

## **Pro-Secession Group Regroups, Takes Role of Watchdog**

By JACQUELINE FOX

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Cash-strapped and lacking the vigor it possessed prior to the election of 2002, Valley VOTE, the group that spearheaded the push for an independent Valley city, is struggling to reconstitute itself following the defeat of Measure F last November and a year of relative quiet within its own inner circle.

Monthly meetings are still held at Galpin Ford and the overriding theme of fair-share politics remains the group's core mantra.

But discussion of "Secession, Round Two," although not entirely dead according to some, is by most accounts, said to be off the radar for the time being.

Although many of the same individuals are involved, Valley VOTE's current focus has shifted away from secession and, according to its new president, the organization now aims to serve more as a governmental watchdog for the Valley's business leaders and residents.

"Our board of directors has changed a little, in fact, particularly because at the beginning of 2003 everyone was a bit discouraged," said Joe Vitti (photo), a former Rockwell engineer, businessman and member of the board of directors for the Granada Hills Chamber of Commerce and Neighborhood Council.



Vitti said the organization is now being run from a home office of one of its board members, communicating with its some 300 members via e-mail and hoping to boost finances this year so it can rent out office space.

"We had an office before the vote on secession, but the financial drain of the campaign took all of our funds," said Vitti.

In fact, Valley Residents For Independence, the campaign committee arm for Valley VOTE, raised roughly \$8,000 toward its cause, but it was no match to Mayor James Hahn's roughly \$8 million anti-breakup war chest, which was also backed by a separate campaign by One Los Angeles, a local grassroots committee led by political consultant Larry Levine of Van Nuys-based Levine and Associates.

Richard Close, a prominent figure in the cityhood movement and an alternate on the

Local Agency Formation Commission, the panel that put the issue to voters and laid out the blueprint for a new Valley city, is still Valley Vote's chairman.

However, the high-profile role he played in the media and the community at large, has waned significantly.

His counterpart, Jeff Brain, who spent a small fortune of his own in getting Measure F on the ballot, resigned as president from the group earlier this year.

Brain is now working as a consultant to, among others, Gene La Pietra, who led the breakup effort for a separate Hollywood city.

Vote years away

Although Close says there will likely be another secession try down the road, even he conceded that it wouldn't likely happen before 2006 and he remains unclear whether he would get involved.

"Our goal now is to help and work with other groups to reform city government," said Close, who is also president of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association, the largest homeowners group in the Valley.

But although Close also said that Valley VOTE intends to work closely with the Neighborhood Councils, 26 of which have been certified in the Valley so far, he intimated what many supporters of a breakup reflected prior to the secession vote: that the councils would likely never have the authority to produce real change.

"They do little more than take notes," said Close. "There is wide frustration within the city and, I suspect that, if there is another drive to break up Los Angeles, that it will be an issue to focus on."

Nonetheless, Valley VOTE's rhetoric of 2002 has given way to a kinder, gentler strategy that, as opposed to broad-strokes finger pointing, now serves to support ongoing efforts to work with the city to make things better.

"There is strong sentiment in the group that there will be another vote in the future on Valley cityhood, but at this time we want to focus on the specific issues," said Close.

To sharpen the focus, Valley Vote has established about a half-dozen new committees, each charged with tracking the actions of city officials and departments: one for planning, finance, cultural affairs, business taxes and neighborhood councils.

Focusing on issues

Top issues include: promoting charter schools and breaking up Los Angeles Unified; closing Sunshine Canyon Landfill; tracking "unchecked" development and improving

police response times.

“What we are calling our ‘phase-two’ mentality focuses on real things like cutting the business taxes,” said Vitti. “The Business Tax Advisory Committee has made great strides, but now we need to take it to the next level and find a way to lower the taxes so that businesses can stand a chance. But this time around, not everything we do is going to be shot down or done against the backdrop of a breakup effort. We have a broader mission and it’s to help the Valley get what it’s entitled to.

Richard Leyner, is Valley VOTE’s executive vice president and heads up the group’s commission on neighborhood councils. He says his primary focus is to push for more power for the councils, which are struggling to emerge amid growing frustrations with the city agency overseeing their formation, the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE).

“One of the things we want to do is keep score on the ideas and recommendations on what neighborhood councils were supposed to be about and whether the city is really going to listen to them, or if this was just another ploy to make us quiet,” said Leyner.

Leyner is also president of the Encino Neighborhood Council.

But some question whether Valley VOTE’s function may or may not be duplicating the efforts of the councils and other advocacy groups, such as the Valley Industry and Commerce Association, the United Chambers of Commerce, Valley homeowners’ groups and The Valley Group, which formed immediately after the vote on secession.

“The group (Valley VOTE) is a shadow of its former self,” said Levine. “And, when you have so many other groups in the Valley already advocating for the same things, business tax reform, traffic solutions, more police, it can be difficult to stand out.”

Nonetheless, said Vitti, there can never be too many voices pushing for a common cause. He says Valley VOTE has taken a very strong interest in supporting projects and ideas that have surfaced in recent weeks and, in one fashion or another, would answer many concerns that sparked the initial breakup drive.

“One of the biggest project ideas we are very interested in supporting right now is the plan to possibly put a sports stadium up in North Hollywood,” said Vitti. “That is certainly an asset that was not part of the division game during secession and one that the Valley is long overdue for. If we were to have been successful in getting a separate city, the Valley would have been the sixth largest city in the country, and yet, we don’t have anything approaching an arena of that sort.”