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Cutbacks could curb city's local councils

By James Nash

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Los Angeles spends more than \$5 million a year on its experiment of empowering neighborhoods through advisory neighborhood councils -- an expense that is coming under increased scrutiny as city officials look to cut spending in the face of a budget crunch.

The city department that oversees Los Angeles' network of 86 certified neighborhood councils was told last month that it won't be able to fill 11 vacancies on its 61-person staff -- a decision that got a mixed reaction from advisory panel leaders. Those who complain about the agency's meddling welcomed the cut while others who want its help were upset.

City officials said further cuts could be made since only police and fire services are protected, although the \$50,000 to be allocated to each council is safe.

Greg Nelson, general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, posted the openings in late November when he learned he could fill vacancies under a City Council rule allowing understaffed departments to hire. Only weeks later, however, City Administrative Officer Bill Fujioka suspended that rule.

"We'll continue to try to do the best we can with the people we have," Nelson said.

"There may be neighborhood council leaders who expect us to have someone at each of their meetings. They will be disappointed."

DONE has been particularly controversial in the San Fernando Valley, where neighborhood activists and leaders of last year's secession drive have joined many of the Valley's 26 neighborhood councils. Some Valley neighborhood council leaders accuse DONE of meddling in their affairs, while others say DONE is a remote bureaucracy whose staff members always claim they're too busy to help.

Cutting DONE's staff could make the bureaucracy even more sluggish, said Laurie Lavine, a founder of the Valley Glen Neighborhood Council. The group has tangled with DONE over its election procedures and has yet to elect its board.

"I'm always getting the excuse that they're overworked, which is why they say they can't get to our election procedures," Lavine said. "We've been waiting for a year and a half."

But Jill Banks Barad, vice president of the Sherman Oaks Neighborhood Council and leader of the Valley Alliance of Neighborhood Councils, said a smaller DONE staff might be a blessing. She said many Valley neighborhood council leaders have complained about DONE staffers trying to control neighborhood councils.

"Once they're all certified, as far as I'm concerned, DONE is done," Barad said.

Currently, 86 neighborhood councils are certified, making them officially recognized by the city and eligible for \$50,000 each in city funding. City officials expect the network to grow to more than 100 neighborhood councils. DONE is the newest city department, created by a 1999 charter measure intended to thwart secession by decentralizing city government.

City Council members have not threatened to cut the \$50,000 allocations. Neighborhood councils use the money for office supplies and small community projects.

Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who heads a council committee that deals with neighborhood councils, said the \$50,000 allocations are safe, but DONE's own budget is not. The department won't be dissolved because it is required by the 1999 charter, but it could face further cuts.

"Everything's on the chopping block except public safety," she said. "We have to look at every department."

Hahn said the city budget crisis might be a turning point for neighborhood councils, which have been criticized as ineffectual. Members of the advisory groups will have a voice on what programs and areas city officials should pare to balance the budget, she said.

"The leaner the times we get into, the more prudent it is to give the neighborhood councils more of a say on where money should be spent in their community," Hahn said. James Nash, (213) 978-0390 james.nash@dailynews.com