

Los Angeles Daily News

Battling neighbors now colleagues on Toluca Lake panel

By James Nash
Staff Writer

Monday, February 24, 2003 - TOLUCA LAKE -- Spencer Carter and Theresa Karam have brought their long-running neighborhood feud to the table as members of one of Los Angeles' new advisory neighborhood councils.

Carter and Karam, next-door neighbors in North Hollywood, have spent more time together in court than at neighborhood barbecues. He accuses her of being a neighborhood bully with a history of over-the-top activism. She calls him an obsessive pest with violent tendencies.

And now both are members of the Greater Toluca Lake Neighborhood Council, elected to voice the concerns of their neighbors to Los Angeles City Hall.

Some observers say the election of both -- over Carter's strenuous objections and despite his long-standing restraining order against her -- illustrates the peril of a form of government so local that neighbor-to-neighbor rivalries become tangled in its fabric.

"You've got a certain political immaturity," said Sol Ajalat, president of the Greater Toluca Lake Neighborhood Council. "Some of the fighting has been pretty devastating, particularly when it flows from one council to the other."

Several of the 63 neighborhood councils in Los Angeles have been strafed by conflict in their formative stages. Most of the disputes are over territory: The Woodland Hills/Warner Center and Canoga Park neighborhood councils feuded over boundaries, and two neighborhood councils in the Cahuenga Pass area had competing claims over a greenbelt between them.

So far, tensions at the Greater Toluca Lake Neighborhood Council have mostly remained below the surface. Carter challenged the election in which both he and Karam were elected, saying there was improper electioneering

at the polling place. At its first meeting Jan. 28, the newly elected board rejected the challenge.

Carter also charged that Karam's group, the Toluca Terrace Woods Homeowners Association, doesn't exist. Karam has used it to fight businesses -- including a bakery and a medical laboratory -- that she says are a detriment to their quiet tree-lined neighborhood.

Even though the group's first meeting was outwardly civil, Karam weighed in the next morning with criticisms of her rival.

"He started off in a very, very poor manner," she said. "Everyone was antagonized by his criticisms of the election process. He's been divisive since he moved in. He's been libelous and slanderous since he moved in. I don't see him changing that."

Carter, for his part, says he's one of only a handful of people with the courage to stand up to a neighborhood bully. When Karam announced her candidacy for the neighborhood council, he jumped into the race as a "sound, sane alternative to Theresa Karam."

In a flier distributed through the neighborhood, Carter wrote that Karam has been arrested twice and had two restraining orders against her -- one of them from Carter himself.

Karam was arrested in 1995 on suspicion of trespassing at a recording studio she opposed. She was arrested again in 2000 on suspicion of trespassing and obstructing a police officer at a Burbank City Council meeting she had attended to speak out against airport expansion.

She said the arrests are part of a pattern of "terrorism against an activist," and charged that Carter is aligned with airport expansion backers.

"This woman has the fantasy that she has some power in the neighborhood," he said. "People like her don't respond to rational suggestions. They live in their own little dream world."

The neighbors' dispute dates back almost three years, when Carter and his wife moved to the neighborhood. Carter said Karam was holding yard sales

in an alley between their houses almost every weekend, causing traffic and noise.

Karam denied she did anything to antagonize Carter and doesn't understand his animosity.

The Carters have grainy videotape from a security camera that shows a woman -- who they say is Karam -- peering into their gates with a video camera and, on another day, flinging an object into their yard.

Karam suggests that the tape was doctored or that the Carters got someone who looks like her to stage the video.

The videotape was later used as evidence to get a restraining order preventing Karam from coming within 15 feet of him.

Although personality conflicts sometimes develop during the formative stages of a neighborhood council, it's unusual for two people with intense bad feelings to find themselves on a council together, said Greg Nelson, general manager of the city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

"Once you have the governing board duly elected by all the stakeholders, things are pretty much in place," Nelson said.

Ajalat, the council's president, said he hopes his squabbling colleagues will leave their personal disputes at home. If things flare up, Ajalat said, they both could be removed.

"This has been one of the more successful neighborhood councils around. I just hope that they can defuse the problems as they go along."