

Council Panel Rejects Neighborhoods Department's Staffing Requests

By ROBERT GREENE
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City Councilwoman Laura Chick has branded a public relations post sought by the city's new neighborhoods agency as a "spin doctor" job.

Rejecting the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment's request to hire four new administrators, Chick said last Monday that the department was continuing to drift from her goal of grass-roots organizers helping residents organize neighborhood councils while fostering dialog between communities and City Hall.

The public relations and senior management positions requested are "not the kind of people and not the kind of job descriptions that the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment most desperately needs in order to advance this most important work of neighborhood councils," Chick said.

The comments came at a meeting of the City Council's Governmental Efficiency Committee, which Chick chairs. Committee member Mike Feuer was also scathing in his criticism, demanding a detailed description of what the new employees would accomplish.

Department Assistant General Manager Michelle Banks-Ordone defended the requests, saying a public relations director was needed to interpret for neighborhood leaders the technical language of the legal requirements for creating councils.

The official would assist in "popularizing that information for public consumption," Banks-Ordone said.

Chick and Feuer appeared unimpressed.

"It seems to me you want to hire a spin doctor," Chick said.

She also criticized requests to expand the department's downtown headquarters.

The request goes to without the committee's recommendation to two more panels, where it is not expected to fare much better. Feuer is chairman on the Budget and Finance Committee, and is a member of the Personnel Committee. Personnel is chaired by Mark Ridley-Thomas, a Governmental Efficiency member who was unable to attend Monday's session, but who has generally been in accord with Chick and Feuer in their criticisms of the approach taken so far by the neighborhoods department.

The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment has proposed a plan, and is requesting funding, that would keep city officials out of the business of staffing the new neighborhood groups. The council committee, and a number of other City Council members, have stressed the urgency of directly funding the groups and offering ongoing staff support.

Mayor Richard Riordan is to present his proposed annual budget next month. It is expected to closely track DONE's funding requests, and not the council's. The budget is subject to the council's approval.

The council also is facing a June 15 deadline to alter the DONE plan, or be stuck with it as the city's official blueprint for establishing neighborhood councils.

Chick on Monday also noted that DONE leaders have suggested they could only certify about 10 councils in their first year of eligibility, which begins July 1.

Such a low figure "is going to cause a revolution in the communities," Chick said. "Because we've got more than 10 lining up [for certification] as we speak."