

LOS ANGELES TIMES EDITORIALS



MARK H. WILLES, *Publisher*

KATHRYN M. DOWNING, *President and Chief Executive Officer*

MICHAEL PARKS, *Editor and Executive Vice President*

JANET CLAYTON, *Editor of the Editorial Pages and Vice President*

Clout for Neighborhoods

If there has been one consistent beef about the way the city works, it's that local communities feel they have no voice at City Hall. Spending priorities and decisions about city services are made downtown without regard to the real needs at neighborhood parks or libraries. Because centralized boards and commissions make critical decisions on zoning, land use and development projects, neighbors worrying about a proposed shopping mall or the opening of still another liquor store have to persuade bureaucrats who might not know or care about their community and who certainly don't have to live with the consequences of their decisions.

Our first and still best answer to those concerns is that voters ought to hold their elected officials accountable for representing all parts of the city well. But too many years of frustration with unkept promises have led to a push for neighborhood councils and a city department to work with them.

Cities like Portland, Ore., and St. Paul have satisfactorily tried community councils, and at least three Los Angeles City Council members—Mark Ridley-Thomas, Mike Feuer and Joel Wachs—have launched successful efforts in their districts.

These volunteer programs have been started by politicians who understand the value of community input. We would have preferred a continuation of that approach, but many community activists, convinced that neighborhood councils should be embedded in the proposed charter that voters will consider June 8, successfully worked to make that happen.

Those who drafted the proposed charter over the last two years wisely rejected elected neighborhood councils that would have decision-making power over issues such as land use; such groups would only have promoted more not-in-my-backyard thinking and gridlock. Instead, the councils would be advisory, but they would not be powerless. City Council members who ignore well-organized, vocal and involved groups, whether advisory or determinative, might well find themselves out of a job.

But empowerment is not a one-way street. Under this plan, yes, all neighborhoods should be better able to get their

also would be expected to take the initiative and work harder to improve their community. Neighborhoods new to this role should get plenty of help from the city, but the network of community councils should not be used to further balkanize this already fragmented metropolis.

The proposed charter, which voters have been receiving in the mail, also dramatically changes the process by which land-use decisions are made, again by devolving power locally when it makes sense to do so. The new charter eliminates the Board of Zoning Appeals, which hears ap-

peals from the Office of Zoning Administration on all variances and some other land-use permits. In its place would be at least five area planning commissions, composed of residents who live in those neighborhoods.

While that might sound like a recipe for localism gone mad, here's why it isn't.

Under the current charter, if the city zoning administrator denied a conditional use for, say, a liquor store, the store owner could appeal first to the Board of Zoning Appeals, then to the City Council and ultimately even to the mayor. The current charter allows land-use decisions to drag on endlessly, frustrating both the public and developers.

Section 552 of the new charter, however, cuts the number of appeals to one in most cases, introducing greater certainty to this process. The proposed charter gives the City Council the authority to decide, by ordinance, which types of land-use decisions originate with the zoning administrator and which with the area planning commissions. The council might decide by the size of the project, its dollar value or the type of facility. But the council could not, as it does now, essentially reserve the right to revisit everything.

In most cases, there would be but one appeal. So our hypothetical liquor store owner, if first denied a conditional use permit, could not keep trying endlessly. In this way, the proposed charter not only streamlines a serpentine planning process but makes it far more sensitive to the needs and desires of local residents.

Neighborhoods can begin to have some serious clout, while still keeping the big picture of Los Angeles' overall needs in mind. The new charter would make both easier to accomplish. Vote yes on Mea-



CHARTER
REFORM

Why It Matters