

Rousing Neighborhoods to Action

The good news is that neighborhood councils, a creation of Los Angeles' new charter, seem to have gained traction in this big, fragmented city. Residents in communities as diverse as Venice and Hancock Park are busily drawing boundaries and drafting bylaws, in anticipation of gaveling to order next summer, as the charter permits.

The not-so-good news is that, as feared, the poorer, denser and more blighted communities for the most part don't have the wherewithal to do the same.

Neighborhood councils are the new charter's antidote to the distrust and apathy that have colored Los Angeles politics. The charter directs that these councils be voluntary and advisory. The hope is that by banding together, local residents will make real improvements in their communities and force City Hall to pay attention.

That's likely to happen in Westside and San Fernando Valley neighborhoods with a tradition of activism and residents with time and political savvy, not to mention resident lawyers, money for mass mailings and e-mail networks to mobilize residents. But what about older, poorer communities where residents don't have those advantages?

The new city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, or DONE, is supposed to assist communities that don't come together on their own. But the department is preoccupied these days with writing a final version of rules that will govern council operation. For that reason, the flurry of meetings in recent months in church halls and living rooms across the city has upped the stakes considerably for communities that are having trouble organizing.

What are those stakes? For one, councils will be able to compete for city grant money to plant trees, beautify parks, renovate storefronts and make other improvements. For another, there's the attention that these councils and their concerns will undoubtedly get at City Hall. Last week, for example, the South Robertson Neighborhoods Council, a 3-year-old group that in many ways is a model for neighborhood councils, helped persuade the Building and Safety Commission to order that a large, illegally sited billboard along Robertson Boulevard be removed—no mean feat in this city. The fear is that residents of poor, immigrant neighborhoods will be powerless to resist more billboards, more liquor stores, more warehouses.

The charter doesn't require neighborhoods to organize, nor does it require the department to prod residents into doing so. But many communities whose residents might want to form councils will need help from the department, City Council offices and the mayor. The department won't have the staff or budget to reach out to help local residents draw boundaries, identify existing neighborhood groups and organize meetings until mid-2001. But the grass-roots organizing in more affluent neighborhoods has at this point clearly moved faster than the department anticipated. DONE may need to step up its organizing efforts in communities at risk of being left out, meaning that the City Council and the mayor need to pitch in with money and time.

Neighborhood councils began as a noble effort to unite and improve Los Angeles. It would be a pity if this worthwhile experiment instead further divided us.

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