

April 18, 2003

LOS ANGELES

Report Recommends Invalidating Election for Van Nuys Council

A study by the League of Women Voters found improper contact by one candidate and a lack of consistent checking of IDs in Feb. 8 balloting.

By Caitlin Liu, Times Staff Writer

An election for the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council should be invalidated because officials allowed improper electioneering and failed to adopt a consistent standard for checking voter identification, according to a report by the Los Angeles League of Women Voters.

The report, presented this week to the city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, also recommended a revision of election procedures and a requirement that all candidates attend a workshop to learn proper campaign practices before a new election is held. The administrator of the controversial Feb. 8 election, Jill Banks Barad, said she agreed with the report's findings. She said the election rules and procedures were confusing, and a staff member of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment at the polling site gave her staff erroneous advice and instructions.

Greg Nelson, general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, said it shouldn't be blamed. "Our department had no role in this election," he said, adding that the staff members of his agency, which supports neighborhood councils, were only there "watching and observing" the election.

According to the report, one candidate -- Hilda Garcia -- was talking to voters up to the time they entered the voting booth and had to be asked three times to leave before she was removed from the premises.

Garcia, who won the election, denied that she did anything wrong. She said she was merely helping her Spanish-speaking neighbors because there were no interpreters there.

"They didn't understand the voting process," Garcia said. "I just told them this is what you do, you fill out the paper, you go to the voting booth and that's it."

The neighborhood council system was approved by voters in 1999 to address public disenchantment with city government spurred by secession efforts in the San Fernando Valley and Hollywood. There are 67 neighborhood councils citywide, 44 of which have held elections since the first poll took place a year ago, according to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

Now that the report is complete, there is disagreement over what should be done next, and who should decide.

The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment "has to make this decision," said the executive director of the voters league, Julie Rajan, who wrote the report. "They are responsible for neighborhood councils and certifying elections."

But Nelson said it's not his department's responsibility. Rather, it is up to each neighborhood council to decide how its elections are finalized. The Van Nuys community council has already settled on Pacoima-based legal aid group Neighborhood Legal Services as the independent third-party monitor.

Monitoring an election "is not something we have done in the past," said Neal Dudovitz, the group's executive director, declining to speculate on what it would do because it hasn't been formally asked to participate.

"This is such a turmoil," said Don Schultz, president of the Van Nuys Homeowners Assn., who had to provide identification to vote in the election, while his wife did not. "To me, this is being mishandled by the Department of Neighborhood [Empowerment]. To me, there's just no leadership there."