made a neighborhood councils system a major element of the rewritten City Charter and cleared the way for communities to organize their own local councils.

The neighborhood council system had two main goals: promote greater public participation in government and hold government decision makers accountable on a daily basis.

Nelson took over the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment in 2001 after Mayor James Hahn was elected.

Nelson became a champion of neighborhood councils as what he calls "public lobbyists," which, if organized and educated, could become as influential as the most highly paid lobbyists for private interests.

But while many councils have managed community cleanups and flexed their new political muscle over issues including land use and burglar alarms, others have had problems organizing themselves and have been torn apart by infighting.

### **Infighting**

And virtually every neighborhood council has chafed under DONE oversight. Nelson became a lightning rod for a department often criticized for bureaucracy and poor communication.

"The infighting was totally expected. The whole idea was to bring together people of diverse neighborhoods, where there may be longstanding feuds. They weren't just going to hold hands and say now we get along," said Nelson, 59, who last month announced his retirement to travel the world while still relatively young.

As general manager, Nelson has had a mantra: "Democracy is messy." He said he has tried to let councils settle differences and develop an organization that works for each community.

"We don't want a system where government steps in and says you're acting silly; now you need to do A, B, C."

He denies the system ever became mired in bureaucracy: "I pledged to ensure that even the perception of bureaucracy doesn't exist," said Nelson. Most neighborhood council members have never worked in city government and have no idea what "real bureaucracy" is, he said.

Still, many local leaders hope the mayor and new review commission will make big changes at the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

"The culture of DONE has to change," said Jill Banks Barad, president of the Sherman Oaks Neighborhood Council and chairwoman of the Valley Alliance of Neighborhood Councils. "DONE seems to us as the ultimate bureaucracy. They tell you what to do and impose too many rules and regulations, and they do it in a punitive way."

She sees too many people dropping off neighborhood councils because they're frustrated with the system and are not seeing positive change from their efforts.

"With the mayor being as hands-on as he is, I hope he makes substantial changes in the department," Banks Barad added.

## **Growing power**

However, others fear the mayor may want to lessen neighborhood councils' growing power.

In recent months, the mayor appointed one of his former City Council office staffers, Lisa Sarno, as the second in command at the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

Some have praised her efficiency, but others have complained she is beholden to the mayor.

Activists working on two memorandums of understanding with the Department of Transportation and the Planning Department complain that negotiations have stalled in recent weeks, though Nelson points out that those two departments have new directors appointed by Villaraigosa and still settling in.

Then the mayor's deputy Larry Frank almost provoked a boycott of the Congress of Neighborhoods, to be held June 17, when he told the Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Congress or LANCC, which is a growing movement to organize councils around regional issues, that it would not be given mention on the program or space at the biannual event.

Feeling slighted, some neighborhood council leaders threatened to picket the June 17 event. But representatives of the mayor and DONE, saying it was all a misunderstanding, agreed to allow LANCC to participate.

Leonard Shaffer, who heads the Tarzana Neighborhood Council and is chairman of the LANCC, said he was pleased it was only misunderstanding.

Brady Westwater, who heads the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council, said he believes the mayor can only benefit from a strong relationship with the local panels.

"I don't think the mayor has stronger supporters than the neighborhood councils. Once his staff understands that, this miscommunication won't happen again."