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Stay put, Dennis

Zine can best serve West Hills council in City Hall

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Memo to Los Angeles City Councilman Dennis Zine: You already serve on the elected council in this city, and that's enough.

Zine, who fancies himself a man of the people, wants to bolster his populist credentials by joining the struggling West Hills Neighborhood Council -- the advisory group that's supposed to help the community get some respect in City Hall.

The problem is, Zine already *is* in City Hall. If he wants the West Hills Neighborhood Council to get some respect, all he has to do is give it.

Members of the neighborhood council, fed up with the city bureaucracy's failure to deliver on \$50,000 in promised funding, have threatened to disband the panel altogether. That has Zine, who served on the commission that created the powerless neighborhood-council system, in a tizzy. Rather than let the West Hills panel die on the vine, he hopes to run for it, then vote for its continued operation.

"It was either (run) or stand by and watch it dissolve," Zine said.

But there's a more logical alternative, one that might not be as sensational as a city councilman's mixing it up with the little people back home, but one that would be far more effective: Zine could throw some of his clout around in City Hall.

Specifically, he and his colleagues on the City Council could launch an investigation into the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which, by most counts, has done little to live up to its name. DONE has exasperated members of the West Hills Neighborhood Council, as well as others. Its general manager, Greg Nelson, should be called in to answer for its obstruction of neighborhood empowerment, feeble as the City Hall power structure envisioned.

Of course, the same could be said for most every city department. Few have lived up to their responsibility to serve the public. That's why neighborhood councils were created in the first place -- to give communities greater say in City Hall, with the hope that a better, more responsive city government would result.

But neighborhood councils, as the experience of the West Hills panel illustrates, are failing to fulfill that promise despite the hard work and earnest commitment of thousands of ordinary people. And the blame belongs not only to DONE, but also to the mayor and the City Council for turning a blind eye to DONE's inadequacy.

If Zine wants to improve the lot of neighborhood councils -- rather than simply grandstand -- he'll take on the thornier task of getting DONE to become a vehicle for, rather than an obstacle to, community empowerment.

Anything less is meaningless posturing.

As Zine should know better than anyone, neighborhood councils need their autonomy. That's why City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo calls Zine's ambitions for lower office inadvisable.

The point of neighborhood councils was to give communities a voice in City Hall -- not to give City Hall a voice in the community.