

Contra Costa Times

Neighborhood issues take center stage

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This is work week for neighborhood council activists, with a pair of big forums scheduled to address local issues.

Next weekend, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa will hold his annual budget day with the Congress of Neighborhood Councils where he and city officials will lay out the city's budget problems and survey the Neighborhood Council leaders on their priorities.

But this past week, an upstart group of activists from the neighborhood councils got together at Los Angeles City College to deal with the hot-button issues circulating among them in what they called the Neighborhood Council Action Summit.

These include proposals to cut City Council salaries in half, create a ratepayer advocate in the Department of Water and Power, support a bicycle rider bill of rights and address issues involving medical marijuana.

Greg Nelson, the former head of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment who has remained active in the movement, is one of the organizers of the summit. He has a Web page for information at: ncactionsummit.wetpaint.com.

"We tried to get the city to consider some of these issues, but they already had their agenda set," Nelson said. "And we wanted to demonstrate there is a much better way of doing the Congress of Neighborhood Councils in a way that doesn't cost huge amounts.

"This came about when I was talking with about a dozen people, who wanted to have some real action."

At the same time, Nelson acknowledged he was not sure what will happen out of the daylong meeting.

Some networking will occur as proponents of one proposal or another seek support from the group, hoping they will return to their neighborhood councils to get them on board.

Nelson said he also hopes that those participating will try to raise some of the topics at next week's session to try to get more attention from the mayor and city officials.

Several San Fernando Valley organizations are joining forces to make sure the Valley is not forgotten when it comes to federal stimulus money.

The Valley Economic Alliance, Pierce College and the West Side Occupational Training Center have formed a collaborative to make sure some of the money makes its way to the Valley as the allocations are being made.

They hired Laurette Healey, a former deputy state controller who has been active in Valley politics for the past several years, to coordinate their efforts.

Kenn Phillips, vice president of work force initiatives for the Economic Alliance, said it is hoped the joint effort will focus on job training for renewable energy programs.

Healey said the stimulus money can provide an opportunity for college students as well as those who have been laid off in the construction or entertainment industries to train for new careers.

"My efforts will be to work with government agencies and venture capitalists to obtain the funding for job training and regional economic development," Healey said.

As expected, Attorney General Jerry Brown last week opened his exploratory committee to run for governor in 2010 so he can begin raising money to be competitive.

Also, as expected, San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom - who has announced his candidacy - took the opportunity to challenge Brown to a series of 11 debates before the June primary election.

Brown's campaign responded politely to the offer, but declined to engage, saying Brown still has not formally declared for the office and he was concentrating on his job.

Steve Glazer, senior advisor to Brown, said it is too early to talk about debates.

"The primary is eight months away," Galzer said. "There will be plenty of time for politics and debates."

Speaking of elections, there is some new competition in the race for the 12th City Council District race in 2011.

Winnetka businesswoman Armineh Chelebian has taken out papers allowing her to raise funds and challenge Mitch Englander for the seat. Englander is chief of staff to Councilman Greig Smith, who has said he will not seek a third term.

Chelebian said she is serious about the race.

"Let the games begin," she said.

A Republican, Chelebian has run unsuccessfully for several offices in recent years, including Valley city council in the 2002 secession election, Los Angeles City Council in 2003 and state Assembly in 2006 and 2008.