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CRITICS: PANEL BAD FOR COUNCILS CITY CRITICIZED FOR 'SABOTAGING' EFFORTS

The botched election of the advisory Van Nuys Neighborhood Council has become the flash point in a growing controversy over the city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment and how it operates. Many activists involved in the 34 councils in the San Fernando Valley accuse DONE of pitting neighbors against one another, meddling in neighborhood council elections, creating arbitrary rules and stalling the formation of some councils.

"I believe that DONE is effectively sabotaging the independence and autonomy of the neighborhood councils," said Robert Lamishaw of Winnetka, who worked on the 1999 city charter reform that spawned the councils. "They don't give guidance, but they tell you what you can't do, so you have to kind of guess at what is acceptable."

Neighborhood councils were a key component of the charter reform effort offered as an antidote to secession. A citywide network of more than 100 neighborhood councils – made up of homeowners, renters, employees and other "stakeholders" in communities – was supposed to give a voice to average people who weren't often heard at City Hall.

Many leaders of the Valley secession movement – including Lamishaw, who placed first in the race for a council seat in the proposed Valley city – have immersed themselves in neighborhood councils in their communities. And while many say they haven't given up on the city's experiment in neighborhood empowerment, they're discouraged by what they see so far.

Van Nuys has become the battleground. The Feb. 8 election for the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council has drawn five challenges from people who allege that the winners illegally solicited votes within 100 feet of the polling place and, in some cases, accompanied voters to the booth to get their votes. The challenges say DONE officials sided with a group of Latino activists and candidates who won most of the seats. They note that DONE rejected a report from the League of Women Voters that supported the allegations and recommended a new election overseen by different DONE officials.

Jill Banks Barad, a newly elected Sherman Oak's Neighborhood Council member who served as the election administrator in Van Nuys, said she has noticed a pattern of DONE officials trying to control the councils.

The Van Nuys election brought many of the issues to a head, said Barad, who has organized the Valley Alliance of Neighborhood Councils.

DONE is so controlling that it attempted to bring the alliance – which was supposed to be independent of the city under city and state rules for conducting public meetings, she said. “Rather than empower, they control”, she said. “They tell you what you can’t do. It seems to me that their role should be to facilitate.” DONE General Manager Greg Nelson defends his staff, saying they’re caught between some neighborhood councils that want near-total independence and others that desire more guidance from DONE. Nelson denied that his department has any interest in the outcome of elections, other than that they yield councils that represent a cross-section of the community. People who are demanding that DONE create and enforce a uniform set of rules for neighborhood councils are missing a point, Nelson said.

“People are used to government telling them what to do,” he said. “We decided early on that we didn’t want rules and regulations to be developed at City Hall.” Instead, some Valley activists say, the rules are being developed on the fly by inexperienced DONE staffers who sometimes have their own agendas. In North Hollywood, DONE officials insisted that the neighborhood councils election not be held at the police station for fear of scaring off some voters, according to information compiled by the Valley Alliance of Neighborhood Councils.

Higher level DONE officials overturned that decision and the election took place at the police station. In Northridge, DONE officials rejected the concept of neighborhood council meetings conducted in the “town hall” format with stakeholders allowed to vote on issues along with the neighborhood council itself, said Jane Lowenthal, the panel’s president.

The back-and-forth debate with different DONE officials and other city leaders delayed the formation of the Northridge Neighborhood Council by about 18 months, she said. “The rules keep changing,” Lowenthal said. “We’ve been bombarded with problems by (DONE officials).”

Defenders of the neighborhood council system say the problems so far are fairly minor and an inevitable reflection of the messy nature of democracy. Nelson often points out that no other major U.S. city has developed a comprehensive system of neighborhood advisory councils, so Los Angeles lacks a road map.

“It’s absolutely amazing that 11/2 years into the certification process, we have 69 neighborhood councils certified and 45 elections for board members,” said Bill Christopher, president of the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners, an advisory panel that suggests policy to DONE. “Do we have some issues to work through? Absolutely.” More troubling, though, is that DONE officials seem not to learn from their mistakes, some activists say. In the case of Van Nuys, the DONE officials acted in their self-interest by rejecting valid criticism from the League of Women Voters and others, said Valley Village resident David Hernandez, who has been involved in forming neighborhood councils in Sun Valley and North Hollywood.

“It’s one thing to evolve and make mistakes,” Hernandez said. “But not to learn from those errors to continue to manipulate the process knowing there were mistakes made and lessons to be learned shows me there’s an individual who’s not able to evolve with the process.” Nelson, the individual to whom Hernandez was referring said his organization is constantly evolving and that he also embraces change.

Harbor-area Councilwoman Janice Hahn, the chairwoman of a City Council committee that oversees DONE, said she hears the criticism of the department and is working to hold DONE officials accountable for their actions “They are there for one reason only, and that is to empower neighborhoods,” Hahn said. “I would just keep reminding them of that mission.”