

City Charter Panel Seeks to Accelerate Reform Plan

■ **Politics:** Elected commission backs implementation by 2000, setting up a possible conflict with the council.

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In a move that opens yet another opportunity for a major conflict over reform of the Los Angeles City Charter, members of the elected reform commission have endorsed a plan to make the proposed municipal Constitution take effect by July 2000, rather than a year later as favored by the City Council.

If the plan is approved, it would give Mayor Richard Riordan a full year to run the city under a new charter that gives the mayor substantially more authority than he now has.

The elected commission voted after 11 p.m. Monday to phase in the new City Charter, assuming it is approved by voters in June. By a vote of 9 to 4—with commissioners Bill Weinberger, Rob Glushon and Chet Widom leading the charge—the commission approved a two-step process toward putting the new charter into effect. The panel's chairman, constitutional law professor Erwin Chemerinsky, was on the losing side of the vote.

Under the plan adopted by the elected commission, some aspects of the new charter—those that do not require any special ordinances—would take effect six months after the voters approve it. Those would include provisions that allow the mayor greater authority over city department heads and commissioners, as well as some changes to the City Council and to some departments.

Other, more complicated aspects of the charter, such as the restructuring of the city administrative office and of the city's fiscal and budget operations, would take effect July 1, 2000. One of the charter's most ambitious proposals, to establish a citywide network of neighbor-

hood councils, would go forward independently from the rest of the charter; planning for that innovation would begin essentially immediately upon approval of the document.

The elected commission proposal for phasing in the new charter is squarely at odds with language in the draft of the proposed unified charter, which calls for the new charter to take effect July 1, 2001, one day after Mayor Riordan leaves office. The 2001 date has drawn fire from the mayor and others, who complain that it will delay the chance for voters to reap the benefits of charter reform.

Some critics of that date say that it was deliberately chosen to keep Riordan from wielding any power bestowed by the new charter. Riordan, who is chiefly responsible for launching the charter reform effort, is disliked by some City Council members and other city officials, and some do not trust him with the new document.

"There's a little bit of the view that giving this mayor this charter is like giving a teenager a Testarosa," one official said.

Riordan has emphasized, however, that he supports charter reform for its overall effect on making

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civic government more effective and accountable.

"This is not a charter for Dick Riordan or for the City Council," Riordan said. "It's for the people of Los Angeles."

Supporters of the 2001 effective date counter that time will be needed to make the transition from one governing document to the next. Rushing that process, they say, could result in confusion and mistakes.

Moreover, supporters say there is political value to waiting. The new mayor, new city attorney and new council members will take office July 1, 2001, so delaying the effective date until then would remove any suggestion that the new charter was drafted to enhance the authority of any incumbent.

With other issues in the charter debate largely resolved, the implementation date has become the most controversial topic left on the table, frustrating and agitating officials on both sides of the discussion.

What makes it especially difficult is that the elected commission never voted in favor of the later date; instead, it was included in the draft by agreement of the chairmen of the appointed and elected commissions, who said they picked it as a logical date, not anticipating that it would turn out to be a source of discord.

Instead, Riordan and members of the council have seized on the effective date as a key issue in the final hours of the charter debate, and now some advocates of compromise worry that months of negotiations could unravel over the issue.

On Wednesday, Chemerinsky, who voted against a majority of his colleagues Tuesday night, warned of the growing tensions around the effective date.

"It's not worth putting the whole charter at risk over this," he said. "There's a real sense of wanting to dig our heels in, and that's not helpful."

Chemerinsky's counterpart, appointed commission Chairman George Kieffer, also expressed unhappiness over the elected panel's vote.

"It just presents an obstacle," Kieffer said. "But we've dealt with other obstacles before."

Kieffer, who enjoys the solid backing of his commission and negotiates with its blessing, said he

continues to support the 2001 date for political and technical reasons.

In opposing the two-step implementation, Chemerinsky accused supporters of the approach of offering it mainly as a bargaining chip, fully intending to fall back later in support of a single implementation date, probably July 1, 2000.

Weinberger disputed that, stressing that the elected commission's approach was no less serious than the insistence of Kieffer and others on the 2001 date. "If everybody agreed to this and agreed to make this work, I'd be happy with it," he said of the two-step implementation.

Still, Weinberger said he was open to compromise. Asked whether he could live with a single implementation date of July 1, 2000, he responded: "I think that if that's something that all the stakeholders would agree to, I would support it."

Time for a prolonged debate on the implementation date is fast running out. The council and elected commissions have until March 5 to decide whether to place charter reform measures on the June ballot.

The council may place the proposed charter on the ballot as written, but also may decide to make some changes before forwarding it to voters. If that happens—and Kieffer warned that the council might be more inclined to make changes if it does not get its way on the question of the effective date—the elected commission then would have to decide whether to go along with the revisions or move ahead with its own proposal.

That prospect, of two dueling charter reform proposals on the same ballot, has bothered some reform advocates for months and has been the force behind negotiations for a single document. Many political observers believe that if the council and elected commission each forward their own version of charter reform to voters, the commission would enjoy significant advantages. Mayor Riordan would undoubtedly back the elected commission, bringing his personal popularity and deep pockets to that campaign.

The council, by contrast, is held in relatively low public esteem. That realization has led some council members to consider forwarding the unified charter to voters essentially as written, even though many of the officials dislike the final document.