

3/31/99

LOS ANGELES INDEPENDENT

CITY BEAT.

Council leaning toward department to oversee neighborhood councils

■ The City Council took its first steps last week toward creating an agency to oversee any neighborhood councils that would be set up under the new City Charter voters will be asked to approve June 8. Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas' motion instructs the city attorney to draft the language of an ordinance establishing a Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. The measure that will go before voters calls for self-elected neighborhood councils to advise the City Council on issues before final votes are taken. Ridley-Thomas told his colleagues he has support from labor unions and community activist groups for a citywide network of neighborhood councils. Some members, like Councilwoman Cindy Miscikowski, already have such councils in their districts and say the time is right to establish the department. But Councilman Hal Bernson, who represents the Granada Hills area, said it will probably mean spending more tax dollars on unneeded bureaucracy. "Sometimes we do the right things for the wrong reasons," said Bernson, who voted yes on Ridley-Thomas' motion. He said his district has had a working neighborhood council for more than 10 years. He said the effort to create a new citywide department is an attempt to go around the charter reform process. Councilman Joel Wachs, who chairs the Governmental Efficiency Committee, disagreed. "This is not about blocking the charter reform process," said Wachs, who also represents part of the San Fernando Valley. "It's about getting the public more involved with city government." Through an ordinance, the council has authority to create the department and a network of neighborhood councils, even if voters reject the unified charter proposal. "This will ensure that neighborhood councils will not have to compete with other charter measures for implementation should the unified proposal succeed at the ballot," Ridley-Thomas' motion says. "Additionally, it will shorten considerably the 18 months it will take to set up the councils." If approved, the new department would develop guidelines for establishing neighborhood councils, their staff, rules and restrictions.