

[Close Window](#)[Send To Printer](#)

Does wimp factor ail councils?

Neighborhood panels urged to exert power

BY TONY CASTRO, Staff Writer
LA Daily News

Article Last Updated: 01/28/2007 09:48:06 PM PST

Encino land-use attorney Rob Glushon felt he'd helped create a jewel of participatory democracy while serving on the commission that established Los Angeles' neighborhood council system.

That all changed two years ago when he attended a monthly meeting of the Encino Neighborhood Council to make a complaint and found himself given only 60 seconds to speak.

"It was a sad state of affairs, and then I got scolded for expressing my opinion," he recalled.

"You'd get more time to talk going to the City Council than you would at your neighborhood council," said Glushon, who worked for years as field deputy to then-Councilman Marvin Braude.

Glushon's experience that night galvanized him to organize a slate of candidates that captured control of the Encino Neighborhood Council's board of directors in the next election.

It's that brand of force, that level of commitment, that neighborhood council activists say is needed to win more influence in decisions made at City Hall.

Glushon says neighborhood councils must become proactive in shaping their future role.

"You don't need to be given power," he said. "Power is not something you need to have granted by the City Charter or a city ordinance.

"Do labor unions have power given to them in the charter? Show me where.

"Show me where other interests long considered to be very powerful are given their power in the charter.

"That doesn't mean that neighborhood councils don't have the power. It's the neighborhood councils themselves that have to exert power."

City reports and audits and recent interviews cite the reluctance of neighborhood councils to exert authority as their most noticeable failure in the seven years since their creation.

It is also one of the issues that a blue-ribbon panel - the 29-member Neighborhood Council Review Commission - is examining in a top-to-bottom review required by the City Charter approved by voters in 1999.

Raphael Sonenshein, a California State University, Fullerton, professor who chairs the commission, said the influence of neighborhood councils is what the panel is currently hammering out in public meetings.

"Should they be advisory? And if advisory, how much should they be strengthened? The commission has a sense they could be more influential than they are," Sonenshein said.

The system's relatively short history has been spotty, but not without achievements. One of the most significant - at least politically - came last year when the councils gained a voice on a proposed water-rate hike.

Many neighborhood council activists marvel that some City Council members have been among their most ardent supporters.

"There are some City Council people who will not even look at a development issue until they have talked to their neighborhood councils," boasted Jill Banks Barad, president of the Sherman Oaks Neighborhood Council and founder and chairwoman of the Valley Alliance of Neighborhood Councils, a coordinating panel of some 30 neighborhood councils in the San Fernando Valley.

Last fall, Councilman Dennis Zine refused to consider the Valley Sports Authority's plan for a 10,000-seat sports arena before it was presented to the Woodland Hills-Warner Center Neighborhood Council. The Neighborhood Council rejected the proposal, and Zine said in an interview last week the arena likely won't be built.

"I don't know how other City Council members do it," Zine said, "but in my district, all development (proposals) go to neighborhood councils for review before they come to me.

"I respect neighborhood councils. I don't always agree with them, ... but my philosophy on development is that if you're going to go into a neighborhood, you need to blend with that neighborhood and not disrupt that community."

And after the media characterized a report released last month by the University of Southern California as saying the neighborhood council system is failing, the study's authors issued a response on CityWatch.com, a community Web site.

"Neighborhood councils have created broad networks that have been mobilized to attain political goals, and they have engaged in a variety of community improvement activities," the USC team wrote in CityWatch.

"Board members view their councils as effective in solving neighborhood problems and providing advice on service delivery and land use. Some provide support for school programs and community organizations or invest in community beautification and emergency preparedness."

But all too often in reports, these contributions have been overshadowed by reports of threats, shouting matches and even fistfights at meetings.

Among the myriad complaints about rigged elections was an incident in which dogs were allowed to vote for the board of directors of the Old Northridge Community Council.

A positive side Potholes in system

Neighborhood councils have traveled a precarious road since their creation in 1999.

They have operated with limited funding, limited support from some City Council members and limited schooling in how the Los Angeles City Hall political machine operates.

The upshot has been public meetings - held in City Hall's stately John Ferraro Council Chambers - filled with tension and drama among neighborhood council activists and some elected officials.

Glushon says this is exactly what those on the Charter Reform Commission feared - and even expected - when they developed the grass-roots system.

"It was envisioned that there would be difficulties for the neighborhood councils and for the city in dealing with neighborhood councils, and the whole reason to have a review (after seven years) was because of that," Glushon said.

