

Panel urged to empower people

By Jason Kandel
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GRANADA HILLS -- Fearing that large corporations and other special interests could drown out the voices of the community, residents on Tuesday night urged a city commission overseeing certification of a neighborhood council in the San Fernando Valley to give the power to the people.

"This must be a real voice in the neighborhood," said Granada Hills resident Mary Edwards. "City Hall does not need more representation from the monied interests or special interests of any kind. They need to hear finally and at long last from the people."

Edwards spoke in front of a 10-member panel of the city's Board of Neighborhood Commissioners. The panel is charged with the duty of certifying neighborhood councils across the city.

The decision to certify Granada Hills' council was postponed while officials and community members resolved the voting rights for members.

The David versus Goliath issue at hand Tuesday night reflected a broader problem across the city: Will the voice of large corporations outweigh the interests of the people in community decisions?

"I understand the desire of the Granada Hills people to structure their bylaws in such a way that that can't happen," said Bill Christopher, president of the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners. "It's not only an issue here in Granada Hills, but it's an issue in Westchester relative to the airport and in San Pedro relative to the harbor."

Earlier this month, the city's first two neighborhood councils, authorized two years ago by approval of the new City Charter, were formally certified by Mayor James Hahn in the Harbor area, which like the Valley is a hotbed of secession sentiment.

In the Valley, seven neighborhoods have applied for certification and 22 others are trying to form council plans. Many have bumped up against conflicts between local groups, problems attracting diverse interests to participate, and deep-seated skepticism driven by doubt whether they will wield real influence at City Hall.

Northridge, Old Northridge, Pacoima, Sun Valley, West Hills, Woodland Hills-Warner Center, and Granada Hills North have applications pending.

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