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Valley Glen victory

Delgadillo overrules DONE regulations

By James Nash, Staff Writer

With a big assist from Los Angeles City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo, community activists scored a major victory over the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment and its efforts to dictate the rules by which local community councils are formed.

The issue of the ground rules for forming the advisory neighborhood councils has been a point of bitter contention, especially in the San Fernando Valley, with repeated accusations that DONE and its general manager, Greg Nelson, have sought to undermine city charter reform by controlling the process.

But earlier this year, Delgadillo sent attorneys from his office to a meeting of the board overseeing DONE to consider a claim by Valley Glen Community Council organizers that the rules were unreasonable and arbitrary.

Delgadillo's lawyers agreed, saying there was nothing wrong with electing some council members by geographic areas and others by categories such as homeowners, renters and business owners.

The board came to the same conclusion, and for activists the Jan. 29 meeting was independence day. Valley Glen is now getting ready for its March 24 election on its own terms.

"I see this as freedom," said Laurie Lavine, an organizer of the Valley Glen group. "(The city) is supposed to assist in elections, not impose cookie-cutter requirements."

Nelson, DONE's general manager, remains unwilling to accept the principle unless he is ordered to extend the rule citywide.

"If the city attorney wants to change its opinion, that's fine with us," Nelson said. "But we need it in writing so we can see if it applies only to this isolated situation, or more generally."

Los Angeles voters approved neighborhood councils as part of a 1999 city charter reform effort to bring more power to neighborhoods. But many members of the nearly 100 councils in formation have complained that city and state

laws, as well as the size and sluggishness of the city bureaucracy hamper their efforts.

Some neighborhood council activists say Delgadillo's intervention gives them the chance to have greater independence and authority.

"DONE was really hindering the effectiveness of neighborhood councils," Lavine said.

DONE objected to the plan for Valley Glen's election on grounds that it would disenfranchise voters by electing some members by geographic areas and others by categories such as homeowners, renters and business owners.

At the Jan. 29 meeting of the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners, which sets policy for DONE, the City Attorney's Office said Valley Glen's ability to devise its own structure should take precedence. The Board of Neighborhood Commissioners agreed.

Delgadillo attended meetings of several neighborhood councils and heard their complaints about requirements that neighborhood council members disclose their personal finances and that their meetings operate according to the same state laws that govern City Council meetings.

"I think that helped free up a discussion with people in the neighborhoods to give them more and more information that gave me an ability to review the current state of neighborhood empowerment," Delgadillo said.

"Maybe I'm too much of an optimist but I remain hopeful that neighborhood councils will be a tool to improve everybody's quality of life, he said."

The breakthrough in Valley Glen is viewed as significant because complaints about DONE and the city bureaucracy have multiplied in recent months.

"Valley Glen had a great victory -- they were allowed to set their own rules and procedures," said Jill Banks Barad, head of the Valley Alliance of Neighborhood Councils.

But one of the original Valley Glen organizers blames the City Attorney's office, not DONE, for the group's woes. Peer Ghent, the former Valley Glen Homeowners Association president, said DONE was caught between conflicting advice issued by the City Attorney's office.

As Ghent sees it, the move by Delgadillo's office to let Valley Glen proceed with its election places politics ahead of sound, consistent legal advice.

"It's no way to run a railroad," he said. "If that's what you're going to

do, you might as well do away with DONE and (the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners) and let Rocky run it through the adjudication process."

Mayor James Hahn continues to believe that neighborhood councils are on the right track, Deputy Mayor Doane Liu said. More than 80 of the panels are now certified, and while some have had problems, many have not, he said.

"We're going through growing pains," said Liu. "It's a brand-new, exciting experiment in empowering neighborhoods that's never been done before. These neighborhood activists and neighborhood council members are clamoring to be part of city government. I'm sure they would not want neighborhood councils to hold secret meetings or not have to follow government ethics rules."

In general, Nelson said, DONE is trying to strip away layers of bureaucracy such as the former office-leasing rules that stymied West Hills.

"Everything we do is aimed at reducing the bureaucracy for neighborhood councils," Nelson said. "The toughest thing we have to deal with is the state law."

(Comment from Greg Nelson. To set the record straight, the BONC never voted on this issue and therefore never directed DONE to do anything. Last minute private verbal advice from the City Attorney contradicted a formal written City Attorney opinion on a single narrow issue, so DONE asked the BONC to advise a course of action. The City Attorney representative came to the meeting, provided verbal advice, and DONE accepted that advice and the advice of the BONC. The City Attorney was then asked to provide that advice in writing, and they agreed to do so. This is necessary to determine whether or not the advice applied only to Valley Glen or had broader implications.)