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Greg Nelson Tapped to Lead Department of Neighborhood Empowerment

By ROBERT GREENE, Staff Writer

Greg Nelson, one of the city's top thinkers on neighborhood councils and a longtime aide to outgoing Councilman Joel Wachs, was appointed yesterday to head the year-old Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

Mayor James Hahn named Nelson, 55, to take over the agency as interim general manager effective Tuesday pending confirmation to the permanent post by the City Council.

"I am confident that he will work tirelessly to effectively lead this department, bring people in neighborhoods together, and improve the quality of life for residents in every community," Hahn said of Nelson yesterday.

Hahn has promised to focus on formation and support of neighborhood councils as a cornerstone of his administration. Councils were mandated by the 2000 city charter, but no details were set forth and progress has been slow.

The appointment is Hahn's first to lead a major city agency and comes just a week before the department is to begin accepting applications from organizations around the city for official recognition as neighborhood councils.

It follows by several weeks the resignation of Rosalind Stewart, the department's controversial first general manager who was roundly criticized by community groups and many in City Hall for poor outreach and communication.

As recently as Saturday, neighborhood groups meeting at a conference on organizing councils roundly criticized the department for an unwieldy application form.

Some observers have defended Stewart, saying she was a victim of former Mayor Richard Riordan's de-emphasis on neighborhood councils.

But Nelson is almost universally respected as one of the founders of the neighborhood council movement in Los Angeles. His selection was greeted by some of the department's fiercest critics as a new start for neighborhood councils.

"I have a good feeling about Greg Nelson's desire to make this department what it should have been," Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas said. "It is about time we got somebody in there with the capability and the inclination to make this department work."

Ridley-Thomas organized the Eighth District Empowerment Congress nearly a decade ago as a tightly run neighborhood council serving his constituents. But he was largely ignored by Stewart.

The councilman said Nelson has been a “close observer” of the Empowerment Congress.

Nelson was soon to be phased out of a job. Wachs announced soon after he lost his mayoral bid in April that he was leaving the council to lead a nonprofit arts group in New York.

Nelson first joined Wachs’ staff 26 years ago and became his chief deputy. He began focusing on neighborhood councils nine years ago when Wachs, during an earlier mayoral run, made the neighborhood empowerment groups a major plank in his campaign platform.

Since then, Nelson has taken the lead in researching councils around the nation and formulating strategies to make them work in Los Angeles.

Present at most of nearly 200 sessions of the two charter reform commissions, Nelson had a major role in crafting the charter provision that requires a department and commission to support councils.

He said that properly formed and supported, councils can become lobbying groups for the city’s far-flung neighborhoods and can provide the same City Hall access that more traditional lobbyists now enjoy. But first the department had to reverse an emphasis on internal organization and get more resources to communities, he said.

“What the department needs to do first is focus itself less inward and more outward on issues of importance to the public,” Nelson said.

Nelson is a lifelong resident of the San Fernando Valley, where many community leaders are pressing for a vote next year on secession.

He graduated from Grant High School in Van Nuys and attended Valley College and Cal State Northridge.

He said he moved yesterday to a new home near downtown in anticipation of his appointment so that he could have easy access to all neighborhoods in the city.

No council confirmation date has yet been set. The nomination will be first reviewed by a new committee on neighborhoods and education—headed by Councilwoman Janice Hahn, the mayor’s sister.