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Neighborhood council rules to be reviewed

Holdings, clients at issue

By James Nash, Staff Writer

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Los Angeles City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo and three City Council members said Tuesday that neighborhood councils should be liberated from requirements that have caused several leaders of the advisory groups to resign rather than have their finances made public.

The officials were responding to complaints that members of neighborhood councils -- part-time advisory panels composed of volunteer community leaders -- were being held to the same financial disclosure requirements as the City Council.

Council members Janice Hahn, Antonio Villaraigosa and Dennis Zine, who sit on a committee that deals with neighborhood councils, asked Delgadillo on Tuesday to revisit a 2000 city attorney's opinion holding neighborhood council members to many of the requirements of the Political Reform Act of 1974, which requires public officials to disclose their finances.

"It's distressing to me that it's become so bogged down with red tape, bureaucracy and politics that it would discourage people from getting involved," Zine said. "We didn't want those regulations. We wanted it to be simple for (community members) to get involved with their community."

If enforced, the requirements would mean that many neighborhood council members who are lawyers would have to reveal their clients, and people who own property would have to disclose their land holdings.

City officials said only eight neighborhood council members have resigned rather than submit to the requirements. But some neighborhood council activists said the number is higher, particularly in light of people who don't join neighborhood councils because of the mandate.

Sol Ajalat, an attorney who had served as president of the Greater Toluca Lake Neighborhood Council, said in an interview that he stepped down rather than make public his clients.

"There is no way I could disclose, or would disclose, a client who paid me \$10,000 or more," said Ajalat, who said 13 members of the Toluca Lake group resigned or cut short their terms to avoid the requirement.

"This has created a major problem for many people. It is the entrepreneurs who are being driven off the board."

The 2000 legal opinion holding neighborhood councils to the Political Reform Act was issued by a deputy to then-City Attorney James Hahn. Delgadillo, who was elected in 2001, wrote in a letter to council members Tuesday that he is willing to review that opinion and other legal requirements on neighborhood councils.

"Originally billed as a means to promote more participation in government and make government more responsive to local needs, neighborhood councils have been hamstrung by the very system they were intended to change," Delgadillo wrote.