

City Wants Answers on Elections

By James Nash
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Monday, August 16, 2004 - Los Angeles city officials are asking a proudly unorthodox panel that is supposed to represent parts of Northridge to City Hall to explain a nearly year-old election in which dogs, but not cats, were allowed to vote.

The Old Northridge Community Council is one of four Los Angeles advisory panels that has neither had a recognized election nor taken steps toward a vote, city officials said.

"It's a matter of how you define an election," Greg Nelson, the general manager of the city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, said Monday. "We never saw (Old Northridge's) election rules or procedures or heard back from their election administrator.

"It may simply be that what happened was not an election at all but simply a fun time."

About 1,400 people voted in December 2003 for 12 candidates to represent an area near California State University, Northridge, on the neighborhood council.

Organizers of the panel faced questions immediately afterward over the lack of competition in the election, the apparent lack of notification to some in the community, and the provision allowing dogs to vote but not cats.

Supporters of the city's 4-year-old experiment with neighborhood councils had touted Old Northridge as an example of an iconoclastic group operating within the city's guidelines for local empowerment.

The neighborhood council calls itself the Gilgamesh, a reference to a mythical hero.

But the group ran afoul of city officials with last year's election, which occurred during a festival that featured art, a burlesque performer and loud rock music.

Don L. Larson, the lead organizer of the Old Northridge Neighborhood Council, blamed the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment for failing to send a staff member to the election. Larson said the group welcomed oversight but would resist any attempts to dictate the terms of its election.

"We're unorthodox," he said. "I'm trying to make for a very loose and free open election."

In a letter to the Old Northridge organizers mailed last week, Department of Neighborhood Empowerment officials asked them to respond to challenges to the 2003 election and to outline steps to resolve the impasse.

If the organizers fail to respond, the city could initiate steps to decertify the panel, the letter states. The ultimate decision to decertify would belong to the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners, a citywide panel.

In addition to Old Northridge, three neighborhood councils are stuck in impasses or inaction in holding elections, according to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. Those are the Greater Wilshire Neighborhood Council, the Wilshire Center-Koreatown Neighborhood Council and the Greater Cypress Park Neighborhood Council.