

LOS ANGELES TIMES EDITORIALS



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Let's Get Specific

The first draft of a citywide plan for neighborhood councils was released Tuesday with little fanfare. A thin 11 pages with many holes, the guidelines nonetheless are an important first step and open a discussion of the trade-offs and problems of Los Angeles' grand experiment with grass-roots civic action.

The charter that voters passed in June 1999 encourages formation of voluntary community councils across the city. Such groups in Portland, Ore., and St. Paul, Minn., are credited with spurring neighbors to solve local problems while rebuilding a sense of community.

But in Los Angeles, where each City Council district has 250,000 people, more than the entire population of Stockton or Lincoln, Neb., community spirit has long been more an ache than a reality. The hope is that neighborhood councils will help by cutting the city into friendlier, more workable pieces.

Getting there will be hard. The charter directed the new Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, or DONE, to figure out how these councils will work. Up and running less than a year, the department deserves credit for keeping to its timetable despite staff changes and pressure from established and vocal community groups. However, its first draft leaves many important questions to be answered before a final draft goes to the City Council in December for approval.

For example, the draft plan says that a neighborhood council should represent at least 25,000 people. That could mean as many as 160 councils citywide. Why 25,000 and not another number?

The charter requires councils to represent

all neighborhood stakeholders, including tenants, merchants, homeowners, churches and nonprofit agencies. Once DONE certifies that a council conforms to the guidelines, the group can compete for city grants and qualify for hands-on administrative help. But the draft plan is vague on the timetable and the steps involved in certification. And heaven help us if 160 councils do emerge. DONE, which now has just 17 staff members, cannot

hope to respond to the needs of so many groups.

Which brings this discussion to money. The charter permits the city to help neighborhood councils with expenses including office equip-

ment, transportation and child care. But with dozens of councils, costs could become a multimillion-dollar commitment. Is that an appropriate use of tax funds, especially with Rampart settlements looming?

There's a lot riding on the success of community councils. In some parts of town, activists are champing at the bit to organize, get certified and get to work sprucing up gritty streets, planting trees and reclaiming local parks. Other neighborhoods will need more help to pull together. They will all need specific guidelines to succeed.

Next week DONE begins a series of hearings to receive public reaction to this plan. Department officials like to say that neighborhood councils need to bubble up from the grass roots, not flow down from City Hall. But if the final plan isn't more specific, frustration will be what surfaces first.

To Take Action: For a schedule of the public hearings, call DONE at (213) 485-1360 or go to <http://www.lacityneighborhoods.com>.

A plan for L.A. neighborhood councils, now in its first draft, needs more flesh on the bones.
