

## Los Angeles Daily News

### **DONE and finished?**

West Hills Neighborhood Council tires of City Hall's betrayals

**Sunday, August 24, 2003** - The West Hills Neighborhood Council was the first such panel to come into existence in the San Fernando Valley. Soon, it could be the first to go out of existence, too.

In 1999, neighborhood councils were the great selling point of City Charter reform. At long last, Los Angeles city officials claimed, the city's residents would play an active role in making policies that most directly affect their everyday lives. But the promise was never more than just that: a cheap political ploy to satisfy the public's yearning for real reform with a *faux* substitute. Councils were given a strictly "advisory" (read: symbolic) role, with little funding and no authority.

Then, as if to make matters even worse, the city created the laughably misnamed Department of Neighborhood Empowerment to oversee the creation and operation of the councils. The department's true purpose, it seems, is to obstruct and hamstring the councils as much as possible -- a job DONE's done all too well.

Nowhere has the sham of the councils been more apparent than in the Valley. In Van Nuys, DONE allegedly botched the local council's elections, failing to make sure only eligible voters took part, then showed preference to one set of candidates. In Northridge, DONE worked to successfully block the unofficial neighborhood council's certification, and some members think it's because they actively supported Valley secession.

DONE, of course, denies the allegations, but what's undeniable is that neighborhood councils are not living up to their billing.

And so we now have the prospect of the West Hills council being the first, although probably not the last, to consider pulling the plug on itself. At its meeting Sept. 3, the council will vote on its own dissolution.

Council members are fed up with their inability to take care of even the most basic procedural responsibilities, such as securing their \$50,000 in funding and office space. DONE has been little help, offering an office in Panorama City or Reseda, but West Hills' representatives hang on to their belief that the seat of their government should, in fact, be in West Hills.

Member Ed Youngblood sums up the council's frustration when he complains about two years of bureaucratic delays: "It's a long time to be listening to the promises of what it can and should be versus what it really is."

Surely the West Hills community leaders aren't alone. There are already some 100 neighborhood councils in Los Angeles, all dealing with DONE, and many are, no doubt, every bit as frustrated by the experience. As the neighborhood council experiment fails on an ever broader scale, more and more L.A. residents will be left feeling betrayed and disappointed.

This is the sort of alienation that breeds the apathy and low voter turnout on which City Hall thrives, and the city withers.