

Panel vote favors new city department
By Rick Orlov, Staff Writer, Los Angeles Daily News
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A city panel urged the creation of a new bureaucracy Wednesday to implement portions of the new charter that enhance the public's role in Los Angeles government by creating advisory neighborhood councils.

In the first move to breathe life into any major provision of the city's new constitution, the City Council's Government Efficiency Committee voted 2-0 to recommend creation of a new Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

"The Department of Neighborhoods is on the way," said Councilman Joel Wachs. "We're on the way."

The proposal -- coming eight days after voter approval of the new charter -- now goes to the City Council for consideration where little opposition is expected and then on to Mayor Richard Riordan for approval.

Under the charter, the department during its first year of operation will develop guidelines, suggest areas for the creation of neighborhood councils around the city and develop outreach programs to increase citizen involvement.

The neighborhood councils are expected to be self-selecting and have a say in how government services are delivered, as well as establish priorities for how they would like to see their communities maintained.

The purpose of creating the councils and the new department to oversee them is to "empower neighborhoods to do more than just communicate," said Councilwoman Laura Chick. "They are going to expect this department to not only communicate their problems but see that those problems are addressed," she said.

The new department will have a seven-member citizens commission. As part of its action, the committee recommended that the members represent the diversity of the city in age, race, gender and where they live.

As for the cost of the new agency, Wachs said he didn't believe the current estimates of \$1 million to \$1.7 million in start-up costs and \$3 million to \$5 million in ongoing expenses were accurate.

"My personal view is that this will only work if we put in staff and organizers but I'm sure there will be a debate in the City Council on how much we put into this,"

Wachs said. "I think it will be expensive and the question is what is the appropriate level."

Chick said it was her hope the costs of the department will be offset by efficiencies and could result in a reduction in the size of City Council staffs.

The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment is the only aspect of the new charter that is to take effect immediately, with other provisions phased in by July 2000 and July 2001.

Although the new charter was approved only last week, the City Council had asked the City Attorney's Office to begin drafting the legal language to allow it to take effect as soon as possible.