

## NEWS

# 160 Neighborhood Panels Proposed

■ **Communities:** Draft plan to be unveiled today offers few details, allowing residents to develop their own councils.

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According to the first draft of a citywide plan for neighborhood councils, about 160 new community panels should be created—but the process of how they will be formed and what areas they will represent is not specified.

The draft by the city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment will be released today to the city's Board of Neighborhood Commissioners. It suggests that the councils each represent about 25,000 people. But most details are not laid out in a copy obtained by The Times.

The objective, according to city officials, is to remain true to the new city charter, which stipulates that residents develop and run their panels.

"We will assist and guide and train, but ultimately the residents, the stakeholders in a community, have to be willing and want to do this," said Rosalind Stewart, department general manager. "This is not a top-down process, it's bottom-up."

Local community leaders have criticized the department for its inability to reach those residents who are the most disconnected from City Hall.

"We feel it's the opposite of what charter reform wanted to ac-

complish," said Teresa Sanchez, field representative for Local 347 of the Service Employees International Union. "What we fear is happening is the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment is going in the opposite direction, creating another layer of bureaucracy between residents and the City Council."

The fledgling department has been under fire by several council members for inadequately reaching out to all residents of the city. That criticism spurred the department to rethink its outreach efforts.

The concept of neighborhood councils arose out of the city's charter reform as a way to give far-flung communities more say at City Hall.

"The secret to the success of neighborhood councils is to avoid making them unwieldy," Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas said. "One-hundred sixty? How will they be managed?"

Ridley-Thomas, who had not yet received a draft of the plan, said he had earlier voiced concern about creating as many as 100 councils, saying the number would also be too large.

If there are 160 councils, they will have to be phased in, Councilwoman Laura Chick said. That alone might tip the political power to favor those groups that are formed first. Chick, who also had not received a draft copy, said that the department's progress has been

troubling. "So far, what I've seen from the department, is there's no there there."

Much of the draft is purposely vague, so that residents develop their own council goals and needs. It does not map out how the city might be divided. It does not provide a mission statement, bylaws or budget.

All those issues will be left to the boards once they are approved.

"There was a misconception that this would be a how-to book," said Karen Kelly Tobin, special assistant to Stewart.

In July, several critics blasted the department for what they perceived as its failure to reach renters, non-English-speaking residents and poor, immigrant communities.

Sanchez said she's already heard that well-organized community and neighborhood groups view the new councils as a way to further their leverage at City Hall.

No budget has been hammered out yet for the councils, but they will be funded through a combination of city funds and competitive grants.

"There are whole vast sections of the city where you don't have resident structures. How will they compete for funds?" Sanchez asked. "More affluent areas of cities have attorneys, accountants that can do what needs to be done."

A series of 15 public hearings on the draft are scheduled to begin next week. The council will receive a final draft of the plan in December.