

6/6/99 Los Angeles Times

COMMENTARY / ANALYSIS / TIMES IN

SECTION

M

SUNDAY

JUNE 6, 1999

□

OPINIC

CHARTER REFORM

Humanizing L.A.

The City's
Future Is in Its
Neighborhoods

Cell
See my
prints

By D.J. Waldie

From the perspective of the small cities that ring the Los Angeles Plain, the city of L.A. is both uncomfortably close and reassuringly distant. It's only among urban theorists that Los Angeles is the capital of the place we share. Never in *our* hearts. The cities of the plain made other choices—often, it was not to be L.A.—and now they have separate histories that permanently constrain how they relate to each other and the looming, if not completely real, presence of Los Angeles.

There are 80 cities on the plain (out of 88) with populations under 125,000. Think of them collectively as the Canada of Los Angeles County. They are sovereign in ways that matter locally but invisible to the big political and corporate egos that claim to be L.A.'s future. When they register at all, it's generally as backdrops for one interminable freeway car chase after another.

When L.A. writhes in communal violence or political muscle flexing, these cities look for shelter.

Seen from the margin, charter reform for Los Angeles seems both necessary and unavailing. Necessary, because the charter approved in 1924 placed ultimate political responsibility in the hands of a tiny social and economic elite that has since passed away. Unavailing, if reform only revises the calculus of political power in Los Angeles and does little to change the shared experiences of Angeleno lives.

What the march to reform has delivered so far to



the shared experiences of Angelenos. What the march to reform has delivered so far, to those on the outside, after the negotiations of the politically connected over the terms of their political future. This is where charter reform has failed before, six times since 1900.

With a decision on a new charter only two days away, the object of reform has dwindled again to the blunt exercise of power. To take the place of the absent city hall and the committee of 13 which picked the mayor would come the City Council. Power must be efficiently supplied. A majority of City Council members nominate themselves with the backing of the city's public employee unions. They urge L.A. voters to reject the charter proposal and accept a promise of incremental change, on the principle that power must be handled delicately. Good local politics, as the cities on the plain know, are neither efficient nor delicate. The politics ordinary people actually want are modest and flexible. In West L.A., charter reform pleads for politicians, lobbyists, union executives, developers, lawyers, and issue-oriented activists. Reform even pleads for the empowerment of individual voters, whose newly refurbished "right to choose" could call reform into existence on June 8. But reform may fail to speak for the fabric of L.A.'s neighborhoods and communities and the shared habits that form them. There's not much room in the old, merely efficient, for the claims of these fragile sovereignties and their struggle for self-expression.

There's no future, however, in the status quo most City Council members now defend. The current City Charter, despite its 394 amendments, remains darkly suspicious of public life. Please see CITY, M6

D.J. Waldie, the author of "Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir," is a city official in Lakewood.

City

Continued from M1

lic life and its messy reliance on communal experience. It contains the cruel assumptions of the era of its drafting, that the city's working-class people should be politically neutral, the city's governance should be in the hands of dispassionate technicians and its elected leadership should be a bland board of directors. The charter also assumed that the city's Latino population would be permanently exiled east of the Los Angeles River, safely beyond city boundaries, and its tiny minority of African Americans would remain invisible.

Everything has changed, and yet Los Angeles is still governed posthumously by white, Protestant men who used professionalism and prejudice to make their Los Angeles a perfect Midwestern small town.

It stopped being that at least 40 years ago. What L.A.'s civic culture might have become has been held in suspension, which partly explains the city's tendency to go up in flames.

No wonder, then, that Los Angeles residents of color or immigrant background see only an eyeless mask, instead of a comprehending human face, when they turn to a city government framed on these principles. Or that middle-class Anglo voters, because they were urged to turn their backs on it, accuse city government of being remote.

The life of any city is a story. Beyond the edge of Los Angeles, the civic stories contain their share of failure and heroism. The stories also are familiar, small-scale and believable. Very few Los Angeles residents believe in their city's unrealistic story about itself, because that story contains so little about them and what they yearn for.

They yearn for accountability, identity and decency. In its compromised way, the reform charter points toward these values, the ones that sustain communities like Lakewood at the level they are most comprehensible.

• Executive authority. A stronger

mayor, who can be checked by council veto, makes executive authority accountable and gives it a citywide identity.

• Legislative authority. An expanded City Council, if Amendment 3 or 4 is approved, makes legislative authority more accountable to community-specific interests and gives it a neighborhood identity.

• Land-use planning. A democratized zoning process, with more planning, commissioners and neighborhood-oriented area commissions, gives the current developer-driven process a fig leaf of respectability.

• Neighborhood councils. The conflict over expansion of the City Council and concentration of authority in the mayor's office has pushed the creation of neighborhood councils to the periphery of reform. That's unfortunate. Although they would be only advisory, neighborhood councils, supported by their own department, general manager and board of neighborhood commissioners, are the reform charter's most radical break with the city's past. They would do the most to give Los Angeles a shared civic culture to replace the elitist one that has failed.

Neighborhood councils respond to the communitarian impulses that come with the cultural experience of the city's immigrant populations. They can substitute for the corporate boardrooms, mostly long since departed, that once incubated the city's leadership. They propose an alternative to the increasing privatization of life in Los Angeles and to the silence that swallows the sounds of ordinary Angeleno voices whenever they speak in public. Neighborhood councils may even diffuse secessionist longing in the San Fernando Valley and at the harbor, although that gives an untried idea too much credit.

At least, they would bring governance in Los Angeles closer to the standard of the cities of the plain. Of the county's 80 smaller cities, the average is one city council member for every 11,500 residents. In L.A., the 15 council members each represent 250,000 residents, the largest number in the nation. If a five-member neighborhood council appeared in every district of an expanded City Council, local

government could have a human face for every 30,000 residents, perhaps, even fewer.

A human face does not mean that neighborhood councils won't become captive to the values of homeowner and business determinists, or be subverted by suspicious City Council members or be drafted as the mayor's cheering section. Neighborhood councils face many risks, not the least of which is the brittleness of the system in which they would operate.

The same phenomenon constrains the ability of computer technology to be optimally efficient. Think of your troubled relationship with Microsoft Windows and the backward-looking code needed to accommodate decades of less than optimal choices. Lock-in also permanently limits the "civic technology" of the charter. Nothing in its reform will make Los Angeles smaller, bring back the industries that produced its middle class, change its overall pattern of land use, or level its rigorous sorting of populations by race and economic status.

Charter reform won't address the rigidity in government financing. When voters approved Propositions 13 and 218, they shifted the cost of many municipal services from property owners to consumption-based taxes and user fees. Turning citizens into mere consumers let homeowners disavow their property-based obligations to each other. Bewildering layers of municipal fees made city government look inefficient and greedy. Also, the shift made the state Legislature, not local voters, ultimately responsible for the city's budget. Los Angeles, and every California city, struggles with the implications.

L.A.'s story was once only a sales pitch for a Caucasian utopia of middle-class health, wealth and happiness in the sunshine. My city's story, like many from the margins, was deliberately more modest, though still an incomplete solution to the problem of how we can live together. Los Angeles voters have the opportunity Tuesday to make their story more realistic, and that's probably a good thing. It's a limited, historically conditioned and ultimately heroic choice.