

Valley's plan for L.A.

By Patrick McGreevy, Daily News
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Calling for "revolutionary" change, reform movement co-founder David Fleming proposed on Thursday the creation of 15 "quasi-cities" throughout Los Angeles, each with elected mayors and councils, each with broad powers over local budget, services and planning.

"What we have to do is push power down," said Fleming, a Studio City attorney and prominent San Fernando Valley civic leader.

Fleming, who last year co-sponsored with Mayor Richard Riordan the measure that created an elected Charter Reform Commission and recently helped fund a poll on Valley secession, warned that failure to take dramatic action could lead to the breakup of the city.

His charter proposal would preserve Los Angeles as a city by having each of the 15 elected district boards send its mayor -- the City Council member under the current system -- and several representatives to a 50-member Metropolitan Council that would decide citywide issues such as harbor, airport, utilities, police and fire services.

Members of the district boards and Metropolitan Council would serve on a part-time basis and be paid about \$100 a meeting.

The downtown metropolitan government would continue to provide centralized police, fire, public works and other services for the whole city, but the local districts would be free to shop from a menu of services.

As an incentive to development, local districts would be able to keep revenue generated by their decisions for enhancing their neighborhoods.

Fleming, who has avoided direct comment as the elected and appointed Charter Reform Commissions grappled and often stumbled in different directions, chose as a forum for his proposal a major meeting on charter reform sponsored by the Valley Industry and Commerce Association.

With his longtime leadership roles in the VICA, the Economic Alliance of the Valley and numerous civic and philanthropic organizations, Fleming long has been regarded as the unofficial mayor of the Valley.

His proposal was well-received by VICA and other Valley leaders who have been debating endorsement of similar proposals, but others outside the Valley rejected Fleming's ideas outright.

Sam Bell, who heads the Los Angeles Business Advisors, said downtown business leaders would actively oppose any system of local councils with power to decide planning matters.

Bell said the group of prominent downtown corporation leaders wants to expand the City Council from 15 to 33 or 35 members, but opposes empowered neighborhood councils.

George Kieffer, president of the city's appointed Charter Reform Commission, said his panel has tentatively endorsed trying advisory councils first since no other major city has given neighborhood councils decision-making power.

Kieffer said having elected, decision-making district councils might not guarantee that business and other groups are represented in the process. "Right now we're not comfortable that there's a system that can do that," he said.

Fleming, however, said he would transfer significant powers to the 15 district boards, including authority to set locations and hours for local parks and libraries, deciding which trees to trim and streets to repair, and regulating street vending and signs.

Each district could contract with the metropolitan government for local services, but they could also put tax-increase measures on the district ballot to improve services in their area.

"These in effect should be quasi-cities within the city of Los Angeles," Fleming said during the forum, attended by 50 business and political leaders at the Sheraton Universal Hotel.

Fleming's charter would contain a doctrine of regional supremacy that would allow citywide interests to take precedence over local ones. For instance, a district near Los Angeles International Airport could not shut^ @down the facility if it conflicted with the citywide policy.

The mayor would serve as the arbitrator when the interests of two districts conflict, with the mayor's decision subject to ratification by the Metropolitan Council, which could override on a two-thirds vote.

Each district board could issue building permits, adopt curfews and street vending rules, and decide local land-use and planning matters.

Answering concerns about anti-development neighborhood boards, Fleming proposed the incentive of having new tax revenue generated by development staying with the district.

"If you just give them the power to say no, they will say no," he said. "What you have to do is give them incentives to say yes to expansion, to say yes to new jobs, to say yes to new business."

He cited the economic boom in Burbank as an example of what could happen if each of the 15 districts benefits from rising tax revenue generated by new development.

While the 15 districts reflect the current number of council districts, boundaries would be reconfigured to reflect communities and shared interests.

VICA leaders said the plan is very similar to their proposal of a system of elected town councils with decision-making powers.

"I think his proposal is right in line with the empowered town council idea that we've been talking about," said Robert Scott, a VICA board member and city Planning Commission member.

Added VICA leader Joyce Prager, "We wanted an elected board, an empowered board ... with substantial fiscal responsibility."

The Fleming proposal is also similar to an idea advanced by elected Charter Reform Commission member Paula Boland. She was not at the forum, but Encino attorney Rob Glushon, another member of the city's elected charter panel, said he is open to Fleming's concept.

"I think it deserves thoughtful attention and dialogue," Glushon said.

Jeff Brain, co-chairman of Valley Voters Organized Toward Empowerment, the organization pushing for a study of Valley cityhood, said Fleming's proposal "goes in the direction of addressing some of the issues we have raised."

Brain was skeptical about whether the proposal will be accepted either by the Charter Reform Commissions or the City Council.

"David can propose it. I'm not sure how far it will get," he said.

Some City Council members were equally skeptical.

"It's provocative. It's entertaining. I don't know if it's workable," said Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas, who supports advisory councils.

Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg said she is concerned that some parts of the city would have more development, new tax money and better services than others.

"I think it would be unconstitutional," Goldberg said. "You would have the problem of having tremendous potential for some areas of the city becoming destitute, 'have-not' areas."

Fleming said his proposal would require that all areas of the city retain, at a minimum, their current levels of services and revenue.

"Nobody should get hurt by what we do with charter reform," he said.

Goldberg favors local councils with decision-making power on land-use issues and access to a small pot of money, about \$250,000, to spend on local priorities.

She also challenged any comparison between Los Angeles and cities like Burbank.

"Those smaller cities have the ability to `zone out' most of the people who are poor, most of the people who are blue-collar, and they do," Goldberg said.

Los Angeles cannot afford, for instance, to do what she said Torrance does, which is to turn down federal funds for low-income housing.

She also predicted it would also be hard to get voter approval of expanding the City Council to 50 members.

Fleming said his proposal provides for part-time members of the district boards and Metropolitan Council, who might at most receive a \$100-per-meeting stipend, except for the district mayors.

The first mayor of each district would be the City Council member who represents the district in 2001, when the new charter would take effect. They would be paid the same \$107,390 a year they now earn as City Council members and would retain their staffs.

Each five- to seven-member district board would meet once a week. Each would send its mayor and a few board members to the Metropolitan Council, which might meet three or four times a month.

The mayor of Los Angeles would remain the city's chief administrator, with expanded power over policy, and hiring and firing department heads.

Fleming said the new system of government should begin July 1, 2001, when the current mayor and half of the City Council will be term-limited out of office.

He plans to formally present the plan to Riordan and both Charter Reform Commissions soon.

Riordan has proposed creation of a system of advisory neighborhood councils, selected at local caucuses, with some power over a portion of the city budget.

Deputy Mayor Kelly Martin, a forum panel participant, said Riordan is open to other ideas, including Fleming's. "I think it's very intriguing," Martin said.

Fleming said, "It seems to me this kind of devolution is what Los Angeles needs."

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