

3 quit neighborhood council

Beset Van Nuys panel now left without quorum

By James Nash, Staff Writer
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VAN NUYS -- The Van Nuys Neighborhood Council, dogged for nearly a year by allegations that its election was tainted, was left in limbo Thursday by the resignations of three of its members.

The advisory panel is supposed to represent nearly 90,000 residents, property owners and workers in Van Nuys to the Los Angeles city government. But the group has been paralyzed since its February 2003 election by infighting among its board members and constituents.

On Wednesday, three of the remaining 13 Van Nuys Neighborhood Council board members resigned in frustration, leaving the panel with 10 members. It needs 11 to hold meetings and conduct business.

Jamie Cordaro, one of the board members who resigned, said the group had become too dysfunctional to continue.

"It just didn't go anywhere," he said. "(Resigning) was hard. It was heavy on my heart, man."

Another member who resigned, Maggie Estrada, told other board members in an e-mail that she had been bullied by people attempting to "push me around in an effort to impose their way of thinking." Estrada declined to comment when reached by phone.

The neighborhood council's president, Robert Kanter, who did not resign, blamed the group's collapse in part on a lack of support from Los Angeles city officials. In an e-mail message, he criticized city officials for not addressing allegations that board members were harassed for not speaking English or for being immigrants.

"The neighborhood council project was never intended to work for the 'little people' who have little knowledge of City Hall politics," Kanter wrote.

The Van Nuys Neighborhood Council is one of nearly 100 advisory panels forming under a 1999 City Charter amendment intended to give neighborhoods a greater say at City Hall.

Greg Nelson, general manager of the city department that oversees neighborhood councils, said the city has tried to help the Van Nuys group but couldn't dictate a solution. He said his department referred the allegations of ethnic harassment to the city's Human Relations Commission.

With the resignations, Nelson said, the neighborhood council probably will have to start over with new rules and a new board -- a process that likely would take months.

Several residents challenged the neighborhood council's February 2003 election, saying it was tainted by illegal electioneering near the polling place. Many of the same residents later accused city officials of siding with the winning candidates by refusing to adopt a League of Women Voters recommendation that the election be thrown out.

Later, the Los Angeles City Clerk's Office voided the election of two board members over the allegations.