

THE ROLE OF NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS AS ADVISORS TO CITY DECISION-MAKERS

Los Angeles City Charter Section 900 specifies that neighborhood councils "shall have an advisory role on issues of concern to the neighborhood." Some neighborhood councils have suggested that this language allows their boards to communicate their positions directly with county, state, and/or federal legislators. However, this interpretation conflicts with the Mayor and City Council's role under the Charter.

The Charter vests the City Council with the power to establish the City's official position on local, state or federal legislation, rules, regulations and policies, subject to the Mayor's veto (Charter Section 254). Administrative Code Section 2.19 sets forth a detailed process the City must follow to take an official position. Pursuant to that Section, "No person or department affiliated with the City of Los Angeles may represent that the City of Los Angeles supports, opposes, seeks, wishes to amend or has any position regarding any legislation, rules, regulations or policies unless such position has been adopted as an official position of the City of Los Angeles." Further, the Charter confers on the Mayor the power to engage in and supervise intergovernmental relations (Charter Section 231(h)).

The Charter's specification of these roles ensures a system where the City speaks with one voice to avoid confusion on matters involving county, state or federal legislation and other issues. Neighborhood councils, in their advisory role, are permitted to send their board-approved positions to the City Council and Mayor. Also, neighborhood council board members may in their individual capacity advocate for or against county, state or federal issues as long as it is made clear that they are communicating in their private capacities and not using public resources to present their opinions. Board members may use their neighborhood council titles for identification purposes only.

Neighborhood councils serve an important role by weighing in on city business before decisions are made and are expected to bring issues of community concern to city departments and leaders. Thus, as advisory bodies by design, an effective neighborhood council can advise city decision-makers and present an important perspective upon which elected officials may rely. However, it is ultimately and exclusively within the elected officials' authority acting as collectively as the City Council and Mayor to determine and convey the City's position on legislation and similar policy issues.

