

# Put neighborhood council plan up to a vote

By James K. Hahn

**I**NTEREST is clearly building in the debate over the drafting of a new City Charter, and it is terrific to see so many people engaged in a discussion about our city's future.

But as I watch the oftentimes heated debate over whether to establish a system of neighborhood councils and the efforts by both commissions to keep a real neighborhood council proposal from seeing the light of day, I continue to come to the same conclusion: Let the people decide.

From the very beginning of this discussion I have thrown my strong support behind establishing a system of elected neighborhood councils with real power over land use and other issues of local impact.

City Hall is broken and in need of repair. We need to reconnect people to city government, and the best way to do that, from my vantage point, is to return some real power to the neighborhoods that are the heart of this city. A strong system of elected neighborhood councils can achieve that goal.

I am a strong believer in democracy and think that Chicken Little would have found a lot of comfort among those who decry neighborhood councils as the end of civilization as we know it. More democracy is always a good thing. Nevertheless, there are clearly strong views on both sides of the issue, as was evidenced by the huge numbers of public speakers that turned out

recently to address this issue before the elected Charter Reform Commission.

Organized labor and the downtown businesses are concerned that development and growth will come to a grinding halt as rogue neighborhood councils vote to stop all construction. Nonprofit organizations are concerned that they will be driven out of communities or will not be able to find a home. Some elected officials are concerned that the city will simply become unmanageable.

As nothing more than a half measure, some commission members are recommending that we establish "participatory" councils with "advisory" powers. But if you look around, there are advisory groups all over the place, so this change would in fact be no change at all. People can form all the participatory groups they want right now, with or without charter reform.

I recognize that elected neighborhood councils represent a radical change from the status quo. There is no doubt that establishing a system of neighborhood councils would cause some headaches and some bumps in the road, but any significant change will do that.

If we wanted to do business the same old way, we would not have started the charter reform effort in the first place. But a few potential bumps in the road should not cause the commissions to turn tail and run.

Most importantly, the commissions should not deny the voters the chance to vote on such a proposal. One issue above all

others is driving the debate on charter reform, and that's whether to establish neighborhood councils.

Reconnecting people to city government is the heart and soul of the charter reform effort. Commission members, who by the nature of their office never have to face the voters again (and in the case of the appointed commission never had to face voters in the first place), should not deny the people of this city the opportunity to vote their mind on the most important charter reform issue, neighborhood councils. To deny the people of this city the opportunity to vote up or down on a strong system of neighborhood councils would make the commission members guilty of the same unresponsive behavior for which they consistently condemn the City Council.

The elected Charter Reform Commission voted this week to leave the number of City Council members the same, but to put a separate measure on the ballot that gives the public the opportunity to vote on expanding the City Council to 25 members. This should serve as the model as to how we deal with the issues of neighborhood councils.

There are a number of models of elected neighborhood councils that have been proposed — mine, the Coalition's, Commissioner Bennett Kayser's. Both commissions should work to develop a consensus around one proposal that establishes a powerful system of elected neighborhood councils and place this proposal on the ballot separately from a core proposal of charter changes. Such an approach would serve a number of valuable purposes.

First, strong opposition to a separate neighborhood council proposal would not impact the more mundane, but valuable, charter changes that will be contained in the core proposal. If the opponents of neighborhood councils prevailed, the core charter changes could still pass.

Second, a wide-open election on neighborhood councils will allow us to address this debate head-on. If people want a real voice in fundamental decisions affecting the quality of life in their neighborhoods, they will have the chance to say so. If not, the proposal will fail.

If the charter commissions only nibble around the edges by putting forward minimal changes cloaked in words like "participatory" and "advisory," what will stop the proponents of neighborhood councils from collecting the signatures to put a charter amendment on the ballot the following year? Why not have the debate today?

The Los Angeles Business Advisors has its view. Organized labor has its view. The homeowners groups have their view. I have my view. Let's have a real campaign on this issue, people can put their cards on the table, and let's see who wins.