

City Says No-Go to Secession

Valley measure leads at home, but it's not enough. Hollywood effort soundly defeated.

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Los Angeles voters spurned both San Fernando Valley and Hollywood secession proposals Tuesday, deciding overwhelmingly to keep the nation's second-largest city intact.

In the Valley, the spawning ground of the secession movement, the breakup plan was leading, but to pass, the measure needed a citywide majority. In Hollywood, secession was losing badly.

Half an hour after the polls closed, a confident Mayor James K. Hahn, who led the anti-secession campaign, already was relaxing at a cocktail reception in a Universal City hotel, alongside more than 400 developers, lobbyists, union members and other breakup opponents.

"Clearly, an overwhelming majority of the people of Los Angeles don't want to see it broken up," Hahn said as the returns began to tumble in.

"I want to tell people out there, no matter which way they voted, tomorrow is the first day of all of our lives and we are going to build a great city together," he told the cheering crowd.

A few miles away at a Sherman Oaks hotel, about 250 Valley secessionists gathered under a canopy of red and blue balloons to watch the returns.

Breakup leader Richard Katz said the proposal was buried under an avalanche of anti-secession campaign cash and union opposition.

The drive to defeat secession raised \$7 million, more than four times the breakup proponents' \$1.7 million.

"We have sent a message to City Hall that even those who are tone-deaf can't miss," said Katz, a former assemblyman. "Life in Los Angeles will never be the same."

Richard Close, chairman of the secession group Valley VOTE, said the organization might file a lawsuit if secession wins in the Valley but loses citywide.

"If the Valley votes to leave Los Angeles, we shouldn't be held hostage," Close insisted.

He also said if that happens he does not plan to work with Hahn to address Valley concerns. "He hasn't been a problem-solver," he said of the mayor.

Assemblyman Keith Richman (R-Northridge), a candidate for Valley mayor, was leading nine other candidates. Richman was also coasting to reelection in his Assembly race.

"Let me be clear: This is not the end," Richman said as the votes against secession began to mount. "I intend to work with the Valley candidates in holding Mayor Hahn and the council members' feet to the fire when it comes to city issues and services."

The winners in the races for Valley mayor and 14 Valley council seats, as well as for five Hollywood council posts, would have taken office only if secession had won.

As for the name Valley voters preferred for a new city, the straight-forward "San Fernando Valley" easily outpaced choices such as "Camelot" or "Rancho San Fernando."

At the Hollywood Independence Committee's headquarters, about 100 candidates and supporters gathered around loudspeakers blaring the Measure H campaign's rock 'n' roll theme song, belting out the lyrics at the top of their lungs.

"Hey, L.A., set Hollywood free! Give her back her dignity!"

Shortly before midnight, Gene La Pietra, the wealthy nightclub owner who bankrolled the Hollywood secession bid, conceded defeat. "I believe in what we've done here. We've put the spotlight on Hollywood," he said.

Hahn assembled a potent coalition of municipal unions, black and Latino leaders, billionaire business moguls and most of the city's politicians to raise the money to put down the Valley and Hollywood insurrections.

The mayor's L.A. United campaign deluged the television airwaves with ads warning of secession's dire consequences for public safety, taxes, utility costs and rent control.

Separatists had limited options for countering such claims, which they labeled scare tactics. Pressed for money, they aired their commercials only on cable stations, and otherwise relied on mailers, debates, e-mail messages and word of mouth to persuade voters.

The results Tuesday were hardly a surprise, even for some hard-core secessionists who have toiled for years to carve out the two cities.

The breakup campaign had been hobbled since spring by the money shortage, leadership troubles and a lack of volunteers.

Polls have shown support for secession withering in almost every quarter of the city in recent months--except the West Valley, a relatively affluent and conservative area where voters were closely divided.

"It's not going to win, is it?" Johnny Gearhart, a Hollywood secession supporter, said wistfully after he cast his ballot Tuesday.

In retrospect, it appeared that the separatists' high point came months ago when they landed their breakup proposals on the ballot. It was a striking achievement for a small band of suburbanites who had chipped away at the established order of city government for six years.

