

Critics call local rule plan a flop

By Rick Orlov
and Dominic Berbeo
Staff Writers

San Fernando Valley civic leaders balked at the plan laid out Thursday by Mayor Richard Riordan to form advisory neighborhood councils around Los Angeles.

At a ceremony at Olvera Street, the city's birthplace, Riordan insisted the councils will empower residents.

"This is government by the people and of the people," Riordan said. "It will be up to the neighborhoods to find the ways to improve their quality of life."

"And, while they are advisory in nature, they will serve as a political force to require the city to listen to their demands."

But critics said the panels won't be effective in bringing direct community representation in

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Mayor's neighborhood plan hollow, critics say

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City Hall because they have no power.

"People have been able to advise since the First Amendment was passed 200 years ago," said David Fleming, chairman of the Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley and, along with Riordan, a founder of the movement that led to voter-approved rewriting of the City Charter in 1999. But Fleming wanted more power for neighborhood councils.

"Had they been structured in the charter with some real legislative power, it may have lessened the need for Valley secession," he said, "but now they're neither fish nor fowl."

Richard Close, president of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association representing 2,800 families, said the new panels are less likely to unite Los Angeles than to enhance the drive for a separate Valley city.

"These appointed panels will be packed with yes people in order not to contradict the council member in any given district and create a compromising situation," Close said. "The bottom line is, you can't get local control over government through advisory panels."

The structure of the neighborhood councils would be left up to individual communities under the plan, which will undergo scrutiny by the City Council before taking effect.

"We didn't want to have a cookie-cutter approach where each council was told by City Hall . . . (how to) operate," said Bill Weinberger, president of the commission overseeing the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which developed the plan.

"The success of our new neighborhood councils will depend on the participation and commitment of residents, businesses and other stakeholders in communities throughout the city."

Riordan also pledged to provide the funding — whatever amount is required — to ensure that neighborhood councils are a success.

With the possibility of more than 100 neighborhood councils, there has been no estimate of their potential expenses. A panel may be formed in any large neighborhood with at least 20,000 residents. Under Riordan's plan, each neighborhood will determine how its panel is organized, how often it meets and what issues it deals with.

A system is being developed to give each neighborhood council early warning of proposals within its boundaries for zoning changes, applications for land-use permits and other issues. Also, each of the new area planning commissions will set aside time in its process so that all projects can be reviewed by neighborhood councils before commissioners make decisions.

To create a neighborhood council, residents, business representatives and others in the neighborhood will develop an organizational plan to be submitted to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment for certification. Department officials say the neighborhood should have common interest through history and census tracts, but need not be limited by political boundaries.

Each neighborhood council will elect its own officers and develop its own by-laws. An annual congress of neighborhood councils will be held for the members to assess their progress and deal with citywide issues.

The concept of neighborhood councils was included in the rewriting of the City Charter that voters approved nearly 2-to-1 in June 1999. Riordan had hoped charter reform would head off movements in the Valley and elsewhere to secede from Los Angeles.

"We want the Valley to recognize what we are doing here," Riordan said. "The Valley is important to the city, and we've recognized that. We have three times more commissioners from the Valley than before I was mayor, and we think the Valley is getting its fair share of services from what it spends in taxes."

"What we are telling the Valley is this is a way they can get their message heard without leaving Los Angeles."

But Close said he believes the

neighborhood councils will be ineffective and thus further frustrate Valley residents who feel left out of the decision-making process.

"Had the panels been set up as elected and with legislative powers, it may have been different," he said.

Riordan and Weinberger said the new councils are not intended to replace homeowner associations or any other organizations.

"We see them as working together," Weinberger said. "There will be a lot of areas of common interest, and we think they will be representing the same viewpoint."

A homeowner association, if it disagreed with recommendations from a neighborhood council, could still directly contact city officials, Riordan said.

"There is nothing to prevent that," he said. "But we think we've created a new special-interest group: a special-interest group of the community."