
Neighborhood Council Delays Irk Residents

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Staff Reporter

The effort to create neighborhood councils, the single most important charter reform for those seeking to prevent the San Fernando Valley from seceding, has become mired in political bickering and confusion. The result: The very grassroots activists who were supposed to be placated by creation of the councils are now more frustrated than ever.

"The process is so slow, it's grinding to a halt," said Richard Close, president of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association. "We don't know who's eligible to be on the councils, what authority they have, how they operate. It's total inaction."

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The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment and a neighborhood empowerment commission, formed under the charter reform measure passed by L.A. voters last year, are charged with forming a plan that outlines how the advisory neighborhood councils will operate, how many councils there will be, how boundaries will be determined, who can run for the councils and what powers they will have.

But so far, after a year of effort, there has not even been a draft plan proposed, and many residents complain that they've been left out of the process.

Please see NEIGHBORHOOD page 87

Neighborhood: Infighting Plagues Power-Sharing Plan

Continued from page 1

Roslyn Stewart, executive director of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, defends the department's timeline and outreach, noting that more than 16,000 flyers were distributed throughout the city to inform people of community meetings.

"I've felt the frustration, but I have a different take on it," Stewart said. "Frequently when government goes in with a presentation formulated, we're accused of already deciding what something will look like. We decided to take what we had and go to the community and ask for opinions."

According to the timeline set forth by the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, the draft plan won't be submitted to the City Council until early December. From that point, the charter gives the council six months to vote on a final plan.

Councilwoman Laura Chick, chairwoman of the Government Efficiency Committee, said she understands the frustration that some people are feeling.

"There's not a whole lot of information forthcoming at this point," Chick said. "I think the public wants to hear what they have to do to become a neighborhood councilor and the basics of how you form a group."

No answers, no feedback

So far, the department has held a number of public meetings that allowed for little interaction between commissioners and residents. People who attended the meetings were allowed to submit written questions, but there was no feedback or answers provided.

"They keep having these dog-and-pony shows where people write post-it notes," said Close. "It's very frustrating. Neighborhood councils were supposed to be the greatest benefit of the new charter."

Bill Powers, vice chair of the United Chambers of Commerce and a former member of the charter task force that came up with the neighborhood councils, said he's disappointed with the lack of movement.

"Sure it's frustrating, we don't have anything," Powers said. "The meetings are pointless, repetitive and extensively exhaustive. The

councils should have started July 1."

Powers said the drawn-out process is fueling an increasing lack of interest in the councils. And while the San Fernando Valley seems to be a focus for discontent because of its ongoing secession movement, the frustration has gone beyond Valley borders.

Several groups citywide have formed under the umbrella organization CURE – Communities United for Real Empowerment – in response to what they believe is a lack of outreach to people who are not traditionally active in community groups.

"Our main concern is about the process engaged so far, its inability to engage people in a meaningful way and to get thoughts from people and do something about it," said Adrienne Shropshire, a director at Agenda, a South L.A. nonprofit involved in CURE. "People don't have a concept of what these commissions could look like."

Shropshire said her group, which has been active for three years, found out about the public meetings from a resident who had heard about a South L.A. meeting just one day before it was held. When she got to the meeting, she was handed a survey to write comments but was not given any feedback. She said there was confusion about how the councils would be designed and the process, but little explanation was given by the department or by commissioners.

More meetings to come

In September, the department will hold a second series of meetings, this time explaining the process to attendees and providing a view of the draft plan. But some say the meetings aren't enough.

"We can have community meetings until we're blue in the face," Chick said. "Somewhere along the way, you have to bite the bullet and make a decision."

Not everyone is disappointed with the department's progress. Tony Lucente, president of the Studio City Residents Association, said he views the continued hearings as a positive sign that the department wants to hear from a number of people.

"I hold a much different view than much of the folks in the Valley," Lucente said. "I don't

think it's necessarily a bad thing (that the process is taking this long). It's part of the process and I feel they are trying to make a broad initiative and make it more inclusive than in the past."

Lucente said his group, which has been vocal on past city issues, was told of the meeting well in advance and formed a committee to study the issue and organize questions. At the meeting at the CBS Studios lot in Studio City, the committee of homeowners spoke with three neighborhood commissioners following the event.

"No one said the process would be easy," Lucente said. "But I think we're going to get there."