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## Mayor chooses leader of neighborhood councils

By David Zahniser, COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

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One of Los Angeles' strongest advocates for a system of neighborhood councils was chosen Thursday to lead the new Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, an agency already under fire for making the council system too bureaucratic.

Mayor James Hahn nominated Greg Nelson, a 26-year aide to Councilman Joel Wachs, to head the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment as it prepares to receive dozens of neighborhood council applications from across the city.

Nelson, 55, will serve as DONE's interim general manager until the City Council votes on his permanent appointment. But he is already winning praise as someone who will help the department face its biggest challenge — reconnecting citizens with city government.

“I don't think anybody in Los Angeles has spent more time studying and encouraging the idea of neighborhood government,” Hahn said. “This is something that has been his love for the past few years.”

The nomination comes at a pivotal time for DONE, which expects a deluge of neighborhood council applications Oct. 1. The agency also faces criticism from residents who say it has left neighborhoods on their own to grapple with issues like boundaries and bylaws.

Last week, residents and elected officials opened a new round of criticism, saying the new neighborhood council application form is too long and too cumbersome.

“It's 21 pages. It's horrible,” said Doug Epperhart, a volunteer with the proposed Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council. “They want to know what percentage of your stakeholders are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered. They want to know the income level of your stakeholders. They want to know how many belong to lobbying groups.”

Under the city charter, neighborhood councils will be advisory, providing communities information about local proposals and the opportunity to weigh in on them.

Many, including Hahn, hope the councils will stave off secession movements in the Harbor Area, Hollywood and San Fernando Valley by giving citizens more input at City Hall.

Instead, problems with the council-formation process have fostered cynicism among the very volunteers who once embraced the process. Dozens of community leaders vented their anger last weekend at a conference focusing on new neighborhood councils, said Bill Christopher, who serves on the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners.

“One of the things I’m hoping Greg will do is . . . allay some of those fears and disgruntled feelings,” he said.

DONE’s previous general manager, Rosalind Stewart, left last month amid complaints from various neighborhoods. Though Hahn said Stewart resigned voluntarily, he also said his office “obviously saw some problems” with the agency.

Nelson said he intends to address those problems by sending DONE into communities to provide more hands-on assistance.