Valley secessionists managed to rewrite state law to allow voters--not city councils--to decide the fate of cityhood proposals. They collected signatures from 25% of the Valley's registered voters, triggering a study of secession's financial effects and forcing skeptical Los Angeles leaders to take their complaints ever more seriously.

Secession leaders even got the state, county and city to foot the study's \$2-million bill.

Impressed by the Valley movement's advances, La Pietra helped spark a parallel effort in Hollywood. But the Hollywood bid, driven by more than \$2 million in contributions from La Pietra, never had the broad base of support evident in the Valley.

After an exhaustive two-year study, the Local Agency Formation Commission found that Valley and Hollywood cities would be financially viable without damaging the rest of Los Angeles, setting the stage for Tuesday's showdown.

Secession fever ran high among the tract homes sprawling in the hills of Porter Ranch, at the Valley's northern rim. Dozens of people leaving the polls said they voted yes on Measure F, the Valley cityhood proposal.

"I've seen the Valley go downhill over the years," said Linda Rudell, 55, who has lived in the northwest Valley for most of her life. "You can see a difference when you drive into cities like Santa Monica, Burbank, Glendale and Pasadena."

But at several polling places on the other side of the hill, voters voiced little sympathy for secessionist claims that the Valley and Hollywood are treated unfairly. Many said they rejected the breakup proposals because they feared that a split might drive up taxes, curtail public services and spoil the image of L.A.'s diverse yet united neighborhoods.

"I think it's a bad idea and we the taxpayers will end up paying more if it passes," said retiree Ervin Hogan after casting his ballot in South Los Angeles.

In Boyle Heights, Yolanda Hernandez said that the city's recent attempts to spin power away from City Hall should be given a chance.

"It would cut a lot of the services here if we break apart," said Hernandez, a member of the newly certified Boyle Heights Neighborhood Council.

Sensing that his message of unification and steadily improving city services had taken root, Hahn was upbeat after voting Tuesday morning near his San Pedro home. The mayor worked the phones at the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor's offices, personally reaching out to voters to ask them to reject secession. Some people didn't believe it was actually the mayor.

"Hi Deborah, this is Mayor Jim Hahn calling," the mayor said. "No, this is not a recording. Would you like a recording?"

As the election approached, Hahn lavished attention on the breakaway regions, especially the Valley, holding multiple media events each day to plug potholes, tout the neighborhood councils or simply lend an ear.

Hahn even invited Blake Nordstrom, president of the department store noted for its attentive clerks, to give the city's general managers some pointers on customer service.

"We put together a tremendous coalition of business and labor and community-based organizations," Hahn said as the sun set Tuesday. "I really do think we got our message out that the city is moving forward, things are improving and breaking up would move us in the wrong direction."

Even before Tuesday's vote, separatists had steadily gained ground in their grass-roots crusade for more local control. They didn't always get exactly what they wanted, but they did succeed in focusing public debate on their complaints that City Hall is wasteful, arrogant and unresponsive.

During the 1999 overhaul of the City Charter, many secessionists pressed for a system of neighborhood councils empowered with land-use and budget authority. Instead, the councils wound up being advisory panels, which convinced many residents that breaking off from Los Angeles was the only solution.

"Los Angeles is just a completely gridlocked system," said C. Edward Dilkes, a municipal law expert who served briefly as director of the elected charter commission.

"Everyone has his or her own little grip ... on a tiny piece of the political system, and it's not possible to change anything without goring the ox of someone who's important," said Dilkes, a Hollywood resident running for city council in the proposed city.

As if to prove the point, a group of Los Angeles City Council members announced Tuesday -- even as voters were streaming to the polls -- that they will meet in the Valley today to renew their commitment to improving city services.

Council members Dennis Zine, Jack Weiss, Ruth Galanter, Alex Padilla, Cindy Miscikowski and Nick Pacheco are scheduled to appear on the steps of Van Nuys City Hall -- the symbolic heart of the Valley -- for a morning news conference.

Robert Lamishaw, a Valley council candidate from Van Nuys, vowed to support a fresh secession effort if city services did not improve.

"The goal is not to have two cities or 50 cities," he said. "The goal is to have a better place to live."

Times staff writers Kristina Sauerwein, Sharon Bernstein, Caitlin Liu, Beth Shuster and Stephanie Stassel contributed to this report.
