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Done deal

Neighborhood council bureaucrats system is tainted by corruption charges

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Ever since the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council held its election back in February, the body has been plagued by allegations of scandal.

Now those allegations are starting to stick.

A League of Women Voters investigation -- commissioned by the city Department of Neighborhoods -- into the election has substantiated many of the losing candidates' charges. Some winning candidates engaged in improper electioneering, poll workers neglected to get proper identification from many voters -- and worse.

The League of Women Voters' L.A. chapter has also concluded that racial politics tainted the election by trying to advantage Latino candidates.

Worst of all, officials from the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment -- which is responsible for overseeing neighborhood council elections -- might have played a role in the corruption.

According to some of the disgruntled candidates, DONE staffers, most notably Rita Moreno, sided with the winning candidates and rigged the process to prevent challengers from getting a fresh hearing.

The league found enough merit to those charges to recommend a new vote, one overseen by an entirely different set of DONE staffers. That's the only way, league Executive Director Julie Rajan says, "to ensure the appearance of some integrity." But DONE prefers to squelch criticisms that raise serious questions about the very legitimacy of the entire neighborhood council system.

General Manager Greg Nelson first tried to obstruct the release of the league report, then denied that DONE had ever formally contracted with the league to make it. After that, he dismissed Rajan's verdict as "recommendations from one person."

Those recommendations, Nelson says, are now "subject to reactions from people who want to edit it, who want to add to it or subtract from it."

But what people would that be?

It took an outside organization like the league to conduct this investigation because no one in city government -- least of all at DONE -- wants neighborhood councils to be anything but be a fig leaf covering up the failures of City Hall.

Neighborhood councils were supposed to be the great deliverer of local control to L.A.'s communities. But when city officials drew up the new City Charter, they rendered the councils impotent, denying them adequate money or authority.

Then, as though to ensure that the councils would never amount to anything, they created DONE , an agency that has done its best to make sure the councils don't really do anything.

Many neighborhood council activists have complained from the outset that DONE has set up rules and controls that keep many stakeholders out of the process.

The mayor and City Council have rested their case for community empowerment on these advisory neighborhood councils. If they really have any commitment to community empowerment and openness in government, they need to call DONE officials on the carpet in a public meeting and get to the bottom of this scandal.