

Wachs Quits Key Council Post Over Charter Opposition

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Veteran Los Angeles City Councilman Joel Wachs announced Thursday that he is quitting his leadership post on the council because he is disillusioned with the majority's rejection of charter reform and no longer respects those colleagues.

In many respects, Wachs' move is more symbolic than practical. His leadership position, president pro tem of the council, makes him the lawmakers' second-ranking officer, but carries little day-to-day responsibility. Also, his term was about to expire in July, and it was not clear that he would have retained it.

But the symbolic significance of his resignation could ripple through the charter debate, in part because Wachs used the announcement to launch a stinging broadside at his colleagues.

Trembling slightly as he read from a handwritten statement, Wachs said he was "appalled at the bad-faith bargaining" that resulted in compromises to the charter, only to have the council majority then oppose the final document. He also said he was "appalled at the thinly veiled threats" by council members directed at city employee unions whose leaders were urged to join in opposing the charter.

And Wachs also denounced what he called the "baldfaced lies" in some of the advertising that urges voters to oppose the charter—ad-

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One of those colleagues, Council President John Ferraro, is the leading contributor to the effort to defeat the charter. He was not available for comment after Wachs' news conference, but he released a statement through his office.

"I'm glad the election is only five days away," he said. "And I have faith the voters will see their way through all this rhetoric and have the good sense to vote no on Tuesday."

Mike Hernandez, another councilman who opposes the charter, was more aggressive in his response.

"Joel Wachs deserves an Oscar. He's putting his political interests ahead of the interests of the city," Hernandez said. "Based on his actions, I don't think he was suited to be president pro tem."

And Jackie Goldberg, who has emerged as a key spokeswoman for the anti-charter campaign, said she interpreted Wachs' move as a sign of desperation, an indication that the campaign for the charter is struggling and in need of a jolt.

"It feels like a stunt," she said. "This is the kind of stuff that



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City Councilman Joel Wachs

makes people cynical. . . . We have enough cynicism to fight."

In contrast to his unwillingness to point fingers at specific council members, Wachs was more specific in his denunciation of the council-sponsored advertisements, in particular one that warns residents that the charter will "make it more difficult for the Fire Department to do its job."

That charge, Wachs said, was false and deliberately intended to make residents so fearful that they vote against the charter.

"The Fire Department won't be able to do its job?" Wachs asked sarcastically. "Come on. . . . What are we going to do? Take away their hoses?"

Steven Afriat, the anti-charter campaign consultant who supervised creation of its mailings, was not immediately available for comment. But Hernandez said he believed the advertisement was fair.

According to Hernandez—an ardent critic of the charter's leading advocate, Mayor Richard Riordan—the charter would consolidate so much power in the mayor's office that it would skew budget priorities and make it harder for the Fire Department and other agencies to win support for their funding needs.

Wachs' announcement came just as the charter campaign is peaking, with both sides working hard to round up money, endorsements and support. The campaign against the charter has won endorsements from a number of organized labor groups and some homeowner organizations. The pro-charter campaign has won the backing of the city's three elected citywide officials, most major newspapers and a number of leading civic organizations, including the League of Women Voters, the NAACP and the Urban League.

In the San Fernando Valley on Thursday, more than three dozen prominent business, religious and homeowner leaders banded together to tout charter reform as a way to improve accountability and representation for all Los Angeles residents, reiterating that the overhaul was necessary whether or not the Valley secedes from the city.

The group, brought together by the Reform LA! Yes on 1 campaign, spent much of the news conference discussing how the charter would give disenfranchised Valley residents a bigger say in city government, and allow them to better address local concerns.

"Valley citizens are really fed up with the status quo, and we want change," said Police Commissioner and Valley business leader Bert Boeckmann. "I think the Valley wants a more efficient city government, and we want to know who is responsible."

Tony Lucente of the Studio City Residents Assn. highlighted the proposed charter's addition of regional planning boards, saying that such panels could only result in more thoughtful land use decisions in local neighborhoods.

"It does offer the community, especially in the San Fernando Valley, a greater voice in city government," said Lucente, who argued that many members of the citywide Planning Commission do not even know the Valley geography, much less neighborhood characteristics.

Appointed charter reform commissioner Alexandra Glickman shared an anecdote about life in her Valley Village neighborhood as an example of the type of slow-reacting city government that she feels is fueling the need for change.

City officials took a year to respond to a neighbor's request to cut down a large, diseased tree in her neighborhood—and then another six months to take the tree limbs and trunk away, Glickman recalled.

By the time the job was finished, three homes in the neighborhood had been infested with termites, Glickman said—including hers.

"What I see in this new charter is that there is accountability," she said. "The people who earn their paychecks from the city have to respond to the needs of the community, or be held responsible."