

Proposal for Neighborhood Councils Moves Forward in Committee

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A City Council panel inched forward yesterday with a plan for neighborhood councils around Los Angeles, taking a first look at a draft ordinance that would set up a new city department and guarantee funding and staff for community-level advisory groups.

A majority of council members oppose the June 8 charter reform ballot measure, which would among other things mandate a Department of Neighborhoods to help establish and foster advisory councils. But at the behest of Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas, they voted in March to expedite action on the neighborhood bodies—in part to get a jump start on the ordinance in case the charter passes and in part because they have always had authority to set up councils under the current charter.

Even as he led the council's Governmental Efficiency Committee in its critique of the city attorney's first draft, though, chairman Joel Wachs expressed pessimism that neighborhood councils would move forward without a new charter.

"There hasn't been the will" to establish councils without a mandate, Wachs said.

"Don't bet on this happening without a charter change," he said. "Much of this is coming kicking and screaming."

The new law, drafted by Deputy City Attorney Claudia Culling, would track the proposed language hammered out by two rival reform commissions over the last two years, requiring a new city department to foster creation of local councils and to help participants keep informed of developments in city government that may affect them.

The mayor would appoint a department general manager and a board of seven unpaid commissioners.

City officials have estimated a cost of \$1.4 million for the first year of the new department to cover a downtown headquarters and equipment and a staff of 12. Second-year costs would be \$4.4 million, in part to pay for 15 field offices and a staff of 15.

Each neighborhood council could require "additional discretionary funding," according to the May 21 report by acting City Administrative Officer Paul K. Cauley and Chief Legislative Analyst Ron Deaton.

Bob Duncan, general manager of one of the city's largest employee unions, warned the panel that without sufficient funding for staff the ordinance could turn into an "unfunded mandate." Wachs agreed.

"We're probably going to need your substantial lobbying clout in getting this funding," Wachs told Duncan.

Much of the fine-tuning to be dealt with by ordinance may focus on the difficult task of changing City Hall culture to acknowledge and serve the new councils. The city's Transportation Department, for example, urged that language requiring the Department of Neighborhoods to "facilitate the delivery of city services to the neighborhoods" be changed to "identify" and clarify or coordinate services.

That suggestion did not sit well with Councilwoman Laura Chick, who wanted the language beefed up to put the new department in the role of the neighborhoods' advocate for services and to make clear that the various departments must become part of an integrated problem-solving team.

"I see the Department of Neighborhoods being able to actually push and prod other departments," Chick said.

The panel also grappled with the "early warning" mandate to advise neighborhoods when the city is about to take an action that could affect them. Questions to be addressed include how to determine what items require early warning, how far in advance to give notice, and whether the city's current practice of posting agendas in advance on its Internet website is sufficient.

"I have a feeling that as we go there's going to be constant reforming, revising and changing," Wachs said.

Wachs, Chick and Ridley-Thomas have emphasized the importance of community input into the new ordinances, but few residents attended the morning session at City Hall.

Many neighborhood council supporters pressed early in the charter reform process for elected councils serving within set geographical boundaries with authority to make land-use decisions and perhaps spend money within the neighborhood for particular service enhancements.

But the idea of elected councils, never seriously considered by the appointed Charter Reform Commission, was ultimately rejected by the Elected Charter Reform Commission as unworkable.