

## Valley Group to Appeal Denial of City Status

Members are told they failed to do enough outreach to represent the Northridge area.

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A Northridge group said Monday it plans to appeal the denial of its neighborhood council status to the Los Angeles City Council, and some members said they believe the rejection came because the group had been outspoken.

City officials, however, said they opposed certification because the organizers consistently failed to involve community members and were often hostile to those who tried to work with them.

On July 1, the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners, which has approved 74 of the newly formed councils across the city, voted unanimously against certifying the Northridge Neighborhood Council.

Before the vote, the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which helps organize the new groups around Los Angeles, recommended against certification. It was the first time the department had made such a recommendation because a group had not done enough outreach.

"We were appalled," said Charles Brink, a community activist who had been organizing the group for 2 1/2 years. He added that he believes the department wants only "councils they control, made up of people they vet as correct leaders of communities."

Calling the claim "terribly wrong," Greg Nelson, the department's general manager, said organizers "just weren't equipped to go out and have an election."

Information fliers were printed only in English, Nelson said, and organizers did not go to churches, civic organizations or door-to-door to interest prospective members.

They also developed unworkable relations with city employees who tried to help them, physically assaulting one and warning another to leave a public meeting and never come back, Nelson said.

Steve Slutzah, a Northridge resident who tried to get involved in the group and became so frustrated that he spoke against certification at the commission hearing, called the group "the most irritating and frustrating people that I have ever come in contact with." He said he had been called names and intimidated at meetings.

Disagreeing with those allegations, Jane Lowenthal, president of the Northridge group, said she wants the City Council to appoint a mediator to help the group comply with the department's requirements and then ask commissioners to rehear the petition.

"I've never seen hostility to people who were willing to be a working part of the group," Lowenthal said.

Authorized by the 1999 reform of the City Charter, neighborhood councils were designed to give disenchanted residents a voice in city government. The groups began organizing in 2001. Officials hope to have 100 by next June.

Although the groups are encouraged to develop their own rules, each community council must be certified before it may elect officers and become eligible to receive \$50,000 annually in city funding.