For many, City Heights offers first lesson in democracy

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It would be hard to say who is happier with the outcome of the recent City Heights Town Council election: the newly elected board members or the current board members who recruited them as candidates.

The urban core neighborhood of City Heights, where 47 languages and 87 dialects are spoken, is one of the most diverse areas of San Diego. An estimated 71,286 residents lived in City Heights in 1999 -- a significant portion of them immigrants or refugees. Many come from countries with little or no tradition of democracy.

So incumbent board members saw a need to assure a good number of candidates came from ethnic minority groups. In fact, four of the eight board members elected Nov. 14 are from ethnic minorities. That raises the number of ethnic minorities on the 18-member board to seven.

The composition of the town council is of particular importance to a neighborhood like City Heights, which is in the midst of a dramatic revitalization.

Board members help decide such issues as what gets built in the neighborhood and what officially is considered a nuisance.

Good constituency relations are essential. Unlike state and national politicians who, once elected, move to distant offices, town council board members regularly encounter their constituents on the sidewalk.

Citizenship is not required to run for a place on the town council, only a City Heights address.

The council is set up so that half its members depart office each year, leaving their seats open for election. The council began looking for candidates this past summer.

For example, Victor van Saanen, 72, a tall, pony-tailed retired flight instructor for Pacific Southwest Airlines and a council member, made the rounds of various groups in the community.

"Nobody asked me to," van Saanen said. "I took it upon myself."

The new board members are: Cynthia O'Neill, Zane Horace Grey, Delfina Woolley, Elizabeth Tate, Greg Diethrich, Michael Dunn, Michael Sprague and Ismail Sahardid.

Voter turnout was high compared to last year.
"The turnout has been tremendous," a clearly elated Patrick Ambrosio, chairman of the elections committee, declared on the day of the vote. This year, 290 voted; last year, about 125.

Many of those marking the paper ballots were voting for the first time.

Galwak Deng, 34, originally from Sudan and in the United States 14 months, paused over his ballot, pencil in hand, to savor the moment. Deng said it felt good to be "taking part in a civic process after a long, long time."

He decided to vote, he said, because, "Since I live here, I know there are a lot of issues that need to be taken care of. So I said, 'OK. Let me vote. It's my neighborhood.' "

He added with a broad smile, "For us, for refugees, it's something special. Feeling part of something."

Ismail Sahardid, a 53-year-old father of eight from Somalia, announced his candidacy in fliers distributed around City Heights, including the section commonly called Little Mogadishu, after the capital of Somalia.

But, Sahardid said, "the message of the community is more stronger than the fliers. It goes back to the culture. The message passes from one person to another person. In coffeehouses. Apartment buildings. Wherever they had weddings."

Members of the Somali refugee community came up to him and asked, "Is it really possible you are a candidate?"

"Why not?" Sahardid said he answered. "We've been living here long enough. We are part of this society. All doors are open to us."

Remembering, the candidate shook his head. "But they didn't believe it."

On election day, when Sahardid's name did indeed appear on the ballot, he reported, "It was very exciting for them."

Somalis streamed into the library's community meeting room to vote. Sahardid's 20-year-old son, Faisal Mohamed, was at the library. "He called me, so excited. 'Dad, everybody's coming here!' "

However, unaccustomed to the ritual of voting, a small measure of confusion reigned.

"Somalis were coming in," incumbent board member van Saanen said, "but they were only marking Ismail on the ballot."

Van Saanen called Sahardid, who called his son, who explained to the Somali voters that they should make a choice in each category.
The Somali turnout gladdened van Saanen's heart. However, he noted, "We didn't get hardly any Vietnamese. But we will next year," he vowed. "I guarantee it."

After voting, Sahardid recalled how, seven years ago in Kenya, "I was just going on board the bus to the airport with my family," when a U.N. refugee worker called out to him.

"She told me, 'Goodbye, the future mayor of San Diego!' " He smiled shyly. "In front of everybody!"

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