

Dissing the hoods

FED up with the lack of responsiveness, the arrogance, the impenetrable bureaucracy of City Hall?

We'd recommend bringing your complaint to your neighborhood council, but that would be a cruel joke.

There are no neighborhood councils, and there won't be any any time soon — even though they were supposed to be up and running by July.

After months of foot-dragging and delay, the City Council now proposes to start accepting applications for certification in October.

If all goes according to plan — and it seldom does — there will be 10 to 20 councils approved within the next year. By 2006, there could be as many as 100, assuming that City Hall delivers on one of its promises for once.

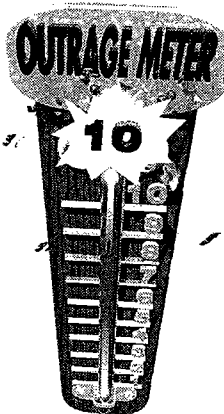
The jewel of L.A.'s 1999 charter-reform measure, neighborhood councils still remain a mere flicker in the public eye.

Despite being a cheerleader for charter reform, Mayor Richard Riordan was never willing to use his leadership to get the neighborhood councils afoot. Neither he nor the City Council wanted them to actually have the power to do anything.

As a result, the underfunded, undermanned and wrong-headed Department of Neighborhood Empowerment couldn't fulfill its duty to craft a detailed, coherent implementation scheme. That left the task up to the City Council, whose members dread the thought of being held accountable to their constituents.

That bias shows itself in the 21-page plan the council backed unanimously Monday.

The plan is still subject to a second hearing and a mayoral veto, but if the council gets its way, neighborhood boards will be nothing more than another useless layer of the mammoth city bureaucracy.



The council and the Department of Neighborhoods have come up with extensive regulations for the neighborhood organizations' membership, operating procedures and officers. They also propose giving the neighborhoods some money, but they've left the question of how much up for grabs.

That actual dollar amount that the council ends up providing should be a good measure of how serious its members are — if at all — about local control.

But neighborhoods need more than money.

They also deserve a say, including real authority over spending and community concerns — and there's practically no chance that City Hall will yield that much.

By stalling and thwarting the move toward decentralizing local government, City Hall has blatantly trampled on the spirit of charter reform.

Neighborhood councils were supposed to restore power to the people, and thus prevent Valley secession.

But the indifference of the mayor, the bureaucratic mind-set of the Department of Neighborhoods and the recalcitrance of the City Council are combining to kill them even before they are born.

Like so many other politicians, mayoral candidates Antonio Villaraigosa and James Hahn have talked a good game. But it's time for both of them to nail down specific commitments to neighborhood councils, including real money and, most of all, strong and effective leadership to get them going city-wide in a hurry.

So far neighborhood councils are nothing but another reminder of all that's wrong in City Hall.

That's why half the people of Los Angeles are looking at secession as a healthy alternative.