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Citizen review panels help to strengthen relations with police

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Twenty-five years ago, in 1992, the city of Los Angeles created the Board of Police Commissioners Police Permit Review Panel. The city established the board in response to recommendations from the Christopher Commission, which formed after the Los Angeles Police

Department (LAPD) beating of Rodney King left residents feeling angry, distrustful and powerless. The Christopher Commission recommended that, by handing routine business such as permits over to a citizen panel subsidiary to the Police Commission, the latter would have more time to concentrate on broad policy issues and the oversight of the LAPD.

The panel is responsible for approving or denying all police permits that have a First Amendment component. These permits include motion picture theater and café entertainment and shows, which include adult entertainment establishments. Community members, City Council offices and neighborhood councils have an opportunity to give the panel information to consider the appropriateness of issuing a permit.

Other jurisdictions across California have also created citizen review panels that help strengthen relations between residents and police. For instance, last year San Diego revived a community policing board that makes residents aware of their rights and responsibilities when interacting with police. It can also recommend policies to make law enforcement more sensitive, effective and responsive. And in March, the city of Fresno created a Citizens Public Safety Advisory Board to review major incidents including officer-involved shootings and to enhance trust and accountability with the Fresno police department.

In Los Angeles, if the panel denies a permit, it must make findings of fact as to why the permit is denied. There are 57 different types of police permits, such as massage parlors, valet operators, auto park operators, tow truck operators, etc. The authority to issue most of these permits is with the executive director of the Board of Police Commissioners. However, the panel has the authority to consider an appeal to a denial of any of these permits and to consider a request to suspend or revoke a permit for any violation of the city ordinance or state law. The panel reviews permits for different reasons - sometimes because it is a new business or a new owner, other times because the permittee has violated the law or conditions of the permit.

The citizen panel, which includes attorneys, receives reports from the Commission Investigation Division (CID) - a team of sworn and civilian investigators and clerical staff who review each permit and make recommendations to the panel. In other words, LAPD staffers make a recommendation about whether to approve or deny an establishment's operational permit. Sometimes, the CID will recommend denying the permit, perhaps out of concerns for too many noise complaints, zoning or conditional use permit issues, failure to pay Los Angeles City taxes, criminal records of applicants or other violations of law.

Despite some wrinkles, the system works well. It is efficient and effective as all the counterparts, just as the spokes in a wheel, collaborate to provide the necessary due process to the applicants while providing a public forum for citizen concerns and complaints.

While some prefer not to see how their sausage is made, I think it is beautiful to see citizens objectively adjudicating these issues to help other citizens and businesses in this diverse state we call home. It is true civic involvement and an important cornerstone for a city democracy committed to not repeating past mistakes.

Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners Police Permit Review Panel meetings are open to the public. The panel meets the first and third Wednesdays of each month at 1 p.m. in the Police Commission hearing room at LAPD headquarters in downtown.