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Hands off

City Hall needs to empower and adequately fund L.A. neighborhood councils

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Things broke down so badly in the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council's attempt to hold a valid election that even the city Board of Neighborhood Commissioners reluctantly came to see the obvious.

The commission finally ordered a new election, which was necessary because of improper meddling in the original election by officials at the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

The Van Nuys council was plagued by bitter infighting since its farcical election in February 2003. In trying to manipulate the outcome, DONE officials went so far over the line that the council has not been able to even muster a quorum, depriving the community of badly needed leadership for nearly 18 months.

While the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council's story is certainly an extreme case, it represents how City Hall is micromanaging what's supposed to be a community-driven effort. That the city's 80 neighborhood councils get anything done on their own is a testament to the strong desires for local control.

Just the day before the commission's overdue action involving Van Nuys, City Council members spent an inordinate amount of time discussing how the neighborhood councils spend their piddling \$50,000 annual allowance -- a sum that's less than all but a handful of the council's own staff members are paid.

What seemed to bother the City Council most was a report that one neighborhood organization had used some of its funds to pay for T-shirts and a band to boost community spirit. But it's not the job of DONE, the City Council or even the mayor to dictate how the neighborhood councils spend their money, short of making sure it isn't stolen or used in illegal ways. And if the councils decide that T-shirts and bands are a reasonable expense, that's their business.

Neighborhood councils were created under the voter-approved City Charter to give some local control back to communities that felt shut out of City Hall. And local control means staying out of their business.

The council generously gave the neighborhoods the right to carry over their unspent funds until next year. But the councils ought to be given more authority over local issues and more money to lift the spirits of their communities by improving the quality of life.