

GOVERNMENT



LOS ANGELES

Panel Recommends Council Bring On Its Own Neighborhood Organizers

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Still skeptical of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment's efforts, City Council members moved yesterday to draft their own panel of organizers to advise them on setting up local councils.

The Governmental Efficiency Committee approved "in concept" a plan to pull professional community organizers—many who have criticized the new neighborhoods department for insufficient outreach—directly into the process of implementing the most highly publicized portion of the new city charter.

Committee members said they were unwilling to wait until December, when the department is to present the full council its final plan for creating neighborhood councils. The council will have six months to adopt, modify or replace the plan, but members said they did not want to have to redo the organizing process from scratch.

"I'd rather have it happen at the front end, and I think it's important to the process that it does," Committee Chair Laura Chick said.

The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment on Friday convened its own meeting of professional organizers to offer advice as the agency prepares for a community education program. DONE is to conduct 75 "learning sessions" around the city after the plan—presently being drafted by a consultant—is unveiled Sept. 12.

The organizers' meeting came months after the council first instructed DONE General Manager Rosalind Stewart to convene the group, and only after exasperated council members repeated the instruction three times.

Stewart said the first meeting of the Public Outreach Advisory Group was a success.

"We had a very constructive dialog about our outreach strategy," Stewart told members of Chick's panel and the Personnel Committee.

She also acknowledged shortcomings in the earlier "workshop" phase of preparing for neighborhood councils, and said the department is reassessing how to conduct the learning sessions based on those lessons and on input from the organizers.

But members appeared unimpressed. Personnel Committee Chair Jackie Goldberg grilled Stewart about the way organizers were selected, the change in the group's name from "organizers" to "outreach," and the fact the group is not due to meet again until after the plan is presented.

"What's the role of the advisory committee if all this stuff is done by the time they meet again?" Goldberg asked.

Stewart said individual members of the group already have been consulted continuously during the process and would continue to be as the plan is drafted.

But members remained skeptical.

"That is not the feedback that I'm getting," Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas told Stewart.

Chick set a formal vote on creating an organizers' panel for the Governmental Efficiency Committee for a future agenda.

The joint committee also considered, but took no action on, a request for nine exempt positions for the department so that it can hire project coordinators to run the learning sessions.

Goldberg said she planned to vote against the positions when the item comes before the full council today. Under the new charter, the positions are automatically approved unless the council acts today.

"I don't believe we are using the people we have now effectively," Goldberg said. "I do not believe you have been willing to take advantage of people who want to serve in an advisory capacity."

Goldberg also objected to what she said was the improper use of a special "experts" classification for exempting certain employees from civil service protection.

Meeting alone after the joint session, the Governmental Efficiency Committee approved Mayor Richard Riordan's nomination of attorney Rob Glushon and businessman Marvin Jackson to the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners, the panel that oversees DONE.

Both men come up for confirmation in the full council on Friday.