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## LOS ANGELES

### The Other Face of Secession

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SHERMAN OAKS -- The battle for San Fernando Valley independence ostensibly pits the downtown power structure against Valley business leaders and homeowner-activists. But the front line in the secession struggle cuts right through the northeast Valley, where most of the Valley's African Americans and hundreds of thousands of Latino immigrants live. There, theoretical arguments about taxes paid and city services received aren't the talk of the town. Instead, it's City Hall's inattention to their daily lives.

Some anti-secessionists have tried to racialize the battle. For example, USC constitutional law professor Erwin Chemerinsky recently wrote that "part of the impetus for secession comes from some whites in the [Valley] who would prefer to be in a new city in which whites are a majority."

In truth, the San Fernando Valley is anything but a white enclave. More than 158,000 Asians live here, nearly one-third of them Filipino. In the areas hoping to secede, the Anglo and Latino populations are roughly equal. About one-third of the Valley's 1.7 million people are immigrants, many of whom fled war-ravaged Central America in the 1980s when the City Council declared Los Angeles a refuge. City Hall hopes they will reject the uncertainty that comes with creating a new city. But immigrants are people who have experience with dysfunctional government and the hard work required to build a better life. After studying the U.S. political system to obtain citizenship, they more than most know the meaning of representative government.

"All you have to do is walk around here to see that [City Hall doesn't listen]," says John Hunter, a black retired Army sergeant. He's standing beside Glenoaks Boulevard, along with a handful of disenchanted Pacoima residents, nearly all of whom plan to vote for Valley cityhood. He points to a traffic island just south of the Ronald Reagan Freeway that has become a barren swatch of dirt for lack of irrigation. For more than a year, residents had requested the median be landscaped and a sign put up welcoming motorists to their community. Finally, last May, Betty Cooper took matters in her own hands: She camped out on the island amid hand-lettered signs chastising the city for its empty promises.

"After five days, one of Councilman Alex Padilla's deputies came and said the city would fix the sprinklers if I went home," says Cooper, who is grateful for the sprouting grass but wonders if the landscaping and welcome sign ever will arrive.

"It's tragic that you have to fight just to get broken sprinklers repaired," she says with a sigh. "If this median had been properly maintained, it would have been a great morale builder. We care about our community, but Padilla never visits, and his aides are always in meetings when we call."

Ask an Encino resident why he supports Valley independence and you'll hear a theoretical discussion about the imbalance between taxes paid and services received. But for residents of the northeast Valley, Los Angeles' indifference to neighborhood concerns is a source of daily frustration.

"Just look at these streets," Sylmar's Oscar Mendoza exclaims as we bounce along roads evocative of rural Mississippi. "This is a nice community, with homes worth over \$500,000, but we can't get the city to pave the streets."

Mendoza, 28, is a project manager for a roofing company. He's also president of San Fernando Valley Residents for Independence. How does Mendoza recruit secessionists? By driving up Glenoaks, which floods every time it rains, traversing the rutted track called Olden Street, then returning down San Fernando Road, passing vacant lots that serve as flea markets for drugs and cheap sex.

"Now look at what the Valley could become if it were independent," he says as we enter the City of San Fernando. Immediately, the ruts and potholes disappear, sidewalks become clean and traffic medians blossom with profusions of flowers. "Both San Fernando and Sylmar are Latino communities, but only one of them functions properly. Latinos in Sylmar pay their taxes, and they'd like to live in a decent community too."

No large U.S. city has all the money it needs. But residents of the northeast Valley wonder why City Hall pleads poverty when they ask for civic improvements, yet continues to subsidize downtown developers and reward political contributors with sweetheart contracts to study municipal projects that seldom are completed.

Vickie and Alejandro Aguilar's potluck Neighborhood Watch meetings are famous in the northeast San Fernando Valley. Held each month in a different Sun Valley home, the meetings are conducted in Spanish. But the scene is pure Norman Rockwell. While children play soccer in the backyard and parents nibble on tamales, politicians and community leaders stand and deliver five-minute orations. Then they listen to what the neighbors have to say. But during this month's meeting, the frustration is palpable when a representative of Mayor James K. Hahn rises to speak.

