

Panel backs compromise on neighborhood councils

By Patrick McGreevy
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HOLLYWOOD — Los Angeles' elected Charter Reform Commission voted Monday to create up to 25 neighborhood councils with authority to boost local services with a small portion of the city budget, but balked at giving the councils more than advisory powers over planning matters.

The Charter Reform Commission voted unanimously that neighborhood councils should have at least advisory powers over planning matters, but fell short of enough votes to also give them decision-making power.

The charter commission split over the issue of how to select neighborhood councils and decided to give voters a choice between elected councils or those selected by the communities, possibly at caucuses.

On the issue of the power of the neighborhood councils, Commission Chairman Erwin Chemerinsky argued that giving them authority over land-use decisions could draw significant opposition from business and labor, killing the whole idea of the neighborhood councils.

"I think elected neighborhood councils with decision-making on money and advisory on land use will have a chance of getting passed," Chemerinsky said.

He said "there is intense division" on the 15-member charter panel as well as in the community on the issue of how to select neighborhood council members, so the voters should be allowed a choice between two ballot measures.

"We've been threatened by both sides," Chemerinsky said regarding community input on the issue. "Our commission is very divided about what is the

Charter panel gives voters choice on councils

CHARTER / From Page 1

best approach."

Commissioner Dennis Zine said the compromise is the only way to salvage the notion of having neighborhood councils in the new charter.

"I don't know why we can't trust the voters to make the choice," Zine said.

"Otherwise we're going to have a stalemate and go nowhere."

The vote was 8-4 to put two measures on the ballot, with Commissioner Paula Boland among those arguing against dividing the issue.

Boland said voters will be confused if they have to make a choice.

"We were elected to do a job. We cannot bifurcate this charter. I think it's a huge mistake," Boland said.

Under the proposal, the main charter with dozens of reforms previously approved would include a system for community selection of the neighborhood councils.

Under the model recommended Monday, residents of each City Council district would submit a plan to a new Department of Neighborhoods to self-select its commission, possibly by holding a community caucus, in a way that would guarantee that each panel represents the diversity of its neighborhoods.

One proposal that might be used calls for seats to be reserved for, and voted on by, business interests, homeowner groups, property owners and the heads of social service agencies and churches.

Commissioner Bill Weinberger said the neighborhood council system will still give local residents a better chance to influence their city government.

"It would give communities and neighborhoods a better voice, an institutionalized voice in city government," Weinberger said.

A separate ballot measure would

allow voters to approve a system for electing neighborhood council members.

The commission met Monday at Melrose Elementary School in Hollywood.

The charter panel voted that each of up to 25 neighborhood councils should have seven members. Last week the charter panel decided to give voters a choice between having a 15-member City Council and a 25-member City Council.

On Monday the panel recommended that there be the same number of neighborhood councils as council districts.

Their recommendations will be put into a draft charter to be considered at a Constitutional Convention scheduled for Nov. 7 at the Convention Center.

The panel will then finalize its proposed charter after the convention and submit it to voters next year, giving Los Angeles residents a chance to replace a charter that is 73 years old and is blamed for giving residents an ineffective city government.

One of the biggest complaints has been that the city government that operates downtown is too distant and inaccessible for residents of the San Fernando Valley and other parts of the city.

Richard Close, chairman of Valley Voters Organized Toward Empowerment, criticized the charter panel for not giving neighborhood councils decision-making power over land-use issues.

"People do not feel connected involved in their community. The solution is elected community councils with authority over land use. That's what the public wants," Close said, citing the 172,000 people who have signed petitions to secede for the San Fernando Valley.