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L.A. City Council redistricting discussions turn nasty

By DAVID ZAHNISER, LOS ANGELES TIMES

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The once-a-decade ritual to redraw Los Angeles City Council district lines has become an increasingly messy and acrimonious bit of political theater as lawmakers and community groups jockey for favored positions.

Councilman Bernard C. Parks is seething over what he said was a four-letter epithet directed his way by the executive director of the Redistricting Commission, a former aide and close ally of rival lawmaker and Council President Herb Wesson.

Tongues also were wagging last week about a widely circulated email that said downtowners had “a deal” to speak out in favor of a map sought by Councilman Jose Huizar in exchange for a funding meeting with a top Huizar aide. After The Times inquired about the email, Huizar and the email’s author insisted that there was no deal or quid pro quo.

Elsewhere, angry Koreatown activists who want their neighborhood to be placed in a single council district announced that they have set up a phone line to gather information on City Hall corruption and misdeeds.

Those activists have testified that Korean business owners have fallen prey to crooked city employees but have not provided names of any alleged victims. They also have claimed that the city's politicians neglect their neighborhood while routinely demanding campaign contributions.

“Our community will no longer sit idly and be pimped out like a two-dollar whore,” said 34-year-old James Beck, a Korean American lawyer who testified at a hearing two weeks ago.

The tensions reflect the high stakes for both politicians and community groups — and are likely to intensify in the coming weeks as the deadline for approving new district maps nears. After hearing complaints from around the city, the commission will meet Wednesday to consider 75 changes to the new council district maps initially drafted.

Roughly 800 people showed up at a City Hall redistricting hearing last week, a turnout that filled the council chamber and an overflow room. More attendees milled about in the hallways.

That night, testimony focused on downtown — a rich source of campaign funds — and whether it should remain partly in Councilwoman Jan Perry’s 9th District or moved mostly into Huizar’s 14th District. Adding to the drama was an email from a downtown marketing consultant who encouraged his allies to show up and side with Huizar.

Consultant Josh Gray-Emmer said in his email that property owner Michael Delijani had promised to reward a strong turnout by arranging a meeting with Huizar aide Jessica Wethington McLean to discuss projects sought by downtown residents, including an effort to relight a historic radio tower. Wethington McLean heads Huizar’s initiative to revitalize Broadway, where Delijani’s family has multiple properties.

“I made a deal with Michael,” said Gray-Emmer’s email, a copy of which was obtained by The Times. “If I show up, and bring people to support me (and therefore him and CD14), he will take LaTanya, Francie and I to sushi with Jessica from CD14 to discuss FUNDING and pushing forward the re-lighting of the KRKD Tower.”

Delijani called the assertions fabricated. Gray-Emmer initially told The Times that the email was intended for “a small group of people.” Hours later, he called back to say its contents were untrue.

Perry, whose district could lose much of downtown, seized on the email, saying it reflected the “transactional” politics influencing redistricting.

Perry and Huizar backers testified for nearly five hours, while some speakers from Koreatown waited. That infuriated redistricting Commissioner Helen Kim, who complained that 80- and 90-year-old citizens were being forced to wait for hours. Kim, an appointee of City Controller Wendy Greuel, said she confronted Huizar’s chief of staff and told her to stop rifling through the speaker cards and changing the order.

“At first she said that she was merely culling out the public comment cards of people who had left,” Kim said. “Then she went on to say that her people — people from

[Huizar's district] — had gotten there early and she was entitled to make sure they didn't testify last."

Huizar spokesman Rick Coca called Kim's assertions false, saying the councilman's aide was simply helping to identify cards from Huizar's district. He said many of Huizar's constituents left after not being called to the microphone for several hours, even though they had arrived early.

Meanwhile, Parks wrote the commission last week alleging that the panel's executive director, Andrew Westall, directed a profanity at one of his staff members. "Mr. Westall told one of my employees: Tell your boss to go F himself," Parks wrote. "To clarify, Mr. Westall did not stop at the letter F."

The exchange, according to Parks, took place Feb. 2 at a commission hearing where hundreds of Westchester residents protested a proposal to put their neighborhood into Parks' district. It was unclear whether the alleged statement was related to a key departure from Parks' office that same day.

Less than an hour before the hearing, Westall's stepson, Domingo Orosco, abruptly announced he was stepping down as an aide to Parks. Orosco could not be reached for comment and Parks would not discuss the departure.

Neither Westall nor commission president Arturo Vargas responded to requests for comment on the profanity allegation.

Westall is a former aide to Wesson, the council president whose relations with Parks have grown increasingly chilly. Parks, saying he was ill, did not show up for the vote in November that made Wesson council president. Last month, Wesson yanked Parks from the Budget and Finance Committee that he chaired for eight years.

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