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Term Limits Reshape L.A. City Council

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To get a good idea of how the L.A. City Council has changed, consider Wendy Greuel. Elected to the council just a little over a year ago by a 242-vote margin, the 41-year-old former DreamWorks executive is now campaigning against Alex Padilla to be council president – a post that not long ago was the uncontested domain of powerbroker John Ferraro.

These days, it doesn't take decades of experience to grab the council's top spot. It can't – under term limits, Greuel will only have eight years to make a difference.

"You don't have time to waste," said Greuel, a former housing deputy to Mayor Tom Bradley who is expecting her first child in the next few weeks. "When I first took office, people were saying to me, 'Aren't you ever going to slow down?' I said I don't have time. I have to run 100 miles per hour because there is such a short amount of time to make the difference we want."

Over and over again comes the same refrain: the term limits law that passed in 1993 has changed everything. And starting next week, when the last three members of the old guard – Hal Bernson, Ruth Galanter and Nate Holden – leave office after a combined 56 years of service, the effect of term limits will be fully realized (see story page 13).

At that time, the senior member of the council will be Cindy Miscikowski, at a

mere six years. Besides Miscikowski, only one other member on this new council will have served longer than two years: Council President Alex Padilla, who joined the body in 1999.

No father figure

Term limits have ushered in a new crop of younger members, eager to make a mark as they eye their next steps up the political ladder. How that will eventually be felt in terms of L.A. public policy has yet to be played out, but without a strong father figure like Ferraro, these council members are likely to be more independent and assertive, yet also more unpredictable.

"The post-term limits council moves at a much faster velocity than councils in the past," said Councilman Eric Garcetti. "You have to learn things much more quickly. But the advantage is that you also get things done more quickly."

L.A. Mayor James Hahn learned about this new council the hard way, when after weeks of heated rhetoric, the council rejected his budget plan to hire 320 additional police officers. The council rejected the brusque urgings of Police Chief William Bratton about the need for more cops and instead heeded warnings from top City Hall staff members that hiring those officers would create a long-term structural deficit.

"The budget battle was our own graduation as elected officials," said Garcetti.

The response was a far cry from previous councils, which were often criticized for their free-spending ways. So much so that Hahn appeared caught off guard by the council's adamancy – not helped, many believe, by Bratton's icy rhetoric that suggested council members didn't appreciate the importance of the additional hires because they don't attend the funerals of police officers.

"Back in the Bradley years, the mayor could almost always count on eight votes for any issue that was important to him and it was usually the same eight votes," Greuel recalled. "Now, there are different coalitions, depending on the issues. You rarely see the same eight members voting in favor of something each time. I think that's a good thing."

All new members

The incoming council members are hardly government rookies. Antonio Villaraigosa was the former Speaker of the California Assembly, while Tony Cardenas was chair of the Assembly Budget Committee. Greig Smith was Bernson's longtime chief of staff.

But having government experience is not the same as serving with the same group of colleagues for years on end and dealing with many of the same issues.

"The council members themselves won't have a lot of institutional memory," said local political consultant and lobbyist Richard Lichtenstein. "Not only that, but there is little previous interplay among many of the members. It's going to make for a very interesting sorting out period."

That will begin with the vote for council president, which could take place as early as next week.

Just two months ago, Padilla's grip on the presidency was widely being questioned around City Hall. Some had criticized his youth and fractured leadership style. By this past April, when rumors were swirling that Greuel would launch her bid, Padilla could only count five or six council members as firmly in his camp.

But then came the budget clash. Early on, Padilla determined that Hahn's plan would not be fiscally prudent. He rallied 10 of his colleagues to his side for the council's version of the budget – enough to ensure an override of Hahn's veto. "I don't think anyone should overlook the resolve of the recently emboldened council," he said. "There is a balance of power set up in the charter."

Strong, high-profile personalities like Villaraigosa and former Police Chief Bernard Parks will occupy the spotlight, while others, like Miscikowski and Smith, have long years of experience at City Hall and may not necessarily fall into line behind a leader.

"Looking at the resumes of the people on the council, it's an awfully strong group – maybe too strong and talented," said Raphael Sonenshein, professor of political science at California State University Fullerton.

But Sonenshein noted that it might be less important to keep the 15-member council in line than a larger legislative body, like the state Assembly.

"All you have to do on most issues in the Council is get to eight votes," Sonenshein said. "It's not quite as important that they hold together."

Getting noticed

Another byproduct of term limits is the tendency to try to get noticed in a hurry.

Earlier this year, Janice Hahn led the charge against the Police Commission's plan to stop responding to burglar alarms unless there is visual verification. Last year, it was Greuel introducing her boroughs motion after only six weeks on the council.

Since these issues sometimes spring up quickly, it makes coalition building more difficult. But it also tends to lessen long-term enmities.

"You don't see any Hatfield and McCoy rivalries on the council now," said Garcetti. "Even councilmembers Bernie Parks and Dennis Zine, who were on opposite sides of most issues before they came onto the council, now collaborate on public safety issues."

As a result, interest groups lobbying the council have to keep on their toes. "We approach every issue as a new day," said Carol Schatz, president and chief executive of the Central City Association.

Added Ben Reznik, a land use attorney with Jeffer Mangels Butler & Marmaro LLP: "On this council, groups and alliances have formed, but just when you see a group of people band together on some votes and begin to adjust your own approach, they split apart again."

There will be no shortage of issues to deal with – adding more cops and reducing crime, building more affordable housing, reforming the city's cumbersome business tax, weighing in on Hahn's \$10 billion plan to overhaul Los Angeles International Airport, to name a few.

But Sonenshein, who has observed L.A. city councils for more than 20 years, says he thinks the new council will be up to the task.

"I'm optimistic about this incoming council," Sonenshein said. "Sure there can be a lot of tension and competition. But you're going to be seeing a lot of constructive energy and even some battlefield friendships. That's because the overriding mission in an era of term limits is getting things done."

And Padilla notes that while the last two years have been "a period of transition," there will be fewer termed-out scenarios for a while. "Assuming the council members who are up for reelection in 2005 get reelected, we are looking at a council that should stay relatively stable for the next four to six years."

These days, that's practically forever.