

Secession Is Dead, but Self-Rule Dream Lives

By DAVID DEVOSS

For the city of Los Angeles, it was the biggest day since Nov. 5, 1913, when William Mulholland kicked open the sluice gates of the California Aqueduct and rasped, "There it is. Take it." On this occasion, however, Mayor James K. Hahn was the man of the hour, and the celebration was not about Los Angeles' salvation but its survival.

The day before, a citywide measure asking voters to allow the San Fernando Valley to become a separate city had been soundly defeated. Now, as Hahn stood before a cheering crowd of mostly city employees, he could afford to be magnanimous. At his feet stood dozens of Valley secessionists still smarting from having been outspent 10 to 1 in the campaign, thanks to wealthy political contributors living on the other side of the hill. Many believed their dream of a city government beholden to neighborhoods, not municipal unions and property developers, was gone forever. But Hahn told them not to despair.

"The secession debate has forever changed our city," Hahn said between rounds of applause. "Join us in moving Los Angeles forward. Join us in making city government work better for everybody in every single part of the city."

Hahn's blueprint was TeamWork LA, a 10-point program that called for the creation of seven regional city halls. Each would have a director, a team of specialists trained to solve problems and a "service cabinet" composed of representatives from

In some ways, Valley residents' desire for local control is slowly being realized.

city departments assigned to work closely with newly created neighborhood councils. All service requests would be logged and tracked by a special computer program.

"We're going to do this without creating another layer of government, without increasing costs, without creating bureaucracy," Hahn promised.

TeamWork LA did not begin auspiciously in the Valley. Within days of secession's defeat, city workers who had been assigned to trim trees and fill potholes before the election were gone. Officers stationed at busy intersections to ease rush-hour traffic also disappeared. By mid-January, when Hahn announced a citywide hiring freeze, he was forced to admit that California's budget crisis would postpone delivery on his promises.

"I think nothing can be worse, after convincing everyone that we're better off staying together and how we're going to improve services, when the first thing we have to do is cut back on everything because the state pulled the rug out from under us," Hahn said.

Today, only three of the seven regional city halls have fully functioning offices; just two have directors. (One of these is the South Valley office in Van Nuys, which opened in March.) Sewer-service charges have soared, trash-collection fees are up 66%, and in May the City Council refused to spend \$69 million budgeted for hiring 320 police officers. At the same time, the highest-paid city officials in the U.S. enjoyed a 5% salary hike, twice

the rate of inflation. (Last month, Hahn proposed to cancel the automatic raises.)

More than half of Valley residents who went to the polls last November voted to establish their own city. Would they be better governed today if secession had passed citywide? Some veteran politicians think so.

"I couldn't publicly support secession because I didn't want to anger the mayor, but I certainly voted for Valley cityhood," says retired City Council member Ruth Galanter, who represented the northeast San Fernando Valley during her final year in office. "The Valley should be a separate city. It's certainly large enough. The [Los Angeles] Basin has no experience with the Valley. People here think it's a foreign country."

Because Hahn was candid, most Valley civic organizations seem willing to look beyond the current budget crisis and give him the benefit of the doubt. Valley VOTE, the organization that spearheaded last year's secession drive and on whose board I serve, no longer lists Valley cityhood as one of its priorities. Instead, it wants business-tax reform, swift completion of the North Hollywood Arts District and construction of a performing arts center at Cal State Northridge. According to Valley VOTE President Joe Vitti, "We want Valley VOTE to be a positive force that supports those on the council who are working to make the San Fernando Valley a better place to live and work."

One of the main frustrations fuel-

ing secession was the disparity between taxes paid by the Valley and services received from the city. Although the Valley has 37% of L.A.'s population and 25% of its poor, it often came up short when City Hall distributed federal Community Development Block Grants. This year, more than one-third of the federal money will have found its way to Valley neighborhoods, a 14% increase over last year's assistance.

The most dramatic change in Los Angeles over last year, however, is the presence of neighborhood councils. Often dismissed as advisory committees with no real authority and limited budgets, the councils have become a major conduit linking residents to city government. A council's effectiveness greatly depends on a City Council member's willingness to work with it, but the Valley's 35 councils already are forming relationships with city departments.

"Recently a manager from the Bureau of Street Services attended a West Hills council meeting during which a woman told him she had lived in her house for 54 years and never had her street repaired," said Jill Barad, a Sherman Oaks political consultant who chairs the Valley Alliance of Neighborhood Councils. "[The manager] asked for her name and address and by the end of the week her street was fixed."

Only 78 of the city's estimated 100 neighborhood councils have been certified by the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. Most operate smoothly, but several openly criticize the department, which serves as a buffer between the neighborhoods and the City Council. For these councils, the department's rules on disbursement of funds and meeting sites seem arbitrary, if not

capricious. All 19 members of one neighborhood council recently had threatened to resign en masse before the department would relent and allow them to rent office space.

The greatest failure of the new unified L.A., however, is its inability to improve police protection. Cost pay increases for the city's civil employees, combined with a short workweek for uniformed police, have left many neighborhoods undergirded. In Pacoima, one Latino gang has taken over Humphrey Park, terrorized African American children and turned a public gymnasium where civic gatherings often occurred into a latter-day Ft. Apache.

"The gang is so bold that six weeks ago it even slashed the tires of a police car during one of our nighttime meetings," said Pacoima neighborhood council member Betty Cooper. "I on the seniors subcommittee, but I'm so afraid, I won't go to the park unless the police give me a ride."

The secession fight may be over, but the battle for boroughs is just beginning. At a town hall meeting last week called by Valley council member Wendy Greuel, one speaker after another predicted that Los Angeles eventually would be forced to accept a borough system if only because traffic was so bad that one could fly Denver in less time than it often took to drive from San Pedro or Chatsworth to downtown Los Angeles.

Los Angeles will defend its centralized authority with the same energy brought to the defeat of secession. Boroughs never become reality, it will be because of the success of neighborhood councils and the access they have to decision-making. Once people develop a knack for self-governance, it's hard to cede authority back to City Hall.

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