

Los Angeles Daily News

Beyond Northridge

It's time to investigate and overhaul the city's neighborhood council system

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The brouhaha surrounding Northridge's would-be neighborhood council is a reminder of all that's wrong with Los Angeles city officials' faint-hearted attempt at empowering communities.

Not that reminders were necessary.

Ever since voters approved City Charter reform in 1999, the City Hall crowd has done its best to gut the neighborhood council system. It has dragged its feet on creating the councils and stingily resisted sharing money or authority with them.

The system has been broken since its very inception, and, with the fiasco in Northridge, the problems become all the harder for city leaders to deny.

At the beginning of the month, the city's Board of Neighborhood Commissioners voted to reject the would-be council's application for certification -- the first rejection after more than 70 approvals.

The Northridge petitioners claim the rejection was politically motivated, and it's hard to blame them for thinking that way. Northridge has long been a hotbed of San Fernando Valley political activism, which the group pushing for the neighborhood council vividly reflects. Its leaders are the sort of people most disdained at City Hall -- people who are more interested in fighting the city's political establishment than in joining it.

It's impossible to know whether politics alone kept them from getting their council, but politics surely had something to do with it.

It doesn't help that, in rejecting Northridge's application, the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners' cited largely subjective criteria. The board claims that the Northridge group didn't reach out enough to the local community or cooperate sufficiently with the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

But exactly how much and what kind of community outreach is enough?

And what, precisely, does "cooperating" with the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment require?

Absent clear guidelines and criteria, it's easy for political considerations to corrupt the neighborhood council formation process.

That certainly appears to be the case with the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment in this and other cases.

In Van Nuys, residents claim the city department not only botched neighborhood council elections, but also took sides.

In Northridge, the department tried to block local leaders from conducting meetings in a town hall format, even though "local control" should, at the very least, mean that local councils control their own meetings.

Rather than empowering neighborhoods, the department keeps getting in their way. And even when neighborhood councils do get off the ground, their power is only symbolic.

This is not the local control that voters bargained for when they approved charter reform.

It is, to be sure, what city leaders had in mind.

They wanted neighborhood councils to serve them, not the public. But the public deserves better, and the new breed of City Council members who have taken office since then ought to provide it.

The Northridge controversy gives them the perfect opportunity.

In granting the community its requested appeal, the Los Angeles City Council could launch a larger investigation into all that ails the neighborhood council system. If the City Council members are sincere about empowering communities, they'll do just that.