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Better Access to City Hall Smaller L.A. council districts could re-create representation

Imagine for a moment that you live in Las Vegas, Norfolk, Va., or Rochester, N.Y.--cities with 225,000 to 260,000 people. Imagine that your city council suddenly disbanded, leaving only the mayor. Now, think about trying to get through to the mayor when you need help with a building permit problem or when you discover that an X-rated movie theater is opening next door to the local preschool. Ridiculously hopeless, yes?

Welcome to municipal government, Los Angeles style. This deplorable situation has prevailed in Los Angeles for quite a while. Each council district now encompasses a population equivalent to that of entire cities--Las Vegas or Norfolk or Rochester or Corpus Christi, Texas, or St. Petersburg, Fla.

Is it any wonder that some folks in the San Fernando Valley, the Westside and San Pedro contemplate seceding? Or that so many others feel that only the richest, the loudest or the most powerful in the city get heard?

The central task for the two reform panels now weighing options to change the 73-year-old city charter is to reconnect people with their government, to make representative democracy mean something here again.

In 1930, the year of the first census after the current charter was adopted, each of the 15 City Council districts had 83,000 people. Now each council member represents close to 250,000, far more than councilmanic districts in any of the 10 largest U.S. cities. Effective representation is a joke, an impossibility. But shrink the size of Los Angeles' council districts to 100,000 residents and notions like neighborhood representation and constituent service begin to mean something. And the benefits of smaller council districts ripple through municipal government.

Granted, the size of the council would grow dramatically, to about 35 members. But think of the accountability. A community the size of Boyle Heights would be entitled to its own council seat. The same is true for North Hollywood, the Silverlake/Echo Park neighborhoods, Palms/Mar Vista and Van Nuys/North Sherman Oaks. Hollywood and South-Central Los Angeles each would have enough people to justify two council seats. That's real neighborhood clout.

Both the elected and appointed reform panels want to ensure that neighborhood-level concerns are heard at City Hall. So-called neighborhood councils are one approach. But smaller council districts are a simpler and more effective way to get at the same problem. Voluntary advisory groups already work well in some council districts. The new charter should not block their creation, but neither should it require them. The cleaner approach is to make council members accountable again by cutting their districts to a manageable size.

Downsizing districts improves government in other ways too. Thirty-five council members can never be as clubby as 15. Even if a new city charter does not specifically increase the mayor's authority, a larger, more diffuse council would enhance mayoral power. The elected commission last week endorsed the notion of granting the mayor more authority. We too support it. But with a larger council, the mayor would inevitably have to become a coalition builder, a power broker--in essence, a leader. That's good for the city.

The men and women drafting a new city charter have already discovered that their decisions about the mayor, the council, neighborhood power and the operation of city departments are interconnected. The City Council, our most powerful institution, is the place to start. Give residents a real voice by making council districts much smaller.