

New City Charter looked good on paper

I don't know about my fellow 3.6 million residents, but I haven't felt particularly empowered these days, despite our new Los Angeles City Charter that took effect last summer, mandating that citizens be more active in a participatory democracy frame-

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Local View

work. The charter calls for creating a series of neighborhood councils to bring more of us into the local governmental process. A neighbor, a retired electrical engineer who flies his own small plane and rushes off to places like Egypt or New Zealand with frightening frequency, attended one of the 15 public hearings that the city's newly created Department of Neighborhood Empowerment has held this fall. He was only in town long enough to collect a bunch of informational materials and drop them in my lap — literally — before driving one of his vintage cars to an antique car show in San Luis Obispo.

What I found was enlightening, if a little too redundant and filled with new acronyms such as ENS (early notifica-

Promising citizen participation is easy, but it's hard to deliver

tion system) and DONE (www.lacityneighborhoods.com). The public meetings are supposed to obtain citizen input for the draft plan for a citywide system of neighborhood councils, that will be submitted to the Los Angeles City Council by the end of the year.

Citizen participation is always easier to promise politically than to make work practically. That is why we need to pay close attention to the latest attempt to squeeze more democracy out of a populace that too often is ambivalent. Some would say that the lack of real outrage and concerted citizen activism in the face of police department scandals and the recent MTA strike are vivid examples of people just not caring much.

While the city elected officials will have up to six months to ruminate on the proposed overall plan, individual parts of the city will be busy gearing up to create local councils that can gain certification from DONE as spelled out in the new City Charter.

As a natural skeptic, this looks like some daunting, paperwork-filled tasks that will probably get pushed by commercial and political interests. The question will be how much real citizen participation anyone really wants. (Or how much citizens want to give.)

On a set of five pink-colored sheets of paper, the city's DONE attempts to anticipate the average citizen's questions, and the first sheet answers a cogent one, "What's in it for me?" (That's always popular among the populace.) In response, the city staffers promise a combination of education, training, support and resources for citizens who will stick their necks out and help organize a neighborhood council.

In reality, it is difficult for the individual citizen to independently join an effort like DONE envisions. The scope and details can become overwhelming. People in existing groups tied to their neighborhoods, however, should be more easily attracted to the new councils.

Neighborhood associations, public safety volunteer efforts, parent/school groups, churches, synagogues and other houses of worship, youth organizations, sports programs, etc. — along with local business associations, this existing community framework seems to be the best place to start, brought together by the local council office.

We're nearing the end of the initial public feedback phase, and November should bring the completion of a final draft plan for the mayor and City Council to ultimately approve. I am sure many local interests and individuals have surfaced in the patchwork of neighborhoods and subregions that make up Los Angeles.

The real test will come once the politicians have OK'd the framework. Who will come forward and, can they make a difference for the average citizen who knows little about city government and has precious little time to devote to the issues that go beyond his own trash pickup and road maintenance? It will be interesting to see if Los Angeles' residents will respond.

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