"I know street lighting and speed bumps are important to this group, but the city doesn't have any money to pay for these things," says James Burkhardt, City Hall's North Valley area director. "We've looked for but can't find any community block grant money," Burkhardt continues. "This means residents have to pay for any improvements."

Greeted with grimaces and rolled-up eyes, Burkhardt's message is not the one that residents want to hear. "Sun Valley is a neighborhood with a lot of children and no sidewalks," says Vickie Aguilar after the meeting. "We need street lights and speed bumps because there's no place for children to play but the streets. Many people here believe they could benefit from a new city."

Crime is an issue that cuts across geographic boundaries. In the West Valley, people complain about the recent 22% increase in Valley homicides and the estimated \$125 million L.A. will need

to resolve lawsuits arising from the Rampart police corruption scandal. They worry that the 3-12 arrangement, which allows police who work three 12-hour shifts to get the rest of the week off, will affect response times. There's also a concern that because four of five LAPD officers live outside the city, police no longer have a vested interest in the city they have pledged to serve and protect.

But it is in the northeast Valley where the city's commitment to public safety is most severely questioned. "They say my son's death was gang-related, but he wasn't in a gang," Gonzalo Sanchez says. "He was a victim of police incompetence."

When Sylmar High student David Sanchez was stabbed after school two months ago, his friends called 911. Twice they received a recorded message that police were busy. By the time the Los Angeles Police Department answered a third call, Sanchez had been bleeding for more than 30 minutes. Police never called to inform the family of their son's killing. Neither did they come to the Sanchez home to investigate. The way the family found David was by randomly calling local hospitals.

"The city wouldn't even release the body until I paid for the autopsy," the embittered father says. Sanchez is grateful that his son's presumed killers were quickly captured, but he thinks a more visible police presence might have prevented the slaying. "I think the Valley should secede," he adds. "It's the only way we'll ever get more police on the street."

Hahn claims secession will hurt minorities. But many in the Valley are not persuaded. "The Valley is not a GOP stronghold," says Alan Clayton of the California Latino Redistricting Coalition. "Ten of the 14 council districts in a new Valley city would be heavily Democratic. At least four, and probably five, of the new council seats would be controlled by Latinos."

LA United and its allies south of Mulholland Drive are counting on Latino union leaders like Miguel Contreras, head of the 810,000-strong Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, to stem the secessionist tide. But it remains unclear whether Mexican American union bosses truly reflect the sentiments of their members from Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador, many of whom do not regard Mexicans as their natural leaders. One indication that the days of ethnic bloc voting may be over was the defeat of Tony Cardenas by Wendy Greuel in the race to replace departed council member Joel Wachs.

"Tony Cardenas calls just before the election and says, 'Why are you helping Greuel? She doesn't care about you,' " recalls Jose Roy Garcia, a Van Nuys businessman from El Salvador. "I wanted to tell him, but never actually said, 'Because you haven't done anything for our community, and she's at least trying to help.' "

The election may turn on how many of the city's presumed supporters are secret secessionists. Last year, Los Angeles' Central City Assn. ("the voice for downtown") proclaimed Garcia "a treasure of Los Angeles" for his work in building the United Nations Soccer League. Today, Garcia supports Valley independence, ironically because of his struggles with the city.

"It took three years to get a fence around the park where we have 7,000 people playing soccer," Garcia says. "When we asked police to chase away the drunks and drug dealers, the LAPD said it was too busy. Recently, I proposed creating two soccer fields for women at Valley Plaza Park. The Department of Recreation and Parks responded by scattering boulders on the grass, making the land unusable for any sport."

Garcia wants to create soccer fields beneath the Department of Water and Power lines slicing through Latino neighborhoods. But he's not optimistic.

"I told them the Latino community would pay for everything," Garcia says. "After waiting for more than a year, the DWP told me to put it in writing."