

New politics in neighborhood

School runs own slate for city advisory panel

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Miffed by its neighborhood council's dogged land-use reviews, a Chatsworth school has become the latest institution to take its grievances to the ballot box.

High-ranking officials of Sierra Canyon School are among candidates being promoted on a slate that, in an election to be held Saturday, could become a new majority on the Chatsworth Neighborhood Council.

Some Chatsworth Neighborhood Council leaders fear a single-issue takeover by a school slate that they contend does not want to play by all the rules. School officials counter that their education-focused priorities are more inclusive than the current council's agenda.

"It's a small, self-perpetuating oligarchy that's been there, (and) that needed to be rectified," said Sanje Ratnavale, associate head of Sierra Canyon School and a candidate in the election.

But the current president of the council, Marty Woll, said a victory by the school's slate would raise other concerns.

"The only real issue is whether it's a good thing for the neighborhood council to have six employees from one company on the board," he said.

Officials with the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment are aware of the concerns but say no official complaints have been lodged.

"If those are legitimate candidates and the people who come to vote for them are legitimate people, then it's legitimate," said Greg Nelson, general manager of the agency, which oversees the city's approximately 120 neighborhood councils.

The situation seems to resemble previous elections in which candidate slates or voting blocs from certain political, economic or religious-interest groups have become decisive factors, Nelson said.

He cast it as a sign that the relatively young neighborhood council system might be coming to resemble traditional politics.

"Republicans and Democrats have done that for a long time - and unions and environmental groups and pro-life and pro-this and pro-that," he said. "Slates are very common."

A nondenominational private school, Sierra Canyon opened its elementary and middle school in

the North Valley in 1977. It added its first high school class this year.

That transition generated some friction as the proposal for the temporary high school site on Nordhoff Place moved through city government's planning process.

The area's City Council member, Greig Smith, has a policy of seeking advice from neighborhood councils on development projects.

The Chatsworth Neighborhood Council gave its approval to the temporary site, though it followed up with a letter to city officials outlining conditions of the approval and referring to neighbors' concerns about traffic and parking.

"I think we're generally in favor of having it there," Woll said. "I think the only concern is making sure the site impacts to the surrounding community will be adequately considered and mitigated to the extent feasible."

School officials, though, say the council's actions led to more difficulty with the city and helped encourage a lawsuit by a Chatsworth resident in June challenging city approval of the project and seeking a public hearing.

The litigation has since been settled, but it generated frustration and tens of thousands of dollars in legal fees, said Sierra Canyon School head Jim Skrumbis, a Chatsworth Neighborhood Council candidate.

"Most of the people we've come across in the Neighborhood Council have been good, hard-working and interested in community service, but unfortunately some have an agenda," Skrumbis said.

While Skrumbis and Ratnavale acknowledge that their land-use issues sparked their candidacy, they point to some allies in the wider community as evidence of a broader goal.

"I think of it as an education slate, not as a Sierra Canyon slate," said Myranda Marsh, head of James Jordan Middle School.

James Jordan, a nearby charter school, has also had a brush with the Chatsworth Neighborhood Council. The council had pushed for a full public hearing when the school sought a quicker review of a zoning issue, Marsh said.

"With the demographics how they've been the last 20 years, (education) hasn't been a big concern of the council, and that's fine," Marsh said. "But now with the discussions of public education going on in the city of Los Angeles, we really think the Neighborhood Council is going to be an important voice for us in the direction of public education."

Diana Dixon-Davis, currently vice president of the council, denied any anti-education bias on the panel.

"No matter what project, no matter how big or how small, we want a public hearing because that's one of the few controls over land use in our community we have, and it's an important one," she said.