

Neighborhood council election rules ordered
By James Nash, Staff Writer

Seeking to impose order on the often-chaotic process of electing members to neighborhood councils, the Los Angeles City Council adopted dozens of rules Tuesday to ensure transparent elections.

The rules are the city's first attempt to regulate the elections of the advisory panels, which were set up under a 1999 charter reform designed to give communities more representation in City Hall.

Many of the more than 80 neighborhood councils formed to date already have conducted their initial elections. Several of the elections, including those in Van Nuys and Northridge, have been marred by irregularities including animals voting and candidates electioneering at polling places.

Neighborhood council organizers still can choose the election format but must follow standard procedures, such as requiring polling sites to be open at least four hours and requiring at least two candidate information forums in the 45 days leading up to the election.

"There are a lot of different ways to hold an election," said Greg Nelson, general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which oversees the councils. "Whatever (organizers) want to choose, we want to make sure it's an open and fair election."

Nelson's department was accused of meddling in the election of the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council nearly two years ago, which was partially overturned on allegations that winning candidates had solicited votes outside the polling place. In the elections for the Grassroots Venice and Old Northridge neighborhood councils, challengers said the polling was tainted by rules allowing animals to vote.

Don L. Larson, the founder of the Old Northridge panel, welcomed the new rules even though they would have restricted the election to his unorthodox panel.

"We wanted to address those issues," Larson said of the prior lack of rules. "We had fun with that part, but DONE has tightened up its act. They haven't suppressed our creative tensions."

Jill Banks Barad, the president of the Valley Alliance of Neighborhood Councils, said the rules establish some uniform procedures but aren't a foolproof safeguard against election tampering.

"Some of the abuses, for instance the Van Nuys situation, had nothing to do with guidelines," Barad said. "This was outside people coming in, and also DONE coming in, and having a slate of candidates and doing things that weren't right."

The Van Nuys Neighborhood Council is scheduled to hold its first election in two years next month.