

Political manipulators

Mayor, city officials are abusing integrity of neighborhood councils

The Los Angeles Department of Neighborhood Empowerment operates more like a Department of Mayoral Empowerment.

The department, which has done its best to keep the new advisory neighborhood councils as powerless as possible, has taken to using its resources in concert with Mayor James Hahn, City Council members and appointed officials to pressure the citizen panels to call for a ballot measure raising the sales tax to pay for more police officers.

As part of a campaign to drum up support, DONE is sponsoring seminars with Police Chief William Bratton and Fire Chief William Bamattre who are telling dozens of advisory neighborhood council members what they would do with the \$150 million a year they would get from a half-percent sales tax increase and why it's such a good thing.

Some neighborhood council members are delighted to be getting such high-level attention and have gotten aboard the tax hike train. Others found the sales tax presentations are more like strong-arm propaganda campaigns than informational meetings. They felt heavy pressure to support the May ballot initiative -- or else.

It's telling that DONE officials did not get opponents or opposing views to present. And why would they? At its very core, DONE is a just an arm of the mayor and the power structure members whose only goal is the preservation of power for themselves.

It's also telling that only one council member, the Northwest San Fernando Valley's Greig Smith, has shown the guts to call DONE out. He sent a scathing letter to DONE General Manager Greg Nelson over his abuse of power and has publicly accused Hahn of trying to "use neighborhood councils to his benefit."

That's Hahn's way. He gives away \$3 million a year or more to a public relations firm and then uses its services to promote himself. In this case, he perverts the whole idea of neighborhood councils.

The neighborhood councils were not created to be municipal echo chambers, yet that's what city officials would like. And if DONE -- and the Mayor's Office by extension -- continue to pull the strings of the neighborhood councils, that's exactly what they will become.