

Los Angeles Daily News

Advisory panel hopefuls say election flawed

By James Nash
Staff Writer

Friday, February 14, 2003 - VAN NUYS -- Activists stacked the new Van Nuys Neighborhood Council with their hand-picked candidates in last weekend's election by asking passers-by -- including some who were only visiting Van Nuys -- to come and cast ballots for them, according to complaints filed Friday.

The challenge filed by the three losing candidates cuts to the heart of the question of who can vote in elections for Los Angeles' new neighborhood councils. The city currently has 63 councils, which are intended to advise City Hall on matters affecting local communities.

"The process was flawed and divisive, and it introduced ethnic politics," said Hal Netkin, who filed one of the complaints. "Whether it's right or wrong, I don't know, but it's divisive."

Netkin, who finished second of three candidates in the race for a senior citizens representative on the council, filed a written complaint that accused a faction of Latino activists of enticing people on the street to vote for them with promises of better social services.

The winning candidates denied wrongdoing and said their only goal was to involve a broad cross section of Van Nuys in local governance.

Netkin was joined in the challenge by John Quinn, who finished last of four candidates for a resident representative seat, and Malcolm Gibson, who finished second in the same race.

The complaints were filed with Jill Barad, a Sherman Oaks Neighborhood Council organizer who served as the volunteer election administrator in Van Nuys. She will investigate and determine the validity of the complaints.

The Van Nuys Neighborhood Council election took place last Saturday in a storefront near Victory and Van Nuys boulevards. The complaints allege that activists led by Enrique Aragon solicited votes from people walking past -- without regard for city rules that limit voting to those who live, work or own property in the area.

Aragon, who did not run for a council seat, denied that he manipulated the process and said he supported a diverse group of neighborhood leaders.

"We need people from all areas of Van Nuys to be involved to improve their neighborhoods," Aragon said. "That's the only way we can rebuild our communities and be involved."

One of the winning candidates, Hilda Garcia, said she did not witness any attempts to improperly influence the election.

"(Election monitors) did a good job in monitoring the election," she said. "I think I can represent the community very well. I think everybody needs to participate in the process."

The Los Angeles Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which is overseeing the development of the advisory councils, opens the elections for the panels to "stakeholders," but people who are simply visiting or shopping in an area do not qualify, said Greg Nelson, the department's general manager.

Netkin charged in his written complaint that activists stood near the intersection and handed fliers to passers-by encouraging them to vote for the slate.

Such electioneering is prohibited within 100 feet of a polling place, but the activists were standing in the prohibited area and the city election monitors did nothing to stop them until more than three hours into the election, according to Netkin.

Furthermore, he said, the election monitors only checked the identification of some voters, which meant that people could vote without proving they met any "stakeholder" criteria.

Barad, the election administrator, said she received conflicting orders from Department of Neighborhood Empowerment officials about whether to check identification. Some people were checked and others weren't, she said.

And, even though prospective voters had to fill out forms in which they stated -- under penalty of perjury -- their names, addresses or other affiliation to Van Nuys, the election monitors had no way to verify the information, she said.

Meanwhile, 15 miles south, a candidate who lost an unrelated election for the Hollywood Neighborhood Council is charging that Scientologists packed the polling place Wednesday night to ensure that fellow Scientologists would be elected to the council.

Joe Shea, a former Los Angeles mayoral candidate who edits an Internet newspaper called American Reporter, wrote that Scientologists "descended by the busload" at the Hollywood Neighborhood Council election.

Church of Scientology International spokeswoman Linda Simmons Hight said hundreds of Scientologists live and work in Hollywood and are entitled to vote as much as anyone else. She blasted Shea for making an issue of voters' religious backgrounds and denied that there was an official Scientology slate of candidates.

"We're so much a part of the Hollywood community and we're big supporters of the neighborhood council," Hight said.