

## Los Angeles Daily News

### League assails Van Nuys election

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The League of Women Voters, brought in to investigate a controversial election for the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council, called for a new election -- blaming city officials for allowing the voting to be tainted by illegal electioneering, according to a report released Wednesday to the Daily News.

The league's Los Angeles chapter also said the Department of Neighborhood Organization officials who oversaw the election should be removed from the process.

The recommendations were dismissed by Greg Nelson, DONE's general manager who has defended the election process, on the basis that the league's conclusion was nothing but one point of view.

Nelson released the report only after repeated requests from the Daily News. It was received verbally by DONE officials Friday and department officials sought to deny that the league, which has provided education services for a fee to DONE in the past, was formally contracted to make the report.

Nelson said it will not be the final word on the Feb. 8 election. Although nine of the council's 15 members face challenges to their elections, the council itself will have to determine how to resolve the dispute.

In its report, the league supports the allegations of several losing candidates and their supporters that the winners improperly campaigned within 100 feet of the polling place, that the electioneering was targeted at Latino voters, that winning candidates might have influenced voters at the voting booth and that election monitors asked only some voters for identification.

"Obviously with this report there's a certain feeling of vindication, but it's sad that it had to come to this point," said Malcolm Gibson, one of the losing candidates who challenged the election. "I think we're coming to the point that we need to come to."

Hilda Garcia, one of the winning candidates named in the report, denied any illegal or improper electioneering and said many of the challenges are based on rumors and misinformation.

"When (one of the challengers) said we were within 50 feet of a polling place -- I've worked on many elections at many polling places, and it's ingrained in my head that you can't (campaign) within 100 feet of a polling place," Garcia said.

The Van Nuys Neighborhood Council asked the league to review the election after the offices of City Council members Wendy Greuel and Ruth Galanter, as well as the office of City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo, declined to take up the matter because of conflicts of interest.

The league's report suggests a new election, to be overseen by different DONE officials, but the neighborhood council is not obligated to follow the recommendations, Nelson said.

"These are recommendations from one person," Nelson said, referring to league Executive Director Julie Rajan. "Now they're subject to reactions from people who want to edit it, who want to add to it or to subtract from it."

Hal Netkin, an unsuccessful candidate who has filed a challenge to the election, said DONE continues to resist any move that could overturn the election.

"DONE is just looking for what they want to hear," he said, "and if they don't find it they'll keep looking."

The election challenges now go to Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County, which the neighborhood council designated as Plan C if binding recommendation did not come out of the league's investigation. Nelson said the league agreed only to provide advisory recommendations.

Rajan said the league was prepared to provide binding recommendations but backed off after a DONE staff member indicated the department would not accept its findings.

Neighborhood Legal Services officials have not said whether they plan to take up the Van Nuys challenges.

Rajan said she spent about 15 hours in March and early April interviewing nine people involved with the election.

Her report recommended that DONE assign different staff members to a new election "to ensure the appearance of integrity." Some of those involved accused DONE staff members, particularly senior project coordinator Rita Moreno, of siding with the winning candidates and rigging the process to prevent the challengers from getting a fair hearing.

In an interview last week, Moreno denied having any agenda other than empowering people in Van Nuys.

"(Critics) should walk a mile in my shoes," she said.

The dispute has all but paralyzed the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council even though its members -- most of whom face formal challenges -- have been holding regular meetings. Many of the meetings are marked by catcalls and loud allegations.

The Van Nuys group is one of 99 advisory councils set up in Los Angeles under a 1999 charter reform measure designed to devolve power into neighborhoods. From the outset, the councils, a key element of the 1999 City Charter reform, has been dogged by controversy over city officials handling of the rules for the constitution and operation of the councils.