



Mayor Richard Riordan welcomes citizens to the first Neighborhood Convention at the Natural History Museum in Exposition Park.

Community disappointed with first Neighborhood Convention (2-9-00)

By P.R. McDonald, Los Angeles Independent

For an event that was supposed to ignite a new era of citizen-friendly government, the first-ever Los Angeles Neighborhood Convention seemed mired in the usual political rigmarole.

Mayor Richard Riordan was introduced as a white knight who saved the city despite itself, mayoral candidates took the stage with Riordan to hand out plaques but no one wanted to delve too deeply into specifics. The citizens, however, did get a free lunch...courtesy of the Mayor's Office.

On a hazy Saturday morning at the Natural History Museum in Exposition Park, the first Los Angeles Neighborhood Convention convened. It was supposed to be an event to "create a forum for Angelenos to exchange ideas and concerns regarding neighborhood improvement," according to a press release, and it also featured commissioners from the newly established Department of Neighborhood Empowerment Commission. For some conventioners, though, a day of bright promise largely fell short.

"We don't have time to network," said Terri Tippit, president of the West of Westwood Homeowners Association. "We need network time."

Tippit wasn't the only community activist disappointed with the event. After a workshop with representatives of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, Terri Gerger, president of the Hollywood Dell Civic Association, said: "They're a month away [from community meetings], and they don't have anything yet."

And Charlotte De Armond, president of the Los Feliz Improvement Association, claimed "such a lack of specificity" caused her frustration.

From the beginning, the convention seemed at odds with itself. While politicians

were claiming the focus was on the people, they quickly placed the spotlight on themselves. For Riordan's introduction, Department of Neighborhood Empowerment Commission President Lee Kanon Alpert ran through a litany of the mayor's accomplishments, while also making it clear to conventioners that Riordan had given up a profitable law practice to save Los Angeles.

Noelia Rodriguez, Riordan's spokeswoman, said the introduction's message was to point out that "it didn't happen overnight," and she claimed that the convention was not "politically driven, but people-driven." It still didn't stop Riordan from asking mayoral candidate Steve Soboroff to join him on stage with 2nd District Councilman Joel Wachs, another mayoral candidate.

And when Riordan handed out the "Neighborhood Heroes Awards," the mayor failed to mention the recipients' list of accomplishments for receiving such an award. At one point, an audience member yelled out, "What did she do?" But the conventioner never received an answer.

Although several City Council members attended the event, 8th District Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas was noticeably absent -- the councilman represents the district where the convention took place. It seemed to be a glaring no-show since Ridley-Thomas works closely with the kind of Neighborhood Council that may be a prototype for the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which is charged with organizing Neighborhood Councils citywide. The councilman, however, was perturbed that the mayor failed to appoint someone from his district to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment Commission. As a result, Ridley-Thomas skipped the event.

At the Neighborhood Empowerment workshop, conventioners were only further reminded about the politics that may affect their efforts for a more open city government. Wachs said "resources" and a "willingness to share power" will be essential for the success of Neighborhood Councils, and added, "Not everybody [in the City Council] believes in Neighborhood Councils or neighborhood empowerment."

Eleventh District City Councilwoman Cindy Miscikowski backed up that observation, claiming there is "no deep support" for Neighborhood Councils on the City Council.

The workshop -- titled "Who We Are and What's Next?" -- was another opportunity for the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment to share its mission and progress with a public thirsty for information. The department, however, was unable to present anything new.

Father John Bakas, Dean of St. Sophia Cathedral in Downtown, only underlined that point when he told commissioners, "I'm not worried about the people here. They're all veterans of these meetings, and they know about these things. What you really need is a convention for managers and city workers." Community activists erupted in applause.

Although the department is still in the beginning stages, it has yet to hook up its computers or create a website. It also hasn't set up resource centers across the city for citizens to gain information. Next month, the department will begin a series of community meetings that will continue through July, but community activists worry that the lack of information will make the early meetings useless.

During the workshop, commission chair Lee Kanon Alpert said the mission of the department was "finding a way to access you into city services." He also claimed, "We're going to make mistakes. And when we do, we'll say it was a mistake and tweak it." For many conventioners, the tweaking of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, and access to it, should commence immediately.