

PERSPECTIVE ON CHARTER REFORM

Advisory Councils Lack Clout to Effect Change

Small wonder, then, that those who oppose reform are their proponents.

By SHIRLEY SVORNY

In revising the city charter, Mayor Richard Riordan has proposed the establishment of advisory councils. City Council member Mark Ridley-Thomas favors replicating his own success in forming advisory councils in the 8th District to the other 14 council districts. Council member Joel Wachs has suggested advisory councils in each of 103 neighborhoods in Los Angeles. But if the goal is to significantly improve local government, these plans will fail.

There is evidence that advisory councils have little impact on city government or outcomes. When five U.S. cities, chosen because they had well-organized neighborhood councils, were compared to similar cities without councils, researchers found no greater level of citizen participation or any increased ability of residents to communicate their needs to public officials. The researchers concluded that "participatory democracy demands too much from citizens to be broadly appealing."

Researchers in Europe have studied the effect of neighborhood councils as well. In 1979, the Swedish parliament passed legislation that allowed municipalities to establish neighborhood councils and other sub-municipal bodies with decision-making power. The initial interest in sub-municipal political bodies was based on a desire to improve democracy and efficiency. Extensive examination of areas in Sweden with formal neighborhood councils found no increase in citizen participation; citizens who were already active simply had one more avenue to express their views.

There was an increase in the number of local political representatives in the municipalities that adopted neighborhood councils in Sweden, but researchers found "no wave of citizens waiting for local politicians to speak with." On the efficiency front, despite their decision-making power, neighborhood council representatives were found to have too little actual control over policy and implementation to influence service provision.

In Los Angeles, advisory councils have been proposed by those who oppose true reform, to dissuade residents intent upon secession. But the vast majority of resi-

dents do not want to spend their evenings and weekends at community meetings. What residents want is to be represented, to have a government that can act with only moderate public input to take care of the basic needs of their community. Rather than advisory councils, what is really needed is neighborhood government that brings power closer to residents.

The debate over neighborhood government parallels an age-old debate over the benefits of decentralization versus central planning for the economy as a whole. Nobel laureate Friedrich A. Hayek argued that decentralized structures take advantage of local knowledge—information of "time and place"—that central planners cannot know on a day-to-day basis. Hayek pointed out how the individual at the local level has the most knowledge of possible alternatives, of substitution possibilities. For example, if resources need to be shifted

individual making decisions in the community, accountable to the local population, can react quickly and is best suited to decide which other tasks can be delayed at the least annoyance to local residents.

For centralized government to triumph over decentralized decision-making requires a central government agency that can absorb a million details, make every decision in the interests of the individuals for whom it will have an impact, be able to focus on a multitude of local issues—and do all of this at the same time.

Lessons about local control can be learned from America's best-run companies. A characteristic of successful firms is that they spin off independent units as soon as size reaches a certain critical limit. These firms appreciate the importance of local control.

If reform is to offer Angelenos true local control, it must include a system of financially autonomous neighborhood governments, taking all major services and shifting purchase and oversight responsibility to the neighborhood level. If devolution occurs through detachment, financial autonomy will be guaranteed. If devolution comes through charter reform, individual neighborhoods must be given a great deal of financial autonomy, essentially spending the lion's share of the tax revenue raised within their boundaries as they see fit. Advisory councils offer none of the benefits of neighborhood government. It is no surprise they have come to be favored by those who oppose reform.

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