

EDITORIAL, LA TIMES

Bringing City Hall Closer

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A week after city voters rejected a drastic proposal to break Los Angeles apart, Mayor James K. Hahn unveiled a plan to make the city more responsive to the complaints behind the breakup effort. Laid out before secession leaders had time to regroup, the plan is not just good politics; it has the potential to be good government.

By moving so quickly, Hahn rightly acknowledges that the "no" vote on San Fernando Valley and Hollywood secession was not a victory for the status quo. Instead, it was a call to continue building on reforms that voters said yes to three years ago.

The revamped City Charter, approved in 1999, created seven regional planning commissions and dozens of advisory neighborhood councils, 56 of which have organized so far. Hahn's 10-point "TeamWork LA" capitalizes on this and aims to bring government closer to the people. Literally. It establishes "neighborhood city halls" in each of the seven local planning districts -- the North Valley, the South Valley, the Eastside, the Westside, Central L.A., South L.A. and the harbor area.

Borrowing from the Los Angeles Police Department's popular senior lead officers program, each city hall will have a director accountable for the quality of services in that area and "neighborhood specialists" to help residents learn how to use the new system. A "neighborhood cabinet" made up of city workers from departments such as public works, parks and transportation will staff the city halls. Expanded hours and computer tracking of services modeled on a program being set up in the LAPD to track crime complete the plan.

Its advantage over either a breakup or a dramatic restructuring of Los Angeles into semi-independent boroughs is that the city can start on this new model right away, due to charter reforms that gave the mayor the power to make administrative changes without going through the City Council. (City Council members Tom LaBonge, Ruth Galanter, Wendy Greuel and Janice Hahn contributed to the plan, and LaBonge is working to organize regional City Council committees to work with each of the city halls.)

Five of the seven regional planning districts, now doubling as city service districts, already have municipal buildings. Hahn claims that staffing them is just a matter of reassigning downtown workers, not hiring new ones. The test, of course, will lie in whether this plan works, and that will take a long-term commitment to thoughtful reform. It is at the very least a welcome first step.