

Neighborhood Councils
Council Plays Tug of War Over Neighborhood Councils
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LOS ANGELES (CNS) - The City Council gave tentative approval today to the backbone of a citywide system of neighborhood councils, but not without an hour of sometimes personal attacks.

Setting up a Department of Neighborhood Empowerment to oversee the advisory councils is the first step the council has taken toward enacting the revised city charter voters approved June 8.

Council members who supported the new charter were pitted today against those who opposed it.

Joel Wachs, Mark Ridley-Thomas and Laura Chick are members of a council panel that has been working on the ordinance to create the new department for months.

But other members, such as Hal Bernson, suggested a number of amendments to the ordinance to spell out details of the new advisory council system. He also asked for more time to study the situation.

In the process, Bernson took a chance to berate Wachs for his role in pushing for passage of the ordinance.

"For 20 years I've had neighborhood councils in my district and they've worked very nicely," the Granada Hills-area lawmaker said. "The hardest pusher (for them) ... has been on this council for nearly 30 years, and has never had a neighborhood council (in his district)."

Bernson suggested a number of changes to the ordinance to define where the councils would meet, and how public complaints would be handled.

When 26-year-old and newly elected Councilman Alex Padilla said the ordinance was meant as a general outline for the new department, and that details would be worked out later through the system of "checks and balances," Bernson took issue.

"You're new and you're young and you don't understand the process," he told Padilla. "We're responsible to make sure these councils work, and if we

don't spell out the details, they won't work."

Padilla told Bernson the ``people voted for reform ... not for the City Council to control (the new advisory councils)."

Nate Holden, Mike Hernandez, Ruth Galanter and Jackie Goldberg, all of whom opposed the revised charter, repeatedly commented that the new constitution essentially was passed by only 17 percent of the city's 1.4 million registered voters.

Holden said passing the ordinance when there were a dozen unresolved amendments pending ``stupid" and ``bad legislation."

Hernandez said somebody had an ``agenda" in setting up the councils. He accused Wachs, who is running for mayor, of using the issue for political gain and said ``a deal (has been) cut" for his top deputy, Greg Nelson, to head the new department.

Wachs denied that but said he is recommending Nelson, who has worked for him since 1971, for the spot.

The general manager and a seven-member commission to oversee the department will be appointed by the mayor, with council confirmation.

Ridley-Thomas said it looked as though some of his colleagues were trying to subvert the ordinance via unfriendly amendments.

``We can't answer every question today," he said. ``We've been working on this idea for two years ... and this simply states the broad principles and practices of the new department."

In the end, the council voted to put most of those amendments into a ``policy statement" that a special committee set up to deal with charter implementation will consider, and to approve the ordinance with a second and final vote set for next week.

Members of the special committee are expected to be appointed by council President John Ferraro in the coming days.

Once the ordinance is in place, a new department and commission can be set up to develop a plan for working out the logistics of how neighborhood councils will carry out their everyday business.

Los Angeles would become the biggest city in the nation with such a system, which charter proponents have argued will enable residents to have a stronger say in local government.