

## 11/08 NEWS: Advisory panels frustrated by their lack of real power

By Deborah Sullivan, Daily News

For years, a citizens advisory council in North Hollywood has resisted approving a \$225,000 city loan for the American Renegade Repertory Company because the theater would be unlikely to repay the money.

But last week, the City Council overrode the advisory body, saying the theater's importance to the community outweighs the risk.

It was just another example of how many city-established advisory committees, commissions and panels ultimately are ignored or dismissed.

Now the appointed and elected Charter Reform Commissions are proposing that a reform of city government include neighborhood councils that have only advisory powers.

The plan was presented to residents Saturday by the elected Charter Reform Commission at its constitutional convention.

Similar groups already provide community input to several council members, the five Valley police divisions, the city Airport Commission and the Community Redevelopment Agency.

Members of those groups predict that advisory neighborhood councils will meet with the same brick wall from City Hall.

"An advisory group is only as good as the advice it gives to those wanting the advice," said Carlos Ferreyra, president of Councilman Mike Feuer's Valley Neighborhood Council.

While his group kept an unwanted pawnshop out of the area and has helped shape development proposals to meet community needs, a council with real power could do even more, Ferreyra said.

"A council or group with some decision-making power that is representing the community is listened to much more seriously," he said, "because it holds those that they're advising accountable -- which we haven't had in a long time in this city."

Advisory councils "certainly are better than nothing," said Harry Coleman, president of the North Hills Coordinating Council, a county advisory body. "But they're not as good as councils with authority. They have to be empowered."

### Trial balloons

Upon taking office in 1978, Los Angeles Councilman Hal Bemson set up a network of advisory boards throughout his district in the Northwest Valley.

Each area in his council district has both a land-use and an overall committee, while specialized committees advise him on public safety, parks and libraries, and streets and transportation. Other Valley council members have similar advisory groups.

Bemson said the committees screen all his important decisions through the filter of community wisdom.

"We submit virtually every case that is coming before me and the council, and they look at it and make a recommendation," he said. "Some of the people have been there 19 years, and they're very professional and very unbiased."

Bemson acknowledged that he disagrees with the suggestions at times, but said "99 percent of the time they're right on target and I listen to them."

Members of the committees have differing views of their own impact.

John Weitkamp, who has served on Bemson's Granada Hills Planning and Environment Committee for 12 years, said the groups offer business owners considering developments in the area the chance "to float a trial balloon."

"Over the years we've had a good track record of giving him advice, and most of the time he takes it," said Weitkamp, a Granada Hills attorney.

Walter Prince, a former Bemson challenger who serves on several of the councilman's advisory groups in the Northwest Valley, commends the councilman for including critics such as himself in the committees.

But in the end, Prince said, their voices don't seem to count.

"We are given all the latitude in the world to come up with advice for the councilman," he said, "but the final decision belongs to the councilperson. And that means we have no power."

Good advice

As advisory groups go, the Community Police Advisory Boards have been successful throughout the Valley, many community activists agree. But still, they could do more if given more authority.

The West Valley police advisory board has introduced a number of programs on community issues ranging from domestic violence to day laborers. The Van Nuys police advisory board has chipped away at neighborhood problems such as graffiti and traffic enforcement and is developing a domestic violence program, said Capt. Val Paniccia.

But member Tom Grant said the groups' advisory role is not well-defined and that they aren't involved in nuts-and-bolts issues like the police budget or police response time.

Paniccia said the boards are not intended to be budgetary advisers. Response time could be a discussion topic for the advisory boards, but it has never come up, he said.

No final say

In North Hollywood, city administrators recognize that community leaders are frustrated by their lack of real power.

Walter Beaumont, the Community Redevelopment Agency's assistant project director in North Hollywood, said the disagreement between the advisory committee and the city officials to whom it reports reflects an inherent frustration of advisory bodies.

"One of the issues that continually comes up is the level of authority that the advisory committee should have," he said. "They, over time on a variety of issues, are clearly uncomfortable with being just advisory. They wish they had more authority."

To Mildred Weller, a member of the advisory committee, the disagreement signals that without real power, the group's advisory role is of little use.

"We were elected by the community to represent the community, but because we have no final say, they can override or ignore everything we say," she said. "And they do."11/8/98 12:25 AM