When John Given walks onto the backyard deck of his spacious Brentwood home, his eye is drawn not to the vista of Sullivan Canyon galloping away beneath him, but to the brushy excess of chaparral bristling down to his property line from the hill to his right.

The hills of Brentwood, a place of million-dollar-plus houses, are among the sites with the highest wildfire risk in Los Angeles. Given's house is the last on his street, the closest to the thirsty, combustible slopes of the Santa Monica Mountains. Although he is meticulous about keeping brush cleared a safe distance from his home, such is not the case with his neighbor.

That is the city of Los Angeles, which owns the adjacent property and is responsible for its upkeep.

"Were a terrible brush fire to happen, they would not be in compliance with the fire code," he says. "For me it means paying $1,200 a year extra in fire insurance because my neighbor, the city, doesn't take care of their brush."

Even in Brentwood, people such as Given have their beefs with the city. In that, they are much like people in the San Fernando Valley, whose discontent with city services has long fueled the fires of secession.

The difference is that Given and his neighbors, brush clearance issues notwithstanding, have been quite successful in getting the city to act on their concerns.

When the city announced that it would install five car-slowing speed tables on Mandeville Canyon Road, residents protested that the tables would also slow emergency vehicles trying to get to the upper reaches of the canyon. After detailed study and negotiation, they persuaded the city to install only two speed tables. When some residents learned that their homes were beyond the five-minute response zone of the Fire Department, they managed to obtain a meeting with L.A. Fire Chief William Bamattre himself.

Given, who composes music for animated films, is an officer of the Brentwood Hills Homeowners Assn. He credits local residents' success with the city not to being "a bunch of spoiled rich people," but to being highly organized.
Which is what many Valley neighborhoods apparently are not, according to a new study by USC's Neighborhood Participation Project.

The study suggests that the mostly middle-class Valley has fewer homeowners associations and community-based organizations than other major areas of the city, not just richer areas such as Brentwood, but poorer areas such as East L.A. and South-Central.

Professor Juliet Musso, who led the study, said this disparity may explain why, of the 39 neighborhood councils that have been certified by the city under its charter-mandated neighborhood empowerment program, only seven, or 18%, are in the Valley, which accounts for about 36% of L.A.'s population.

Musso contends that this lag has less to do with secessionist skepticism about the effectiveness of the councils, which are advisory, than with the fact that the Valley "historically has not had a high concentration of community-based organizations."

Clearly, many Valley residents want to participate in the councils program. Of the 24 applications for certification currently pending, 15 are from Valley neighborhoods.

The answer to why so few Valley councils made it into the first wave of certification, Musso says, may lie in the area's relative lack of "social capital" in the form of pre-existing community organizations.

"To do a viable neighborhood council proposal, it's a lot of hard work," she says. "It's harder to organize in an area where you don't have a lot of associations already bringing people together."

The USC researchers caution that their study is more suggestive than definitive. They sent questionnaires to 1,900 neighborhood organizations in Los Angeles, and 555 responded.

ZIP Code populations, moreover, vary greatly, and the Valley's relatively low population density may account for some of the discrepancy between it and other quarters of the city (the researchers hope to conduct a more definitive study based on census tracts).

Musso, however, also sees another factor at work: namely, the Valley's relatively tranquil history—at least in comparison to some of the city's more embattled communities.

The researchers were surprised to find that the amount of organizational activity in a neighborhood depends less on residents' socioeconomic status than on a history of having to confront troublesome phenomena in their neighborhoods.

Coastal neighborhoods have rallied against environmental threats, hillside areas against over-development (the Brentwood Hills Homeowners Assn. fought for a dozen years against a proposal for 34 mansions on the slopes near Given's home, and eventually won).

East L.A. and South-Central neighborhoods have mobilized against poverty, racism, crime and police abuse; some organizations there date to the War on Poverty, begun four decades ago.
"For example, Pacific Palisades ... has a long history of organizing around issues of land use and environmental protection, which may have contributed to development of particularly strong and active homeowners associations," the USC study states.

Similarly, "there are relatively high levels of organizational activity found ... in Central and South-Central Los Angeles.... It would appear that historical patterns of political organization and community-based service organizations in these communities may provide a legacy of political engagement."

The pattern seems to obtain even within the Valley, where strong neighborhood organizations tend to exist in the over-development-vigilant hillside neighborhoods (for example, the influential Sherman Oaks Homeowners Assn., long presided over by Richard Close, an active supporter of secession) and where residents have faced environmental threats (for example, the Granada Hills area, where the North Valley Coalition battled expansion of the nearby Sunshine Canyon Landfill).

A particular Valley case in point, Musso says, is Pacoima. The study found that in the ZIP Code that includes the low-income area, seven community organizations were active, with four more operating on the community's outskirts. The total is nearly 2 1/2 times the Valley's overall average of 4.5 such organizations per ZIP Code (the average for Los Angeles as a whole was 6.2).

From his vantage point on the other side of the Santa Monicas, Given can't understand why Valley residents would contemplate the so-called "alimony" payments they will have to make to the rest of Los Angeles if secession occurs, to help finance "my Fire Department, my Police Department, my Department of Public Works."

Secession is especially ill-advised, he says, if it's driven by dissatisfaction with City Hall's responsiveness on the part of unorganized citizens.

Disaffected Valley residents, he says, "want something legitimate--but they already have it. They can vote. They can organize. They can have as much access to the city government as we do. We have access because we ask for access. One person up against the city is very difficult. That's why neighborhood organizations exist, so that we can collectively say, 'This is our concern. This is our problem.'

"People have a right to self-determination," he adds. "That's one of the things that make our country great. On the other hand, if they're not fully taking advantage of all the access that they do have--voting, participating in neighborhood organizations like ours--well, will they participate any more in a new city?"