

Daily Breeze

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Will neighborhood councils give say to communities?

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In just a few years, instead of traveling from the Harbor Area or Westchester to Los Angeles City Hall, residents who want a say in their government may be able to just go next door.

That's what community leaders and those involved in shaping the city's new neighborhood council plan hope will happen in the near future.

"We're talking about giving these groups independence to stand on their own," said Greg Nelson, chief deputy to Councilman Joel Wachs, who has spearheaded the drive for neighborhood councils. "It's going to exist totally outside of the city bureaucracy."

Today, the Los Angeles City Council is scheduled to approve plans establishing a Department of Neighborhood Empowerment and move forward with the organization of advisory councils that will hear residents' gripes on a range of issues, from tree trimming to crime.

Elected neighborhood councils will blossom in communities around Los Angeles as part of the changes mandated by the revised city charter. But because the charter provides little detail or guidelines for the creation of the department and the subsequent councils, some wonder whether the new advisory groups will bring government closer to the people or merely compete with existing homeowner associations and business groups.

"There might be some duplication of efforts," said Westchester resident John Ruhlen, who during his 36 years in the community has been active with the Westchester/LAX-Marina del Rey Chamber of Commerce and the Gateway L.A. panel. Ruhlen said that as a member of Councilwoman Ruth Galanter's Community Planning Advisory Council, he and his 11 colleagues already pass on community concerns to the city.

"The majority of the population feel they might have a little more control over their destiny, but we really won't know for another year or two down the road," he said.

With pressure mounting from secession movements in San Pedro, the San Fernando Valley and elsewhere, Mayor Richard Riordan and some council

members led an effort to revise the city's 75-year old charter. They hoped it would give more access to constituents. On June 8, voters gave approval to the neighborhood councils concept and agreed that the community should be allowed to serve on at least five regional planning commissions with authority over land-use permits.

Voters rejected other amendments that would have expanded the City Council from the current 15 members to 21 or 25.

#### Input sought on councils

The two groups that drafted the charter purposely left the guidelines for the creation of the neighborhood councils short on details to allow the council and community to have input. The bylaws require only that the councils be open to membership to everyone who lives, works or owns property in the area and reflect the diverse interest of the area.

"We wanted to leave some things open for the community and the council to decide," said Erwin Chemerinsky, head of the elected charter reform commission. "We wanted the community to have some involvement in determining the rules and guidelines for the (neighborhood) councils."

Under provisions of the charter, the mayor will appoint the manager of the new department and select seven people to serve on the commission and craft the rules for organizing the councils.

The City Council then must confirm the appointments. The city must have the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment running by October and the neighborhood councils must be in place by 2001.

But the process already has been met by controversy. Some members of the City Council, the majority of whom opposed the charter, claim it gives too much power to the mayor. They also have said the charter does not guarantee neighborhood participation in governing the city.

"We hope this will allow some sort of mechanism for those who can't participate to be heard," said Niki Tennant, a spokeswoman for Galanter, who opposed the charter. "I think her concern is that it not exclude anyone and be open."

Some community leaders have been critical because the neighborhood councils will lack decision-making power over their budgets and other matters. The councils will be advisory and hold public meetings .... [text missing] ....

Citizens from his neighborhoods represent community leaders from block clubs, homeowners groups and businesses to serve on a 10-member Neighborhood Development Council that advises the councilman.

"It has bridged the gap between government and citizens," said Elizabeth McCullan, a resident of Southeast Los Angeles who is running for co-chair of the 10-member Neighborhood Development Council. She said her community had problems with getting regular trash picked up until the Empowerment Congress was created.

Still, the mayor and City Council will play a key role in the shaping of the neighborhood councils. Gaye Williams, assistant deputy to Riordan, is charged with compiling a list of potential commissioners. The Manhattan Beach resident was assistant chief deputy for retired South Bay Supervisor Deane Dana and ran the Los Angeles office for former Gov. Pete Wilson.

She will have to cull through a list of hundreds of individuals, including members of the charter reform committee [text missing].