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Wachs leads effort to pass neighborhood councils decree

By Rick Orlov
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A city panel recommended an approach to creating a series of neighborhood councils around Los Angeles on Monday, rejecting arguments it was an attempt to undermine a June 8 charter reform ballot measure.

"If it wasn't for charter reform, this wouldn't be going forward at all," said Councilman Joel Wachs, chairman of the council's Governmental Efficiency Committee and a longtime advocate of neighborhood councils.

"It is charter reform that is the driving force behind this. And, if the charter fails, I don't know what will happen," he said.

Wachs' committee recommended a number of changes in an ordinance presented by the City Attorney's Office and will reconsider the proposal shortly after the June 8 election on the new charter, Proposition 1.

"We want to be ready to begin creating the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment as soon as the charter is approved," Wachs said. "This will help put us in a position to move forward quickly. If the charter fails, I'm

going to keep pushing to get this through. It's been a long time coming."

Wachs advocated the creation of neighborhood councils when he ran for mayor six years ago. Since then, his staff has been studying different approaches around the country and worked with the elected Charter Reform Commission on its approach.

"If it was needed six years ago, it's needed even more now," Wachs said.

Under the proposal, each part of the city would be included within a specified area for a neighborhood council. All of the councils would be working with a new Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

The department would develop regulations for the neighborhood councils on the work they would do and the advice they would offer to their City Council member.

Early estimates put start-up costs at \$1.5 million, with annual costs of about \$4 million.

Mark Ridley-Thomas and Laura Chick, who have different forms of neighborhood councils in their districts and said they would welcome a more formalized structure overseen by the city.