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## **Resolution yet to be reached in Van Nuys election dispute**

**By James Nash**  
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VAN NUYS -- The third organization tapped to resolve an emotional dispute over the election of the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council has declined to take up the matter, prolonging an impasse that has left some in Van Nuys disillusioned over the future of neighborhood governance.

Last week, Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County formally announced that it would not mediate a dispute over whether the Feb. 8 election for 15 Van Nuys Neighborhood Council seats was tainted by illegal electioneering.

Neal Dudovitz, executive director of the Pacoima-based nonprofit legal group, wrote that the ruling on the Van Nuys election was inconsistent with its goal of providing legal advice to low-income residents.

The setback is the third for the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council, which is one of 97 of the panels forming in Los Angeles under a charter-reform measure to bring more power to neighborhoods.

Previously, the offices of City Council members Ruth Galanter and Wendy Greuel, as well as City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo, announced that they would not mediate the dispute.

The Los Angeles Chapter of the League of Women Voters investigated the election and wrote a report recommending a new vote, but city officials said the league's findings were not binding.

Tonight, the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners, a panel drawn from neighborhood councils across the city, is scheduled to discuss the Van Nuys stalemate and come up with nonbinding recommendations of its own.

The nearly 3-month-old impasse has some Van Nuys activists frustrated that their community is being left behind in the neighborhood-empowerment process. Others accuse the city of Los Angeles Department of Neighborhood Empowerment -- dubbed the Department of Neighborhood Emasculation by some -- of tampering with the process.

"I'm seeking for us to be self-determining, rather than having DONE dictate to us," said Launa Prince, who was a member of the interim neighborhood council

before the February election. "The stakeholders are being completely disenfranchised and circumvented, while the neighborhood council board is being given the opportunity to decide how to handle the challenge. It's a complete conflict of interest."

DONE officials have maintained that the neighborhood council board, even though nine of its 15 members face election challenges, should decide how to resolve the challenges.

Several activists, including losing candidates for neighborhood council seats, filed formal challenges after the election, alleging that the winners illegally solicited votes outside the polling place by promising better social services for Latinos. The campaigning violated a rule against soliciting votes within 100 feet of a polling place, the challengers said.

The winning candidates deny the charges.

"Once we get a third party (to take up the challenges), I think they'll find that the elected board, the ones who are challenged, did nothing wrong," said Hilda Garcia, one of the victorious candidates. "For them to tell us that we can't target Latinos, which is almost 80 percent of Van Nuys, is absurd."

Department of Neighborhood Empowerment General Manager Greg Nelson sent a memo to former candidates and other interested parties last week in which he suggested a special "retreat" meeting to resolve differences over the election. He said critics who are asking his department to step in and resolve the challenges don't understand the concept of empowering neighborhoods.

"We don't want to be making stuff up; we want to follow the laws and procedures that are in place," Nelson said. "We don't have the ability to declare martial law."