

Council throws residents a bone with neighborhood plan

Reluctant OK of Ridley-Thomas proposal seems like cynical move

THE Los Angeles City Council finally dusted off the 2-year-old proposal by 8th District Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas to establish neighborhood councils in all parts of the city.

The plan would set up something called the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment that would determine who would sit on the councils, what neighborhoods they'd represent and what powers they'd have. Ridley-Thomas claims that these councils will give Los Angeles residents the missing direct pipeline to city government that many have long clamored for.

But there are two gaping problems with his plan. The first is what it took to get the council to budge on it. It took a hard and determined drive by the Valley secession group, a companion campaign by a Valley parents group to secede from the Los Angeles Unified School District and threats from neighborhood groups in Venice, the Westside, South Central Los Angeles and San Pedro to launch their own secession movements.

It took public anger over the perceived indifference and remoteness of City Council members, city officials and agencies to the needs and problems of residents. It took a prolonged and contentious debate over reform of the city's archaic charter.

The City Council's approval of Ridley-Thomas' plan coming on the eve of the April 13 city elections in which residents will vote on City Charter reform measures seems more like a cynical move to quell the citizen rebellion. This will only reinforce the suspicions of many residents that politicians will say and do anything to not give up any of their decision-making powers.

The second, and much bigger, problem with Ridley-Thomas' plan is that — like the proposal for neighborhood councils in the charter reform measures on the ballot — it gives almost no real decision-making power to Los Angeles residents.

The neighborhood councils are strictly advisory. Who sits on them and what their duties would be are pretty much left to the whim of the City Council



EARL O.
HUTCHINSON

member who appoints them.

A good example of this is the much-publicized four Empowerment Congresses Ridley-Thomas set up in his district. They are advisory, and the elected and appointed representatives serve at his pleasure. They have absolutely no say-so over planning and spending on neighborhood services.

This does not mean that they merely rubber stamp Ridley-Thomas's decisions. They give residents a sounding board to discuss issues and air their grievances. They provide members their first experience with real political involvement. They enable Ridley-Thomas to tune into the problems and needs of his constituents. And they break down the often impersonal and foreboding wall between elected officials and neighborhood residents.

But the fact remains that all hard decisions about spending, services and land use are tightly controlled by the mayor and City Council members. They want it no other way. They argue that as elected officials they have the know-how, savvy and expertise to make all major decisions involving city issues and interface with agencies and departments.

Their message is, trust us to do what's right for the city, and if you don't like the job we're doing, then you can always vote us out and put someone in who'll do a better job. This is part truth and part self-serving fiction.

In the era of wealth, special-interest groups, grossly ballooning campaign costs and media star power, incumbents know full well that they hold nearly all of the cards in a political race.

Short of being convicted and jailed for criminal malfeasance, it is virtually impossible to knock an incumbent out of office. It is also true that decisions on issues such as taxes, zoning, budgets and development projects are often complex and time-consuming. Most residents are ill-equipped to deal with them.

However, this does not mean that there is no need for neighborhood councils that are more than ceremonial talk and debate klatches.

Ideally, a solid and effective neighborhood council would elect representatives with limited power to make decisions on neighborhood services, park and street improvements, and land use.

City Council members would be mandated to actively solicit their advice on city budget issues, capital improvement projects, arts and public services.

The problem of lack of time, management and legal skills of the representatives could be overcome by employing trained consultants to advise neighborhood council members on spending priorities, budget management, zoning laws and requirements, commercial development, street, sewer and lighting improvements, and police deployment.

The final approval on all major projects would stay with the mayor and City Council. This is a fail-safe mechanism to ensure that neighborhood councils do not sink into partisan, personal and political bickering. This would paralyze government and further Balkanize the city.

The only elected official who has come anywhere close to putting forth a sensible neighborhood council plan that would give residents more power is City Attorney James Hahn. His idea was to divide the city into 20 neighborhoods of 200,000 persons, with five elected representatives. The councils would have authority to make decisions on land use, parks and arts funding. Predictably, his plan went nowhere.

Yet, it was a milestone of sorts in that it marked the first time a prominent elected official in Los Angeles had the courage to offer a workable plan for real power sharing. Hopefully, more elected officials will show the same courage and propose strong, workable neighborhood council plans in future years.

But for now whether the charter reform measures win, lose or draw on April 13, the one thing certain is that Los Angeles residents will still not have a much greater say about what government does than before the election. This will even more firmly convince the backers of Valley secession, and secessionists in other parts of the city, that the only way they ever will is to form their own government.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson contributes frequently to the Sunday Viewpoint section. Write to him in care of Daily News Opinions, P.O. Box 4200, Woodland Hills, CA 91365-4200, or by e-mail at ehutchi344@aol.com.