

Charter panel advises against wide powers for neighborhood councils

By Patrick McGreevy
Daily News Staff Writer
October 16, 1998

In a setback for proponents of creating powerful neighborhood councils in Los Angeles, a charter reform panel recommended in a report Thursday against giving the councils decision-making powers over planning and land-use issues.

The recommendation to give neighborhood councils only advisory powers over planning issues will be considered Monday at a key meeting of the city's elected Charter Reform Commission. The meeting takes place at 3:30 p.m. at the downtown headquarters of the Department of Water and Power.

The proposal was offered in a report released Thursday by the commission's five-person Task Force on Alternative Structures In Government.

Task Force Chairman Bill Weinberger said there are too many problems with giving decision-making power to neighborhood councils, including the chance that each group would adopt a "not in my back yard" opposition to development.

Commission Executive Director Geoffrey Garfield agreed. "It doesn't make sense to

give local groups that power because then nothing can go into that area," he said.

Weinberger is also concerned about how the city could define what projects are within the jurisdiction of a specific neighborhood council.

"One of the concerns is how it would work," he said.

The recommendation drew strong objections from a San Fernando Valley-based group of business, labor and homeowner leaders called The Coalition, which earlier this week proposed establishing elected neighborhood-councils with decision-making power.

Coalition member Robert Scott, an officer with the Valley Industry and Commerce Association, said the city already has advisory councils in many council districts, but what citizens want is decision-making authority.

"People can make recommendations now," said Scott, a Woodland Hills attorney and city planning commissioner. "That (task force proposal) is an insult. That's a joke."

Task force members Bennett Kayser and Paula Boland were unsuccessful in getting approval of a recommendation to grant

decision-making powers over land-use issues.

Boland said she agrees with The Coalition that such powers should be granted as long as the community can enjoy the financial benefits of developments it approves.

"You need to provide a carrot and stick," Boland said Thursday.

Commissioner Janice Hahn, who was absent for the task force vote on The Coalition proposal, said she, too, favors giving decision-making powers to the neighborhood councils on land-use issues.

"Those are quality-of-life issues," Hahn said. "People really want to have that decision-making authority in their community."

However, neither of the two neighborhood council models recommended in the task force report would provide decision-making power over planning issues.

One of the models would create about 23 councils that are self-selected, possibly through a local caucus process. Each would be notified of any ordinance or planning case affecting the community before the City Council takes an action, so that the neighborhood council could review it and offer a recommendation.

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If the commission stays with its earlier vote to create elected community councils, the task force recommends there be one seven-member panel for each City Council district, that they be given a small pool of discretionary funds to spend on local services, and allowed a chance to review and make a recommendation on any local issue before the City Council acts.

Scott said that proposal is a placebo that will not satisfy Valley residents who want more say in their destiny.

"Giving just a small allowance to a community is really more an insult than anything else," Scott said.

Weinberger, however, said he does not see sufficient support on the full, 15-member Charter Reform Commission to give neighborhood councils decision-making power over planning issues.

At the same time, George Kieffer, who heads the city's appointed Charter Reform Commission, said he has surveyed the City Council and found strong support for his panel's proposals, which include advisory neighborhood councils similar to the models recommended by the elected commission's task force.

Meanwhile, a separate report released

Thursday by the Los Angeles Business Advisers seeks to buttress its argument that expanding the City Council from 15 to 35 members is preferable to creating another layer of bureaucracy with neighborhood councils. LABA sought the report by voting-rights attorney Richard Fajardo.

LABA has disputed claims by Latino activists — including those with the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund — that expanding the council to 35 members would dilute their voting strength.

Citing the expectation that citizenship participation among traditionally nonvoting immigrants will increase dramatically, Fajardo said a 35-member City Council could have seven "solid" Latino seats, with a majority of Latino voters, and that another six districts would be "growth" districts for Latinos, where they could be expected to be in sufficient numbers to elect a Latino in a few years.

As a result, Latinos could have 13 of 35 council seats, an improvement over the current representation, where Latinos have three of 15 seats, Fajardo said.

There would be five African-American districts, up from the current three, he said.