

Neighborhood Councils Flexing Their Power

By Jessica Garrison, Times Staff Writer
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The electrical contractor was on the verge of tears.

"I apologize," Jamie Cordaro told his neighbors as he resigned from the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council. After 11 months on the panel, he said he could not point to a single accomplishment, only many long nights of racially charged fights.

"It hurts me to think that as 13 adults, we can't come together," Cordaro said.

In the Fairfax area, by contrast, Mid-City West Neighborhood Council members say their panel is a great success, with smoothly run meetings and an array of neighborhood improvement projects. If anything, leaders there say they worry about becoming too slick and bureaucratic.

The heartache in Van Nuys and the cheerful efficiency of Mid-Wilshire are all part of the city's massive, groundbreaking effort to empower Los Angeles communities — and quell their secessionist impulses — by creating 100 neighborhood councils, one for every corner of this vast, disparate metropolis.

More than 80 panels have sprung into being since 2001, and there are signs they have taken root and are flexing their power.

Last week, the Los Angeles City Council scaled back a Department of Water and Power request to raise water rates after some 30 neighborhood organizations rallied against the increase. Chastened DWP officials said they wouldn't make the mistake of ignoring the groups again.

The councils also have purchased playground equipment and paddle boats, planted trees, cleaned streets and put up signs.

But if this grand experiment is sparking a renaissance in community activism, it has also prompted plenty of disputes, disorder and even shoving matches — and led many to despair at how difficult democracy can be, especially at the grass-roots level.

"Democracy is a messy thing," said Terry Cooper, a USC professor who has studied the councils. "It's not a pink tea party. It's more like a street fight."

Still, Cooper said he has been impressed by the hunger for community that Los Angeles residents have exhibited in their rush to create the councils, and on the whole he deems the experiment a success.

"As issues emerge around the city, they are going to respond," he said. The next step, he said, is for the councils to create their own deliberative body to drive a citywide agenda.

The push for the panels began a decade ago but picked up steam in the face of breakaway movements in the San Fernando Valley and elsewhere. Civic leaders pinned their hopes on the councils as a way to knit the city back together. Though many cities across the country have some kind of system of neighborhood panels, none has ever tried to create them so quickly or give them so much money, officials say.

More than 3 million of the city's 3.8 million residents are now represented by councils. Many people never before involved in government are suddenly giving up their evenings to sit on hard metal chairs in bland government buildings, munching stale cookies and navigating an unfamiliar bureaucratic world.

"Something is really happening here," said Greg Nelson, the perpetually cheerful general manager of the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, whose job it is to help the councils organize.

But Nelson said he never claimed it would be easy. And he's got the battle scars to prove it: He's been screamed at, his staff has been physically attacked, and community newspapers have pilloried him.

He just shrugs and laughs, cheerfully comparing Los Angeles' experiment to the democratic endeavors in Iraq and post-Communist Russia.

As in those fledgling democracies, the rules for the new councils are still evolving. Some Neighborhood Councils complain that city bureaucrats have issued a stream of contradictory advice and want them to adhere to a host of complicated rules, such as the state's open-meeting law, which limits how and when board members can communicate with each other.

"Every month or so, something new would come out and they would change their rules," said Charles Gremer, who resigned as founding president of the West Hills Neighborhood Council because he grew so frustrated with efforts to get office space.

The confusion has become so great that City Atty. Rocky Delgadillo issued a letter to City Council members earlier this year warning that "Neighborhood councils have been hamstrung by the very system they were intended to change."

Through it all, many of the neighborhood groups continue to struggle with the nuts and bolts of running democratic institutions.

Elections, in particular, seem to be a sticking point. To encourage participation, the city set few restrictions on who could vote: Anyone who lives, works, owns property or somehow has a stake in the area is invited to mark a ballot, regardless of whether they are U.S. citizens or legal residents. Each panel must hold an election before it can receive its

\$50,000 a year from the city to spend as members see fit.

The loose rules have led to numerous complaints and protests.

In Venice, a woman helped her black Labrador Raku cast an absentee ballot in her Neighborhood Council election to highlight what she thought were fraudulent procedures. Meanwhile, an organizer in Northridge said he had allowed dogs to vote, but not cats, because they are not good citizens, according to officials.

Toddlers have allegedly voted all over town. And some Westchester residents were outraged that the Playa Vista Development Co. dispatched scores of construction workers to the polls to stack the vote, and provided them with beer and chicken wings as a reward, officials said.

In other instances, fights over how elections should be run have prompted neighbors to stop speaking to one another, or develop relationships that consist mostly of screaming fights.

In all, results have been challenged in about half of the 70 council elections held so far.

In many cases, those challenges are quickly resolved, and the councils have thrown themselves into an array of projects and started websites and newsletters to publicize it all. They've sponsored tours, health fairs, political debates and Easter egg hunts. They've sponsored education campaigns about predatory lending and colloquiums on traffic congestion.

They've also been making their voices heard on land-use issues, expressing opposition to homeless shelters, cellphone towers and filming on city streets, and turning out in force at planning and zoning meetings on neighborhood projects.

"It's a wonderful exercise in democracy," said Ken Draper, one of the organizers of the Mid-City West panel, which took an active role in beating back the DWP rate increase.

But for some groups, the election fights have just been a preview of huge battles to come as the councils provide a new forum for long-simmering community issues.

In Van Nuys, which has gradually changed from a white, middle-class suburb to one that is majority Latino, neighbors fell into a yearlong battle after a mostly Latino slate swept into office. Some accused the winners of election fraud. Many of the Latino candidates and their supporters felt that an ugly strain of nativism had emerged.

The city clerk eventually resolved the election dispute by disqualifying two of the nine candidates. But the council has never recovered from the fight.

At one meeting in January, which residents said was typical, council members screamed at one another until residents interceded like angry parents fed up with squabbling

children. Meanwhile, from the audience, some hissed or muttered insults at speakers.

"I no longer believe in neighborhood councils," said Enrique Aragon, who helped organize the diversity slate but says he has since given up on the group. "They sound really great, but in practice ... they just perpetuate the same power structures that were already organized before."

Others, such as Cordaro, the electrical contractor who resigned from his council in January, hang on to the hope that civility will someday prevail. Cordaro is still attending meetings, hoping to reform the council.

"You cannot look through this process with rose-colored glasses," he said. "You've got to expect the worst ... but I have not given up."

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Forming a Council

Under Los Angeles city rules, any group of neighbors can form a council and become eligible to receive \$50,000 a year from the city to spend as they see fit on their community.

The first step is to get together with neighbors and pick boundaries that represent at least 20,000 people. Then the group must reach out to all the ethnic and business groups in the area.

Next, it must write a mini-constitution with bylaws that describe how meetings will run and how elections can proceed.

The group must appear before the city's Board of Neighborhood Commissioners, which makes the decision to certify the group and makes sure that only one group is seeking to represent a single neighborhood.

Once certified, the group holds its election and can apply for its \$50,000. The money can be used only for operating expenses and civic projects like tree plantings or murals.