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Neighborhood Watch

As one of the crafters of the city's new system of local councils and head of the department that oversees them, city hall veteran Greg Nelson finds grassroots government is a tricky business

By **JACQUELINE FOX**
Staff Reporter

It would not be far off the mark to refer to Greg Nelson as the architect of the city's emerging system of neighborhood councils.



In capping a 30-year career as a long-time aide and last chief of staff to former City Councilman Joel Wachs, Nelson crafted the blueprint for a proposed system of councils that served as the cornerstone of the city's charter reform initiative, approved by voters in June of 1999.

The vote led to the establishment of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE), the agency overseeing the council formation process and headed by Nelson, its general manager since August of 2001.

The council system was proposed under former Mayor Richard Riordan as a way to stifle growing support for carving up Los Angeles, fueled largely by a multi-year secession campaign in the Valley.

But critics have been harsh from day one, initially accusing DONE of stonewalling the formation process, others simply refusing to see councils as having the potential to spark real change.

DONE has also taken heat recently for the bungled Van Nuys Neighborhood Council elections, which, due to accusations by losing candidates of polling abuses and other issues, have been placed under formal review since being held in February. Three previous efforts to obtain an outside arbiter to resolve the dispute have failed.

DONE is now counting on the city clerk to bring that situation to a close and is rewriting election guidelines for those councils that are still forming so that they may avoid similar setbacks.

Question: How did you get your current position?

Answer: I worked for Councilman Wachs from 1971 until he left, which meant right up through charter reform. I was asked to sit down and write up the portion of the charter reform ballot amendment that would create this department and the entire citywide council system. When the reforms were approved, Mayor Riordan appointed someone else to run the department, I stayed on as staff for the council district after Joel left office and stayed there until I was appointed by Mayor James Hahn to take over.

Q: Although you were born in San Diego, you grew up in the Valley and spent many years here. Did you support the secession drive?

A: Certainly I understood the reasons why people wanted to break up the city. There was some pretty serious discontent and some of that is still there. But I really felt secession was not the way to remedy that. I actually believe that it was the secession movement that helped fuel the support we have received for neighborhood councils.

Q: How big is your staff and what is DONE's budget?

A: We are authorized for 60 but because of budget cuts we have only 46 full-time employees on staff. Our

budget is at \$4.5 million.

Q: How many councils citywide have been certified and how many have held their elections so far? And what are the figures for the Valley?

A: There are 70 certified neighborhood councils citywide, and 47 of them have held their elections, with Tarzana being the 47th to do so. In the Valley, there are 23 certified and 12 have held their elections, although Van Nuys does hang in the balance and we are hoping that it will soon be resolved. There will be 32 neighborhood councils in the Valley when all are up and running, which would represent about a third of all councils citywide.

Q: DONE has been criticized from the beginning for initially taking too long to establish the procedures for councils to apply for certification, and more recently, for what some characterize as confusing or conflicting guidelines on certification procedures. What's your response to this criticism?

A: I think in the very early stages, before I was appointed, there may not have been as much of a focus on collecting what we call "best practices" from other cities that have established neighborhood councils. Using examples of those would have meant that L.A. didn't just have to create a system from the ground up. Believe me, the system can't move fast enough for me. And, when we had our recent Congress of Neighborhoods conference, that was one of the things we did was begin to work on establishing a set of these best practices so that one council can learn from another where something worked well, or where something didn't.

Q: But what about criticism over the guidelines themselves?

A: The fact is, we are not supposed to get too directly involved in procedures, which means we have set guidelines but we let the councils use those guidelines as a model, otherwise, where is the local control? On the other hand, we do know that one of the problems we've experienced is some councils have had difficulty differentiating between what we recommend and what we say they can and can't do. This has created confusion and it's a fine line for us to walk.

Q: The Valley Alliance for Neighborhood Councils formed specifically to address concerns about conflicting election guidelines and recommendations from DONE. How is this being addressed?

A: We have been working on a booklet of new election guidelines since the (Alliance) asked us to do so. We'd like to have had it done by now, but obviously with a shortage of staff, things don't move as quickly as they should.

Q: What in your opinion went wrong in Van Nuys?

A: I've said this before. I think that there were red flags with their election procedures in their bylaws from the beginning, the biggest one being that they declared that their own elected board would resolve election disputes. Well, that meant that losing candidates couldn't be involved in doing that and they are fighting that. We told them from the beginning that we recommended they designate an outside entity for that and they took that as a recommendation and said "thanks, but we'll do it our way." So this was an accident waiting to happen.

Q: Now that it appears the city clerk will arbitrate the Van Nuys dispute, how long do you predict it will take until the council can get down to business?

A: That's going to depend on who we are asked to help get involved and how many people (the city clerk) will need to contact to get the information they need to settle the dispute. They will be talking to people who can verify what happened at the polls or anybody who has information about the elections. For example, we have a staff member here who had a cell phone conversation on the day of the elections with the election coordinator. So clearly we want them to be calling on as many people as possible.

Q: The Arleta Neighborhood Council elections held in May are also now being challenged by one resident who says ballot material failed to print information in Tagalog for Filipinos in the area. Are these types of challenges happening outside the Valley as well?

A: Yes. The election for the Historical Cultural Neighborhood Council, which encompasses Chinatown, the Little Tokyo Arts District, El Pueblo and Victor Heights, for example, has 40 challenges on file. One of those focuses on the fact that several different Asian dialects were being spoken inside the polls to help voters make their choices and people are questioning what was being said to them. We've had 47 elections so far and most have gone smoothly. But obviously the problems are not unique to the Valley.

Q: Beyond disputes over election results and DONE guidelines, skeptics say neighborhood councils are unlikely to have any real power once they are fully up and running. What's your response?

A: Ever since day one, I've said that real power isn't given, it's taken. If you ask people in the Valley who the most powerful people at city hall are, they'll all say it's the lobbyists. Well nobody gave the lobbyists their power. They took it because they knew they could and they took all they wanted. If the councils recognize their real power there isn't a legislator or school board member in the state who isn't going to pay attention to them.

SNAPSHOT: Greg Nelson

Title: General Manager, Los Angeles Department of Neighborhood Empowerment

Age: 56

Birthplace: San Diego

Education: B.A., Urban Studies, San Fernando Valley State College (Now CSUN)

Career Turning Point: Enlisting in the Vietnam war where he met a friend who suggested the key to success lies in "figuring out the system."

Most Admired Person: U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell

Personal Motto: "Losers make excuses."