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Council Sends Proposed New Charter to Voters

■ **City Hall:** Some members vow to campaign against compromise package, which will be on June ballot.

By JIM NEWTON
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Bowing to the inevitable, the Los Angeles City Council unanimously agreed Tuesday to allow voters to decide whether to adopt a new city charter in the June election.

The council's action ends for now City Hall's involvement in the charter debate and turns the matter over to the electorate. If city voters approve the 333-page package of reforms, they will clear the way for a revamping of Los Angeles government that will take effect July 1, 2000.

Under the new charter, the mayor could fire most city department heads, though they could get their jobs back if they appealed and won the support of two-thirds of the council.

Residents would get the chance to create city-sanctioned neighborhood councils to advise City Hall on a variety of issues, as well as local planning commissions that would guide some city development.

City departments would face the likelihood of more regular audits by a strengthened city controller. And the City Council, whose size could increase to as many as 25

members, would see its management authority curbed by making it more a conventional legislative body and less an executive counterpart to the mayor.

Supporters say those and other provisions would create a government that is more responsive and efficient. Critics range from those who say the reforms go too far in strengthening the mayor's office to those who complain that they do not change the status quo enough.

The provisions that curtail some of the council's powers and those that consolidate more authority under the mayor made the proposed charter a bitter pill for council members, who debated it for days and voted in favor of it largely because they had no real option. Had they rejected it, the city's elected reform commission was prepared to put it on the ballot without council backing.

Indeed, several council members approved sending the package to voters and in the same breath announced that they intend to campaign against it.

"I think this does need to go before the voters," said Councilman Rudy Svorinich Jr. "I am

Please see **CHARTER, A17**

CHARTER: Council Sends Reform Proposal to Voters

Continued from A1

going to encourage everyone to vote against it."

A number of other council members also expressed reservations about the charter and hinted that they would campaign against it, though the potential effect of their opposition is difficult to gauge.

Already, the proposed charter—which is a compromise version of drafts developed by the elected commission and a council-appointed panel—enjoys extraordinarily broad support. Mayor Richard Riordan, who launched the reform effort two years ago, has announced his endorsement, as have leading business and labor organizations. The compromise document was overwhelmingly approved last weekend by the elected charter reform commission, and a nearly identical document was backed last month by the appointed panel.

Just a few months ago, such a coalition seemed all but impossible. Before the end of the year, Riordan was opposing efforts at compromise. At one point, the elected commission rejected the idea, only to reverse field a week later and clear the way for compromise talks to continue.

"People would have said, 'That's pie in the sky,'" said George Kieffer, chairman of the appointed

commission. "Well, it's happened."

As a result, some observers believe that council opposition to the charter will have little or no effect on the election's outcome, especially given the low esteem in which opinion surveys show the body is held. There are other potential pockets of opposition to the new charter, including some advocates of San Fernando Valley secession, who see the compromise document as doing too little to overhaul a civic government they say is distant and unresponsive.

It was the threat of secession that was largely responsible for charter reform taking off. Riordan, who opposes secession, has urged its advocates to put their faith in charter reform instead.

The mayor is popular citywide and especially in the Valley, so reform supporters hope that his endorsement of the package will blunt opposition there.

There are at least some indications that Valley criticism will continue, however.

The Valley Industry and Com-

Key Charter Changes

If Los Angeles voters approve a proposed new city charter in June, they will set the stage for a series of significant changes in city government. Among other things, the new charter would:

- Substantially strengthen the city's mayor, who would gain increased power to fire city department heads and commissioners, as well as formal authority to issue executive orders and more power to oversee city departments.
- Create a citywide system of neighborhood councils, advisory groups that would be created community by community and that would receive logistical and organizational support from the city government.
- Decentralize decisions on zoning and development by creating at least five area planning commissions for different parts of the city.
- Allow voters to choose between the existing City Council size of 15 members and options of expanding it to either 21 or 25 members.
- Eliminate Civil Service protection for some top city officials, including the top deputies to the city's police chief.

merce Assn. voted last month to oppose the unified charter unless it was amended to include an independent redistricting commission that would draw boundaries for City Council and Los Angeles Unified School District seats. The association also insisted that the charter drop language guaranteeing city workers and contractors a minimal "living wage."

Neither of those changes was adopted.

Some on Council Still Opposed

In addition, one member of the elected commission, Paula Boland, has effectively boycotted the commission ever since it approved the compromise document. She has not been to a meeting in weeks.

As it considered the proposed charter, the council clearly was conflicted, with many members taking issue with particular provisions but also being mindful that there was little they could do to derail it. That is because the elected commission has the power to put its proposal directly on the ballot, with or without council approval.

As a result, the City Council could have approved a different charter to run against the elected

commission's, but it could not prevent voters from considering at least one proposal in June.

Councilman Nate Holden called the document a "slick attempt . . . to establish autocratic government in this city."

Councilman Hal Bernson accused the commissioners of "creating a semi-dictator" by giving the mayor enhanced authority and taking away some appeals in land use decisions.

Councilman Mike Hernandez complained that the new charter would add to the burdens on his constituents, whom he said are best served by strong council representation. And Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg argued that the new charter would distance government from the people and open the door to corruption.

"This could have been a historic moment," she said. "I don't think it is."

Still, not all council members joined in those fears.

Councilman Joel Wachs called the proposal a "vast improvement" on the current, 700-page charter adopted in 1925 and amended dozens of times since then. Councilwoman Cindy Miscikowski agreed and blamed some of her colleagues' criticisms on "fear of the unknown, fear of change."

The most emphatic council endorsement came from Councilman Mike Feuer, one of the earliest charter reform enthusiasts.

"Clearly there is controversy here," he said to the rest of the council. "But there is also history here. . . . I think the unified charter offers a vision that is both more inclusive than the status quo and that also has the potential to be more efficient than the status quo."

The council debate was not confined to members' public comments. On the sidelines, they lobbied one another and argued over details. Some fumed about the vote that many felt forced into.

At one point, Bernson turned to Councilman Richard Alatorre and muttered: "I'm going to vote to put it on, but this is insanity."

Bernson then walked out of the room briefly and when Alatorre called him to return and listen to the rest of a discussion on how to handle land use decisions, Bernson responded: "I've heard all I need to hear of it."

Through hours of sometimes acrimonious debate, leaders of the two charter commissions patiently fielded questions and shrugged off criticisms.

Afterward, the two chairmen, Kieffer and elected commission leader Erwin Chemerinsky, said they were pleased by the vote and promised to meet with those council members who remain critical of the proposed charter.

"I'm thrilled," Chemerinsky said. "It was so hard to get to this point, but we made it."