

# Em-Power to the People

*Mark Ridley-Thomas tries to organize a racially divided district*

BY MARIA ELENA FERNANDEZ

ON THIS RAINY SATURDAY, ELDERLY, MIDDLE-AGED, and young African-Americans and Latinos filled Crenshaw High School's multipurpose room almost to capacity for the Second Annual Empowerment Congress convened by 8th District City Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas. Participants donned name tags with bright green ribbons and picked up multicolored conference folders that contained the day's agenda and a resource guide — in Spanish or English — to district services. A neighborhood-festival feeling filled the air as the MC raffled off prizes from the stage while an interpreter provided simultaneous translation from the front of the room.

As part of a larger apparatus for citizen involvement, the Empowerment Congress marked a historic day for L.A. politics. While many City Council members espouse "neighborhood empowerment," Ridley-Thomas is the only one who has established a system of elected — not appointed — neighborhood representatives. The day, was marred, however, by a confrontation that shed light on the obstacles to multiracial organizing in South Los Angeles.

The congress was the culmination of over a year of the councilman's office organizing an elaborate structure of resident involvement to assist him in solving the urgent issues of public safety and economic development that plague the South L.A. district. The district is divided into five Area Assemblies; each assembly is divided into three Neighborhood Development Councils (NDC). Three officers are elected to each NDC. The area assembly is represented by these nine officers, two area co-conveners (also elected) and four members whom Ridley-Thomas appoints. A field representative is assigned to each of the five area assemblies.

The councilman took the stage, and loud applause erupted when he proclaimed, "We are getting rid of liquor stores that are causing public-safety problems! We are fighting for

decency and standards in our community!" Showing slides, he announced a long list of last year's accomplishments. Cheers filled the room when he showed a slide with a Smart and Final being built on 36th and Vermont, replacing a liquor store. More cheers greeted his announcement that Tom's Liquor Store, a problem spot on Florence and Normandie, now has a full-time security guard.

As Ridley-Thomas was closing his presentation, a clean-cut Latino man wearing a suit stood up from his front-row seat on the right side of the room, where all the Latinos were sitting. He yelled, "What about the market on Adams and Vermont?" — referring to a long struggle to get either a warehouse-style or full-service market on that corner. "This is an orderly assembly," responded Ridley-Thomas. "Sit down, and I will speak with you after the assembly." The man in the front yelled something about a Food 4 Less. Then in unison, almost everybody sitting behind him stood up. They were mostly young Latino families from St. Agnes Catholic Church, wearing large white buttons with "SCOC" — the Southern California Organizing Committee, one of L.A.'s confrontational community groups, part of the Industrial Areas Foundation network — printed on them.

As they rose, the middle aisle, already a gulf between black and brown, became impassable. With the people behind him clamoring, SCOC leader Roberto Carrillo pulled out a bullhorn and demanded time on the agenda to state his case. Ridley-Thomas asked the other side of the

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room if they agreed that the SCOC group should sit down, and a loud "I agree" reverberated through the room. After another minute of angry exchanges between the councilman and Carrillo, the group of 150 SCOC members walked out en masse, leaving few Latinos in the auditorium.

SCOC charges that the market would have been operational a year ago had Ridley-Thomas not delayed it, a charge the councilman denies. He says that area assembly representatives want a first-class market, in this case an Alpha Beta (which owns Food 4 Less), not a Boys Market or a warehouse market. "The protesters came to disrupt, not to participate, as you can see from the bullhorn," answered Ridley-Thomas when asked why he didn't give SCOC time to speak. "Their leadership didn't even let them take conference packets or



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translation equipment!" said Ridley-Thomas chief of staff Carolyn Webb de Macias. According to the councilman, "Their action was a big mistake. It's really heartbreaking for black-Latino relations."

Ridley-Thomas tried to re-focus the two-thirds of the remaining attendees on the business of the congress, but participants were reeling from the conflict. They shook their heads as they walked out of the auditorium on their way to one of four workshops: how to start a block club, economic revitalization, public safety, a session for youth. The first three sessions were structured with three to five panelists, leaving little time for the input that had been promised attendees.

In the 15 minutes left for questions in the public-safety workshop, however, residents were not shy about expressing their opinions. In response to Deputy Police Chief Mark Kroeker's presentation on the community-policing plan to be implemented in South L.A., an older African-American man stood up and asked, "Why have we had appointed people [by LAPD area commanding officers to the Community Police Advisory Board] shoved down our throats without our input?"

A notable exception to the three other panel-driven sessions was the youth workshop, facilitated by Adrienne Shropshire, youth organizer for South L.A.'s new community group Action for Grassroots Empowerment and Neighborhood Development Alternatives (AGENDA). Small groups of African-American and Latino youth each made a list of the biggest problems facing young people on one piece of paper and, on another, a list of proposed solutions. They hung up their collective answers on the library walls and reported to the other groups. At the end of the workshop, the lists were turned in to Ridley-Thomas' staff. Asked if she had faith that the input from the conference and the neighborhood council structure would be heeded by the councilman, Shropshire answered, "Absolutely. My faith in this process comes from people in the district who've gotten involved and will stay involved. They will be the accountability measure."

The lack of Latino constituents at the Empowerment Congress after SCOC left, however, points to an unfinished agenda of Ridley-Thomas' new community-involvement model. (While Latinos make up 31 percent of the 8th District residents, they constitute only about 6 percent of its registered voters.) Mónica Villafañá, field representative for the north area — which has the highest Latino concentration (47 percent) of the 8th District — noted that the staff is currently translating all materials and making sure that there is an interpreter for all meetings. Still, none of Ridley-Thomas' top five senior staff people is Latino, although up until four months ago his media-relations representative was Latino.

"Of any universe of people in the district, Latinos receive the most strategic attention," said Webb de Macias. Ridley-Thomas' staff are now tapping Latino businesses, organizations and churches as recruitment targets, since their door-to-door efforts have not been successful. But Ridley-Thomas himself notes that Latinos are more likely to respond to Latino leadership than to black leadership. While the Empowerment Congress marked a historic moment, it illustrated that Latino participation remains an unfinished agenda item for Ridley-Thomas and his new model for resident involvement. LA