

9/20/00

Neighborhood councils proposal to face panel's scrutiny

By Rick Orlov
Staff Writer

A plan that could create up to 160 neighborhood councils around Los Angeles gets its first test today before the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners in the effort to bring government closer to the public.

The proposal being submitted — and which will be subject to 15 hearings around the city over the next month — urges an open-ended process driven by residents to allow the neighborhood councils to decide how they will act.

"We didn't want to come up with something that would be forced on the neighborhood councils," said Karen Kelly Tobin, spokeswoman for the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. "And that's reflected in the draft proposal.

"What we are recommending, and these are the watchwords for all we're doing, is that the councils be self-selected, self-governing, independent, responsible and accountable."

Neighborhood councils are among the reforms called for under the new, voter-approved City Charter.

One key to the success of the advisory panels, according to advocates, is adequate funding. Tobin said no estimate was made of the cost.

However, if \$20,000 a year was to be provided to each of 160 neighborhood councils, the annual cost to the city would be \$3.2 million.

But under the proposal, the actual number of neighborhood councils would depend on how large an area each one represents.

Tobin said the recommendation for as many as 160 panels was based on each council representing a minimum of 25,000 residents.

That figure was based on an analysis of tract maps and other census data in an attempt to determine areas of common interest.

"We are also recommending that the neighborhood councils not be based on any of the City Council district boundaries because areas of common interest go over those lines," Tobin said.

One veteran neighborhood leader in the San Fernando Valley questioned the effectiveness of the proposed panels, on grounds that their role would be advisory only.

Gerald Silver, president of Homeowners of Encino, said he believes that is a fundamental problem with the neighborhood councils that cannot be overcome.

"There is no decision-making authority for the communities," Silver said. "You will have people who do not know the ropes and will have no power to make sure something gets done. And, any recommendations that are made will go to people appointed by the mayor."

The plan issued Monday by the department, which is charged with helping to guide the formation of councils, also contains several different by-law forms, including one to create a nonprofit corporation.

"These are merely suggestions on what might work for different areas," Tobin said.

Included in the suggestions is the set of by-laws used by the Empowerment Congress of the Eighth City Council District represented by Councilman

Mark-Ridley Thomas. The congress has special committees to deal with youth, transportation and other issues.

Commission President Bill Weinberger cautioned that the department's proposal is a first draft subject to change by the commission after its public hearings.

"We want to have some common standards, but we don't want a cookie-cutter approach," Weinberger said. "The whole purpose is to have this grass-roots driven with the ideas bubbling up from the community."

Xandra Kayden, who is president of the League of Women Voters and has been active in the study of neighborhood councils, said she is more interested in seeing how the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment is able to coordinate getting information to the neighborhood councils.

"What's important is how the whole system will respond," Kayden said. "The neighborhood councils will only work if the communities make it work, but DONE will have to coordinate reaching out to get people involved."

Kayden said she is also interested in how the neighborhood councils — once formed — will influence all of public policy.

"One of the things that occurred to us is that these neighborhood councils will only affect city government, but every other level of government," Kayden said. "These councils will be talking about health care, transportation and education. And they will have a structure to get involved."