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Secession remorse

Griev live beyond rejection of cityhood

By James Nash

Staff Writer

Saturday, November 01, 2003 - CHATSWORTH -- A year after voters rejected cityhood for the San Fernando Valley, secession still runs deep in this neighborhood of horse trails and \$700,000 ranch homes.

Residents of this area just south of the Ronald Reagan (118) Freeway and east of De Soto Avenue voted by a more than 3 to 1 margin for a divorce from Los Angeles. It was the biggest pro-secession vote as the effort was trounced citywide although the Valley narrowly supported cityhood.

Today, the sentiments persist -- but the quest for a Valley city does not.

A year after the campaign for a separate Valley city laid bare the area's grievances against City Hall, the activism that drove the campaign has diffused. Some leaders of the secession campaign have gotten involved in the fledgling network of neighborhood councils; others have returned to advocating on specific issues; while many have dropped out of public life.

Mike Grassi, a resident of the heavily pro-secession Chatsworth precinct, said people have been distracted by the war in Iraq, the recall campaign against Gov. Gray Davis and, most recently, the series of devastating fires in Southern California.

"Nothing really happened one way or the other," said Grassi, who voted for secession.

"There hasn't been any resolution or people running through the streets saying, 'See, I told you so.' The whole thing just kind of died."

Behind the scenes, though, there are signs of incremental progress:

The five Los Angeles City Council members whose districts lie entirely within the Valley met for dinner Oct. 21 to discuss ways to work as a team on Valley issues. On Oct. 30, four of the five council members met with leaders of the Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley to discuss a "Vision for the Valley" statement.

Valley and city leaders are lobbying the U.S. Census Bureau to create a separate statistical district for the Valley. The new district data would allow regional leaders to track trends on income, unemployment and demographics in the Valley alone, rather than the entire city of Los Angeles.

The Valley's 26 neighborhood councils -- local advisory groups created under a 1999 charter reform -- continue to form. Although the neighborhood councils have been criticized as powerless and often dysfunctional, members of the 26 Valley panels have created a Valley-wide alliance that they hope will serve as an outlet for Valley activism.

Leading proponents of a borough system -- in which Los Angeles would be divided into mostly self-governing districts -- say they plan to revive the issue next year. Bob Hertzberg, the former state Assembly speaker who has spearheaded the borough idea, said he expects to revisit the issue after working on a ballot initiative to stabilize funding for cities and counties in California.

Still, many Valley leaders say the issues that spurred the municipal breakup effort have received only a cursory look.

City services such as street repair and tree trimming haven't improved noticeably -- recently have been cut back sharply citywide.

Police still take longer to respond to calls in the Valley than other parts of the city -- and response times everywhere are getting longer.

Reforms to the city's business tax -- considered an onerous job-killer -- have been mostly cosmetic.

"There's been very little to no improvement since the Valley cityhood election," said Keith Richman, a Republican state Assemblyman from Northridge who finished first in the race for Valley mayor.

"There was a fleeting moment of an olive branch, but within a month, Mayor (James) Hahn went back on all the promises he had made in the San Fernando Valley cityhood campaign."

Hahn and other city leaders say budget cuts at the state and local levels have hamstrung efforts to improve municipal services in the Valley or elsewhere in Los Angeles.

"We can be more efficient in how we do things, we can be more strategic in how we use our resources," Hahn said. "(But) it's hard to do a lot more when you have a lot less."

City Council President Alex Padilla, who represents parts of the Northeast Valley, said the city's failure to substantially improve services in the Valley is "absolutely frustrating."

But Padilla, who was an outspoken opponent of secession, said the Valley would be worse off as a fledgling city trying to weather the state fiscal crisis.

"I think overall the Valley is doing OK," Padilla said. "Do we have more work to do? Absolutely."

Last Nov. 5, a slim majority of voters in the Valley voted for secession while the measure was rejected by a 2 to 1 margin citywide. The secession measure needed majorities in both the Valley and citywide to pass. A similar measure for Hollywood to secede from Los Angeles was rejected in both Hollywood and the city as a whole.

Proponents of Valley cityhood said they remain committed to the idea of a separate Valley city, but there is no active campaign to break up Los Angeles. The secession proponents concede their efforts are doomed as long as voters south of Mulholland Drive also have a say in the Valley's political fate.

Valley Voters Organized Toward Empowerment, the group that pushed to get secession on the ballot, has moved on to issues such as the Valley statistical district, a plan to balance California's shaky finances, and a proposal to increase regulation of news racks in Los Angeles.

Joe Vitti, the president of Valley VOTE, said city leaders have been more receptive to Valley concerns since last year's election. Vitti pointed to plans for a Children's Museum at Hansen Dam in Lake View Terrace -- it would be the first public museum in the San Fernando Valley.

An advocacy organization formed after last year's election, The Valley Group, has fallen dormant. Richman, the group's chairman, said he has been discussing ways to reconstitute the group.

Many of the efforts now under way are intended to enhance the Valley's self-identity as a distinct area within a city, an area whose 1.3 million residents would make it the sixth-largest city in the United States if it stood on its own.

Long frustrated with the lack of cultural amenities in the Valley, area leaders are pressing forward with plans for a cultural arts center at California State University in Northridge and for a performing arts center in the West Valley.

There's even consideration of a sports arena at the North Hollywood subway station area, and officials are paying more attention to redevelopment of the area.

Many of the same leaders back the proposal for a separate Census district, saying the Valley-specific data would strengthen the area's case for money for redevelopment projects and other grants. Hahn and other city leaders also support the Valley Census district.

"Everything you do in government and business and even in nonprofits involves some sort of analysis and reporting of the demographics of an area," said Bob Scott, an urban planner who is a leading proponent of the idea.

"It doesn't sound very sexy but it does mean a whole lot in terms of having an identity."

While the secession campaign resulted in few concrete improvements, it did mark a turning point in the Valley's evolution into an assertive, self-confident region, said Joel Kotkin, a research fellow at Pepperdine University who has followed Valley politics and trends.

Kotkin, who lives in Valley Village, said the Valley's assertiveness will influence the 2005 mayoral campaign, when Hahn is expected to run for a second term.

"There is more of a self-confidence in the Valley and more of a sense that the Valley is not just a bunch of peasants with pitchforks," Kotkin said. "Essentially the Valley put Hahn in office because it didn't like the alternative. It could get rid of Hahn, too."

Back in Chatsworth, in the neighborhood where 316 people voted for secession last year and 100 against, many people say they'd vote to split off from Los Angeles again if they had the chance.

Eunice McTyre, a longtime resident of the neighborhood and a member of Valley VOTE, said people in her neighborhood remain restless and unhappy with City Hall. She said city services haven't improved, the area still feels estranged from downtown Los Angeles and fears that its semi-rural lifestyle is under constant threat of urbanization.

But McTyre isn't pessimistic.

"I have a lot of hope because there were wonderful people involved in Valley VOTE and they're still out there," she said.

"People are just looking for leadership. (Civic activism) is trying to find its way and I don't think it's found it yet." IF YOU GO City Councilwoman Wendy Greuel and San Fernando Valley business groups are hosting a free forum to review the successes and shortcomings in city government since last year's secession vote. It will be held at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Braude Center, 6262 Van Nuys Blvd., Van Nuys. Reservations are due by Monday by calling (818) 755-7858.