

Commentary

PERSPECTIVE ON LOS ANGELES

Promoting a False Promise



Rather than fostering closer ties, neighborhood councils would fragment the city.

By DANIEL P. GARCIA

A coalition of liberal activists and homeowner associations' representatives reportedly are promoting the notion that the city of Los Angeles should create 15 neighborhood councils as part of charter reform. Among other things, these councils would have jurisdiction over land use decisions including commercial, industrial, retail and residential building and rebuilding; "social uses"; private schools; AIDS hospices, and community care centers for battered children.

The altruistic theory expounded by proponents suggests that such councils promote a constructive populism that would restore confidence and intimacy among the city's neighborhoods, which allegedly feel alienated from City Hall. But underneath this lofty theory lies an anti-development, exclusionist mentality that not only would bring balkanization but also would stifle change and progress.

Make no mistake, most of the proponents of the land-use control for these neighborhood councils want this control to stop change of any kind on their turf. This attitude comes directly from the no-growth movement that began on the Westside and in the San Fernando Valley more than 20 years ago. The underlying contention is that because City Hall isn't controlled by "neighborhoods," millions of square feet of traffic-inducing, neighborhood disrupting development has been rammed down residents' throats.

In the 1970s, great fear about rampant development along with sociological change (i.e., racial integration) created an intense loathing of "development" (i.e., change from the imagined idyllic days of orange

groves). Since then, of course, Proposition U (an initiative that I supported) was passed, downzoning most retail/commercial lots in the city; the city's zoning was amended and adjusted downward to reflect the levels largely accepted in community plans, and scores of detailed land-use restrictions were passed, making development more complex and difficult.

During the past 20 years, while these regulations began to take form, the development industry experienced a profound change: The speculative commercial office market collapsed and the days of its former glory ended. Thus, the fear of a high-rise on every corner ended on its own, independent of all these regulations.

In Los Angeles, the land-use approval system now represents a fair political balance between those who advocate change (developers) and those who oppose any change (homeowners). The permit system—for home remodeling, reconstruction or new development—still remains an embarrassing nightmare, but the entitlement system has improved.

These neighborhood councils would be a means of holding any and every project hostage and killing any kind of growth. But the stakes are far different than advertised. The volume of all types of construction in the city is half or less than it was in the '70s. No commercial high-rises have been built or will be built in the foreseeable future. Most development now is small—rebuilding decrepit malls, reworking

older industrial buildings, remodeling homes, establishing community care facilities. We need some of this activity or the city will stagnate. It is these neighborhood-scale developments that would suffer most in the proposed council system.

The ugly reality is that many of the same individuals who support the neighborhood council concept are anti-growth activists: nonelected, media-created gurus who have been trying to stomp out growth for years as homeowners' representatives. During my 12 years on the city's Planning Commission, not one homeowners' group ever supported the creation or expansion of a private school, AIDS hospice, home for battered children and wards of the court, church, museum or anything else. A commercial project or an industrial park? Forget it. There was and is an undeniable tone of exclusivity and yes, however veiled, an undercurrent of racial intolerance lurking behind many of these anti-change positions.

If this is what Los Angeles wants, this is what it might well get from these neighborhood councils. These fragmented councils would not bring us together. They would help separate us further and further. Municipal secessionist movements are not inspired by the notion of being part of a great multiethnic, cosmopolitan city. It's just the reverse: a desire to separate, to reject the sociological, fear-inducing change that a large city represents. Who will perform and implement city-wide transportation, public services or utilities or low-income housing policies? Who will accept airports, harbors, sports arenas or any other form of essential regional infrastructure? Do we want a future where the sole purpose of local government is to stop change, or do we try to understand it and prepare for it in a responsible, fair manner?

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