

Neighborhood council backers suffer setback

By Patrick McGreevy
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Deeply divided, Los Angeles' elected Charter Reform Commission voted Monday against creating 35 neighborhood councils with decision-making power over land-use issues.

Although the commission will revisit the issue next week, some commissioners who support decision-making powers said it appears there are not enough votes to approve powerful neighborhood councils.

The vote for creating 35 neighborhood councils with decision-making power was 4-10, with opponents citing concerns about the councils' blocking development and the large number — more than 200 —

of elected positions that would be created as a result.

The commission took a second vote just on the concept of giving the councils decision-making power over land-use issues, but that motion failed on a 5-9 vote, leading commissioner Nick Pacheco to predict the panel will not support neighborhood councils.

Commissioner Bennett Kayser proposed creating 35 community councils, each with seven members elected from the community.

Commissioner Chet Widom said it would only create another layer of bureaucracy and would draw major opposition from the business community

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and others.

"There would be so much animosity to this that it would kill charter reform," Widom said.

On the issue of City Council size, the commission voted to give the electorate a choice between a 15- and a 25-member City Council.

The commission voted 10-3 to submit to voters a new charter with the current 15-member City Council and a separate ballot measure that would leave it to voters to consider increasing the size of the council to 25 members.

Commission Chairman Erwin Chemerinsky said splitting the issue for voters would not endanger the remainder of charter reforms in the main ballot measure. Chemerinsky cited the fact that each council member now represents 235,000 residents, a record in the country.

"I all along have believed it would increase representation and increase minority representation," Chemerinsky said of the 25-member council proposal, which he supported.

Commissioner Gloria Romero argued against the expansion of the council, saying it could create a larger political bureaucracy that would not necessarily improve city services.

"I do not believe that more is better," Romero said.

Commissioner Dennis Zine said many people will vote against an expanded council because of its increased cost.

"It's not a larger City Council (that's the issue), it's the delivery of city services," he said.

Commissioner Kayser said that in recent public hearings throughout the city people made it clear they want an expanded City Council.

"They said council districts are too big and there are too many people," Kayser said.

The commission also voted to include in the charter the creation of a new Department of Neighborhoods to provide staff support and organizing assistance to any system of neighborhood councils approved by the voters.

But they continued to wrestle over the issue of neighborhood councils

and the power they could wield.

Several commissioners argued for the creation of regional planning commissions to make appealable decisions on land-use issues rather than giving that power to neighborhood councils.

"We could have decentralization of power but in a politically sellable way," Chemerinsky said.

Sam Bell, president of the Los Angeles Business Advisors, said advisory neighborhood councils might be acceptable but argued that the best way to improve representation while maintaining accountability is to expand the City Council to 35 members.

Elected neighborhood councils with decision-making powers worry many business leaders, Bell told the panel, adding that requiring elections would leave out business owners who do not live in the neighborhood.

"Increased bureaucracy, significantly increased cost and the lack of representation by some vital groups in those neighborhoods . . . is a very great concern to us," Bell said.

Robert Lamishaw of the Mid-Valley Chamber of Commerce said that without allowing business owners to serve, the neighborhood council system would be a "grab for power" by homeowner leaders.

Councilman Mike Feuer agreed that all sectors of the community should be able to participate.

"A spectrum of perspectives have to be at the table for it to work," Feuer said, arguing for appointed neighborhood councils with decision-making power.

Carol Schatz, head of the Central City Association, also opposed elected councils.

"You will be creating a layer of government that will be very difficult to cut through as a business," Schatz said, estimating that the cost of an elected system of neighborhood councils could reach \$50 million.

However, supporters said the system could be created and run for less than \$7 million, which they said is worth the price for improving democracy.

Bill Powers of the United Chambers of Commerce of the San Fernando Valley said residents want more say in their government and

they already have the chance to serve on advisory councils.

"You are not going to reform it (the charter) by maintaining the status quo," Powers said. "We want to be empowered."

Smaller cities such as San Fernando, Glendale and Burbank show that localizing decision making improves the quality of life of a community, said Robert Scott, a planning commissioner who also belongs to The Coalition, a Valley-based group supporting powerful neighborhood councils.

"Let Pacoima be like San Fernando," he told the commission.

"Let them enjoy the benefits of neighborhood empowerment."

Scott said neighborhood councils with decision-making power are needed because people do not feel they have a say in their government and over their destinies.

"They do not believe they are hooked up, that they are connected," Scott said.

Several leaders of nonprofit organizations also opposed decision-making councils based on fears that local neighborhoods would reject proposals for needed facilities for the disabled, seniors, and those with alcohol and drug problems.