

Revival for neighborhood panel

Troubled Van Nuys council regrouping, plans new elections

By James Nash, Staff Writer

VAN NUYS -- The Van Nuys Neighborhood Council, which in two years of dysfunction became a symbol of Los Angeles' troubled advisory panels, is regrouping and expects to hold a new election in February, organizers say.

The Van Nuys panel is one of nearly 100 neighborhood councils created under a 1999 charter amendment intended to bring representation to Los Angeles communities. But since its February 2003 election was tainted by allegations of vote-rigging and city favoritism, the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council has stood out as an example of the new system's failings.

The council is scheduled to hold a second election Feb. 19 under new rules intended to prevent a "stealth" candidate or slate from winning -- a key allegation in the group's February 2003 election.

The election brought charges of ethnic favoritism after a predominately Latino slate captured most seats. Several of the candidates won without speaking at public election forums.

Victoria Davidson-Castillo, who has presided over the remnants of the neighborhood council that partially disbanded last year, said organizers are determined to avoid the pitfalls of the last election.

"I believe that it's important enough that it happens and that it works that people will make an effort this time around to really make sure it works out," Davidson-Castillo said.

Another slate is forming for the February election, but organizers of the group insist that they are trying to unite Van Nuys with a representative group of candidates.

Don Schultz, president of the Van Nuys Homeowners Association and an organizer of the new slate, said the candidates share an interest in improving Van Nuys.

"To have a community as large as Van Nuys with 80,000 people and no representation about what's going on with development and with schools -- we're losing out," Schultz said.

Jamie Cordaro, a former neighborhood council board member who stepped down amid the group's meltdown, said the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment is attempting to act as an honest broker in the 2005 election.

In the last election, officials of the city department were accused of favoring the diversity slate and of dismissing a critical report by the League of Women voters recommending a new election.

"This was a big black eye on DONE's report card," Cordaro said. "I think they're trying to play a neutral role in this. They want the election to go forward."

The organizer of the diversity slate, Enrique Aragon, said many members of the slate became disillusioned with the neighborhood council process and will not run again. Aragon said he suspects that leaders of Van Nuys' old guard will dominate the reconstituted neighborhood council -- a charge Davidson-Castillo disputed.

"I don't believe in neighborhood councils, unfortunately," Aragon said. "I believe the process is not transparent enough. It's subject to being hijacked by special-interest groups."

After the 2003 election, several losing candidates and their supporters formally challenged the results, arguing that several winning candidates had improperly solicited votes near the polling place.

DONE rejected a League of Women Voters report calling for a new election, but accepted the Los Angeles city clerk's recommendation that two winning candidates be ousted.

Soon afterward, the group was hobbled by resignations and was occupied mostly by internal disputes, not projects to revive Van Nuys.

Los Angeles City Councilman Tony Cardenas, who represents Van Nuys, said the neighborhood council's troubles have deprived Van Nuys of a collective voice.

"We're looking forward to the neighborhood council regrouping and functioning as a group," Cardenas said. "It will fill a vacuum as far as hearing a collective voice. The individual voices have been heard."

Twenty-five of the 34 neighborhood councils in the San Fernando Valley have held elections, according to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

Another panel that had a disputed election -- the Old Northridge Neighborhood Council - is scheduled to have a new election in May. The group's first election last December was challenged by a resident who said the community had inadequate notice of the election and that dogs were allowed to vote.