

Ridley-Thomas Pushes for Action on Neighborhood Councils

By a NEWSOURCE Staff Writer

The fate of the unified charter reform proposal may now be in the hands of the voters, but Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas is urging his colleagues to move forward immediately with the neighborhood councils portion of the plan.

Ridley-Thomas told representatives of his Eighth District Empowerment Congress Wednesday that neighborhood councils were too important to become lost in the continuing debate over charter reform.

Much of the minutiae of restructuring city government won't happen anytime soon, even if voters approve charter reform on June 8, Ridley-Thomas said.

"I don't want neighborhood councils to be one of the things that doesn't happen, or one of the things that has to compete with recreating the bureaucracy," he said.

The motion, which was before the council Friday but was continued to tomorrow, calls on the city attorney to immediately begin drafting ordinances setting up a Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, as required under the proposed charter.

Once created, the department would have a year to develop a plan for setting up councils throughout the city, with proposed regulations governing their conduct and staff to assist them. The department would be headed by a general manager, who would report to a citizen commission.

Lead Time

The two charter reform commissions already provided for accelerated implementation of neighborhood councils in their joint document, in part because of the long lead time required to create an entirely new form of official civic participation in Los Angeles. If the charter wins approval at the polls, most of it is to be implemented on July 1, 2000, but the mandate for city officials to begin the groundwork for neighborhood councils is to take effect right away.

Ridley-Thomas said it is unnecessary to wait even until voting day since the council can act now by ordinance. If the charter passes in June, it will simply ratify the council's actions, and if it fails, neighborhood councils would still survive if the mechanics are already in place, he said. But he said the council should act now.

"Re-creating this moment for the city

will not be easily accomplished," the councilman said.

He acknowledged that many of his colleagues are still undecided on whether to support the charter as a package, and might feel a little "queasy" about backing a motion that could be seen as an end-run against the full proposal.

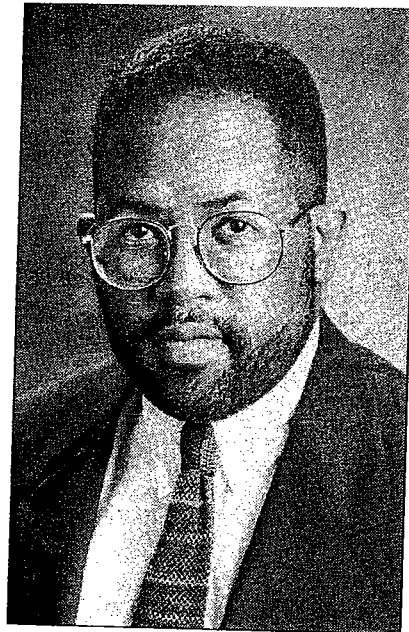
In fact, Ridley-Thomas said, he has not made up his own mind about whether to back the charter. But he said he had no doubts about neighborhood councils.

Empowerment Congress

Ridley-Thomas set up the Eighth District Empowerment Congress in 1993, and has pushed ever since for a citywide system of similar organizations to connect constituents with their municipal government. During the charter reform hearings and deliberations over the last two years, the congress has been cited as a possible template for councils.

But the councilman, whose district covers much of South Los Angeles, has been unable to move several motions on the subject to the City Council. Last year, the Governmental Efficiency Committee held several hearings on different visions for councils but the members—Chairman Joel Wachs, Laura Chick and Ridley-Thomas—could not come to agreement.

Wachs aide Greg Nelson, who helped shape the two commissions' discussions and decisions on councils, said he could support immediate implementation. But he cautioned that one of the key components of a councils system is active public participation in setting forth the nuts and bolts. That can happen if Ridley-Thomas' motion goes to committee for hearings, Nelson said, but may not happen if the council passes it immediately and instead just instructs the city attorney to begin drafting immediately.



RIDLEY-THOMAS