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Neighborhood Councils Struggling

By SHELLY GARCIA
Senior Reporter

If the secession movement can arguably be called the boldest power grab attempted in the city, you'd hardly know it from the neighborhood councils the cityhood drive spawned.

While some councils have logged a few successes, many others have been bogged down by infighting, confusion over their role and, ironically, the same bureaucracy they were created to surmount.

For many of the all-volunteer councils, intended to make government more accountable and responsive to local communities, participatory democracy is seeming more like pandemonium.

Some council members have quit in exasperation, and others say they are too burned out to re-enlist for another term.

"We have had people who dropped out," said Leonard Shaffer, president of the Tarzana Neighborhood Council. "A couple of people were unaware of what their responsibilities might be. It's not an easy thing to do."

Created along with the city's new charter in part as an attempt to dampen the San Fernando Valley's secessionist inclinations, neighborhood councils are advisory bodies composed of so-called stakeholders in the community - folks who live, work, attend school, own property or otherwise have an interest in a neighborhood.

Since 2001 when the first of the neighborhood councils was launched, more than 80 such bodies have formed across the city, about 30 in the Valley.

And there are cases where neighborhood councils, which operate with a budget of \$50,000 a year, have had a genuine impact on city policy, such as the recent case where a coalition of councils led by Jim Alger, one of the board members of the Northridge West neighborhood group, was able to persuade city officials to cut back a planned power rate hike.

But six years after the city charter was reformed, about five Valley neighborhoods, representing almost 200,000 residents, don't have neighborhood councils at all. And many of those that have formed have logged few successes either because they are just inexperienced, unclear as to their role, or, in some cases, laboring under the impression that

democracy is whatever you make it.

Retreat nixed

Consider the West Hills Neighborhood Council, where plans to hold a retreat for board members at the Palm Springs Hilton had to be intercepted by the Dept. of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE), the city authority that oversees the councils.

The problem? Though independent, the councils are bound by the same rules that govern city lawmakers, including one that says all meetings must be open and public, not to mention the little problem of spending city taxpayer money in other cities.

"There are things like that where neighborhood councils think they can do anything they want," said Greg Nelson, general manager for DONE.

Nelson said these types of situations are atypical, but the confusion over the role of the councils, even if they are not breaking rules, is far more common.

"This mixing of quasi-government has made it very difficult for them to figure out what they're supposed to do," said Ira Handelman, president of Handelman Consulting, which specializes in government and community relations. "I think they're confused, and the city is confused over what their role should be. That's why they're getting burnt out."

Handelman is representing developers of a Best Buy in Sherman Oaks, a project that is opposed by some of the folks on the neighborhood council. But the project conforms to the area's specific plan, which means that, although the neighborhood council can help shape some of the details of the development, like ways to cut down the potential traffic generated the group has little authority to prevent it from going forward.

These kinds of situations have frustrated many of the councils, especially when members are very new to the process and don't understand the nuances of a system that draws its power and influence by presenting a united block to lobby elected officials rather than any direct authority.

But a number of councils haven't even reached that stage - they have become stymied by the conflict within the group itself.

Even experienced community activists are finding neighborhood councils can be a challenge because of their diverse memberships.

"If it's the Kiwanis or the Neighborhood Watch, there's a lot of

homogeneity," said Nelson. "The whole idea of neighborhood councils is to try to bring together all the different interests in the community, people of different backgrounds. This is a very foreign concept to people who are just driven to win."

Lacking a quorum

The Van Nuys Neighborhood Council was on the brink of dissolving after so many of its board members resigned in frustration and acrimony that it did not have a quorum to continue.

"From my point of view nothing was going nowhere," said Martha Barron, who resigned from the council earlier this year. "When I would go to a meeting they'd be arguing about little things and it would take forever, so I stopped going."

The council, which was certified more than two years ago, has yet to have a full board, although a new election is expected to be held later this year.

Other councils have run headlong into other strong, established community ups that are reluctant to cede control over their communities.

"The homeowners group fought the neighborhood council," said Jill Banks Barad who founded and now chairs the Sherman Oaks Neighborhood Council. "Every month, every way they try to sabotage our group."

Some of the biggest frustration faced by neighborhood councils, though, have come from the very body they were set up to overcome - the city bureaucracy.

Because the councils are composed of volunteers, often with full time jobs or businesses of their own, the groups have to rely on the city for information and other resources.

"Instead of finding a way to do it, they say, no you can't do it," said Barad. "We keep saying it says in the charter you're supposed to facilitate, not dictate."

The nature and newness of these neighborhood councils has some marveling at the fact that they have been able to accomplish anything at all and pushed the need for additional training to the forefront.

Barad has organized a loose coalition of some of the neighborhood councils to help members become educated.

DONE too has stepped up the assistance it offers, establishing neighborhood

academies that hold classes on an ongoing basis, and contacting with Coro, a group that provides leadership training in the public arena.