

LOCAL

Local control remains key question

Critics say Prop. 1 would give neighborhoods no real power

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It was the one promise offered in charter reform that seemed a way to head off the burgeoning secession movement in the San Fernando Valley and elsewhere: Create elected neighborhood councils with power to decide on police services and local issues, from proposals for strip malls and liquor stores to hours for parks and libraries.

That dream has been edited out, but supporters of Proposition 1 on

the June 8 ballot say its system of self-selected neighborhood councils, organized through a new Department of Neighborhoods, will provide enough political muscle to force politicians to listen.

"I think any politician who didn't listen to the neighborhood councils would be crazy," Mayor Richard Riordan said recently. "These councils will have tremendous political clout."

But critics dismiss them.

"These are nothing more than student councils," Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg said. "I was one of the few officials willing to give up power for neighborhood councils. But I don't see where these will do anything."

The decision to have self-selected neighborhood councils came about as a compromise between the two charter reform commissions — one elected, the other appointed — as they attempted to forge a consensus.

It clearly rankled some members of the elected commission who

called for elected neighborhood councils with decision-making authority.

"I wanted elected councils with real power," Commissioner Bennett Kayser said. "But I've come around to think that this at least is a good first step. It became obvious that a lot of people weren't ready to turn that much power over to neighborhood councils."

Another concern is the final shape of these councils — the number of members, even the number of councils, and the amount of time and attention that will be paid to them.

A lot of this is to be determined by the new Department of Neighborhoods, but also will be influenced by what each Los Angeles City Council member wants in his or her district.

There also is a concern that a City Council member could manipulate neighborhood councils against each other.

The ballot proposal holds potential for some local control through creation of at least five area planning commissions around the city. Subject to City Council approval of the appointments, the mayor would choose all five members of each commission, which would decide all local planning matters.

A seven-member Citywide Planning Commission would oversee major developments.

But there is controversy because of the appeal process.

Hal Bernson is among several City Council members who believe a resident should be able to take a planning appeal all the way to the council. The charter proposal would allow the city to cut the process short with an appeal only to the Citywide Planning Commission.

"I think the public should have the right to come to us, their elected representatives," Bernson said.

Goldberg said she believes the City Council will keep its power to take appeals.

"I'm thinking people need some guarantee to hold us responsible for these types of decisions," Goldberg said. "I don't see how we can say we came here to duck the issues."

