

Los Angeles Daily News

Missed opportunity

2002 should have been a year of reform and renewal in L.A.

Monday, December 30, 2002 - On the first day of this year, we wrote that "the most important criterion that will measure the success of city leaders in the following year is the empowerment of local communities."

And so on this, the last day of the year, it's only fitting to judge our local leaders by that standard.

The verdict isn't pretty.

Going into the year, with independence movements under way in half of the city's neighborhoods, the downtown power structure had an obvious political crisis on its hands. Mass numbers of people were fed up with the corrupt, self-serving nature of City Hall. Stymied in every past reform effort, they were latching onto secession as their last and desperate hope.

For City Hall, there were two possible ways to deal with the mounting challenge of secession: opening government up to the people, or crushing secession with brute force.

Sadly, the city's power structure chose the latter.

When former state Assembly Speaker Bob Hertzberg proposed a citywide borough system that could have staved off secession and answered the key demand of L.A.'s communities, the power structure refused even to consider it. And in recent weeks, City Hall has made it clear it will fight any form of genuine power sharing.

For members of the City Council and Hahn, running a fear campaign funded by special interests seemed more palatable than relinquishing any power. The closest they came to any sort of decentralization was approving a few more neighborhood councils, which have neither power nor resources.

From a political standpoint, City Hall's resistance to reform paid off, but at a steep price. Secession failed citywide, but it passed in the Valley, leaving local residents all the more estranged and frustrated with a government they rejected.

The year 2002 was ripe for reform in Los Angeles, but that reform never came to be.

And that's the story of 2002 in L.A., a year of missed opportunity.

Those missed opportunities weren't limited to City Hall.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority's new CEO, Roger Snoble, took office in late 2001 promising to bring decentralization to the transit behemoth. He did to a degree by creating "service sectors," but stopped far short of empowering the communities in each sector to make decisions about what's best for their area.

The MTA's scheme was a lot like the Los Angeles Unified School District's mini-districts and City Hall's neighborhood councils before them. All the people of Los Angeles's neighborhoods get to do is provide advice without authority. Like colonies anywhere in the world, the real power is tightly held elsewhere, in this case by a narrow downtown power structure that has failed the people for far too long.

It was largely the same story in the LAUSD, which boasts of improving standardized test scores among the youngest students but is no more accessible or responsive today than it was a year ago.

The district remains the exclusive plaything of unions and billionaires, impervious to the concerns of teachers, taxpayers, parents and the children themselves.

The LAUSD succeeded in securing some \$5 billion in new school construction bonds this year, but it failed to make itself any more accountable to the public.

Still, the powerless residents of Los Angeles can take some comfort in the gains that have been made.

City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo created a "neighborhood prosecutors" program, which assigns a city lawyer to each of the 18 police divisions. There are signs it helped fix some "broken windows" in the neighborhood in an effort to prevent further deterioration.

And the first advisory neighborhood councils were certified under City Hall rules that minimize the involvement of people who actually live in a neighborhood. While the councils lack any authority, activist communities can use them as an organizing tool and work with other councils to challenge City Hall's policies.

While the secession movement in the Valley was soundly defeated, fully one-third of all L.A. voters supported breakup and the debate heightened interest in civic affairs among the electorate. In 2002, Los Angeles had a tremendous opportunity to become a city built upon and governed by its people working together for the greater good of the community as a whole. Instead, the city's ruling elite talk of creating more "service sectors" tightly under their control. For the people of Los Angeles, service sectors and advisory councils are progress, a place to stand to build a better community in 2003 and the years ahead. The seeds of democracy are growing and will flourish as more people get involved in community affairs and stand up for a government that respects each person and balances their interests to create a dynamic city of the 21st century.