

At 83, Anne Finn stands tough

By Rick Orlov

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At 83, the pixielike Anne Finn has become one of the most powerful players in the inside world of downtown politics.

The Sun Valley matriarch and widow of Councilman Howard Finn looks more like everyone's favorite grandmother, with her quick laugh and comforting tone as she wears her favorite sweat shirts and baseball caps.

But inside that nearly 5-foot frame, Finn is as tough and independent as any hardball political player — ready to stand her ground no matter the opposition as a member of the elected Charter Reform Commission.

She is under pressure from all quarters — Mayor Richard Riordan, public employee unions and just about everyone else in town — because she could be the swing vote on whether the commission sticks by its decision to give the mayor the power to hire and fire department heads.

"I haven't decided what I'll do yet," Finn said in an interview last week.

"I've talked to a lot of people. I'll talk to anybody. My concern is that we come up with a good charter that all the people can embrace. I have high hopes for that."

It is Finn and commission Chairman Erwin

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Anne Finn surprises people with her independence as a member of the Elected Charter Reform Commission. The 83-year-old widow could be the swing vote on whether to give Mayor Richard Riordan the power to hire and fire department heads.

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Chemerinsky who are the main focus of lobbying efforts by Riordan, who wants expanded power put in the Mayor's Office, and the Service Employees International Union and City Council, which oppose him.

"There's some pressure," Finn said. "But that's just part of it because people feel so passionately about it. And I'm sure we will be able to work it all out."

Finn's election to the panel was supported by the union, but the independent streak that has always marked Anne Finn's life is clearly still there.

"We thought she was ours," said Julie Butcher, general manager of SEIU Local 347 which represents most city workers. "She has shown she will go her own way."

She is very thoughtful, and she has been very reflective, listening to all the arguments and then giving her views. What she adds is a keen sense of history that is often lacking. She knows we're not talking just about the next mayor, but the mayor we'll have 70 years from now.

And she forces people to be nice."

Finn said she was reluctant when she was approached by Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg to be a candidate.

"I didn't have the least bit interest in it," Finn said. "But she convinced me that I could bring something to the commission."

Finn is no stranger to politics.

Her late husband was a popular city councilman for five years from the Sun Valley area until his death in 1986. After a brief mourning period, Finn said she wanted to run for her husband's seat, but the City Council at the time redrew the district boundaries to create a Latino district in another part of the city.

"That was one of the things I was concerned with, how they just redrew the district," Finn said.

One of the proposals contained in the elected charter reform plan is to have an independent panel recommend new political boundaries, but a deal has been cut that could water it down.

Rob Glushon, a fellow commissioner, said he has been surprised at some of Finn's votes.

"Given she was elected with help from the unions, she has gone against them on a number of issues," Glushon said. "In a lot of ways, she's as independent as her husband was on the council. They are both willing to go their own ways."

"She is perceived as not having any vested political interests."

Butcher adds that Finn has

provided some perspective on the needs of the Valley and how those can be met to avert the secession drive.

"I'm not one of the creative thinkers on the commission," Finn says of herself. "I'm just like an average citizen, but I think I bring some common sense to it all."

One of the defining moments in Finn's life was the death of her husband of 47 years.

They met and married at the University of California at Berkeley, and her husband worked as a chemical engineer for the U.S. Department of Agriculture during World War II — at a salary of \$40 a month.

When her husband was released from duty in 1944, they moved to the San Fernando Valley, where he became involved in the early land boom.

One of his first projects was building a 22-acre housing development. He went on to become one of the major developers of residential housing.

At first, after his death, Finn said she felt somewhat lost.

"That's when I started swimming," she said, "every morning, for about 15 minutes. I used it as my impetus to get up in the morning."

Now, even though she needs no such impetus, she still swims.

"I'm afraid if I stop, I won't be able to do it again," Finn said.