

Can Hahn Think Big?

In ousting Chief Parks and tackling secession, the mayor took risks. Now will he slide back into pothole politics?

By Bill Boyarsky

Bill Boyarsky is senior consultant for the Center for Governmental Studies and teaches journalism at the USC Annenberg School for Communications. He is writing a biography of the late California polit

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It was Mayor James K. Hahn's moment of triumph the day after secession's defeat. Arrayed behind him on the platform at the Airtel Plaza Hotel in Van Nuys were some of the city's biggest powers, among them schools Supt. Roy Romer and new Police Chief William J. Bratton. But as Hahn approached the peroration of his celebratory speech, the audience didn't hear about his vision for the city he had fought to keep whole.

"I ask you, Kim Thompson, and you, Al Fuong, to join me in working to close the Sunshine Canyon Landfill in your backyard," said the mayor, naming two people seated behind him. "I ask you, Jim Dunn, to join me in making L.A. a better city in which to do business." And on he went, naming names.

Listening to Hahn, I was reminded of the small San Francisco Bay Area city where I went to school and later worked as a reporter for the Oakland Tribune. San Leandro was the kind of place where decisions were made by a few men in the coffee shop across from City Hall, discussing which streets to fix and nailing down the details of the Fourth of July parade. Hahn, chief executive of the nation's second-largest city, sounded like the mayor of San Leandro.

Could this be the "new" Hahn, who had defied expectations and boldly risked his core black supporters by dumping Police Chief Bernard C. Parks because he felt the chief not only opposed police reform but also insisted on lecturing the mayor on the subject rather than listening to him? Could this be the "new" Hahn who had single-mindedly raised huge amounts of money to beat secession and campaigned against it by invoking an image of a greater L.A.?

Or, with the secession threat neutralized, had the "old" Hahn, who finds comfort in the small and mundane, just as he has done throughout most of his career, resurfaced?

His father, the late Los Angeles County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn, was the master of pothole politics, first-name friend of every businessperson and neighborhood big shot in his working-class South-Central district, and relentless provider of parks, libraries, swimming pools and well-maintained streets and sidewalks. Although he was a risk taker -- he conceived the sales tax increase that began the county's rail transit system -- Supervisor Hahn never let on that he was the smartest, craftiest and toughest of politicians. His was the safe political path.

The son, first as city attorney and then in his early days as mayor, also favored a safe, almost passive, approach. What's more, unlike his publicity-loving dad, he recoiled from the public spotlight -- except when he was in trouble. In two races for city attorney, Hahn the younger, faced with tough challenges, turned into a political killer, just as he did when he beat Antonio Villaraigosa for mayor in 2001, when he fired Parks and when he defeated secession.

In an interview in his City Hall office after his celebratory speech, the mayor didn't deny his small-town approach to governance, what his political advisor, Bill Wardlaw, calls putting a face on city government. Hahn embraced it, saying it was the way for the city and for him to succeed after the trauma of the secession fight. "I've got to be the mayor of Atwater Village and Arleta and the mayor of Westchester and Winnetka," Hahn said.

"People want specifics these days," Hahn continued. "They are looking past the idea that someone is going to give an eloquent, feel-good speech."

Yes, Hahn said he understood that he also had to deal with the big picture, but, "I'll tell you, if you have to choose, if one thing has to give, I think you have to concentrate on those little things. Taxpayers want to see the tax dollars at work in our neighborhoods."

With that simple -- or simplistic -- formula, Hahn aims to make peace with the 50.7% of the Valley that voted for secession and still retain the support of the downtown-oriented public employee unions and businesses that bankrolled his fight against secession. Clean, smooth streets, he hopes, will help dissipate the unhappiness many black leaders still feel over his firing of Parks.

Such a goal didn't seem improbable the Wednesday morning after the election, when the roomful of old supporters and new toadies cheered him and hustled to shake his hand. L.A. loves a winner. But the immensity of the task ahead was much clearer the night before at a pro-secession party at another San Fernando Valley hotel.

The music was minimal. The decorations were spare. The returns, even at the early hour, didn't look favorable. But in addition to the good feelings generated by the pay bars, there seemed to be a real spirit, much of it coming from campaigners for candidates for seats on the proposed Valley city council. These people -- many new to the game -- had gotten a taste of political participation and, with leadership, could stick with it.

A few were cynical about how the San Fernando Valley has been inundated with city street fixers and traffic managers during City Hall's campaign against secession. "I think if they stop the traffic guys, the Valley will be outraged," said one council candidate, Scott Svonkin.

It's safe to assume, given Hahn's formula for political conversion, that the traffic-minders will remain on duty, supplemented by more left-turn lanes and the latest in stoplight technology. Services, however, were just one aspect of the secession drive. More powerful was the demand for decentralization of political power. That is a perennial Valley issue that won't go away.

"Can that structure on Spring Street change and share power with the neighborhoods?" asked

secession leader Richard Katz. The vote, he said, "was a wake-up call that business as usual will not satisfy" the Valley.

In the interview in his mayoral office, Hahn said he recognized the need for neighborhood representation. He's betting on neighborhood councils, authorized by a revision of the Los Angeles City Charter two years ago, as well as homeowner organizations, business owners and various community groups that have a stake in a neighborhood.

The councils will advise city government but have no lawmaking power. They can protest a controversial development but can't stop it. Nor do they have authority over the city budget. That is why Assemblyman Bob Hertzberg (D-Sherman Oaks) proposed earlier in the year a borough system that would make the various parts of the city largely self-governing in many municipal matters. The Hertzberg plan, which fell flat in City Hall, was supported by a number of Valley leaders, who also favor giving the neighborhood councils real power or enlarging the City Council.

Hahn disagrees about the need for boroughs, although he did announce last week a plan for reorganizing most city departments so that each one breaks the city down into the same seven regions. Each region will have its own "neighborhood city hall" out of which employees of most city departments will work. But the regions don't correspond to boundary lines of any council or neighborhood council districts, and no new elected officials will represent them.

"We are just in the infancy of neighborhood councils," Hahn said. "Many of them are weeks old. They are just learning to walk now. I would like to see how [they] develop ... before saying we have to have boroughs, we have to have more City Council members, we need to do this, we need to do that. I'd like to see how we're doing with this structure and try to get people to buy into it."

Political consultant Joel Fox, a secessionist advisor, said that unless that happened, people would see the councils "as a bowl of jelly" and Hahn would fail.

The neighborhood councils are just part of how Hahn will be judged. For example, owners of small and medium-sized businesses -- the heart and soul of the pro-secessionist Valley Industrial and Commercial Assn. -- want the city tax on gross business receipts reduced; the levy is a complex mess of categories. But that potential loss of city revenue clashes with the salary-and-benefit goals of the municipal employee unions so helpful to Hahn in the anti-secession fight.

Hahn realizes his fierce campaign against secession made people mad. "At the end of the day, I am going to have to mend fences with a lot of people," he said. "I think that's already begun.... I don't know if people will elect me to a second term as mayor or not. But I know I'm here now, and I worked really hard to get here. So, every time there's a decision on your plate, you're going to do what you think is right. I may not get this chance again."

The mayor's words seem to show that Hahn understands the difficulties that lie ahead. Certainly, he rose to the occasion with Parks and secession. The question is: Can he sustain this toughness, or will he bury himself in small, safe tasks? L.A. is not a small town. It is a complex, contentious

place, where race relations are volatile and the gap between rich and poor is widening. To govern it effectively will require more than filling potholes.

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