



## Voices in the 'Hood Not easy getting City Hall's attention

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Photo by Ted Soqui A new L.A. city government department set up to run neighborhood councils, once touted as a link between far-flung communities and City Hall, is under fire these days.

The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE) came on the scene in January as part of the city-charter reform approved by L.A. voters in June 1999. The fledgling agency faces mounting criticism from grassroots groups who call DONE exclusionary and top-down, and from some City Council members who find Mayor Richard Riordan's support of the neighborhood-empowerment measure suspect. Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg earlier this year called it "a cynical strategy" by Riordan to entice voters to pass a charter that consolidates power in the Mayor's Office; Councilwoman Laura Chick, who sits on the council committee enacting the new city charter and is running for city controller, notes that other charter reforms have moved forward apace while the neighborhood-council network plan remains bogged down in meetings, seemingly unaided by mayoral muscle. "It should be the top priority of the mayor of this city," she said. "He touted . . . neighborhood councils as a key part of charter reform."

It's still up in the air how many neighborhood councils there will be. The original plan was for 15, one for each council district. The first sessions won't be until at least after June 2001 — the City Council's target for coming up with the guidelines to govern them.

Lee Kanon Alpert, outgoing president of the Riordan-appointed commission, says the mayor is not indifferent: "Before we even had a budget, the Mayor's Office was supporting us with resources and whatever we needed." Alpert calls the perception that the mayor doesn't care "just dead wrong."

But council members are also concerned that low-income and marginalized communities are not one of DONE's priorities. Earlier this year, Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas sent a brusque letter to the mayor after a February 5 Neighborhood Convention at the Natural History Museum, organized by Riordan's office, overlooked inclusion of Ridley-Thomas' 7-year-old 8th District Empowerment Congress, and criticized DONE's staffing for "a disturbing degree of exclusion of the residents of South Los Angeles." The department's leadership, he said in the missive, overwhelmingly excludes South L.A. in favor of the San Fernando Valley.

DONE's general manager, Rosalind Stewart, is a former staffer for Valley Councilwoman Cindy Miscikowski, while Alpert, who recently resigned from the commission — he had taken on the duty for a specified period of time to get the department off the ground — was a leader of the



secessionist Valley VOTE organization.

Ridley-Thomas does not go as far as some community activists, who speculate that DONE's political leadership was selected by a mayor eager to mollify pro-breakaway forces rather than to extend a political voice to more disenfranchised neighborhoods.

Alpert points out that he was key in moving VOTE from a breakaway position to one supporting a cost-benefit-analysis study and says there's no connection between secession and the formation of neighborhood councils, contending that the councils don't answer the criticisms that contribute to the secession movement.

City Council criticism of DONE recently has been amplified by grassroots objections as DONE prepares to report to the City Council on a series of 14 "workshops" around the city to solicit comments on the neighborhood-council network plan, which is due before city leaders in December.

Some 50 representatives of Communities United for Real Empowerment (CURE) barged into a City Council meeting two weeks ago and, during a brief impromptu public hearing, attacked the way in which the 7-month-old department conducted its outreach and meetings.

Translation at the meetings was inconsistent, they said, and child care and transportation were nonexistent — a de facto skewing of participation away from the most disenfranchised communities.

More than one speaker marveled at the undersize Post-it notes supplied by DONE to record opinions, and complained that staff and volunteer facilitators failed to adequately explain the purpose and goals of the meetings. "If they had only done a 20-minute presentation that explained 'This is where the meeting comes from, this is where DONE comes from' . . . that kind of basic information about what people were about to engage in, people would have a context for the decisions they're expected to make," said Adrienne Shropshire, who works with the Metropolitan Alliance, a lead organization in CURE, in an interview after the protest.

Shropshire added that the workshops included small "breakout groups" where conflicting approaches about how local councils should be organized and governed emerged, but the larger group was never re-convened to discuss and resolve differences.

Chick, who attended two of the DONE workshops, concurred with CURE activists. "Most people attended the meetings with the expectation that they would walk out with new information and know more than when they started about neighborhood councils. You could feel the frustration," she said.

And last week the City Council's Government Efficiency Committee, chaired by Chick, called DONE General Manager Rosalind Stewart on the carpet to explain why she has yet to set up an advisory board proposed by Goldberg and approved by the City Council to provide the department with advice from those with more traditional low-income, door-to-door organizing experience. "I either got defensive answers or answers that were surface and reassuring," Chick said afterward.

Stewart says that the department lacked the staff to bring together the advisory board, but now has begun. "Until July I didn't have the people — we're just now going through the administrative process to bring [advisory board] people onboard . . . it just isn't happening fast enough."

And she stalwartly defends herself against charges of exclusion by pointing out that half of the 22

organizations listed on CURE's letterhead are on the DONE mailing list. They would have received a notice of the meetings, she says. "I thought that we were communicating with a number of different groups — they didn't think we were," Stewart says.

As to complaints about participants' being utterly confused by the proceedings at the DONE workshops, Stewart says they decided to let the public begin only with the broad strokes supplied by charter language. "In governmental processes, people are used to a presentation, but our approach was 'They're going to start where we are.' It worked some places and didn't in others — that's the way risks go. We wanted to hear what they had to say."

Stewart notes that, no matter what the process, there are bound to be critics, but accepts criticism about providing more-informed departure points for discussion. She did defend the much-questioned Post-it notes, explaining that they were taped to flip-charts for discussion and that the salient points that emerged would be presented to the DONE Board of Commissioners next month.

Grassroots organizers remain skeptical that focus group-style discussions of the vagaries of neighborhood-council boundaries and structure — to be revisited months later at a different location before a plan is presented to the City Council in December — will sustain the interest of anyone but seasoned meeting-goers. Nor are the critics convinced that DONE has either the ability or the budget to make the repeated contacts and organize the countless meetings it takes to build grassroots power, especially in areas where the residents have traditionally been excluded from the political process. DONE's budget is \$2.4 million for the fiscal year, which started July 1.

But "neighborhood empowerment" remains the apple-pie issue of the 2001 mayor's race, just as it was during the charter-reform elections. A publication from Councilman Joel Wachs, a mayoral contender — "Grassroots Guide To Forming Neighborhood Councils" — mentions whenever possible his 1996 motion to create the local structures, and City Attorney James Hahn, another mayoral candidate, recently declared his intention on a local TV talk show to beef up funding.

It's still far from certain that there's the political will to push the department toward a strategy that woos the disenfranchised. Earlier this year, Goldberg tried to pass a motion to closely define such vague charter terms as "stakeholders" — often code for the more connected "property owners" rather than renters — in an effort to more clearly spell out who the department's outreach should include; she was unable to muster sufficient votes from her colleagues.

Chick remains cautiously hopeful, despite the foot-dragging on the formation of the advisory board, that the neighborhood councils will eventually gel. "There's too much momentum on this one, and you're going to see the council do everything it can to make it work."