

Fair share for Valley?
Dispute still rages two years after secession vote
By Harrison Sheppard
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Two years after voters defeated the drive for San Fernando Valley cityhood, the activism inspired by the November 2002 campaign has waned, even as city officials and former secessionists disagree over whether the Valley's concerns have been addressed.

Some believe city government shortchanges the Valley even more now than before the secession election -- in part because city officials made a concerted effort to improve services to influence voters.

"I don't think anything has changed -- and if it has changed, it's changed for the worse," said Assemblyman Keith Richman, R-Granada Hills, who was the top vote-getter in the race for mayor of the Valley city then proposed.

"Just prior to the vote for Valley cityhood, Mayor (James) Hahn, probably deceptively, increased services to the Valley. He at that time markedly increased the police presence, the presence of traffic control officers, tree trimming and other city services. Since that time, all of those services have disappeared."

Richman is currently a co-chairman of former Assembly Speaker Bob Hertzberg's mayoral campaign against Hahn.

Hahn, however, argues that services in the Valley continued to improve after the vote. For example, he said, crime has continued to drop, the street-paving budget doubled this year, and city government is continuing to decentralize its services.

Since he took office in 2001, Hahn said, city government has built or renovated 11 libraries in the Valley; started building or opened six new police facilities, along with the 911 dispatch center; and expanded the Los Angeles Better Educated Students for Tomorrow or BEST after-school program to 18 new sites in the Valley.

More than 8,000 potholes in the Valley, thousands of trees have been trimmed, and some 130,000 tons of dumped debris have been removed, he said.

"I think people have seen -- if they keep their eyes open -- that a lot of new, hard construction has been done in the San Fernando Valley, and the Valley is certainly not in position to complain anymore that they're not getting their fair share," Hahn said. "They are getting their fair share, and they can see it every day."

Neighborhood city halls, a new 311 number for city services and neighborhood councils have all helped to give local communities a greater voice in city government, he said.

Neighborhood councils, in particular, have been touted by many city officials some of the important changes that arose from the new City Charter. The revised charter was a pre-secession effort designed to give greater voices to neighborhoods and, in part, to deflate secessionist sentiments that sprouted up across the city in the late 1990s.

But critics deride the neighborhood councils as ineffective because they are only advisory.

"There's a lot of good people that spend countless hours (on neighborhood councils), but the problem is they have no authority, and they have no real resources," said Richard Close, who still serves as chairman of Valley Voters Organized Toward Empowerment; the Valley VOTE group led the drive to put cityhood on the ballot.

"So they tried, but so far have been generally -- with a few exceptions -- unsuccessful."

Jill Banks Barad, the founder and chairwoman of the Valley Alliance of Neighborhood Councils, said she believes it is still too early to judge how effective the councils are. But she said the groups are starting to show some clout, most notably in their protests to the Department of Water and Power's planned rate hikes, which resulted in a scaling back of proposed increases.

"I hear it all the time: They're only advisory. Well, the fact that we're only advisory does not mean we can't have power and we can't have clout," Barad said.

Government agencies such as the Metropolitan Transportation Authority have started sending representatives to neighborhood council meetings to lobby for various projects, which Barad called a sign that the councils' opinions are starting to matter.

Raphael Sonenshein, a political science professor at California State University, Fullerton, notes that area planning commissions are another creation of the new charter giving more voice to local concerns. Also, he noted, the Valley has gained a fifth City Council district entirely located within the Valley, and a sixth member of the 15-member City Council is elected from a district partially in the Valley.

"Clearly what hasn't happened is what secessionists wanted, which is complete local control over land use and services," said Sonenshein, who served as director of the appointed charter reform commission.

"But the city has moved quite a bit. It's still a big old city government that moves slowly toward change, but I think there have been some significant improvements, and it's hard to think they would've happened without the pressure exerted by secession(ists)."

The secession vote was held on Nov. 5, 2002, culminating a six-year effort. Voters in the Valley approved secession by a slim margin -- 50.7 percent -- while voters citywide rejected it 2-1.

Soon after that vote, leaders of the secession movement predicted there would be a new energy in the Valley -- a new generation of activists formed from the ranks of campaign volunteers and the 121 people who ran for city council and mayor of a proposed Valley city.

Several groups were formed to advocate for Valley causes and generate new activism, including one led by Richman called The Valley Group that was composed mostly of former Valley candidates.

There was even talk of a "shadow government" in which those who won the Valley city council and mayoral races would meet on a regular basis and speak with one voice.

Two years later, those Valley groups are mostly defunct or ineffective. There is no shadow government. And, while a few candidates and volunteers have remained active in local politics, many have returned quietly to their private lives.

Still, some hard-core secessionists continue to dream of trying again someday.

Close is convinced that someday Valley secession will return to the ballot. First, he says, state law should be changed to allow only the Valley, not the entire city, to vote on the matter.

That may be difficult, if not impossible.

After the secession vote, Richman said he asked the state legislative counsel for an opinion on whether the law could be changed to allow just the Valley to vote on cityhood. The opinion was that, because the vote would affect the entire city, such a change would likely be ruled unconstitutional even if favored by the Legislature.

It's not clear whether the change could be achieved through a constitutional amendment ballot measure -- or even whether it would be practical to attempt such a move, requiring support from a majority of the state's voters.

Still, Close and a few others remain hopeful. And Valley VOTE continues to meet on a monthly basis, although the group is far less visible than it was during the campaign and its mission now has turned to more general city issues.

"I think at the appropriate time" the Valley will try again, Close said. "The sentiment and desire (for) a separate Valley city hasn't gone away."