

Borough System Would Invigorate Civic Participation

#1 - Borough Implementation

Los Angeles is a big, vibrant, diverse and unwieldy place. That's precisely why so many want to live here.

But as more people pile into L.A., as their needs grow and as pressures on local government increase, it is not reasonable to expect the present legislative structure to be able to answer the growing calls for responsive representation.

A system of boroughs, empowering more people, decentralizing certain government functions and building a new and less entrenched political class, can begin to address those problems.

Civic leaders have wrestled with how best to govern Los Angeles well before it became the second most populous city in the nation. Breaking the municipal government up into semi-autonomous, geographically defined communities – boroughs – was first proposed, and discarded, more than a century ago.

But the city has become a far different place with a far more complex set of problems.

The 3.7 million people who live in Los Angeles are spread out over nearly 470 square miles, an area large enough to contain Milwaukee, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Boston, St. Louis and the island of Manhattan.

Yet the city's legislative branch is made up of 15 city councilmembers – one for every 250,000 people. It is not possible, and therefore not effective, for residents to be represented effectively under the present structure.

Most recently, the issue was brought into focus in 2002, when city officials had to fight off the San Fernando Valley secession effort. Though the measure lost by a 2-1 margin citywide, it divided Valley voters evenly; 125,000 of them felt strongly enough to cast ballots in favor.

That depth of discontent can neither be ignored nor expected to abate as L.A.'s population grows. Smaller, more locally responsive bodies would diffuse such disaffection, make the city run more effectively and, in the end, make it a better place to do business.

The idea for boroughs goes back to 1906, when their formation was considered a way to share the area's resources as the city sought to secure a steady flow of water from the Owens River Valley.

Wilmington and San Pedro agreed to be annexed by Los Angeles in 1909 if the city instituted a borough plan granting them some measure of autonomy. This strategy was

stymied when the state constitution was changed to bar such efforts. By the time state law was changed to allow boroughs, the political will had been sapped. Another plan was broached in the 1940s, only to be met by an indifference that held sway until disaffection in the San Fernando Valley boiled over and boroughs were presented as a last-minute alternative to secession.

Former Assembly speaker and current L.A. mayoral candidate Robert Hertzberg was a key proponent of the secession-alternative borough plan that called for the city to be divided into nine boroughs, and the City Council replaced by a board of borough presidents. Such a plan, involving a drastic reorganization of municipal government, was ill-conceived, and how Hertzberg will really feel about governing a city of boroughs if he is elected mayor remains to be seen.

Indeed, the appeal remains far from universal. Erwin Chemerinsky, the USC law professor who sat on the Charter Reform Commission as it debated the idea of boroughs, holds that they are unnecessary as a result of the new charter's efforts at regionalization.

What has doomed earlier efforts has not been any underlying flaw in the concept, however, but the abruptness and divisions that prompted earlier efforts. In fact, a structure for the organic development of a viable borough system is already in place, a product of Charter Reform of the late 1990s.

In providing for 120 neighborhood councils, the City Charter has laid the groundwork for decision-making to move from the ground up.

There are those who would be content to see the neighborhood council model stay as it is – all but 31 have their elected leadership in place and only 14 are still in formation. But for them to be truly effective, they must evolve to hold a more powerful voice.

The geographic boundaries of a seven-borough city are already in place. In fact, the city has laid the groundwork itself through the Planning Department, which has set up area planning commissions in North and South Valley districts, West, Central, East and South L.A., and the Harbor area.

A ground-up model of the seven boroughs would look like this:

Neighborhood councils would be coalesced within the seven area planning commission zones. The councils would act as both advisors to the elected borough government and a conduit supplying a new crop of civic-minded leadership to those bodies.

The L.A. City Council would remain, reduced to 14 members – two from each of the boroughs. The City Council and the mayor would continue to have oversight responsibility for the city's health and safety departments, as well as the revenue-generating airport, water and power and harbor departments. But the commissions running those departments would have their members appointed by the borough presidents and the mayor, assuring the equitable representation of the citizenry in the

process.

Planning matters, too, would remain in the area planning commissions. And while plans would need final approval of a citywide commission made up of borough and mayoral appointees, the wider commission would be obliged to respect the recommendations of the area commissions. It is a practice already employed in the City Council as it takes up regional planning matters.

With this most basic of structures, the costs of such an effort would be nominal at best. The infrastructure is already in place.

What keeps the process from moving forward is the entrenched political class such a plan would put most at risk. A borough system would not only bring representation down to the neighborhood level, but it would bring a wider set of voices up to the city government.

Can it happen? Yes. Will it? As Raphael Sonenshein, professor of political science and criminal justice at Cal State Fullerton said, "It's been in the air for a hundred years."
Borough Implementation

Proposal: Establishing a borough system of municipal governance

Obstacles: An entrenched civil service and political class, lack of voter will

Cost: Variable. Actual implementation could be simply a matter of establishing boundaries and holding elections. Widest scope could involve millions of dollars in infrastructure improvements.

Time Frame: Ten to 15 years

About This Report

The usual role of most newspapers, including this one, is to report on the agendas of others, not to showcase their own. Taking positions or advancing causes is normally restricted to the editorial page.

So this series of "suggestions," part of the Business Journal's 25th anniversary issue, places us on unfamiliar ground. And yet at a time when many in the media are routinely lambasted for being irresponsible in one way or another, this departure provides us with a

chance to take a close look at the community we cover, week after week, and with any luck offer up some constructive ideas.

Many of proposals being made have been around for a while and some are already being implemented in some fashion. But given that L.A. is a piecemeal sort of place, this agenda combines a lot of things in one place – from water recycling to immigration reform. It's a snapshot of the possibilities for positive change in Los Angeles.

Some important disclaimers: Consider this special report an entity unto itself and not the beginnings of a booster-like campaign that will spill into the news pages. We have and will continue to report the news as we see it – and nothing more. Which is why you don't see any bylines in any of these 25 pieces: The ideas expressed are those of the newspaper and not any single reporter on any particular beat.

That said, the role of our newsroom staff in researching and preparing these agenda items must not go overlooked. My thanks to Jonathan Diamond, Anthony Palazzo, Steve Silkin, Kate Berry, Amanda Bronstad, Laurence Darmiento, Howard Fine, Andy Fixmer, David Greenberg, Pat Maio, Matt Myerhoff, Andrew Simons, Nicole Taylor and Karey Wutkowski. Also contributing were freelance writers Christopher Keough and David Geffner.

We invite your thoughts on this package – either by e-mail (mlacter@labusinessjournal.com) or by mail (Mark Lacter, Editor, Los Angeles Business Journal, 5700 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 170, Los Angeles, Calif., 90036).

– Mark Lacter, Editor