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Move's defeat created power vacuum

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The defeat of San Fernando Valley secession created a temporary leadership vacuum that -- by default -- is being filled by the Los Angeles City Council's five Valley-based members, some observers have said.

The city campaign spawned an advocacy organization, The Valley Group, that has since become dormant. In addition, relatively few of the 111 people who ran for office in the proposed Valley city remain active in civic life.

Overall, the civic energy that fueled the secession campaign has waned, many observers say.

"If you say Los Angeles has a weak political culture -- which is correct -- then the Valley has an even weaker political culture," said Joel Kotkin, a Pepperdine University researcher who follows Valley trends and politics.

The five Valley-based council members -- four of whom opposed secession and one who was publicly neutral -- said they are banding together to address regional concerns at an unprecedented level.

They dined at Ca' Del Sole in North Hollywood on Oct. 21 in what one participant characterized as a "bread-breaking" session. And all but council President Alex Padilla attended an Oct. 30 workshop to begin the process of creating a "Vision for the Valley" statement.

Bruce Ackerman, president of the Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley, said the council members are beginning to move past parochial concerns to a Valley-wide perspective.

"They do fabulous jobs for each of their respective districts, but there is no Valley agenda," said Ackerman, a sponsor of the workshop.

The five council members and Mayor James Hahn said the secession campaign reinforced the need to provide better municipal services and more local empowerment in the Valley.

"The best thing that secession did was to tell the politicians that you either do something or we'll do something ourselves to make it better," said Councilman

Tony Cardenas. "We're fulfilling some of (the campaign promises) by increasing bulky-item pickup, improving services and our parks and after-school programs." But many Valley activists say the gains have been cosmetic at best and illusory at worst. While all five Valley council members point to neighborhood councils as an example of local empowerment, the activists -- including many former secession candidates who have gotten involved in the councils -- say the advisory panels have been ineffective and over-regulated.

Councilman Greig Smith, who represents a Northwest Valley district that was the most pro-secession in the city, acknowledged problems in developing the citywide network of about 100 neighborhood councils. But Smith, like Hahn and the other Valley council members, said he's confident that neighborhood councils eventually will fulfill their goal of bringing power to neighborhoods. "Neighborhood councils can educate people on what the city does and why it does it," Smith said. "(The councils) are absolutely the future, although not today."

Councilwoman Wendy Greuel said she and her colleagues are committed to improving city services. Greuel said she also remains committed to the idea of boroughs, which, unlike neighborhood councils, would have decision-making authority.

"(Secession) was a wake-up call," Greuel said. "We can never forget that people were so frustrated with the downtown bureaucracy."

Hahn, however, remains cool to the idea of boroughs, but said the secession debate did give rise to other local-empowerment measures such as neighborhood councils and area planning commissions.

"The more information we can get and certainly use in a way that allows us to direct resources where they're needed ... is helpful," Hahn said.

Councilman Dennis Zine said council districts that were redrawn in 2001 have given more power to the Valley. Five of the 15 council seats lie entirely within the Valley, while two others stretch across Mulholland Drive. "We've never had that kind of clout," Zine said.

Padilla, who represents the Northeast Valley, said the Valley's newfound power was on display in February, when he and Greuel successfully lobbied for more federal grant money to be directed to social services in the Valley.

Hahn's office had allotted just 9 percent of the Community Development Block Grant funds to the Valley, but Greuel and Padilla got the proportion increased to 21 percent.

"I believe that the message was delivered loudly and clearly about the dissatisfaction of a lot of Valley residents," Padilla said of the secession effort.