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Los Angeles Reinvents Itself, Adopting New City Charter

By TODD S. PURDUM, New York Times

LOS ANGELES -- Voters have approved the most sweeping changes in Los Angeles government in three-quarters of a century, discarding the 1925 city charter in favor of a new document that increases the power of the mayor, creates a system of neighborhood advisory councils and gives local communities some control of planning and zoning.

"For me the 21st century begins today," Mayor Richard J. Riordan, who sparked the charter revision move, said this morning in celebration of the measure's passage, with 60 percent of the vote on Tuesday.

"The voters joined me in sweeping out the old and sweeping in the new."

Although the new charter does not go as far in expanding mayoral powers as he originally wished, the election results were a major victory for Riordan.

Besides winning the charter vote despite the opposition of most City Council members and their allies among the leadership of local unions, he saw his chosen candidate win a runoff election to the school board, giving the four candidates he backed for the board this year a majority among its seven members.

The new charter, which sprang from an effort to head off secession drives in the city's far-flung neighborhoods, passed easily in most areas, failing only in predominantly black districts where alienation from city government and Riordan is high and in the harbor district, a center of secession sentiment. Two companion measures -- to increase the size of the 15-member City Council, to either 21 or 25 members -- both failed by large margins. Fewer than 20 percent of registered voters turned out.

For the first time, the charter establishes a system in which neighborhood groups can petition to form advisory councils, which could be either elected directly or appointed by elected officials subject to broad guidelines. But it leaves the number and precise format of such councils up to a newly created Department of Neighborhood Empowerment and

a vote by the City Council.

The new charter, a compromise drafted by two independent citizens' commissions over the last two years, also creates five neighborhood planning boards with binding power over most zoning decisions, subject to City Council review.

By the standards of big Eastern or Midwestern cities, the mayoralty here remains fairly weak. In months of public hearings and debate, Angelenos made clear that they had no wish to embrace the strong-mayoralty model of New York in particular.

But after the new charter takes effect next year, Riordan and his successors will be able to dismiss city department general managers, subject to a two-thirds override vote by the Council. At present, under the old charter, the mayor must obtain Council approval in advance to dismiss general managers.

Riordan, a millionaire lawyer and investor who by law must leave office when his second term expires in 2001, has had generally fractious relations with the Council during his six-year tenure, and much of the debate over the new charter turned on personal clashes between him and the 12 members who opposed the measure.

Riordan and his allies raised about \$1 million, much of it from wealthy executives, including \$200,000 from a corporation controlled by Rupert Murdoch, and outspent their opponents by about 6 to 1.

The opponents were led by Councilman Rudy Svorinich Jr., who represents the harbor district. He came to Riordan's celebratory news conference at City Hall this morning to make peace, bearing a large jar of stuffed olives in lieu of a branch.

"Are you going to hit me with it?" Riordan asked warily.

Riordan said he believed that "charter reform could go a long way toward easing the move toward secession," in both the suburban San Fernando Valley, on the city's northern flank, and the harbor district, on its south side.

But Jeff Brain, president of Valley Vote, a group that has sought a study of the Valley's secession from the rest of the city -- but has stopped short of directly advocating that idea and took no formal position in the vote on

Tuesday -- said the measure's passage confirmed the public's desire for a government more responsive to neighborhood concerns.

"Did the charter reform go far enough to satisfy the discontent in the San Fernando Valley?" Brain said. "Not at all.

Those in our group that supported it made it very clear that they supported it because it's better than what we have, but that it falls far short of the promises of charter reform," like requiring that the neighborhood councils be elected rather than appointed or creating boroughs or other smaller jurisdictions within the city.

The charter leaves much of the fine print of implementation in the hands of the 15 members of the City Council, and there was some question today about how aggressively they would take up that challenge. But Councilman Joel Wachs, who represents a conservative district in the San Fernando Valley and was one of only three members to support the charter proposal, said that "the mandate of the public is so clear" that the Council would have little choice but to follow through.

"I would say that you have only seen the beginning of the wheels of reform," Wachs said at a news conference with charter supporters outside City Hall.

Besides Riordan's endorsed candidate for the school board, Genethia Hayes, who defeated an incumbent member, Barbara Boudreaux, other victors on Tuesday included Councilman Nate Holden, a veteran black incumbent from a district that stretches across a wide section of the city center, who staved off a challenge from the Rev. Madison Shockley.

