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### Neighborhood Councils Can--and Do--Work

Government: They have for three decades in Washington, D.C. But L.A. mayor and City Council must back concept.

By ARTHUR H. PURCELL, Los Angeles Times

Can grass-roots democracy do what nothing to date has been able to do--bring Los Angeles together? We have a historic opportunity to find out. As the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment goes on line, a new system of local government will be born--Advisory

Neighborhood Councils. These councils are designed to bridge the huge gap between citizens and their elected local government: to make residents feel they can make a positive difference in the community, and that their government will be behind them; to listen to them instead of put them on hold; to let them meet directly with elected representatives, instead of scheduling an appointment with a City Council staff member. In short, neighborhood councils are designed to increase the probability of local government action, instead of just the promise of future action, to solve community problems.

Neighborhood councils can work the way they are designed.

Experience with one of the country's first advisory neighborhood council systems clearly bears this out. Washington, D.C., set up such councils three decades ago. They have done a lot to bring neighborhoods of the nation's capital together and to resolve intra- and inter-community problems. To be sure, there are many dissimilarities between the District of Columbia and Los Angeles; size, geography and demographics head the list. But one factor makes these cities nearly identical, and points to the critical need for an effective neighborhood dimension of local government: Both are high-visibility money and power centers, encompassing wide disparities in income, lifestyle and cross-cultural understanding, where their governments historically have largely forgotten that they are also communities and where their residents have struggled to find common identities.

As an elected neighborhood council representative in Washington, responsible, as an area chair for 10,000 people, I had the opportunity to learn firsthand what these councils could--and could not--do. From traffic problems to liquor licenses to police/community relations, our council provided input into the city government process that was listened to and taken into consideration.

That was highly gratifying, as was seeing residents turn out en masse to monthly public forums with hope on their faces.

The downside? The biggest danger is overexpectation. These councils are, by definition, only advisory. They merely form one piece

of the complicated puzzle known as local government. They cannot, by themselves, dramatically change the way government works for those who pay its bills.

The actual government decision-making is still left to the council and the mayor. What the advisory neighborhood council wants may not be what its constituents get. But, if there is substantive buy-in of the advisory council system by the mayor and the City Council, there is a good chance that the neighborhood councils will not operate in a vacuum but instead serve as a critical mechanism for citizen-government interaction, helping us become a more cohesive community.

Arthur H. Purcell, a Los Angeles-based environmental management analyst, was elected twice to the Washington, D.C., Advisory Neighborhood Commission, the first local government system of its kind in a major U.S. city.