

Is the Studio City Neighborhood Council Biased?

By Ramy Eleteby

Since last year, the majority of the Studio City Neighborhood Council has quietly made several decisions that gay councilmembers and others consider discriminatory. The resulting debate raises the issue of whether the self-determining but official advisory bodies to their Los Angeles City Councilmembers may end up contradicting the city charter mandate for diverse inclusion to encourage citizen political participation.

Eyebrows were raised last September when Studio City resident Mildred Higgins spoke against the participation of the Studio City Neighborhood Council (SCNC) in the annual LA/Valley Pride (LAVP) festival because the National Man Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) would be an exhibitor at the event. Openly gay SCNC member Paul Waters, executive director of LAVP and SCNC secretary, informed the council that NAMBLA, a non-gay organization that promotes sexual relations between older men and underage boys, had not applied to be an exhibitor and has not participated in any gay pride event for over a decade. Despite his protests, a motion to participate in LAVP failed by a vote of 4-7.

The vote stood out since other local neighborhood councils, such as Mid Town North Hollywood and Winnetka, participated in the pride event. Adding fuel to the perception of homophobia was the vote last April to give \$5,000 to the Studio City Chamber of Commerce's Fourth of July event on the CBS Studio Center lot, which is also where the pride event is held. When LAVP requested \$75, the council voted no. Interestingly, the Chamber of Commerce supports LAVP and hosted the Studio City Pavilion at LAVP 2004, with a pledge to do so again this year. LAVP is much larger than the Chamber of Commerce event and attracts more city agencies and overall community participation.

The apparent anti-gay discrimination took an even darker turn from September to November when SCNC members voted to remove the standard nondiscrimination clause from their Code of Conduct (which included eight more protected categories) and Operating Procedures. A final vote to remove the clause from the group's bylaws was tabled until the procedures committee could present recommendations. On Feb. 16 the SCNC voted to retain the standard nondiscrimination clause but rejected a motion brought by Waters to insert additional protected classes.

Neighborhood councils are required to provide a minimum list of protected classes but have the right to expand it. Waters' proposal would have added categories from the now-deleted Code of Conduct rules: familial status, gender identity or transgender status, health status, immigration status, opinion, pregnancy status, social status, and veteran status. The motion failed to pass by a vote of 8-5 with Councilmembers Art Ginsberg, Rafi Kuyumjina, Alan Dymond, David Burg, Lynda Wadler, Paul Samek, Art Howard and Julian Bull voting no.

“It’s unfortunate in this day and age that something is different when the issue is sexual orientation, but it obviously is,” Waters told IN Los Angeles. “(It’s) terribly disappointing to me that it’s true in a place like Studio City with such a large and visible gay population.”

A representative from Los Angeles City Councilmember Wendy Greuel’s office was not at the Feb. 16 meeting so it is unclear if the pro-gay councilmember is aware of SCNC’s apparent discriminatory trend. A call to Greuel’s office was not returned by press time.

For meeting minutes of the SCNC, please see www.scnc.info.