

Local panels stalled in city

Creation of councils a path to nowhere?

By Harrison Sheppard
Staff Writer

Los Angeles city efforts to draft plans to create advisory neighborhood councils have hit a storm of criticism — from being too slow-moving and unambitious, to failing to reach out to disenfranchised and underrepresented communities.

Several council members and community activists said the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment has solicited opinions from established homeowners groups and others who already have loud voices in city politics.

"The disappointment so far has been still the lack of awareness and the lack of information in my council district," said Councilman Alex Padilla, who represents the heavily Latino Northeast Valley.

"There's a lot of people who aren't aware of what stage in the process we're in, what the status

Neighborhood councils criticized

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is of the department, of the framework itself. People know it's happening and want to be involved. It leads me to question what type of outreach has already been done."

DONE General Manager Rosalind Stewart said she agrees with the criticism, and has requested to double the department's budget next year in part so she can hire more staff members to participate in outreach.

"Our budget next year reflects exactly that focus — outreach to communities with a lack of civic participation," Stewart said. "That is fundamentally the scope of work the department is going to be focusing on, when there's a plan and a budget to focus on that."

This year, she has a budget of \$2.4 million, with 17 staff members, including seven project coordinators who each are responsible for outreach to a section of the city. Beyond salaries, the department spent about \$100,000 on contracting for outreach services, including facilitating workshops and translating the draft plan. By comparison, the department spent about \$185,000 just printing and distributing copies of the plan's two drafts.

For the next fiscal year, starting July 1, Stewart has requested a \$5 million budget with 52 staff members, including 20 project coordinators.

The councils were created in the new City Charter approved by voters in 1999 in an effort to make city government more responsive to ordinary citizens. Some political observers also believe it was an attempt to deflate secession drives in the San Fernando Valley, Hollywood and Harbor areas.

The councils will not have any direct authority, but will serve as advisory bodies to present community input on city issues such as development and zoning.

Arturo Vargas, executive director of the Los Angeles-based National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, said his group's concern is that without enough outreach, homeowner groups that are already vocal will simply find new ways to exercise their power.

"But if we do that, then what have we changed?" Vargas said. "We have simply replaced one ad hoc system with an official system of folks being involved."

A spokeswoman for Mayor Richard Riordan said he is pleased with the progress the

department has made in outreach and drafting plans for the councils, noting they are ahead of the original schedule.

Senior press deputy Carolina Guevara said in communities that don't have established homeowners groups, the city is working with other organizations, such as churches and school groups, to spread the word. "Once they're involved in neighborhood councils, they become the stakeholders and the responsibility falls on them, as well as the department to do outreach to residents who are not actively involved," Guevara said.

The City Council's Government Efficiency Committee has been studying the issue of neighborhood councils and has held several public hearings.

Another issue under debate is whether neighborhood councils should have their own staffs and budgets.

Councilwoman Laura Chick, who heads the committee, said she is worried the councils' effectiveness will be diluted without funds and staff.

"I have great concerns that neighborhood councils will not become the empowered entities I want them to become if they're simply helped to become certified and then left to their own devices," Chick said.

Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas recently suggested creating a \$10 million budget for neighborhood councils, with about \$50,000 for each group to pay for office supplies and staff.

But Stewart said that is not part of the department's current plans. Instead, she said, her department will provide clerical and administrative support, but much of the manpower has to come from the councils themselves.

"Neighborhood councils are envisioned as self-directed, individual grass-roots organizations," Stewart said. "We are not establishing this department to create another bureaucracy for the public."

Richard Close, president of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association, noted that groups like his distribute newsletters and fliers, which take time and money to put together. The councils will need similar resources, as well as professional assistance when fighting development projects.

"The developer is going to have 10 attorneys. The neighborhood council is going to have no assistance," Close said. "My prediction is people will very quickly get disillusioned and just drop out."