

07/24 POLITICS: Ex-official says area councils divisive

By Rick Orlov, Daily News

A compromise must be reached on the explosive issue of neighborhood councils or the prospects of significantly reforming the Los Angeles City Charter will be doomed, a former top city official warned Thursday.

"We need to reach a compromise on this," former City Attorney Burt Pines said in a panel discussion hosted by Century Communications and taped for use as a cable-television program in the coming week.

"Without some accommodation, I fear for the survival of charter reform," Pines said. "This issue of elected neighborhood councils, if not resolved, will destroy the whole charter reform movement. It will polarize people, and we need to reach a compromise."

The creation of appointed or elected neighborhood councils -- and whether even to mention one or the other in the charter -- has emerged as one of the key reforms being studied by both the elected and the appointed charter commissions.

The elected commission has called for creation of a series of elected neighborhood councils with limited zoning and budget powers. The appointed commission has backed away from that, instead calling for expanding the City Council and using neighborhood councils on an advisory basis, with no status spelled out in a revised City Charter.

"People don't want more politicians downtown," said Erwin Chemerinsky, chairman of the elected commission. "We want a way for people in neighborhoods to be involved. We can't forget that charter reform was started because of the threat of secession. We can't forget that."

George Kieffer, chairman of the appointed commission, said his group is concerned about getting too detailed in a revised charter.

"The city is different," Kieffer said. "The district of (Councilman) Mark Ridley-Thomas is far different than that of (Councilwoman) Cindy Miscikowski. They should be allowed to develop their own proposals at their own pace to deal with their own issues."

There have been a variety of proposals on the concept of neighborhood councils, ranging from having them appointed by the mayor, who could give them limited power, to having them elected and given broader authority over budgets and the level of neighborhood services provided by city departments.

Sam Bell, president of the Los Angeles Business Advisers, a group of 25 corporate executives, said his group, which opposes neighborhood councils, wants to see the City Council expanded from 15 members to 35 members, roughly one for every 100,000 residents.

He said each council member represents about 240,000 people and has a budget of \$800,000. "We think you could expand the council and remain cost-neutral by reducing the size of the districts and the size of their staffs," he said.

Bell said there would be other savings from his group's proposals to limit the council's duties to legislative matters and reduce its daily workload.

The two charter reform panels have formed a conference committee to try to narrow down differences before making reports in the next few months.

Kieffer said the two groups hope to present a united front on the top governance and legislative issues: how much power the mayor should have and what checks should be in place for the City Council.

The elected panel's recommendations will go directly on the April 1999 ballot, while the appointed commission's recommendations will be submitted to -- and can be revised by -- the council.

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Transmitted: 7/24/1998 11:03 AM