

City Unveils Plan for Community Councils

■ **Government:** Proposal supports the creation of more than 100 neighborhood boards. Idea gets mixed reactions.

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Fulfilling the first step in a long-term plan to strengthen Los Angeles neighborhoods, leaders of the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment on Thursday announced a plan to create more than 100 community councils across the length and breadth of the vast, disparate city.

Riordan told several hundred people gathered at the Olvera Street presentation that the Neighborhood Councils were "a tremendous milestone in our journey toward a more responsive city government that truly meets the needs of the people it serves."

"The City of Angels is on its way to being run for and by the people that live in this city and not for and by the politicians and the bureaucrats," Riordan said.

After the applause faded, the mayor quipped: "Other than me."

Under the plan, which requires City Council approval, councils would be spread across Los Angeles, each representing at least 20,000 people and including residents, business people and community leaders.

They will have no formal authority over planning or zoning in their areas. But they will have advisory powers, and proponents believe they ultimately could grow into a powerful force in city government.

Initial reaction has been mixed. Some of those who have championed the breakup of the city do not believe the councils will have enough authority to be effective. Others worry that the plan unveiled Thursday, while a step in the right direction, may not provide enough detail to give the councils a clear sense of their mission.

Still, advocates argue that the councils will provide a unique opportunity for Los Angeles to build and nurture an organized system for community influence over government decisions. At present, some communities wield significant influence at City Hall, while other, less organized areas get short shrift on many issues.

Whether the system will solve

that age-old problem is up for debate.

"It's a terrific starting point," Erwin Chemerinsky, a USC law professor who led the city's Elected Charter Reform Commission, said of the new proposal. "I do, however, think there's a lot of questions that the council needs to address."

In particular, Chemerinsky suggested that the council amend the proposal to provide more specifics about the role the councils are expected to perform. Without those details, Chemerinsky said, he worries that some councils will flail about in search of a mission.

Riordan—with whom Chemerinsky occasionally was allied and other times disagreed during the charter drafting process—was the principal agent behind charter reform. Although neighborhood councils were not his primary objective, the mayor embraced the notion and helped sell it to voters, who overwhelmingly backed the new charter.

On Thursday, Riordan thanked the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment for putting together the plan, which he said "holds the keys" to the city's revitalization.

"Too many communities feel they have no say in the decisions that are being made in City Hall," Riordan said. "For the first time . . . Angelenos will have a direct voice in their government—a voice that will ring loud and clear from the Valley to the harbor, from Hollywood to South Los Angeles, from East Los Angeles to West Los Angeles and every vibrant, diverse community of our city."

William E. Weinberger, president of the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners, said the plan will give citizens an "early notification system" that will allow residents to voice their concerns before decisions are made at City Hall.

Melinda Ou, a board member of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, said the councils provide "a tremendous opportunity to unharass the trapped energy, insight and wisdom of Angelenos who have been wanting and waiting to be heard." She added: "I believe neighborhood councils will be able to build bridges."