

Everyone gets grabby at charter convention

By Patrick McGreevy
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Despite a boycott by San Fernando Valley civic leaders, Los Angeles' first-ever City Charter Convention turned into a debate Saturday about who should have the power to decide the city's future — with the mayor, City Council members and neighborhood activists all staking claims.

The proposal for neighborhood councils with only advisory power on land-use issues was roundly denounced as the "death of charter reform" by the boycotters from the San Fernando Valley and West Los Angeles who rallied outside the

Convention Center.

"The existing charter proposal only will accomplish a shift of power from the City Council to the mayor," said Richard Close, chairman of Valley Voters Organized Toward Empowerment and president of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association.

Some of the same concerns were voiced inside the convention hall Saturday, although the session turned out, to some extent, not to be the spontaneous outpouring of public opinion some commissioners had hoped for.

Although opposing factions on

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the key issues stacked the audience with their supporters, several speakers decried the low turnout for the daylong convention, sponsored by Los Angeles' elected Charter Reform Commission.

About 250 of the city's 3.5 million residents gathered in the West Hall of the Los Angeles Convention Center to provide the charter panel with input on its draft charter before the reforms are placed on the June 1999 ballot.

Looking out over a convention hall where half the seats were empty, Councilman Nate Holden said many people voiced their opinion by not attending.

"They are not here because they are satisfied with the way government is working," Holden said.

Attendance was also hurt when a coalition of homeowner groups representing 250,000 residents primarily from the San Fernando Valley and West Los Angeles called a boycott, with eight leaders of The Coalition holding a news conference outside to protest the recommendation to create neighborhood councils without decision-making power over land-use issues.

"It's a waste of time," said Diana Plotkin, president of the Westside Civic Association, explaining her boycott of the convention.

Riordan's supporters

Looking to demonstrate support for the draft charter, Mayor Richard Riordan and his business team invited about 70 business and community leaders and 20 of his aides to a breakfast Saturday at the Galaxy restaurant before accompanying them to the convention, where many of the businesspeople stood and spoke of the need to give the Mayor's Office more power.

Riordan's supporters also opposed giving neighborhood councils decision-making power over development.

At the same time, Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas' 8th Council District Empowerment Congress organized a group of about 40 residents who turned out to oppose giving the mayor more power and to support the creation of advisory neighborhood councils.

The proposed charter would give the mayor sole power to fire general managers, allow for expansion of the City Council from 15 to 25 members, and create a system of neighborhood councils with control over a small budget for local services but only an advisory role over land-use issues.

The 74-year-old City Charter has been amended dozens of times and now is 700 pages long.

More accountability

Elected Charter Reform Commission Chairman Erwin Chemerinsky told the audience that the goal

of the new charter is to "promote a more accountable city government, a more efficient city government and a more responsive city government."

Riordan was joined by City Attorney James Hahn and others in voicing support for the commission's recommended charter.

In particular, Riordan and his backers voiced support for charter changes giving the mayor sole power to evaluate and fire general managers — removing the City Council's role in those duties.

In supporting the commission proposal, businesswoman Martha Diaz Ashkenazi told the charter panel that it doesn't make sense for department managers to report to 16 bosses — the mayor and 15 council members.

"There has to be a clear line of authority, and it has to stop with the mayor," she said.

Holden and Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg challenged the claim that the mayor needs more power, including sole authority to remove managers.

"If the council makes policy but has no say-so in whether a city manager's failure to carry out that policy (should cause removal), in fact you have ended the policy-making (role) of the City Council," Goldberg said. "It simply is not a checks-and-balances system."

Neighborhood councils

In the afternoon session, the debate shifted to the equally contentious issue of neighborhood councils. Of the 23 people who spoke on the power of those councils, 13, including Van Nuys businessman Tony Magnone, called for them to be solely advisory. That is also the mayor's position.

"The last thing we manufacturers need is another layer of bureaucratic nonsense to get through," Magnone said.

About 80 people at the convention signed petitions calling for elected neighborhood councils that can make decisions on development, while the boycotters rallied outside.

"They promised us charter reform, and instead they threw us a stink bomb," said Bill Powers of the United Chambers of Commerce of the San Fernando Valley.

State Sen. Tom Hayden, D-Los Angeles, confirmed that he and others are beginning to consider whether to launch a petition drive to qualify an initiative for the ballot that would create strong neighborhood councils.

However, Gordon Murley, the head of a coalition of homeowner groups called the San Fernando Valley Federation, agreed with Powers that the only alternative to a "weak" system of neighborhood councils may be Valley secession.

"What other alternative do we have?" Murley said.