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Valley Perspective

PERSPECTIVE ON CHARTER REFORM

Local Empowerment Key to Any Measure's Success



So-called Fleming plan would divide Los Angeles into quasi-cities. More important, it would bring government closer to the people.

By DAVID W. FLEMING

Valley residents have an instinctive distrust of big government, particularly when it becomes dysfunctional. We believe smaller is better than bigger.

When Valley residents discuss L.A. city government, visions of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's mismanage-

ment, the failures of the Los Angeles Unified School District and the daily ruminations of City Hall leap to mind. Add to that the perceptions of hush-hush back room dealings, the developments stuffed down the throats of unwilling communities while the economic benefits they produce are diverted downtown to disappear within the city's bureaucratic machinery, the aloofness, the indifference, the condescending air of some and the outright disdain of others for all things pertaining to the Valley. I could go on.

Valley residents think in terms of community. That concept is probably foreign to many residents south of Mulholland. If you cannot bring yourself to think in terms of community you cannot begin to understand the Valley.

Not too many years ago, the Valley was a handful of loosely knit communities separated by farms, ranches and orchards. Even as those open spaces filled in and the Valley became one urban mass, our small-town perspective never changed. We still think of ourselves as a comfortable blending of distinct communities.

Valley residents look at Burbank, Glendale or Pasadena and long to have what they have: small governments managing clean, well-policed, efficient, user-friendly cities blessed with low, business-friendly tax structures, clean and safe neighborhoods and great community pride.

These cities are not anti-development. Far from it. They have each permitted and even sought out large, well-planned, area-friendly developments. And the residents of each of these cities have benefited.

The expanding sales and property tax revenues produced by their developments have helped pay for the superior services and benefits the residents of these cities enjoy and expect. In smaller cities, the benefits and burdens of development are inextricably fused. But in Los Angeles and the Valley, it's a different story.

And that brings us back to the Fleming plan for charter reform and why VICA supports it.

This plan would divide the city into districts composed of clusters of wholly contained communities, referred to by some as "quasi-cities." It would break up the current massive city bureaucracy into more manageable units, with closer citizen scrutiny and fewer places for bureaucrats to hide. It would permit communities to retain the tax increments that new development produced so that, just like the residents of Burbank, Glendale and Pasadena, the residents of Los Angeles who must endure the burdens of future development would be able to locally share in its economic benefits.

It would bring government closer to the people. That's what the people of the Valley want. Voter surveys and community forums have made this evident.

Make no mistake. Valley residents will someday attain local empowerment and enjoy the fruits of development—either through charter reform embodying these principles or through independent cityhood.

Those who dismiss the Valley as a disparate bunch of dissidents might reflect on the fact that Richard Riordan became L.A.'s mayor because the Valley elected him. Take away the Valley's votes and Mike Woo would have been mayor.

Although most of those who will determine what charter reform choices appear on next year's city ballot are from outside the Valley, the fate of any proposed charter will be determined by Valley residents, who make up half of the city's voters. If charter reform is to become a reality, the city's bureaucracy and downtown power structure had best consider the deeply held convictions and aspirations expressed by Valley voters about how they want to be governed.

Or else let the Valley go.

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