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HEADLINE: NEIGHBORHOODS AND THE L.A. LEVIATHAN

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BODY:

Large protest movements can be counted on, nearly all the time, to produce large consequences. But as often as not, the consequences aren't the ones the protesters had in mind.

The likelihood is that, in the end, the community activists of California's San Fernando Valley will fail in their campaign to have the Valley, and its 1.4 million people, secede from the city of Los Angeles. The procedural obstacles are simply too great, as other secessionists at all levels of government have learned, and are still learning. But the San Fernando rebels have already set in motion something many of them never intended: a reexamination of the governmental structure of the entire city.

It was in large part to forestall the secession of the Valley--and much of L.A.'s middle-class tax base--that Mayor Richard Riordan promised to rewrite the city's 74-year-old charter, making it more neighborhood-friendly and decentralizing at least some of the decision-making process.

In doing that, he conceded the reasonableness of the basic San Fernando argument: that the Leviathan in downtown L.A. was too big, too distant and too unwieldy to function effectively for the more than 3 million people living under it. "The system is broken," the mayor admitted a year ago, "and we must fix it."

And the primary culprit, Riordan insisted, was the charter itself. Indeed, the document makes an easy target. More than 700 pages long, heavier than the L.A. phone book, the city charter is a morass of checks and balances that make stalemate easier to achieve than constructive action. The mayor hires administrators and managers, but the city council can veto his choices. It also can nullify the decisions of just about all the city boards, agencies and commissions.

There is no doubt that much of Riordan's enthusiasm for rewriting the charter stemmed from his desire to shift power to the mayor's office. But the primary impetus for reform came from the widespread desire in the city, even among those who agreed on little else, to placate the Valley and take the steam out of secession. According to Riordan, one of the main reasons for giving new power to the mayor was so he could redistribute it to the neighborhoods--something that, in his opinion, the fractious 15-member council would never do.

And so, Los Angeles got a charter reform commission. In fact, in typically perverse L.A. fashion, it got two of them. The council appointed one and ordered it to report back with recommendations. Riordan, complaining that that body

would be too beholden to the council to propose fundamental change, raised \$2 million in private money for a referendum creating a separate, elected commission, with the authority to submit its reforms directly to the voters for approval. The result has been parallel panels laboring over the same issues at the same time.

In the end, though, there is one thing the process pretty much has to produce: a tangible change that grants some authority to the neighborhoods and strikes at the alienation that generated the protest and started the whole crisis in the first place. The question is, what might that be?

Out in the wilds of the San Fernando Valley, the most militant community activists know exactly what they want. They want a genuine dissolution of the L.A. governmental monolith, with real political power passed down to much more localized political bodies. They want planning and zoning decisions that affect a neighborhood to be made largely by the elected representatives of that neighborhood. As David Fleming, one of the original Valley organizers, puts it, "people want government closer to them. Therefore, they want government broken up into smaller pieces." Fleming would like to have 15 such semi-autonomous units, which he refers to as "quasi-cities."

But that sort of neighborhood power strikes much of the L.A. business community as a disaster, and not without reason. In its strongest form, it would make development decisions extremely difficult. How would the larger community site an airport, a waste treatment plant or any public facility that everybody wants--but nobody wants close by? Neighborhood-based zoning, to critics, is the NIMBY nightmare of all time.

It isn't going to happen. This version of community power not only arouses the intense opposition of developers, trade unions and public works officials but also seems to have relatively little support on either of the charter commissions. Indeed, the commissions have spent much of their time trying to figure out what they might do for the neighborhoods that would stop short of giving them nuclear weapons.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is a proposal simply to make the city council much larger than it is, so there would be more representation for smaller enclaves within the city. This is the preferred solution of Los Angeles Business Advisors, an elite group of 24 executives.

It's hard to argue against it. Currently, L.A. council members each represent about 230,000 people, more than their counterparts in any large American city. Expanding the council to 35, as the Business Advisors recommend, certainly wouldn't hurt.

On the other hand, it wouldn't do much to pacify the neighborhood-power advocates. It would be derided in any citywide referendum as a fig leaf rather than as sincere devolutionary reform. That's why the appointed charter commission, the more conservative of the two bodies, went a step further and endorsed creation of advisory neighborhood councils, similar to ones that have existed for years in Minneapolis, Washington, D.C., Dayton, Ohio, and a host of other cities. But that isn't exactly a dramatic change, either. Critics scorn these advisory neighborhood groups as "student councils."

The real battle has been fought out in the other commission, the one whose members were chosen by popular vote. When that panel sat down to work early this year, a majority of its 15 commissioners appeared to favor dramatic change: a rewritten city charter that would give neighborhoods formal planning and zoning power. But as the debate wore on, the resolve seemed to grow weaker. Ultimately, the commission voted in favor of neighborhood councils with some limited budget authority, but no control over land use.

Even that much devolution has its sworn enemies. After the commission took its vote, the L.A. Business Advisors met and vowed to finance a campaign against any new charter that includes elected neighborhood councils of any sort. Meanwhile, some neighborhood activists promised to sink the charter if it DIDN'T create the councils.

This dance is supposed to come to an end next spring, after the appointed commission reports to the city council, and its elected twin presents a proposal for the public ballot. How the two competing plans might be merged, and whether there will be any solid ground for consensus, is anybody's guess.

But the whole affair points up the ultimate problem that afflicts devolution, at the local level or any level: Devolving power is a lot harder than it looks. No one really disputes that a city as big and bewilderingly diverse as Los Angeles needs a government more responsive to its smaller communities than the one it has now. But neighborhood councils, even if they are created for the best of reasons, add one more layer of complexity to a system that most people find far too complex already.

This is, in fact, the argument that the neighborhood-power skeptics continue to make against the whole idea. George Kieffer, who chairs the appointed L.A. charter commission, attacks what he calls "the presumptuousness of thinking you can invent a whole third level of government in a very short time."

He has a point. The places that have found a working balance between City Hall and community power seem to be ones that didn't just graft neighborhood councils onto an existing governmental mess. Vancouver, British Columbia, often cited as a model in this respect, has strong neighborhoods but a relatively limited city government. Many of the decisions that elsewhere would be made at City Hall are made regionally.

Portland, Oregon, has been successful with a structure that includes active city and county governments, an elected "Metro" council, and strong neighborhood participation at the same time. It manages to function because the responsibilities are pretty well defined: Metro is the overall planning and zoning body; the cities and counties concentrate on service delivery.

Los Angeles doesn't work in nearly that rational a matter; it's hard to imagine that it ever will--charter reform or no charter reform. One can make a pretty good case, in fact, that the real problem for Los Angeles local government is not the charter but the existence of L.A. as a governmental entity at all. Nobody in his right mind would create what has come to be: an immense and virtually incomprehensible jurisdiction of more than 500 square miles and 3 million people, most of whom have only the faintest feelings of identification with the others.

The truth is that L.A. is too big to deliver services efficiently or present a human face to most of its residents, and yet too small to make intelligent planning decisions for the larger region in which it sits. If there were no city of Los Angeles, the metropolitan region and its innumerable neighborhoods could probably come up with a system that would handle the problems of governance fairly well. Each level, as in Portland and Vancouver, could handle the tasks to which it is best suited--planning at the top, services closer to the bottom.

But then, that can't be done. There are no drawing boards in political reform, just realities that have to be accepted. Los Angeles isn't going away. If the charter process results in a form of government that gives the residents of the city even a modestly greater sense of involvement in its public life, that would be a small achievement worth celebrating, and a victory over a pretty daunting set of odds.

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