

Elected Charter Panel OKs Unified Plan Amid Dissent

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Feuding and fuming right to the end, Los Angeles' elected charter commission voted Monday to adopt a unified package with its appointed counterpart.

Unlike the appointed commission, which adopted the compromise package unanimously, four of the elected commission's 15 members voted to oppose a document they have spent nearly two years trying to write. One commissioner, Paula Boland, complained that the compromises hammered out in recent weeks undermine the final document and leave it pointless.

"We could have made history," she said.
Please see CHARTER, B8

CHARTER

Continued from B1
as the temper of the debate rose.
"We failed."

Others joined in expressing frustration. In fact, few if any commissioners seemed altogether taken with the deal. But a number said that presenting voters with a single, unified proposal makes more sense than offering two competing measures. And despite reservations about a provision here and there in the compromise package, most of the elected commissioners said they ultimately felt they could live with those concessions.

Anne Finn, normally a soft-spoken member of the elected panel who has often praised her fellow commissioners, this time responded to Boland with a sharp rejoinder.

"I'm afraid, Paula, you're wrong," Finn said. "It's a good charter, and the people are going to vote for it."

The debate also highlighted what seems certain to be the focus of opposition to the charter proposal. Boland represents the San Fernando Valley, and charter reform has long been offered in part to quell secessionist impulses there. Her rejection of the charter and some comments from other commissioners and audience members Monday suggest that at least one element of the secessionist movement is unappeased by the package and may work to defeat it.

On the other hand, speakers from a range of organizations—including the League of Women Voters, the Central City Assn., the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce and the African-American Jewish Leadership Connection—spoke in favor of the proposal. It also enjoys the backing of Mayor Richard Riordan, who is especially popular in the Valley, and former Councilman Marvin Braude, who represented a district that lies partly in the Valley.

Riordan's endorsement came after bargaining in recent weeks that included a series of debates and deals regarding the role of proposed neighborhood councils and the power the city's next mayor should have over department heads and commissioners.

A core group of elected commissioners has long supported creating powerful community councils whose members would be elected by city residents. Those commissioners have never represented a majority, but until last week, the elected panel had tentatively favored including more modest community councils in its main charter while still allowing voters the option of choosing the more revolutionary proposal if they wished. The city's appointed commission, most of whose members were tapped by the City Council, objected to that provision, and asked the elected commission to reconsider.

For its part, the appointed commission gave up its insistence that most city commissioners be protected from the mayor's unilateral authority to fire them. Ultimately, it agreed that the mayor should be allowed to remove any commissioner, with the exception of Ethics and Police commissioners, a move the mayor's office argued would strengthen accountability in city government.

That bargaining infuriated some of the die-hard neighborhood council enthusiasts, and they angrily protested Monday.

"This last horse trade," Commissioner Janice Hahn fumed, "I think you traded a Thoroughbred for a nag."

Bennett Kayser, another advocate of elected councils, was similarly angry. He labeled the compromise package a "charter for the insiders, not the people," and struggled to force a series of votes on amendments.

When Commissioner Chet Widom tried to end debate on the matter, Kayser said quietly: "No."

"What do you mean, no?" Widom barked.

Commission Chairman Erwin Chemerinsky, who often acts as referee for the panel's meandering discussions, stepped in quickly,

asking all commissioners to "take a deep breath."

When discussion resumed, Kayser was granted his request for separate votes on each amendment. He lost every one.

In the end, most of the leading players in the charter reform debate got some of what they wanted but not all. Neighborhood council supporters get the chance to approve advisory panels but not more powerful ones. If voters go along, Mayor Richard Riordan will have won for his successor greater powers to oversee city departments, exempt officials from Civil Service protections and oversee city litigation, among other things. He did not, however, get the next mayor the right to fire department heads.

And advocates of a substantially enlarged City Council won a public vote to consider whether 21 or 25 members would be preferable to the existing 15; they did not force a referendum on bigger numbers, recommendations that went as high as 35.

The vote Monday propels the compromise package toward consideration by the City Council, where one last minefield awaits the long drive to give voters a charter proposal in June. The council can adopt the recommendations of the appointed commission, revise them or reject them altogether.

If the council makes changes, however, it risks unraveling the weeks of compromise that have gotten the process to this point. The elected commission, which has the power to send its charter directly to the ballot, could then pull out of the deal and place its competing measure before voters.