

SECESSION SKETCHBOOK; Neighbors Stake Claim to Council

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Abstract:

The councils, established as advisory bodies under the new city charter, have been a favorite rhetorical target of secession- movement leaders in the San Fernando Valley and Hollywood, who have dismissed them as impotent and irrelevant, a sop to residents' legitimate dissatisfaction with the way City Hall does business.

The dichotomy between neighborhood councils and secession, however, may not be quite that clear-cut. Last week, the city- sanctioned Woodland Hills Neighborhood Council became the first such body formally to endorse San Fernando Valley secession.

No matter the outcome of the secession vote on Nov. 5, neighborhood councils seem destined to become permanent fixtures in local civic life. Even secession supporters say they would like a new Valley city to have some kind of councils.

Full Text:

The three conference tables were arrayed in an angular U, but, lest the configuration signal any sort of unneighborly disconnection at its open end, that part was closed by a semicircle of brightly colored plastic chairs.

Around the tables and in the chairs sat 20 people, variously clad in denim and tailored wool, tasseled loafers and cowboy boots. All of them live in, work in or otherwise have an interest in Sun Valley.

The "stakeholders" in the nascent, Los Angeles city-certified Sun Valley Area Neighborhood Council's formation committee gathered in a conference room at Industrial Metal Supply on a recent weekday evening to sift some of the finer elements of democratic process and mold them into usable shape.

At the behest of the city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which oversees neighborhood councils, the participants had come to wrangle their bylaws into harmony with their proposed guidelines for electing a board of directors. The discussion turned to late write- in candidates who might file to run after a cutoff date to be determined by the council's board of directors.

"The problem is," said Louis Avila, a county deputy district attorney, "this says the date is to be set by the board of directors. Well, we won't have a board of directors yet. That's what the election will be for."

"Shall we say, 'As set by the formation committee,' then?" offered Tony Bracy, who works for a local nonprofit rehabilitation center for the homeless and drug users called People in Progress, and who led the others through the proposed bylaw changes.

"But as soon as we elect a board of directors we, as a formation committee, will be out of business," said a neighborhood activist, Victoria Burch.

"Why would we want people to be able to run if they miss the deadline to apply anyway?" asked a real estate broker, Sam Khalaf.

"Well," said a Mission Valley Bank vice president, Carol Dignard, the meeting's chairwoman, "It's a protection. Some of the neighborhood councils aren't doing a good job reaching out to people. We don't want

stakeholders coming by after the deadline and saying, 'I didn't know about this.' Our goal is maximum participation."

"It's more democratic," affirmed Jerry Piro, an activist with the Sun Valley Neighborhood Improvement Assn.

"We're going to be proud of our Sun Valley Neighborhood Council," said a flooring contractor, Jose Garcia. "If somebody comes to us late, we say 'Welcome!'"

Such patient inclusiveness is a hallmark of the Sun Valley group and, observers believe, of many of the other 50 (and counting) neighborhood councils that have been certified by the city of Los Angeles.

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Although members of the Sun Valley Neighborhood Council were hard at work under the auspices of the city, an impromptu poll on secession showed that fully 13 of them favored seceding; five were undecided.

"It doesn't matter if we're part of the city of Los Angeles or not," said Victoria Burch. "We are very committed to our community."

No matter the outcome of the secession vote on Nov. 5, neighborhood councils seem destined to become permanent fixtures in local civic life. Even secession supporters say they would like a new Valley city to have some kind of councils.

If Los Angeles remains whole, the councils could well be the principal champions of greater City Hall responsiveness to the needs of neighborhoods, one of the rallying cries of the secession movement.

That's a commentary on the councils themselves -- groups of dedicated citizens are always hard for politicians to ignore -- but it also speaks to the nature of L.A., a city with few power centers. In such a place, any concentration of influence captures the attention of elected officials.

That politicians are already paying attention is evident. Present at the Sun Valley gathering were Manny Figueras, a field representative for state Sen. Richard Alarcon (D-Sylmar), and David Hernandez, an insurance adjuster who is running simultaneously for mayor of the proposed Valley city and for Congress in the 28th District.

Neighborhood councils such as Sun Valley's, Hernandez said, are made up of "individuals that by their actions demonstrate their loyalty to the community, and any city that doesn't avail itself of them is really shortsighted."

"The power neighborhood council members are going to have is that they're connected, and their neighbors are going to look to them at election time. What the city of L.A. has done is wake a sleeping giant."

Members of the Sun Valley body were undeterred by the advisory nature of their assigned role in Los Angeles.

"I believe, after a few years, they're going to see they need us, and L.A. will change its mind and give neighborhood councils more power," said Roy Garcia, a Sun Valley resident who is running for a city council seat in the proposed San Fernando Valley city.

Observers have been impressed by how hard the councils have worked at being inclusive, making sure that stakeholders -- ranging from residents and businesses to volunteer organizations and churches, from public-affairs veterans to callow novices -- are embraced.

Not that inclusiveness doesn't have its limits.

After finally wrestling the bylaws into submission, the Sun Valley council participants agreed to examine a final complete draft of the rules at the next week's meeting.

"And remember," said the discussion leader, Tony Bracy, "the changes we made today will be only on pages 2, 3 and 4 of the bylaws."

"Yes," cautioned Chairwoman Dignard. "Some of us have been working on this for a year, and so, if you're a newcomer and next week you decide you want changes on page 20 -- look out!"