

# Charter panel to vote on City Council size, neighborhood powers

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Expected to take the pivotal votes that would complete a first draft of a new City Charter, the elected Charter Reform Commission will meet today to decide on its proposals for the size of the City Council and the exact powers of elected neighborhood councils.

A key issue is how much power the voters will be asked next year to approve for elected neighborhood councils — power to make land-use and development decisions or only to give advice to the City Council.

Those involved in the debate say the decision on empowering neighborhood councils could have the greatest effect on the future of Los Angeles of any of the dozens of reforms now under consideration by two separate charter reform commissions.

"The issue of neighborhood councils is the single most important and the single most difficult

issue we have to deal with," said Erwin Chemerinsky, a USC law professor and chairman of the elected Charter Reform Commission.

Chemerinsky predicts a full house and a heated debate when the commission convenes at 3:30 p.m. today at the downtown headquarters of the Department of Water and Power. The commission has set a goal of resolving the issue before a Nov. 7 Constitutional Convention on its charter reform proposals.

The elected commission has power to place its reform proposals directly on the ballot next year, without revision by the City Council. In contrast, an appointed commission must submit its plan to the City Council.

## Empowering neighborhoods

The elected commission has

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voted tentatively to ask the voters to approve creation of a system of elected neighborhood councils with some powers to decide how to spend a small pool of money. The budget could be spent, for example, on adding library hours or park patrols.

The panel has yet to settle the more difficult question of whether the neighborhood councils should be allowed to decide local land-use and planning issues, such as whether a liquor store or a pawn shop should be permitted.

The panel also has not yet decided the number of neighborhood councils, their size, compensation for members and meeting schedule.

Elected commissioners appear to be divided on the issues, although many say they have not yet made up their minds.

Many options are before them,

even on the number of neighborhood councils: one for each of the 15 City Council districts, or one for each of the 35 city planning districts, or one for each of more than 100 identified communities with historical names in Los Angeles.

### Local control urged

A group of homeowner, labor and business leaders called The Coalition proposed last week that nine-member elected neighborhood councils be established in each of the 15 City Council districts. They would decide local land-use and planning issues, although the City Council could review a decision if two-thirds of its members agreed to hear an appeal.

The Coalition, dealing with concerns that neighborhood councils might be prone to reject all development, also proposed an incentive: A portion of tax revenues from new development would stay in the neighborhood where

they were generated.

The group also proposed that local councils receive a budget to spend on local priorities and power to impose new taxes in the area to pay for community priorities, such as additional policing.

The Coalition proposal "provides more responsive government that is closer to the people," said Studio City attorney David Fleming, head of the Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley.

The proposal is vigorously opposed by downtown business groups including the Los Angeles Business Advisors, the Central City Association and Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce.

"It creates another level of government," said Chet Widom, an elected commissioner.

Carol Schatz, who heads the Central City Association, called the proposal "well intended, but certain to kill a vibrant economy" if approved.

The Coalition members, however, said the neighborhood councils could replace the Planning Commission and Board of Zoning Appeals, removing some

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government bureaucracy.

## Enlarging City Council

The downtown-based Los Angeles Business Advisors group opposes having the charter call for creation of powerful, elected neighborhood councils. Instead, LABA suggests that the charter give the City Council authority to create advisory neighborhood councils if it wants any.

LABA has suggested expanding the City Council from 15 to 35 members as an alternative to neighborhood councils.

George Kieffer, chairman of the appointed commission, said elected, decision-making neighborhood councils could Balkanize the city and cause economic stagnation.

"It has not worked anywhere in America," said Kieffer, an attorney. "To think that we can do it here and make it work is a mistake."

A task force of the elected commission endorsed the appointed commission's proposal for appointed neighborhood councils with only advisory powers. Under

that plan, each neighborhood council would be notified of an ordinance, planning case or other matter affecting the community before the City Council acted on the issue.

The neighborhood council could hold hearings and offer a recommendation to the City Council. Neighborhood councils also would have a budget for local priorities.

Kieffer said one benefit of appointed neighborhood councils is that they could include business owners and representatives of social service organizations who work in the area but do not live there.

## Planning commission

Interviews with charter commissioners showed the tide may be shifting away from giving neighborhood councils power over planning issues.

Chemerinsky originally supported allowing the elected neighborhood councils to decide planning cases, but he said he is intrigued by a new proposal, already tentatively supported by the appointed commission. It

hinges on new regional planning commissions appointed by the mayor.

Under that scenario, a development in the San Fernando Valley would not be heard by a single citywide Planning Commission, as now happens, but instead would be decided by a Valley Planning Commission.

"I think there has to be some decentralization of decision-making when it comes to planning, but I'm open-minded as to what form it should take," Chemerinsky said.

Some argue that creation of regional planning commissions would eliminate any need for neighborhood councils to have power over planning issues.

Another proposal to be considered today is being championed by Rob Glushon, an elected charter commissioner who lives in Encino. Glushon, an attorney, is pushing for a reorganization of the City Council.

The City Council as a whole would meet in citywide issues but would break into regional committees for localized issues.