

City Misusing Neighborhood Councils to Push Police Tax, Councilman Says

Greig Smith wants to halt the presentations. Agency head invites foes to present their views.

By Patrick McGreevy and Noam N. Levey
Times Staff Writers

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Los Angeles City Councilman Greig Smith accused city officials Friday of misusing neighborhood councils by organizing meetings intended to win their support for a sales tax increase to pay for more police officers.

Smith called on the city agency that oversees the council network, the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, known as DONE, to stop holding one-sided meetings dominated by supporters of tax increases and to halt a survey that does not mention viable alternatives.

"It is despicable that DONE would implicate itself in an attempt to co-opt neighborhood councils into forcing a tax increase down the throats of the very voters who have already rejected it," Smith wrote to Greg Nelson, the department's general manager.

Noting that Los Angeles County voters rejected a half-cent sales tax for more police in November, Smith said Nelson is inappropriately justifying the meetings by citing an old council motion calling for a review of putting a tax measure on the ballot.

"It is not only disingenuous to resurrect this motion under false pretenses for a city-only tax increase, it is just plain sneaky," he said.

On Wednesday, Council President Alex Padilla proposed putting a half-cent sales tax on the May ballot that would require only a simple majority vote for passage, not the usual two-thirds vote.

Nelson said the City Council asked him to consult with the more than 80 neighborhood councils and report their ideas for hiring more police officers.

"What we are doing is for the first time involving the public in talking about what a proposal might be," said Nelson, who added that this is a more open approach than when city officials work out the details in secret.

Officials of L.A.'s police and fire departments have been attending neighborhood council

meetings, including one Thursday night in San Pedro and one tonight in North Hollywood, and discussing the need for more resources.

As for the lack of balance, Nelson called on Smith and others with different viewpoints to attend the meetings and speak.

"Anybody else who has got some sort of proposals can attend and talk about them," Nelson said.

Smith, who has backed Mayor James K. Hahn for reelection, has floated a proposal to hire 450 police officers without raising taxes by borrowing money against funds the city anticipates receiving from the state, a plan that has been greeted with skepticism by several other city leaders.

Deputy Mayor Doane Liu called Smith's complaint disingenuous and strongly denied the suggestion that city officials were pushing a sales tax increase on the neighborhood councils.

"Nobody is ramming anything down anyone's throats," Liu said. "I don't know why Councilman Smith is complaining. "All they had to do was get up off their butts and go to this meeting," Liu said.