

Daily News

DONE redo

Department undercuts credibility of L.A.'s neighborhood councils

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Officials at the Los Angeles Department of Neighborhood Empowerment "are there for one reason only, and that is to empower neighborhoods," says City Councilwoman Janice Hahn.

"I would just keep reminding them of that mission."

But 1 ½ years into DONE's troubled existence, and with the Van Nuys Advisory Neighborhood Council an embarrassing monument to the department's failures, it would appear that officials need more than just a reminder of their purpose.

They need an investigation.

They need to be held publicly accountable.

And if the public doesn't trust them to do their job honestly and well, they need to be replaced.

In the three months since DONE held elections for the Van Nuys Advisory Neighborhood Council, the results are still in dispute in no small part to DONE's failure to intervene.

Some of the losing candidates in the Van Nuys race claim there were numerous violations on the part of winners, such as campaigning near polling places, targeting voters on the basis of ethnicity and escorting voters into the polls. Worse yet, they also charge DONE staffers with failing to verify voters' eligibility and picking sides in the race.

When an independent investigation from the League of Women Voters substantiated those charges, DONE officials decided to ignore the report.

Meanwhile, grievances against DONE continue to pile up.

Many of the activists involved in the 34 San Fernando Valley neighborhood councils have complained that the department pits neighborhoods against each other, creates arbitrary rules and generally obstructs the creation and operation of councils. Some charge DONE workers with bringing their own agenda -- one that often contradicts the concerns of local residents -- to the table.

Charges, of course, are only charges, and none of the sinister allegations against DONE has been proved.

But if neighborhood councils are going to have any hope of succeeding -- that is, if they are going to provide a voice for local communities in City Hall -- then their integrity is crucial. Not even the appearance of impropriety is acceptable.

Much as the City Council and Mayor James Hahn have tried to wash their hands of the DONE fiasco, their leadership is desperately needed, lest the neighborhood councils lose what little credibility they have left.

It's time for city leaders to shine the spotlight on DONE with an open and public investigation. All allegations must be heard and verified, so that anyone responsible for any wrongdoing is ferreted out and local infighting is put to rest.

Until that happens, DONE will continue to be clouded in a controversy that interferes with its ability to empower neighborhoods. And empowering neighborhoods, as Councilwoman Hahn has rightly observed, is its only purpose.

The cloud hanging over DONE is a disservice to the hundreds of people who got involved in neighborhood councils in hopes of making Los Angeles a better city. They deserve more support from City Hall.