

Neighborhood-Council Debate Shouldn't Be a Private Affair

By Xandra Kayden

The escalating fight over neighborhood councils is not without a bit of irony. A group of 16, in a "summit" called by the elected charter commission, is debating how much power the councils should have, or even if they should be part of charter reform at all. This group consists of the same people who have dominated Los Angeles politics for decades, the same interests that helped fuel the drive to rewrite the city's charter in the first place: business, labor and homeowner associations. Each believes they don't have enough power. Each is willing to make decisions for everyone else, ignoring the central idea of neighborhood councils: increasing the number of voices participating in city government.

The idea of neighborhood councils has become the political equivalent of the "shmoo," the Al Capp pet that is everything to everyone. The latest effort to reach accommodation between those parties farthest apart—the organized business community, which only wants a bigger City Council, and the leaders of elected commission, who insist on local control—is making the possibility of consensus more and more iffy. The irony is not that commission leaders are seeking a solution in secret; it is that if the councils were to be the level of government they want, they would not be able to meet

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behind closed doors.

The ability to arrive at consensus by bringing all the stakeholders to the table is consistent with any notion of neighborhood councils. Locking some out, even temporarily, is not.

It might help to review the arguments for setting up neighborhood councils. First, by fostering a better understanding of city government, they would help improve the delivery of services. Second, by creating a mechanism to strengthen communities, they would facilitate consensus across those communities. Finally,

by establishing a political institution capable of bridging the city's many divides—geographical, ethnic and economic—they would make possible coalition-building to promote the common good.

The sides in this battle are clearly

drawn and, if there is no agreement, charter reform may be the victim. Many elected charter-reform commissioners campaigned on slogans of bringing government closer to home by giving neighborhoods power over land use and zoning. The business community and the building-trade unions want none of this, fearing that neighborhoods would only see the trees, never the forest. Instead, they want the City Council to grow from 15 members to 35, an unlikely proposition, since neither the elected nor the appointed charter commissions nor the City Council is likely to put it on the ballot.

There are many models of neighborhood councils from which to choose. Creating one for Los Angeles will require enormous flexibility, since each community will want to define itself and the way it wants to be represented. Those struggling to design them are faced with choices akin to taking one from column A, another from column B—with no sure sense that the whole will be bigger than the sum of its parts.

While there are real economic interests at stake in the neighborhood-council debate, it would be a serious mistake to leave the outcome to such interests. Surely, this issue involves more than the old argument between pro-growth and no-growth partisans. There are many other faces of a community that make up a neighborhood: schools and religious institutions; civic and human-service organizations; ethnic groups that may not have a voice in a representative system. Now is the time to open the door to them, to engage the people in whose name charter reform was undertaken. □