

Neighborhood councils can be created now

Elected officials should be prodded for ordinance to empower citizens

THIS week marks a new low in the contentious debates regarding charter reform only to leave the people of Los Angeles confused and potentially empty-handed. Each day now, the lines in the sand seem to deepen and harden, which does not bode well for a constructive end.

Today it is no more clear to neighborhoods what they will get out of charter reform than 18 months ago when the two commissions first began deliberating. Why?

The main reason is a lack of clarity and consensus. Competing proposals on the boundaries, authority, funding and selection process for neighborhood involvement have not yet come any closer to advancing citizen participation and City Hall accountability.

It is generally agreed that one of the primary objectives of charter reform is to advance meaningful citizen involvement as we craft the city's new constitution. Further, it is believed that neighborhood councils could provide the most rational model for achieving the goal of citizen participation. This presents a clear opportunity to move forward and guarantee that neighborhood councils are

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institutionalized as an avenue for real citizenship input in the city of Los Angeles.

I think it is timely, if not imperative, to re-establish neighborhood councils as a primary component of charter reform.

Why should the issue of neighborhood councils be given such emphasis? Simply stated, the cry for more effective local representation was simply too loud to ignore.

The city was faced with the threat of secession or the option to reform the system to make City Hall more accessible and responsive to its citizens. Consequently, greater citizen involvement became a fundamental objective of charter reform.

Citizen participation, in the form of neighborhood councils, is key to voter interest in charter reform. There is nothing in charter reform that more directly affects people and their neighborhoods than organized and meaningful input, and there is nothing more important and relevant than that.

Neighborhoods from San Pedro to Sylmar want to participate more effectively in the destiny of their communities, and they want this sooner rather than later.

The 8th District Empowerment Congress has provided an example of participatory democracy at work and is frequently cited as a possible citywide model for neighborhood councils. But paying homage to the Empowerment Congress can quickly turn to lip service unless other communities get the chance to experience similar success.

Based on the experience with the Empowerment Congress, I have found that citizen participation improves the quality of life in communities by giving constituents better access to local government, enabling residents to seek increased and improved city services, and ensuring greater accountability of elected officials, policy-makers and community leaders. This is what reform of local government is about. No municipality can claim currency as a 21st century city without bona fide citizen involvement.

Indeed, people throughout the city are genuinely interested in working with local government to make their communities better. That's why some of the most well-attended charter reform meetings over the past 18 months have been those regarding neighborhood councils. As for the Empowerment Congress, last year's annual meeting held at the University of Southern California's Davidson Conference Center attracted an overflow crowd of more than 700 residents, and we expect even more at our seventh annual meeting a few weeks from now.

Neighborhood councils, based on a structure similar to that for the 8th

District Empowerment Congress, inspire and empower people to build their future, not just endure it. This structure implements the kind of citizen involvement necessary for an effective partnership among neighbors, houses of worship, businesses, labor and their public servants — a full array of stake holders.

Since we have the means to effect more representative government in Los Angeles, why aren't we focused on a way to make that happen now?

Specifically, the details of neighborhood councils — such as the selection process by which they're formed, the boundaries by which they're defined and the way they are staffed — can all be determined by an ordinance that could be adopted by the City Council.

The City Council should be urged to do so. Otherwise, it will take a minimum of 18 more months. This is the case because the neighborhood council proposal will have to compete with other charter measures for implementation — not an easy task.

The time has come to focus on the most meaningful and lasting objectives of charter reform and how to make the principles on which they're based real — now.

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