

First neighborhood council gets behind secession drive

By Harrison Sheppard
Staff Writer

The Woodland Hills-Warner Center Neighborhood Council announced Thursday that it has endorsed San Fernando Valley secession, becoming the first of the newly created advisory groups to take a formal position on the issue.

The Woodland Hills-Warner Center Neighborhood Council voted 11-5 with one abstention Wednesday night to support the Valley breaking away from Los Angeles to become its own city.

There is some irony in the decision, in that

the city set up neighborhood councils as part of the 1999 City Charter reform effort to empower local communities and, to some degree, deflate the drive for secession. The councils actually are an arm of the city government, although they are only advisory, with no voting authority over city projects or policies.

Woodland Hills council chairwoman Sandy Enfield said the group feels frustration with how the neighborhood councils have been run, and that they have yet to get any funding from the city. But the vote, she said, was not a

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referendum on the councils themselves, as much as it was on the larger issue of secession and city government overall.

"The Valley's shortchanged and the operating costs for the city of L.A. are way too high for what we get," Enfield said.

Enfield added she has some concern about retribution from City Hall, especially after receiving calls from two city officials, the chief of staff to City Councilwoman Cindy Miscikowski and the head of the department that oversees neighborhood councils.

She thought the neighborhood councils were supposed to feel free to voice their opinions on political issues, but now she is concerned the group might suffer consequences, such as a loss of funding. City officials, however, insisted that is not the case and said councils are free to take whatever positions they choose.

"My goodness — I guess I was naive enough to think that neighborhood councils could be independent," Enfield said.

Miscikowski's chief of staff, Lisa Gritzner, seemed to take the vote personally, Enfield said.

"She said, How could we do that, how could we betray her?"

Enfield said. "... (She said she was) just so sad and disappointed that we would bite the hand that feeds us."

Enfield also received a call from Greg Nelson, general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. He asked her what more the city could do for her to make her and the council happy.

Gritzner told the Daily News she called Enfield because of her friendship with her, not acting as a city official or under orders from Miscikowski. She said she has worked hard in the past to make sure Enfield has gotten what she needed from City Hall and felt personally hurt that she would criticize the city and support secession.

"I do take it personally," Gritzner said. "I devote my life to making things work here. It is very personal. I was almost in tears when I found out about it."

But Gritzner said there will be no retribution as far as she is concerned.

"From my perspective, there would be no consequences, other than just some bad feelings, and how do you move forward from that. What I told her was that I was personally hurt. Whenever she has needed me, I have been there for her and responded to every single concern she's had."

Miscikowski's district used to include Woodland Hills, but in the recent redistricting she was moved to the coastal areas south of the Valley. Enfield has also been chairwoman of a committee overseeing Proposition K funds, and worked with Miscikowski's office in that capacity and others in the past.

Nelson said there will be no retribution from his department, as did a spokesman for Mayor James Hahn.

Nelson said there are already secessionists involved in other neighborhood councils that have been certified and "if there was going to be any retribution, it would've happened during the certification process. We're certainly not going to sink to that level."

The West Hills council was the only other that Nelson was aware of that has considered the secession issue, but the group voted to take no position.

Deputy Mayor Matt Middlebrook argued that because the Woodland Hills council was the only one out of 51 to oppose secession, to him the vote should be seen as 50-1. No others have taken a position on either side of the issue.

He said it is doubtful the new Valley city would have neighborhood councils at all. Some

secession supporters have proposed keeping neighborhood councils in the new city, and even strengthening them, while others have said they won't be needed. But the decision would be up to the new city council.

Nelson noted that the Woodland Hills council is probably getting more funding than almost any other. At a City Council meeting earlier this year, Councilman Dennis Zine presented the Woodland Hills and West Hills councils with \$20,000 each in discretionary council funds.

In addition to that, Nelson said, because the city hasn't provided the councils with funding yet, his department has purchased \$800 worth of supplies for the Woodland Hills council that are sitting in the office waiting to be picked up.

Neighborhood councils were created in the City Charter reform approved by voters in 1999, but have yet to become fully operational. The city has certified 51 of them, including 15 in the Valley, and expects to certify four more, including three in the Valley, by the Nov. 5 secession election.

The councils are allowed to take positions on political issues, but cannot use city funds or resources to campaign in support of those positions, according to city officials.