

Governing Los Angeles Requires Flexibility

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■ **Charter:** Don't lock the city into a one-size-fits-all mandate for neighborhood councils.

By **MIKE BOWLIN**
and **MIGUEL CONTRERAS**

The first duty of the the charter reform commissioners—elected and appointed—is to devise systems that work. A city charter that contains too much proscriptive detail will tie our hands as we confront the inevitable unforeseen challenges of the coming decades.

As the leader of one of Los Angeles' largest corporations and as the elected head of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor—AFL-CIO, we support a government that is more representative and more accountable to the public, and we are encouraged that both charter reform commissions strongly support these goals. But we have serious concerns about the scope and composition of the proposed community or neighborhood councils.

Instead of bringing government closer to the people, neighborhood councils could evolve into a new layer of bureaucracy. Worse yet, if the members of these councils ultimately don't reflect the views of their community, voters will become even more alienated from the political process. Moreover, an elaborate, complex system of community councils, largely unknown to most voters in the city, could offer opponents of charter reform an opportunity to kill reform in its entirety.

The charter should neither mandate nor prohibit neighborhood councils. The law-making process gives future mayors and council members the power to establish neighborhood councils—or other mechanisms—and determine their composition, duties and powers. Leaving these decisions to our elected officials ensures that they will have the ability to try different approaches and respond to the changing needs of their constituents.

The neighborhoods of Los Angeles are remarkably diverse, and to represent them effectively, one size does not fit all. What works in the San Fernando Valley won't necessarily work in San Pedro or East Los Angeles. Communities and future elected officials must have the latitude to explore different approaches and to change those approaches. We know from the experience of other cities that neighborhood councils fail without strong and consistent support from elected officials. In our city, several council members have demonstrated this

support, but others oppose them or are proposing costly and cumbersome councils that voters are likely to spurn.

Flexibility allows communities and their elected representatives to find the proper balance. Newly incorporated communities often begin with "no growth" sentiments, but council members quickly learn that managed growth is essential to fund the services that taxpayers demand without raising taxes. Elected officials who are accountable for land use decisions and local services have found ways to permit growth and get reelected. This balance would be jeopardized if community councils were granted control over land use issues. Neighborhood councils would have every incentive to consistently oppose discretionary growth, while appealing to "downtown" to fund community priorities.

Communities thrive—economically, politically and as places to live—only when they can find comfortable ways to balance competing concerns. Similarly, neighborhood councils must reflect the true diversity of interests in every community. There is no shortage of people qualified to participate in this dialogue; every community has talented volunteers such as library aides, PTA members, soccer coaches, business, labor and church leaders. But most of these volunteers do not wish to be politicians, so there must be another way to bring them to the dialogue.

Budgeting and the allocation of scarce resources are constant challenges for businesses, for working families and for government. The single greatest pitfall facing charter reform is cost. New funding sources will not magically appear to support a costly neighborhood council system. City taxes are already the highest in Southern California. Moreover, economic growth will not create surplus revenues to fund these councils. Los Angeles has a structural budget deficit; this year, even with a booming economy, our city faced a \$100-million-plus budget deficit that could only be balanced with cuts. We doubt that voters would forgo police service, fire protection or library hours to fund community councils. They are likely to reject charter reform in its entirety if the neighborhood council system is perceived to jeopardize important municipal services.

The new charter should be a document that will guide but not unduly inhibit future mayors and council members. Neighborhood councils may be appropriate in certain areas, but a charter-driven requirement to form such councils in a one-size-fits-all way doesn't make sense. Let's move this debate to a more appropriate forum, the City Council.

Mike Bowlin, chairman and chief executive officer of ARCO, is head of the Los Angeles Business Advisors, a group of corporate chief executives. Miguel Contreras is the executive secretary-treasurer of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO.

