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L.A.'s Pockets of Power

By JIM NEWTON, Times Staff Writer

In the world of Los Angeles charter reform, there is a special place for the debate over how to improve neighborhood representation: It is the most fiercely contested issue because its resolution could create a vastly different city--either for better or for worse.

On one edge of the debate are advocates of strong neighborhood councils, mini-governments that would oversee small sections of the city and determine all manner of local policies, including having the power to veto proposed developments. At the other end of the spectrum are those who reject virtually all government-established neighborhood representation, dismissing it as a wasted layer of bureaucracy that would stifle growth and derail Los Angeles' destiny.

As the two sides dig in over that issue, they draw largely on the experiences of other cities. Portland, Ore., has experimented with neighborhood councils, as have New York, Minneapolis and other cities.

Largely lost in the discussion, however, has been Los Angeles' own long experience with neighborhood organizations, voluntary groups whose influence has waxed and waned over the years and who have moved the city government on issues as varied as policing and development.

In the San Fernando Valley, groups such as the Studio City Residents Assn. and the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Assn. have evolved from small collections of homeowners into genuine political forces. Over the hill, the Los Feliz and Hancock Park homeowners groups command respect at City Hall, and City Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas' Empowerment Congress has emerged as a decisive voice in the politics of South-Central.

Meanwhile, the Los Angeles Police Department has long tested ways of engaging the community in its business while still keeping the public at arms' length. From Neighborhood Watch, which was born in Los Angeles, to today's Community Police Advisory boards, LAPD officials have relied on small groups of public representatives to help them set priorities for police officers.

Those organizations are profoundly different. And from them come conflicting perspectives about what the city might expect from new neighborhood councils, if such organizations are recommended

by one or both commissions charged with reviewing, updating and overhauling the Los Angeles City Charter.

The homeowner groups offer one model. They are established fixtures at City Hall, and their power occasionally is formidable.

A Counterweight to Developers

Take the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Assn. Headed by Richard Close, an affable lawyer with deep roots in Los Angeles affairs, the association has won its share of battles and seen plenty of politics on both the local and state level. For nearly 20 years, the association contested developer after developer who wanted to lop off the top of a ridgeline in the Santa Monica Mountains, dump the dirt into a nearby canyon and then build houses both on the ridge and the fill.

Close and his association negotiated, leaned on the local council members and organized neighbors. Nineteen years after the first proposal was born, the last one died. The property was purchased instead for a park.

"For 19 years, we had a committee focusing on that," Close said. "It never even got to a public hearing."

Such perseverance has made Close's association one of the city's more influential lobbying organizations. And it is not alone.

The Studio City association and its Los Feliz counterpart have tackled developments and neighborhood projects. They serve as centers for community involvement and offer forums for speakers to address everything from local crime waves to mayoral addresses. The Studio City group last week sponsored a farmers market in the community, and Tony Lucente, the association's president, is an important member of the group monitoring Universal Studios' plans to expand its production facilities and amusement park.

Each is a powerful counterweight to local developers, who tacitly recognize the influence of these groups by seeking them out even before they propose new projects. In Studio City, for instance, CBS took its 1993 expansion plans to the residents' group for its scrutiny in advance of formally launching the effort.

The two sides discussed the proposal at length. Both compromised. When CBS eventually filed for approval, the project went through without a single appeal.

"We just worked it out," Lucente said.

Several common themes run through the experiences of these successful community groups: They generally form to protect themselves from development, they select their own leaders, they charge modest dues and they have no government-sanctioned influence.

In the current debate, a couple of those points are especially important, because as charter commissioners wrestle with what kinds of neighborhood councils to create, two of the defining issues are how to select representatives and how much formal power to give them.

The appointed charter commission generally has avoided proposals to create elected commissions with formal government powers, moving instead toward a more flexible structure. Although its recommendations still are being finalized, the commission so far has favored creating a city department of neighborhoods that would be directed to create local councils but not ordered to create a certain type for every community.

"We put in motion all the ingredients to force it to happen," appointed commission Chairman George Kieffer said.

Concerns About Uneven Influence

The elected commission has moved more boldly and generated more controversy. Its members are taking seriously the idea of using the charter to create elected neighborhood councils with broad powers, a proposal favored by some activists, including Close, who describes that type of council as the only meaningful purpose of charter reform.

"Anything else is just smoke and mirrors," Close said. "Without that, it's just rearranging power between the mayor and City Council."

But Close's vehement support for that notion is matched by its critics, who cover the range from big business--most notably the Los Angeles Business Advisors, a group of chief executive officers that includes Times Publisher Mark Willes--to some liberals who worry that the councils could deepen inequities between wealthy and poor Los Angeles.

The concern about equity, although not expressed as loudly as the business perspective, holds that powerful neighborhood councils are likely to wield their influence effectively in places like Studio City and Brentwood, while the same councils will have a harder time attracting leaders with the time and background to govern them in places like South-Central and the Eastside. The possible result: An attempt to broaden democracy ends up exacerbating inequality.

Concerns about uneven influence are partly rooted in the experiences of the LAPD.

For decades, the LAPD has experimented with community outreach and neighborhood organization. Neighborhood Watch, an invention of now-retired Chief Ed Davis, was intended to expand the

Police Department's contacts with residents and to encourage them to look out for one another.

Team policing, another Davis innovation, expanded the department's community focus and added a strong political arm to it. When Davis found his budget requests challenged in the City Council, he could send out the word through his community relations officers, who in turn sent the alarm to their community contacts. Within a day or two, City Hall would be deluged with protests about any possible cut in the budget.

And today, the department oversees a network of Community Police Advisory boards, groups of residents who meet, usually monthly, to discuss law enforcement priorities with the captains and senior officers at each of the LAPD's 18 stations.

In contrast to the homeowner groups, the police advisory boards are a formal part of the city government structure. Captains are required to convene them, and get regular time to meet with those they advise. Like the homeowner groups, they have no formal authority, however, and exist only as advisory bodies, with police officials free to disregard their requests or recommendations.

In practice, the effectiveness of the police advisory boards varies widely. Hollywood's board is considered one of the best. It has worked with police to protect post-production film studios at night and to eliminate virtually all street prostitution along certain stretches of Sunset Boulevard. Likewise, the advisory boards in some San Fernando Valley divisions and in the Wilshire Division have long enjoyed strong relations with their local police stations.

Empowerment in South L.A.

The experience is not the same in some parts of South Los Angeles. There, activists complain that the police advisory boards represent too narrow a slice of the community and do too little to create genuinely improved relations between residents and police.

It is that inconsistency that some critics fear would be replicated in any formal network of neighborhood councils.

There are, however, examples to suggest that fear is misplaced. Most notable is the Empowerment Congress, a vast community organization in South-Central that has woven together business owners, residents, students and others into a significant lobbying force and influential political organization linked to Councilman Ridley-Thomas.

That organization's leaders are mostly elected, though Ridley-Thomas appoints some. And its reach extends from policing to development. It has helped lure growth to areas burned in the 1992

riots, it has helped guide certain controversial projects, and it has brought together hundreds of South-Central residents in a variety of neighborhood causes.

Anthony Thigpenn, who has helped work with the Empowerment Congress, said it owes much of its success to its careful attention to creating neighborhood districts boundaries that reflect real community lines and to the support of the councilman, who supplies it with some staff and other resources. As a result, Thigpenn supports creation of neighborhood councils citywide, and believes that as long as the government backs them with staff, it will overcome the potential problems of inequity between rich and poor communities.

"In the absence of that, it's going to be people with time and resources who will dominate," he warned. "But that's pretty much the situation now."