

GOVERNMENT



LOS ANGELES

Commission Gives Warm Reception to First Plan for Neighborhood Councils

By a METNEWS Staff Writer

City commissioners, who have voiced deepening concern in recent weeks over the progress of the new Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, on Tuesday received with enthusiasm the department's 11-page initial draft plan for organizing and certifying neighborhood councils.

"I think we ought to be very upbeat," Board of Neighborhood Commissioners member Rob Glushon said.

"The plan will force people—positive, negative—to start focusing on the specifics. Of size. Of boundaries," he said.

Commission President William Weinberger stressed that the plan was a first draft and would not be finalized and turned over to the City Council until more than three months of hearings and public input.

"I hope that we as commissioners and those who come to comment on the draft and our efforts keep in mind that we are engaged in a grand experiment of democracy—establishing a framework for people in neighborhoods and communities throughout the city to empower themselves and advocate and work for the improvement of their lives," Weinberger said.

The draft plan offers only the broadest outlines of how to designate official city neighborhoods and how to shape and select the councils that are to represent them. Many of the guidelines are taken directly from the already broad parameters set by the new city charter—the document adopted by voters last year that mandates the creation of neighborhood councils.

For example, the proposal mandates that boundaries "will maintain historical and contemporary community and neighborhood boundaries to the maximum extent feasible."

But the plan also adds new details, such as a requirement that each council cover an area of least 25,000 residents and include non-residential "stakeholders." There are guidelines for drawing up bylaws, budgets and ethical codes as part of the procedure for winning official city recognition.

"Angelenos deserve an effective and responsive city

government that addresses the needs of their communities," Mayor Richard Riordan said after the plan's release.

"This plan takes us one step closer to making city government more accessible to its residents," Riordan said. "I commend the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment for doing a fantastic job putting this draft plan together. I urge all Angelenos to review the plan and work with the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment to ensure that we can put together the most effective final plan to create our new neighborhood councils."

The plan was prepared by the department with the assistance of consultant Kevin Scott of SolutionScope. Scott, the former deputy director of the appointed Charter Reform Commission, was granted a \$40,000 contract in June to draft the plan and offer other research and counsel.

The draft plan is to be reviewed by the seven-member commission and presented at a series of 15 briefing sessions and public hearings beginning Sept. 20. The commission is to approve a final plan by Dec. 10 and then pass it along to the City Council, which will have six months to approve it, amend it or replace it.

In earlier meetings, commissioners have complained that Department of Neighborhood Empowerment staff has done a poor job of sharing information with the board and that the department dragged its feet on convening a panel of community outreach experts.

But Assistant General Manager Michelle Banks-Ordone on Tuesday reported on the first two sessions of the Public Outreach Advisory Group. Commissioner Marvin Jackson noted that some of the group members expressed heavy criticism at the second session, but others remained "very positive."

Glushon said DONE, as it is known, should be pleased to be where it is seven months into its existence.

"This is a new department," he said. "This is a baby department."

And Weinberger, who made a point of complimenting department General Manager Rosalind Stewart and the rest of the staff for their "hard work and dedication," reminded his colleagues that the neighborhood councils endeavor is a learning experience.

"No doubt whatever plan is ultimately adopted will not be perfect," Weinberger said. "Through experience, we will learn what needs to be changed to improve the system, but I hope that we...will work together to craft the best possible plan for the city."