

Few Neighborhoods Request Councils

Government: Only 10 of the city's 184 possible communities have filed so far to create the advisory bodies.

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After years of trying to persuade City Hall to listen to their complaints about the Sunshine Canyon Landfill, Kim Thompson and her Granada Hills neighbors are on the verge of getting a real seat at the table of government.

So is Noel Park of San Pedro, who for years has battled the air pollution and truck traffic from the Port of Los Angeles that plague his neighborhood.

Frances Stronks and her neighbors in Westchester are about to get the same lift for their crusade to put a cap on any expansion of Los Angeles International Airport.

More than a month after the city of Los Angeles began accepting applications for the creation of advisory neighborhood councils, 10 of the 184 possible communities have filed papers, including those of Thompson, Park and Stronks.

The small number of applicants during the first five weeks—some officials had expected 20 or 30 filings by now—has disappointed some, but most city officials are

urging patience, noting that 96 other communities are in the wings filling out applications.

That the first applications came from neighborhoods already organized and active on issues of local import had been predicted by Greg Nelson, general manager of the city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

"We all knew the first groups
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would be where there is already leadership in place that is active around an issue," he said. "Now the hard part for us is to go into areas where there is no activity and generate it—to find the Kim Thompsons in areas that haven't yet organized."

In many neighborhoods, there is no Sunshine Canyon or LAX to stir residents to action, and many residents are so busy trying to maintain order in their own lives after the events of Sept. 11 that they have neither the time nor interest in attending the quarterly meetings of neighborhood councils.

"This is a time when people are not as focused on neighborhood issues as other things," said Erwin Chemerinsky, who chaired the elected charter reform commission that recommended creating a system of advisory councils.

The program was designed to give residents who feel disconnected from and unrepresented by their city government a chance to participate in a new form of democracy, in which neighborhoods gather in a formal setting to give input to the city on how they are governed. Neighborhood councils would weigh in on local planning cases, on how city funds are spent in their communities and on how city agencies are paving their streets and trimming their trees.

ter basic city services and more influence in planning decisions.

The rules are relatively simple: Each neighborhood council must represent an area of at least 20,000 people, and the council should reflect the diversity of its constituency, with businesspeople serving alongside homeowners, renters and representatives of churches, schools and social service agencies.

Bylaws submitted by some groups, however, appear to be setting the stage for governing boards to be dominated by activist residents who can be expected to seek to limit perceived nuisances, such as a landfill.

Thompson and Mary Edwards, leaders of the North Valley Coalition that has tried for years to shut down Sunshine Canyon, are organizers of a Granada Hills North Neighborhood Council that is proposed to include a 19-member board of directors, with only one seat reserved for a business or industry representative, though not necessarily for the landfill operator.

Business representatives can be elected to any of several open seats, but 75% of the "stakeholders" who have signed up so far to vote for the board are from the residential community. And Browning Ferris Industries, the operator of Sunshine Canyon, gets only one stakeholder vote, Thompson said.

Alternative to Secession Threats

Each would get \$50,000 to spend on local priorities.

The system approved two years ago by voters would receive organizational help from the new neighborhood department.

The council system was conceived as an alternative to secession threats from the San Fernando Valley and harbor area. So officials are not surprised that four of the first 10 applications came from those two alienated parts of the city.

Blame for the slow start has also been attributed to confusion caused by early stumbles by the neighborhood department, including its original requirement that groups fill out a 21-page application that some said was more complicated than a corporate tax return. That application has been reduced to five pages.

The program has also been hampered by feuding between neighborhoods over boundaries of the areas that the new councils would help govern.

Richard MacMinn, who founded the Alliance of Neighborhood Councils, said he originally tried to form one neighborhood council for Hollywood, but now four groups are offering rival plans for the area.

"There is a lot of conflict," he said. "Originally, I thought there would be 20 to 30 groups that filed applications the first month. But as more of this disagreement comes out, I'm surprised anyone has filed."

"The neighborhood council is going to have a major impact on Sunshine Canyon," she said.

Neighborhood councils proposed for Westchester and Wilmington have reserved one seat each for a representative of the airport and port, respectively, but not without controversy.

"There are a number of people who feel the airport is the enemy and we should go about our business without their input," said Stronks, chairwoman of the organizing committee in Westchester.

She thinks it is important to have an airport representative at the table when the 30-member council meets.

For Wilmington organizers, there is a "love-hate" relationship with the port, said Eddie Duque, who heads the organizing committee. Residents realize that the area's economy benefits from port operations, but truck traffic and air pollution from the port are nuisances, he said.

"They want the jobs, but they also believe there has to be a less authoritarian influence by the port on the people in this area," Duque said. By including one seat for a port representative on the 21-member board, Duque said he hopes there will be better communications.

"This is a revolutionary thing," Councilwoman Hahn said. "It is really going to turn city government on its ear. But people have never done this in the city of Los Angeles, so it's going to take a while."

Some community activists have declined to organize councils, believing they already have more clout as homeowners associations or chambers of commerce.

That is the feeling of Richard Close, president of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Assn. and head of the secession group Valley VOTE. "Because they are only advisory, we don't see them as being effective," he said.

City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who chairs a council panel overseeing neighborhood issues, said the relatively new neighborhood department created a complex system that probably delayed some groups' applications.

"I felt like it became another bureaucratic city department," she said. "I felt like it didn't understand the mission, which was to empower neighborhoods."

"A lot of people still don't know what these are all about, how to join them, how to get involved," Hahn said. "We really are not reaching the disenfranchised people that this is all about."

City Officials Urge Patience

Officials hope to certify the first neighborhood councils as early as December. Nelson and Hahn are urging patience, predicting that as communities see the first councils begin to have an impact, other neighborhoods will join the program.

For Thompson in Granada Hills and Park in San Pedro, it is no coincidence that communities engaged in such pitched battles have been the first to file papers to establish neighborhood councils.

"People who are negatively impacted and whose communities are suffering are casting about for any way to have a voice," said Park, president of the San Pedro and Peninsula Homeowners Coalition.

Neighborhood council organizers in the Valley, harbor area and Westchester said grievances against major institutions in their areas are but one reason why they are organizing. They all want bet-