

Woodland Hills Panel Backs Valley Secession

Cityhood: Endorsement is a setback for Hahn, who has promoted neighborhood councils as viable alternatives to breaking up Los Angeles.

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The Woodland Hills Neighborhood Council on Thursday announced that it has endorsed San Fernando Valley secession, dealing a blow to Mayor James K. Hahn's efforts to promote the councils as alternatives to a municipal breakup.

In better news for the mayor, the Los Angeles-area branch of the Sierra Club said Friday that it opposes secession because of concerns that a breakup might threaten environmental protections enforced by Los Angeles.

The Woodland Hills panel is the first neighborhood council to back the secession measure on the Nov. 5 ballot. Hahn has touted the burgeoning system of elected advisory councils as a means of getting residents more involved in government without breaking the city apart. Voters approved the system three years ago.

Members of the Woodland Hills council, which represents about 70,000 residents, said they are frustrated with their advisory role, because they have no power to make decisions on local budget and planning issues.

"City Hall set up neighborhood councils to give the individual communities in Los Angeles a voice, and yet we are still being ignored," said Johnny Walker, a council member.

Sandy Enfield, council chairwoman, said the vote to endorse Valley secession on Wednesday night was 11 to 5, with one abstention.

"I think people out here are very frustrated by the level of services and the high cost we pay for what we get," she said. "The vote reflects that frustration."

Enfield also said she was "appalled" to get calls from city officials after the vote accusing the panel members of "biting the hand that feeds us." One city official, whom she would not name, wondered whether the vote would affect city funding for her council, Enfield said.

"I guess I was naive to think we could be independent," she said. "I didn't know the only opinion we could have was the city's."

Some council members opposed to the endorsement felt the panel should stay neutral.

"We weren't going to take a position, but the people in the audience were up in arms, and there were 100 of them," said council member Michael Miller, who voted against the endorsement. "They wanted us to take a stand."

Kam Kuwata, a spokesman for Hahn, said he does not feel that the action represented a vote of no confidence. The mayor has proposed giving councils more power and input in the budget process.

"The fact that a group here or there supports the breakup is going to happen," Kuwata said. "We are still going to move ahead in a positive way with reforms."

Secession leaders say the vote shows that neighborhood council members believe life would be better in a smaller city.

"This is a very significant endorsement," said Laurette Healey, co-chair of the Valley Independ-

ence Committee. "The vision of leaders of the Valley independence movement and candidates for the new city council is to improve and strengthen neighborhood councils by empowering them with decision-making and budgetary authority on local issues."

Meanwhile, in coming out against secession, the Sierra Club chapter cited the "risk" that a Valley city would not adopt the same environmental laws as are on the books in Los Angeles.

"This places every environmental law, ordinance, regulation, requirement and agreement at risk and may mean we will have to fight for them all over again in the Valley," said Emil Lawton, a Sierra Club member and Valley resident.

Secession leaders dismissed the Sierra Club action as a misguided attempt to get back into Hahn's good graces, after the group backed Antonio Villaraigosa for mayor last year.

"That's a joke, considering that the operators of the Sunshine Canyon Landfill are one of the biggest donors to the mayor's anti-secession campaign," said Carlos Ferreyra, co-chair of the Valley Independence Committee. He noted that several Valley city council candidates want to phase out the Granada Hills-area landfill run by Browning-Ferris Industries.

In other news, a group of candidates for the Valley city council released a transition plan aimed at easing the change in government.

Under the proposal, by 9th District candidate Wilma Bennett, the new city would set up 30 to 50 task forces, each examining a different part of government, from how to choose a city manager to how to manage trash collection and city dumps.

Under Bennett's proposal, the new city would use computer software to track the progress of the groups. Each task force would include a city council member, a retired expert in the field under discussion, a young adult or teenager, a city official and five other members of the community.

"What an opportunity we have to position ourselves for the 21st century," Bennett said. "We aren't stuck with old technologies, old software, old ideas."

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