

Cityhood may benefit from panel defeat

Secession could get push

By Patrick McGreevy

Daily News Staff Writer

Advocates of powerful neighborhood councils were rethinking their strategy Tuesday after Los Angeles' elected Charter Reform Commission voted against creating councils with decision-making authority over land-use issues.

At the same time, backers of cityhood for the San Fernando Valley said that if the vote stands, it could give momentum to the drive for secession.

"It's a major defeat short-term," said Richard Close, head of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association and Valley Voters Organized Toward Empowerment. "But it will probably be one of the major reasons people will support cityhood for the Valley."

"Once they see that the whole process has been a game and a ruse, I think even more people will start supporting the Valley becoming a separate city," he said. "Without elected neighborhood councils with authority, there is no charter reform. It's business as usual."

The elected charter commission voted late Monday, after hours of debate, against neighborhood councils that could make land-use planning decisions. Next week, it is set to consider creating neighborhood councils that are advisory on planning issues but can make decisions over a small part of the budget.

"I hope it's not a dead issue now," said Commissioner Bennett Kayser, who sought 35 elected neighborhood councils. "I think basically we've made a decision to take the pragmatic view looking at how the business community will be waging a campaign against it as opposed to what the people want."

Bill Powers of the United Chambers of Commerce of the San Fernando Valley said it is unlikely that the 15-member commission will change its stand.

"The likelihood is they won't give decision-making power because of fears of NIMBYism," he said.

During Monday's seven-hour meeting, the commission voted twice to oppose plans that would allow councils to decide land-use issues.

Kayser and Nick Pacheco were joined by Commissioners Janice Hahn and Marcos Castaneda in supporting the proposal for

decision-making power.

"Community members wanted to have a decision making role in the quality of life issues that affect their community," Castaneda said.

Added Hahn, whose district includes San Pedro: "If we don't give neighborhoods from one end of the city to the other the ability to shape and craft their own communities, their own destinies, we will have fueled the anger more."

Commissioner Paula Boland said she might be able to support decision-making if there are incentives for councils to approve development, including a share of the new tax revenue from approved developments.

But that idea drew strong opposition from Commission Chairman Erwin Chemerinsky, who said it would widen the gulf between poor and affluent communities.

Some commissioners want neighborhood councils with advisory powers on land use but also five regional planning commissions — appointed by the mayor with decisions appealable to the City Council.

"You would have a commission of five members in the Valley who would know the Valley," said Commissioner Chet Widom.

Commissioner Rob Glushon of Encino said a strong system of neighborhood councils is needed.

"These people would be appointed by the mayor and confirmed by the council," Glushon said. "This is not neighborhood empowerment."

Chemerinsky and Kayser said elected councils would have more credibility. But others said elections leave out others who have a stake in the community but are not residents — including noncitizens, business and property owners, and representatives of nonprofit groups.

Those commissioners have proposed a self-selected or participatory model in which the community would submit a plan for selecting council members, possibly through a community caucus, that would make sure most segments of the community are represented.

"With the participatory model, they are inclusive of all the stakeholders," Glushon said.

Pacheco said citizenship should not be an issue.

"Any human being living in the neighborhood could participate," he said.