

October 27, 1998

Neighborhood Councils Backed by Charter Panel

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A dramatically new system for representing Los Angeles' far-flung neighborhoods won endorsement Monday night from members of the elected charter reform commission, who had scrambled for a week to patch together a compromise.

Their recommendation would create a network of advisory neighborhood councils, whose members would be selected in local caucus elections. That plan probably will be forwarded to voters next year, since the commission has the power to put its proposals directly on the ballot.

The debate over neighborhood councils and their power has been one of the commission's most intense. And as it did with another hotly contested idea—enlarging the City Council—the commission

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chose to include one recommendation in its main charter proposal but also offer voters an alternative.

In the case of the council size, that meant leaving the council unchanged in the main charter proposal but giving voters the option of expanding the council from 15 to 25 members. This time, the commission majority favored caucus-style elections for picking neighborhood council members, but also decided to offer voters an alternative: regular ballot elections.

Neighborhood councils chosen by caucus would be prohibited from exercising land use authority, such as approving development. Elected councils, however, might be given that authority.

Some commissioners, most notably Paula Boland, vehemently argued against offering voters that choice. Boland described that as an abdication of the commission's responsibility to draft a single, coherent charter.

But the commission backed the measure by an 8-4 vote, the bare majority needed under the rules of the 15-member body.

"Letting the people choose when people are divided just seems right," said Commission Chairman Erwin Chemerinsky. He favors elected councils but agreed to the compromise because he said it

represented the only chance to place the issue of neighborhood councils before the voters.

As with previous debates on topics of intense disagreement, Monday's debate saw commissioners advancing arguments seemingly at odds with some of their beliefs: Chemerinsky supports elected councils but backed a main charter without them in the search for compromise. Commissioner Dennis Zine opposes growth of the city government, but voted for a measure that could let voters add a new layer of government, because he supports local decision-making.

Although the panel had shown signs of wavering on the neighborhood council proposal, its vote marked a significant reversal. Just a few months ago, the commission approved elected neighborhood councils and seemed intent on recommending that the councils have significant decision-making powers. Some panelists supported giving the councils authority over land use decisions, effectively granting them the power to approve or reject development.

That idea has been enthusiastically endorsed in some quarters, including a broad coalition that encompasses liberal city employee representatives and conservative San Fernando Valley homeowner groups. Those groups have touted the councils as an extension of democracy and proposed a variety of ways to keep them from descending into obstructionist en-

tities that would be inclined to reject developments.

But it has run into opposition from an equally diverse set of interests. Mayor Richard Riordan opposes elected councils with land use powers, as does a coalition of business interests and one wing of the city's labor movement.

With the commission publicly tilting toward rejection of the elected model with land use powers, speaker after speaker rose Monday night to warn of the consequences of rejecting that idea.

"There needs to be a substantial change of governance in the city of Los Angeles," said Richard Close, president of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Assn. and a leader of the effort to study secession by the San Fernando Valley.

Rocky Rushing, the chief of staff of liberal state Sen. Tom Hayden (D-Los Angeles), argued that opposing elected councils with broad powers was catering to elitism.

"You've heard from the grassroots," Rushing said. "But I'm afraid you're listening to the suits."

Commission members balked at the accusation that they were giving into pressure. Commissioner Rob Glushon noted that the Los Angeles Business Advisors, a corporate CEO group that includes Times Publisher Mark Willes, pushed hard for expanding the City Council to 35 members. The commission rejected that proposal, instead favoring the voter choice between 15 and 25.