

Join the Many, Not the Few



An Office of Neighborhood Empowerment would work better than elected councils.

By XANDRA KAYDEN

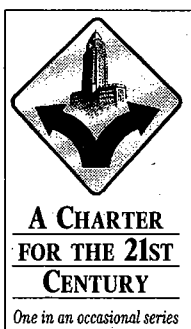
This week is critical for governmental reform in Los Angeles because both the elected and the appointed charter reform commissions will decide whether to accept a single compromise proposal worked out by their leaders. If they do, the odds of reform passing next June go up immeasurably. If they don't, the odds are against it.

For two years, the pros and cons of the reforms were argued by the traditional voices of the city: business, labor and homeowner associations. Each staked out their territory and their concerns: the building trades siding with business against elected neighborhood councils for fear of the NIMBY (Not in My Backyard) syndrome and the slow-growth movement; city service unions siding with homeowners against business; the mayor wanting more authority over the City Council and departments; city management fearing corruption if power is concentrated too heavily in the executive.

The debate has led to the emergence of a new voice, the Civic Coalition for Charter Reform. The coalition represents 22 voluntary and nonprofit organizations that make the city work, caring for the health and well-being of its people, bridging the ethnic and economic divisions that threaten to divide

communities. The main issue of concern to the coalition is the neighborhood council, a proposal to empower local communities. Of the current options, the coalition supports the compromise, advisory model and opposes an elected model because that would exclude participation of nonresidents such as business owners, which in turn would add to the splintering of the city.

The compromise model that most interests can accept provides for an Office of Neighborhood Empowerment that would be charged with recognizing local councils that meet certain basic criteria, including the participation of significant stakeholders such as homeowners, renters (who make up 60% of the city's population), business, religious, educational, ethnic and other human service and civic organizations that serve that



community. The councils would be provided with staff and communication support and meet in citywide congresses during the year. Above all, they would be a place where conflicts could be addressed at the beginning—discussions on a new building, plans for creating a playground, for example—instead of years of appeals.

It would be sad to have gone this far and not be willing to risk trusting the compromise worked out by the commission leaders on those issues that can be resolved by a new charter. That goes for the members of the commissions and the city officials who will review the product of the appointed commission. It also goes for the mayor, who appears ready to risk all of the reforms because of his single-minded focus on wresting authority from the City Council.

The civic coalition is a general rather than a special interest. The fact that it has come together now reflects the importance charter reform holds for the city's life. On the one hand, the fear of elected neighborhood councils made up only of residents bent on keeping out any changes—including social service agencies and other nonprofit activities that serve the community—is a direct threat. But of even greater concern is the fear that elected neighborhood councils represent a lost opportunity to build the civic institutional infrastructure necessary to bring together so many of the diverse communities of the city. For too long, Los Angeles has depended on the personal leadership and commitment of individuals to heal wounds and support understanding. Relationships among groups require institutional connections if they are to last. The model proposed by the conference committee makes that possible.

Xandra Kayden is president of the League of Women Voters. Among the other groups in the coalition are the NAACP, Latin American Civic Assn., American Jewish Congress, Muslim Public Affairs Council and Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council.