

Neighborhood Councils Stumble at the Gate

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The very program created by city hall as the antidote to secession itself – the establishment of neighborhood councils – has gotten off to a bumpy start with community and business leaders expressing growing discontent with the process created to form them.

In the Valley, 26 councils have been certified, with as many as eight to 10 more still forming with 77 certified citywide since the blueprint for the system was finally approved in 2001. It's expected that there will eventually be as many as 100 councils citywide.

A few Valley councils are still in the final stages of formation, but of those certified, only 18 have held elections for board officers.

One Valley council has threatened to throw in the towel; another can't seem to get from certification to elections, despite a two-year gap in between. Many councils have finally received their first installment checks from the city, but are still operating from dining room tables and makeshift offices, as funding for building leases remains stuck somewhere in the pipeline.

City officials are calling for patience, pointing out that they are attempting to implement the largest system of neighborhood councils in the country.

Nonetheless, frustrations are mounting and many council representatives say the so-called "empowerment" promised four years ago by the neighborhood councils concept has yet to materialize.

"The real problem is poor management," said Stephen Lenske, president of the North Hills Neighborhood Council, the first council to be certified in the Valley. North Hills came close to disbanding in September after the city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment or DONE, which oversees the councils, denied its application for funding to lease a local office space.

DONE is in the middle of revamping its guidelines for lease agreements for neighborhood councils, largely due to liability issues that have cropped up. So far, the best it can do for West Hills is to offer a city-owned building roughly 12 miles away, in Panorama City.

"You call that empowerment?" said Lenske. "The whole concept of neighborhood councils is to bring government into the community, not take it out of the community."

West Hills is expected to take a vote on disbanding again in November, but Lenske said his group is working closely with DONE on a resolution.

Greg Nelson, DONE's general manager, concedes there are problems, particularly with office leases. But he says for every criticism of his department and staff there is a legitimate effort being made to address it.

For example, Nelson said he's hoping to get city council support for an ordinance change that

would give DONE direct power to negotiate and approve office leases for the councils, with more flexibility for renting non-city facilities.

“We know that office space is critical for the councils and we want to do whatever it takes to make sure we get them what they need, but we also have liability issues we must confront, particularly when we are talking about leasing private property.” Nelson said. But despite the familiar refrains of dissatisfaction, in this debate both factions share a common goal.

“We may be at odds over how fast the process should be moving, but I say just hang on and keep telling us what’s wrong, because that is how we are going to get through this,” said Nelson. “We are on the same team, even if it doesn’t appear that way to some.”

Roadblocks claimed

One overriding concern, says Jill Banks Barad, vice chairwoman of the Sherman Oaks Neighborhood Council and founder of the Valley Alliance of Neighborhood Councils, is the perception that DONE sets up too many road blocks for councils, particularly when it comes to approving bylaws and elections procedures. And, because both the councils and DONE are represented by the same city attorney, there is also a sense that complaints against DONE about this and other issues aren’t being taken seriously.

Barad has met with City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo and asked for changes.

“There is a feeling that DONE is simply not being held accountable to anyone,” said Barad.

Delgadillo said he has agreed to allocate separate resources for neighborhood councils but offered no clear timeline for doing so. Although he believes reforms are needed he’s also cautioning that his position of authority over city departments is purely advisory.

“I have agreed to commit separate resources,” said Delgadillo. “But as to whether or not our departments are functioning properly, I do advise them (on) managing risks and following the law, but I’m not allowed to give orders.”

The Valley Glen Neighborhood Council was certified in August of 2001, yet it has been asked to rewrite its proposed bylaws three times since, which has meant putting off its board elections.

Now DONE is preparing to revamp election procedures and Valley Glen may be forced to start from scratch. Nelson said one of the potential changes being discussed could require councils to hold their elections within a few months after being certified, or start all over again.

“It’s like we’ve been battling it out now for almost two full years and we can’t get to the next step,” said Laurie Levine, Valley Glen’s interim vice president. “Now what we are hearing is we may have to re-apply for certification again. That means going right back to where we were in 2001.”

Disconnect seen

Barad also said that, in some sectors of the Valley, there is a disconnect between neighborhood councils and the business community, with councils leery of developers’ intentions, and business owners who don’t appear all that interested in viewing the councils as legitimate.

Barad's alliance and the United Chambers Of Commerce held the first of regularly planned forums Oct. 9 with members from both sides, hoping to bridge the divide.

"We think there is a need to bring people together to discuss our goals," said Barad.

Other council officials also say that some city council members who represent the Valley have not shown the level of interest in working with neighborhood councils they promised during the height of the secession drive.

"When you go to the city council with complaints about DONE, or the process, they just send you back to DONE," said James Cordaro, president of the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council, whose elections earlier this year were upset by allegations of vote tampering and other issues.

City Council President Alex Padilla, who formed a close anti-secession alliance with Hahn last year said, despite efforts to support the councils anyway it can, the city council is expected to remain somewhat neutral.

"I'm equally as frustrated," said Padilla. "But as a city council member and an elected official, if I and or my staff participate too much with a (neighborhood) council, I run the risk of trying to control it. So it's a delicate balancing act for me."

But some city council members are getting involved. When news spread that West Hills was preparing to disband, for example, City Councilman Dennis Zine and Nelson went before the council's elected board to urge its members to delay the vote, Nelson said.

Councilwoman Wendy Greuel is said to be forming a workshop for council leaders in her district. And, Councilman Greig Smith has introduced a motion that would allow neighborhood councils to determine how the bulk of public works project funds are spent in their districts.

"They know what streets need to be paved, which trees need trimming," said Smith. "This is probably the most substantial direction of authority for the councils introduced so far."