

Nowhere councils

THE Department of Neighborhood Empowerment deserves the heat it's getting for its indifference to getting neighborhood councils up and running by July 1 when the new City Charter takes full effect.

After a year and \$2.4 million, there ought to be more progress, and concern rightfully is growing that City Hall is deliberately dragging its feet.

The councils — advisory as they are — were a critical provision of the new City Charter approved in 1999 by voters wary of a city government that for a generation had put downtown first, ahead of the neighborhoods.

Neighborhood councils need strong leadership from the mayor and City Council if they are truly to grow and become a force and voice for residents in city government.

And that hasn't happened yet.

All the money to date has gone to bureaucracy to create councils. Where's the commitment from City Hall to actually provide the resources and the tools to neighborhood councils to make them meaningful and effective?

A lot of lip service and very little else has been coming from City Hall.

Starve the neighborhood councils and it's the same as starving the neighborhoods, which is what City Hall seems intent on accomplishing.

DONE General Manager Rosalind Stewart said she agrees

in part with criticism that her office hasn't done enough to get the word out to residents, community groups, churches, businesses, renters and the world that they're trying to organize something called neighborhood councils, which have no authority to do anything.

But there's more at stake.

Unless the councils have control over their own budgets, unless they can make decisions on how that money is spent in their area, and unless they can rate how the city responds and delivers services, it matters little if there are five or 50 neighborhood councils. The end result will continue to be dysfunction, disappointment and disconnection to city government.

The true test is whether enough council members believe in the spirit of the neighborhood councils and the idea that power closer to the people leads to a better city and a more active, involved and empowered public.

The Charter Commission studied the issue for two years before bringing it to the City Council, which watered it down and presented it to voters in 1999.

Voters approved it, and still the city has found a way to drag out the process. City Hall has to get off the merry-go-round.

Enough money for neighborhoods or watch the city shrivel up and break apart.

It's that simple.

Starve the councils, starve the neighborhoods and watch secession grow and prosper.