

Grass Roots Fertilizer

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E-mail long ago replaced the town crier. So it's not surprising that missives were flying through local message groups, trumpeting Tuesday's City Council approval of the neighborhood council plan.

In the year since the new Los Angeles City Charter took effect, community leaders in already-active communities have been busy gathering signatures, canvassing local residents and putting together bylaws in anticipation of Tuesday's action. But the blizzard of e-mail that swept through some of these groups is just one side of the story. While the city should respond to the politically savvy groups, it must also provide resources and assistance to communities that haven't begun to form neighborhood councils, which the charter drafters saw as a way to make the city more responsive to its citizens and improve city services.

Residents in wealthier neighborhoods with a tradition of activism are eager to win city certification for their councils, a designation that will let them apply for grant funding to spruce up a local park, renovate dreary storefronts or take on other improvements. Groups in Sherman Oaks, Mar Vista, South Robertson and elsewhere need only to see the details in the final plan before they formally request certification. Many members of these emerging groups are used to having the ear of their City Council member. They are already net-

worked—electronically and otherwise—and can rally a crowd at City Hall or stonewall the plans of local developers.

However, in poorer neighborhoods, residents might not have the time or resources to organize or have much experience with local politics. City funds and staffing provided up front will determine whether local councils form at all in these communities, which are often home to high numbers of immigrants. Their councils, once formed, are also certain to need continuing support to develop community interest and political expertise.

The City Council action Tuesday approved the plan first drafted last year by the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. Today the mayor's budget request of \$5 million for the department is before the council's Budget Committee. Council members and department staff are in a gentle tug of war, with council members wanting more money for staff outreach and other support in poorer, less vocal communities, and the mayor and the department favoring a larger pool of grant money for the councils, once they are up and running.

No neighborhood is required to form a council. So without a continuing, well-funded effort to energize and support the first steps by communities and groups less experienced in the arm-twisting of local politics, more affluent neighborhoods could elbow them out of the way. That's hardly what the charter's drafters had in mind.