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Politicians won't listen to neighborhood councils

By Don Clinton

Neighborhood empowerment councils are doomed to failure. I would like to see this utopian concept succeed because the idea makes good sense. Bringing citizens closer to their government representatives and allowing people to voice their local concerns is important, and their lawmakers should be genuinely interested. But our system doesn't work that way.

Years ago, we more nearly had a "representative" government. Elected politicians would take office and claim they were there to represent the folks at home, the ones who sent them there. Today, it has become a system of "we know best what the folks at home should have" so our politicians "vote their conscience."

Unfortunately, we are a very tiny part of the government process, except at the voting booth.

The last city administration pushed this idea of empowering people from the neighborhoods and were joined by learned scholars and other well-meaning folks. The idea has been around a long time.

Realistically, planners hoped that neighborhood councils would bring the people closer to the decision-makers. In a dream world, that could happen.

To the callous observer of our city's politicians, it is naive to expect that one more layer of neighborhood opinion will be heard, let alone influence change. It doesn't work that way.

Think for a moment. Our representatives on the City Council believe that they represent each district (neighborhood) of our vast city. They have field offices in each of those districts and field deputies who are even closer to the people living and working in those areas.

It is not the nature of a politician to welcome or accept advice from the general public.

Bureaucrats dislike the delay of listening to citizen feedback; they think they know what is best for their districts. Just ask them. It's a bit like that old bromide about the man who had all the answers and said, "Don't confuse me with the facts."

A recent example of vacillating priorities on community involvement is the CPAB idea. Community Police Advisory Boards were recommended in the Christopher Commission Reports, following the '92 riots. They were to initiate a partnership between the police and the citizens of all the 18 LAPD divisions throughout the city.

The idea took hold and it served the community and the Los Angeles Police Department well -- for about five years. Then the police administration changed and so did the vitality of the "partnership."



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More than 600 citizens were happy to be helping to improve the quality of life and safety in their neighborhoods. But the top man didn't lend support, and the groups have become about as effective as the U.N. is in keeping the peace.

It bugs me that our bureaucrats will contract for study after study of this problem or that problem but won't ask citizens who could give insightful answers. Millions of dollars are wasted nowadays to hire consultants, just to protect politicians' backsides.

It appears to me, and many like me, that real action in our City Council happens with the promise of development, cash investment, boosting the tax base, retail sales and campaign funding support. Action seldom occurs for the residential community. Just look at our street repair and infrastructure.

Would you believe that street maintenance is allocated by council districts and not by the priority of urgency, i.e. the budget is divided by the 15 districts and thus spent?

History has shown us that as politicians move from emphasis to new emphasis, their efforts to the old flag. As they leave office and new regimes take over, priorities change.

I'm afraid the splendid idea of attempting to give more voice to the public and to the decision-making process of government is so contrary to the nature of politicians that those well-intentioned members of neighborhood councils will be worn out through frustration and rejection.

Don Clinton lives in Los Angeles.

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