

Hollywood begins mulling Neighborhood Councils

By P.R. McDonald, Hollywood Independent, 3-1-2000

Like a lot of grassroots movements, the planning for Neighborhood Councils in Hollywood started with a conversation over lunch.

Determined to create the guidelines that will work best for their communities, activists realized the time to organize was now rather than later. At a community meeting last Thursday night, Greg Nelson only underlined that point.

"The [Department of Neighborhood Empowerment] commissioners probably want you to write up your own plan," said Nelson, chief deputy for 2nd District City Councilman Joel Wachs. "Especially if you're agreeing on various issues in the community."

Dan Bernstein, a member of the Hollywood Neighborhood Councils Planning Committee, enthusiastically remarked, "That's exactly what we want to do."

At the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, the Hollywood Neighborhood Councils Planning Committee, which was formed by numerous civic and homeowner associations, sponsored a meeting to better organize Hollywood for the inevitable: the citywide creation of

Neighborhood Councils. As a cornerstone of the revised City Charter, the concept of Neighborhood Councils aims to give citizens a more influential voice in city government as well as create a more civic-minded public. But many people across the city still wonder about the exact nature of Neighborhood Councils. Nelson, who has worked on the idea for eight years, tried to answer some of their concerns.

Essentially, according to Nelson, Neighborhood Councils are a way to help citizens organize and gain the attention of City Council members. At this point, he claimed, lobbyists for special interests -- for example, corporations or labor unions -- hold the most political influence. Nelson sees Neighborhood Councils as a way to balance that system. "We need to get the people to a level playing field," he said. "If Neighborhood Councils have that ability [to lobby], it becomes a tremendous counterforce."

Nelson's vision is ambitious; some people would even say subversive. It also differs from that of Department of Neighborhood Empowerment Commission President Lee Kanon Alpert, who presides over the body that will write citywide guidelines for Neighborhood Councils. Alpert has consistently claimed that his department wants to help citizens gain better access to city services.

Never has the commissioner mentioned leveling the playing field in the sport of government lobbying.

During the course of the meeting, Nelson also figured that nearly 400 Neighborhood Councils would have to be created. "More the merrier," he said. "You want to keep them small."

Alpert and his staff, though, have made the general claim that "over 100" will be formed, but they really aren't sure at this point. Activists in Hollywood, though, already believe that 30 Neighborhood Councils may be created just for their community.

The Hollywood Neighborhood Councils Planning Committee, which formed nearly five months ago with a 10-member board, has been moving ahead with deliberate speed. "If we don't get it together," explained Andrew Ettinger, a member of the committee, "we're afraid the charter reform people will."

The planning committee has agreed upon a system that will create several committees for each Neighborhood Council. For example, if someone wants to address public safety issues in their community, they can attend a public safety committee. Then one member from that committee will be elected to serve on a Neighborhood Council, and the larger body will take up his or her respective issues. The planning committee hopes the concept will better represent all of Hollywood and deal with problems more quickly.

While Nelson applauded the inventiveness of the planning committee, he also commented that a system that may work for Hollywood may not work for other communities. "You can't create a one-size-fits-all," Nelson said.

He also suggested that communities should band together over shared concerns. For example, Nelson said, many community groups want to reinstate the Los Angeles Police Department's Senior Lead Officer program, which established a direct community contact person at LAPD divisions. Chief Bernard Parks changed that policy last year, claiming the need for more police officers in the street. Many civic associations, though, are still enraged over that decision.

Nelson also said that the success of Neighborhood Councils largely relies upon proper funding, which will be determined by the City Council. Nelson called it the one "loophole" that could hinder the work of community activists like the ones in Hollywood.

The Hollywood Neighborhood Councils Planning Committee, though, remains undaunted. It hopes to reach out to more civic groups -- right now, the planning committee is mostly comprised of members of homeowners and neighborhood associations from the Hollywood Hills -- and it plans to create a bylaws committee in the coming weeks. As Ettinger described the committee's work, "It's starting to build up steam fast."