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## Riordan Taps Into Mood for City Panels

The mayor's endorsement of advisory neighborhood councils is in sync with national trends. But some wonder whether the groups should have more power.

By TED ROHRLICH, Times Staff Writer

Mayor Richard Riordan's endorsement of neighborhood councils as a reform of Los Angeles government puts him squarely in the mainstream of a long-simmering national inclination aimed at reducing political alienation in big cities by giving neighborhoods greater influence.

It also reflects a growing sense that, in Los Angeles political circles, where such councils have been discussed for years, their time--or at least their time for being submitted to voters--is near at hand.

Riordan's call to give neighborhood councils advisory, rather than decision-making authority, follows national norms and reflects concerns of business interests worried that formal authority would lead to not-in-my-backyard land use decisions that would stymie economic growth.

Although the mayor's proposal could lead to a big increase in neighborhood influence, with developers and bureaucrats having to consult neighborhood leaders about their plans, it falls far short of much more radical proposals that would make Los Angeles a pioneer among big cities by delegating decision-making authority to neighborhoods.

The more radical approach appears to have captivated a majority of the city's elected charter reform commission, which Riordan ironically pushed to create, and which has the power to place its own plan for a new city government on the ballot next year.

"I think neighborhood councils should have decision-making authority and not just be advisory," said the elected commission's chairman, Erwin Chemerinsky, a USC constitutional law professor. Although the commission has not formally discussed the matter, Chemerinsky said he had talked informally "to probably every commissioner on this issue. . . . My impression is that there is majority support for elected neighborhood councils with decision-making authority."

Those would make for a daring experiment--unique in American municipal government.

As they prepare to make their recommendations to voters, charter reform commissioners have sought to test the depth of support for some form of neighborhood councils. The elected charter commission and a second charter reform panel, appointed by the City Council, recently pooled \$40,000 in public funds to pay for focus groups in nine neighborhoods only to find that none of the 113 likely voter participants--even the handful aware of charter reform--spontaneously suggested

neighborhood councils.

When they were suggested by the marketing firm, no group rejected the idea, and groups in Central, East and South Los Angeles embraced it most strongly. But there was no clear consensus on whether the councils should have advisory or decision-making status. "The principal inference," concluded the marketing firm, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates, "is that their inclusion in charter reform would neither be the reform provision that sells [it] nor its Achilles' heel."

The mayor's proposal, which he sent by letter to the elected and appointed charter commissions, borrows from efforts underway in scores of American cities, from Portland to New York.

Riordan said that their success makes it clear that advisory councils can be a "respected part of the decision-making process."

Echoing recent academic research on the characteristics of the most successful of these advisory councils, Riordan rejected a one-size-fits-all approach and urged that individual neighborhoods be free to decide their own boundaries, write their own bylaws and even incorporate, if they wished, as nonprofit entities.

Neighborhood council members, he suggested, should be residents and businesspeople elected at town hall-style caucuses. They should regularly review city agency plans and budget decisions that affect their neighborhoods and attempt to lobby for whatever changes they want.

The mayor's proposal is similar in many respects to one that City Councilman Joel Wachs advanced as the centerpiece of his failed 1992 mayoral campaign and which his government efficiency committee is holding hearings on now.

However, Wachs is committed to the idea, also supported by the research, that the neighborhood council members, who may be volunteers, will need paid support staff to succeed. He suggests a city Department of Neighborhoods to help with organizing efforts. Riordan appeared lukewarm to that idea.

Wachs and Riordan also differ on their willingness to consider decision-making authority for the neighborhood panels.

Wachs said he is pushing an ordinance that would set up advisory councils because that is all he can do as a council member.

Decision-making authority would require a voter-approved charter change that, he says, could come later, after advisory panels are up and running, if participants decide they need formal authority to be effective.

George David Kieffer, a partner in the law firm of Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, who chairs the appointed charter reform commission, said there is significant sentiment on his panel for some form of neighborhood councils, and that he is leaning toward the kind of flexible, advisory approach Riordan is recommending, with the kind of opportunity Wachs is suggesting to expand to a decision-making model later. "It's very difficult to invent a third branch of government and just place it on top of the whole city," Kieffer said.

Riordan, who is already on the road to getting much of what he wants from charter reform with tentative decisions for increased executive authority, has remained silent on another key participation question--expanding the size of the City Council, each of whose 15 members represents a national-record 250,000 constituents.

A source close to the mayor says that he fears voters would torpedo charter reform if it called for an expansion, whether or not it cost more money, because voters are sick of politicians.