

09/14/98 DAILY NEWS:

Group backs empowered local councils.

A unique group of business, labor and community leaders calling itself The Coalition began solidifying its positions Sunday in favor of elected and empowered community councils as part of Los Angeles City Charter reform.

With about 45 people attending a meeting at the studios of CBS Television, the group agreed charter reform should provide for elected governing bodies, called community councils, representing several neighborhoods each and with power to make decisions directly affecting their constituents' quality of life, including planning issues.

The consensus was also in favor of an appeals process to the City Council, requiring a two-thirds vote to overturn decisions of the community councils. And the group agreed with the principle that the community councils shouldn't cost taxpayers more than \$1 million to \$2 million.

State Sen. Tom Hayden, D-Los Angeles, stayed for the start of the meeting, then spoke briefly, endorsing The Coalition's efforts. "Los Angeles has grown and when you grow in size, I think you have to grow in democracy," Hayden told the group. It hasn't happened, he said, because "the powers-that-be" have squelched the idea.

"I think it's an idea whose time has come," added Hayden, who ran for mayor in 1997. "It just needs the unified coalition you're trying to build today. I think the people who vote in the city will vote for a responsibly crafted proposal for neighborhood councils."

The group, led by Studio City attorney David Fleming, actually came to an informal decision that several community councils each representing perhaps 50,000 to 100,000 residents in a number of neighborhoods near each other would work best.

"It has to be small enough that it can stay on top of neighborhood issues but large enough to be efficient," said Jon Shaughnessy of the Neighborhood Councils Movement.

Gordon Murley, president of the San Fernando Valley Federation, recommended there be a "workable minimum" number of councils to start off with. He didn't give a specific number but said it's easier to add councils later than to start big and try to scale back.

Sal Grammatico, from the Westchester area, said the community councils should have the right to vote on major citywide issues, such as the expansion of Los Angeles International Airport.

The Coalition is hoping to present a unified set of recommendations to the Elected Charter Reform Commission before the commission sits down with its appointed counterpart to write up a ballot measure for the June 1999 election.

Sunday's group, including leaders of Valley and Westside business and resident groups, stands in opposition to downtown business organizations, such as the Los Angeles Business Advisors, that are against dispersing power to neighborhood councils.

Polly Ward, vice president of the Studio City Residents Association, said she worried the creation of local governing bodies could spell the demise of organizations like hers that have acquired significant influence.

"It would not take away from existing groups," said Barbara Fine, a Benedict Canyon homeowners representative who is also vice president of the Federation of Hillside and Canyon Associations.

There was some debate among The Coalition on Sunday over whether charter reform should put forth the principle of power residing in the community councils unless specifically granted to a citywide governing body or whether it should represent the current power structure granting some authority to less powerful bodies.

"I think it should be all powers repose in community councils except those delegated to the City Council," said Bob Scott, a Valley business leader and Los Angeles city planning commissioner who was there on his own behalf. "I'm talking about doing the city of Los Angeles a favor by keeping it together rather than allowing it to disintegrate."

Shaughnessy warned against carrying charter reform so far it will end up in court with a judge reversing the reforms. And Ross Hopkins, vice president of the United Chambers of Commerce, said his organization favors the principle of the existing City Council delegating authority to local councils.

Also attending Sunday's meeting were Charley Mims, a member of the Appointed Charter Reform Commission, and Bennett Kayser, a member of the elected commission.

Groups represented at the meeting included Local 347 of the Service Employees Union International and the Westside Civic Association, while individuals from diverse sections of the city also attended, including El Segundo and Boyle Heights.

With its guiding principles more or less firmed up, The Coalition now needs to round up support from the larger community, including the Eastside and South Central, said Rocky Rushing, Hayden's chief of staff.