

LOS ANGELES DAILY NEWS

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OPINION: L.A. as city-state

Valley civic leader and Los Angeles reformer David Fleming has come up with a bold and innovative plan for improving Los Angeles' dysfunctional municipal government and giving neighborhoods more control over their destiny.

Rather than hobbling the city with more bureaucracy by appointing powerless neighborhood advisory councils as a sop to public discontent, Fleming envisions creating 15 "quasi-cities" throughout Los Angeles. Each would have a mayor and district board with broad powers over local budget, service and planning issues.

The 15 quasi-cities would have great autonomy but still would be part of a larger Los Angeles, ruled by a metropolitan government that would have regional authority and provide centralized police, fire, public works and other services for the whole city.

With its vast, sprawling region and diverse population, Los Angeles has never resembled any conventional city in America. Designing a government that acts more like a city-state makes sense.

The two charter reform commissions have been grappling in very different ways with how to disperse power to neighborhood councils. But neither has addressed dismantling City Hall and its domination by narrow interests while preserving the city's ability to provide governance and stability.

Fleming's plan could achieve that.

Both commissions -- if they have any intent of staving off secession movements in the Valley and elsewhere -- should take the Fleming plan seriously, for it is the only proposal that offers any hope of balancing the diverse interests of the city and creating a greater Los Angeles in the 21st century.

The plan would preserve Los Angeles as a city by having each of the 15 district boards send its mayor and some other members to a part-time, 50-member Metropolitan Council that would decide citywide issues, such as those involving the harbor, airport and utilities.

The Metropolitan Council would have 50 members, but like the local district boards' members, they would get stipends of only \$100 per meeting and meet only a fraction of the times that the City Council now does.

Rather than have career politicians serving their own interests, the idea is to tap residents for public service with limited responsibilities. Current City Council members would become local district mayors serving their constituents instead of downtown politicians serving themselves and various special interests.

Expanding the powers of neighborhood councils has generated fear among corporate and business

interests, who worry that the semi-independent councils proposed by both charter commissions would stop development or seriously delay any new construction.

Those concerns have validity, and that has been the problem: to empower neighborhoods without crippling the city.

The Fleming plan offers an answer by allowing each district to keep new tax revenue generated by development that it approved within its borders, creating an incentive for managed growth.

The 15 district boards could set locations and hours for local parks and libraries, decide which trees to trim and streets to repair, and regulate street vending and signs. They would pick from a menu of city services, spending more or less on any particular service tailored to the needs and values of their respective communities.

Under a doctrine of regional supremacy, the Metropolitan Council would have oversight powers to bring the city together without destroying its diversity.

Given expanded power, the mayor of Los Angeles would become the city's chief administrator and would serve as the arbitrator when the interests of districts conflict -- subject to the checks and balances provided by the Metropolitan Council.

Fleming's plan provides a framework for debate.

Nothing else that has been put forward even begins to invent a city that has any hope of turning things around. It's certainly more thorough than anything advanced by either charter reform commission, especially the elected commission, which is laboring under self-inflicted wounds of stupidity.

Los Angeles is suffering from a long-term decline that is the responsibility of an outdated and dysfunctional form of government. This has resulted in an all-powerful City Council that is beholden to public employee unions, downtown business interests and well-heeled lobbyists.

The people in every neighborhood of the city are second-class citizens, turned off by a system of government that ignores them.

The Fleming plan can be the starting point to a renaissance of Los Angeles. It is time for the powerful ruling interests to provide real leadership and join the movement to bring genuine reform to City Hall.

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