"We knew there were going to be issues that had to be looked at. On the positive side, the strides that neighborhood councils have made institutionally in this time is remarkable."

Neighborhood councils began with then-City Councilman Joel Wachs' ill-fated mayoral campaign in 1993 and his promise of a "city of neighborhoods" - a pledge that Richard Riordan incorporated into his successful runoff to become mayor.

The idea became a centerpiece of Riordan's push in 1997 to reform the City Charter and of the specially elected panel that drafted it.

But neighborhood council activists complain today that those councils have languished since their creation - their dreams and hopes replaced by nightmares of frustration from inability to influence public policy and decisions of key city departments.

Among some neighborhood council activists, there is a feeling that Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa is not supportive of the system. They point to a position he took when running for the city's top office in 2004.

"I don't believe the neighborhood councils should have development input," Villaraigosa said during one debate. "But I also think we should engage the developers early and often. I say to any developer, if you want to come into this district, you're going to have to go into the neighborhood and gain their support."

Villaraigosa reiterated his position in a statement released Friday.

"The mayor believes that neighborhood councils already have significant input on planning and development issues through their council members and the appropriate committees," spokesman Matt Szabo said.

"The mayor and the council have appointed a 29-member Neighborhood Council Review Commission addressing all of these issues, and he looks forward to its recommendations."

Tied in red tape

If the dream of "a city of neighborhoods" has not been fulfilled, some say much of the fault lies squarely on the shoulders of elected officials at City Hall, the bureaucracy and red tape that trips up neighborhood councils at almost each step.

Last year, for instance, no fewer than 30 elections at neighborhood councils were scrapped by the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, a \$4.3 million-a-year, 51-member agency that cited violations of voting regulations.

"Good people are being burned out by all the red tape we have to deal with," Banks Barad said. "This is the hardest volunteer job I've ever had."

In recent weeks, red tape has cost the Pacoima Neighborhood Council one-fifth of its board members, who resigned rather than undergo a two-hour course on conflicts of interest required since last fall of all on Los Angeles neighborhood councils.

"We could understand that requirement if we were involved in dealing with millions of dollars in the budget," said Edwin Ramirez, former president of the Pacoima Neighborhood Council.

"But we're volunteer neighborhood council board members. Our entire annual budget is \$50,000. We don't come close to dealing with a fraction of that every month."

Each of the city's 86 neighborhood councils is allocated \$50,000 annually - a total \$4.3 million investment in democracy that activists say isn't nearly enough.

Steven Naczinski, who late last year became vice chairman of the Woodland Hills/Warner Center Neighborhood Council, quickly discovered the limitations of trying to reach more than 150,000 stakeholders and constituents within his council's borders.

"On \$50,000, it would be impossible to reach each one if we tried to do more than a single mailing," said Naczinski, whose group instead has opted for upgraded computer software to boost its outreach through the Internet.

Lisa Sarno, the interim general manager of DONE, defends the rules and regulations, saying they are required by state laws and the City Charter that created the system.

"Each of these neighborhood councils is spending \$50,000 of taxpayer money, and there should be accountability to the taxpayers of the city.

"A great number of our neighborhood councils have had successes, and some continue to face challenges. We have over 1,600 neighborhood council board members who are all volunteers, and we are appreciative of the time they are giving. We are here to help support them in their successes and their challenges."

What has forced neighborhood councils to deal with mounds of paperwork, officials said, is an opinion from the City Attorney's Office that the Ralph M. Brown Act - the state law governing public access to local government meetings - applied to the councils.

That opinion also subjected neighborhood councils to laws on political reform, conflict of interest and public records. Then last fall, state regulators began requiring all officials covered by the Political Reform Act to take two hours of training.

"We tried to streamline matters, and one of the ways was by having that (two-hour class) available on the Internet," Sarno said.

Still, the cumulative effect of the laws and regulations is burdensome "for these people who are just volunteers," said Greg Nelson, DONE's former general manager. "It takes away from their time to go and serve their neighborhoods. They're just too busy with paperwork."

Nelson, who retired last year and has devoted himself to advocacy for the grass-roots system, said neighborhood councils remain the future of the city's communities despite inherent drawbacks.

"The single biggest change I would like to see in neighborhood councils is a class in how you get political power and how you use it," Nelson said.

"It would be great if you could teach the neighborhood councils all the skills and tricks that city employee unions know and that lobbying groups know.

"If they could master those skills and tricks and mobilizing people, then you'd see their ability to affect decision-making."

tony.castro@dailynews.com

(818) 713-3761