

Why Wait for More Participation?



All that is needed to provide better neighborhood representation is a new city ordinance.

By MARK RIDLEY-THOMAS

Regrettably, as we approach one of the most critical junctures in Los Angeles' efforts to reform its city charter, we are seeing months of exhaustive work get lost in the bro-haha over such overrated issues as mayoral authority and the size of the City Council. Much more important is the issue of increasing neighborhood

representation, which can be done without the tumult surrounding the charter process.



A broad array of civic and community leaders agree that neighborhood councils provide the most rational model of achieving the goal of citizen participation. It is imperative to reestablish neighborhood councils as a primary component of charter reform proposals and not allow it to die on the altar of "chartermania"—the view and corresponding behavior that the charter itself is the "be all and end all" of the future of the city of Los Angeles.

Why is this issue of neighborhood councils so critical? It is generally agreed that the cry for more effective local representation was simply too loud to ignore and ultimately led to the current charter reform effort. The city was faced with the threat of Valley se-

cession to reform the system to make City Hall more accessible and responsive to its citizens. Consequently, greater citizen involvement became a fundamental objective of charter reform.

Citizen participation, in the form of neighborhood councils, is key to voter interest in charter reform. There is nothing in charter reform that more directly affects people and their neighborhoods than organized and meaningful input, and there is nothing more important and relevant than that. The proposal for neighborhood councils is the only aspect of charter reform that has kept it from becoming "inside baseball," which the public neither understands nor likes.

Ironically, a city that's supposedly threatened a citizen movement to deconstruct the current system is also home to an unprecedented model of citizen involvement. The 8th District Empowerment Congress has provided an example of participatory democracy at work. Its advisory role and citizen-elected leadership are frequently cited as a possible citywide model for neighborhood councils.

The experience of the Empowerment Congress has shown that citizen participation improves the quality of life in communities by giving constituents better access to all aspects of local government, enabling residents to seek increased and improved city services and ensuring greater accountability of elected officials, policymakers and community leaders. This is what reform of local government is about. No municipality can claim currency as a 21st century city without bona fide citizen involvement.

Indeed, people are genuinely interested in working with local government to make their communities better. That's why some of the most well-attended charter reform meetings over the past 18 months have been those re-

garding neighborhood councils. As for the Empowerment Congress, last year's annual meeting held at USC's Davidson Conference Center attracted an overflow crowd of more than 700 residents, and we expect even more at our seventh annual meeting a few weeks from now.

Neighborhood councils, based on a structure similar to that in the 8th District, inspire and empower people to build their future, not just endure it. This structure implements the kind of citizen involvement necessary for an effective partnership among neighbors, business and their public servants.

Since we have the means to effect more representative government in Los Angeles, why aren't we focused on a way to make that happen now? Why risk all of the work and goodwill associated with neighborhood councils when a plan can be implemented sooner rather than later?

Specifically, the details of neighborhood councils—such as the selection process by which they're formed, the boundaries by which they're defined and the way they are staffed—can be determined by an ordinance that could be adopted by the City Council based on what the two charter commissions have already agreed on. The City Council should be urged to do so. There is no good reason to have neighborhood councils aboard a ship named charter that may be sinking.

Now is the time to focus on the most meaningful and lasting objectives of charter reform. If we don't, we may very well forfeit this important opportunity for a very long time. After the painstaking work to build a consensus on the issue of representation, we can't afford to blow it by engaging in needless squabbling that renders charter reform impotent before it even gets to the ballot.

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