

Reform Panel Unveils Draft of L.A. Charter

■ **Government:** Appointed commission calls for decentralizing power by adding six members to City Council and spreading the planning process among local boards. Elected panel is still working on proposal.

By JIM NEWTON
TIMES STAFF WRITER

After nearly two years of deliberations and exhaustive public comment, a commission appointed to reform the Los Angeles City Charter released its blueprint for a new city on Monday, recommending a six-seat increase in the size of the City Council and tinkering with the mayor's powers.

The 337-page proposal covers the entire waterfront of city services and organizations, but proposes changes much less sweeping than those that an elected commission is contemplating and appears headed toward approving. The appointed panel recommends expansion of the City Council from 15 to 21 members, and proposes creation of a citywide Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which would be charged with building a network of neighborhood councils. The blueprint also apportions the city planning process among area planning boards in an effort to bring stronger local control to zoning and development.

Each of those moves is intended to decentralize City Hall and improve local representation. At the same time, the proposed charter attempts to streamline city services, consolidating far-flung financial functions in an office of finance, for instance, and removing cumbersome charter provisions regarding bidding and purchasing.

In theory, the revamped charter would give residents a more effective and efficient government, one that better represents the city's diverse neighborhoods and provides better basic services such as police, fire, sanitation and planning. It also is intended to be an easier document for bureaucrats to use, facilitating city business by hacking hundreds of pages of dense and out-of-date material from a city constitution that was last revised in 1925.

"This is as good as it gets," an excited commission Chairman George Kieffer said of the draft, which is still subject to revision but represents the first complete look at a new City Charter by either of

Please see CHARTER, A19

CHARTER: Draft of Plan Unveiled

Continued from A1

two commissions analyzing it. "It is a contemporary, modern charter reflecting Los Angeles."

But the proposed charter by the appointed commission also is notable for what it does not suggest.

That is particularly true in the area of mayoral authority, a major point of contention in the debate over how to manage Los Angeles. Initially, the appointed commission had voted to give the mayor the power to fire department managers without City Council approval. But it reconsidered that position and instead voted to preserve the current system, which allows the council to block a firing by majority vote.

That has become a major sticking point between the city's two charter commissions—one appointed mostly by the City Council, the other elected by city voters—and has led Mayor Richard Riordan to oppose the work of the appointed panel and to favor the elected group's approach.

Riordan was not available for comment Monday, but several aides reiterated the mayor's position, aired two weeks ago, in which Riordan said he would not support the package developed by the appointed group because he does not think it gives the mayor enough power to run the city's various departments.

"It's disappointing to learn that after 18 months of what we were told was such hard work . . . the appointed commission has come up with a proposal that represents reform with a small 'r' and status quo with a capital 'S,'" said Deputy Mayor Noelia Rodriguez, a spokeswoman for Riordan.

Critics Hoped for Sweeping Overhaul

Other critics of the appointed panel include advocates of San Fernando Valley secession and some leaders of the city's business community, all of whom were hoping for a more dramatic overhaul of city services and organizations.

For instance, Richard Close, a leading proponent of studying Valley secession, has criticized proposals for creating advisory neighborhood councils—as opposed to locally elected panels with authority over such issues as land use—as too little, too late. He and others compare the more modest approach to "moving the deck chairs on the Titanic" and warn that it will not be enough to thwart the

secessionist efforts in the Valley and other parts of the city.

Supporters of the appointed commission counter by arguing that the group has skillfully and quietly navigated its way to a more sensible charter. Some of those observers, such as City Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg, have expressed support for the appointed panel's recommendations, specifically its refusal to grant the mayor sweeping new powers for holding department heads in line. City Administrative Officer Keith Comrie has attacked that idea with relish, warning that it would foster corruption.

The debate between Comrie and Riordan has grown intense at times, with Comrie accusing the mayor of running a slipshod administration and Riordan countering that Comrie misunderstands the needs of the city. Although Riordan has resisted direct confrontation with Comrie, the mayor's office Monday continued its campaign for mayoral firing power by releasing a study that showed many big city mayors including those in more than half dozen Western U.S. cities, have the power to fire department heads without city council interference.

That study was accompanied by a letter from noted scholar James Q. Wilson, who is a close friend of Riordan, briefly explaining how the president of the United States came to have the authority to fire Cabinet members without congressional approval.

In its release announcing the completion of the draft, the appointed commission highlighted four areas in which it said it has strengthened the mayor's authority over the delivery of service while maintaining checks and balances with the council.

They are the power to:

- Prepare the city budget.
- Hire and fire commissioner and department heads with the council's approval.
- Conduct evaluations of general managers and grant pay adjustments within council-established ranges.
- Require departments to prepare multiyear budget plans.

In fact, the mayor already has three of those four powers. The fourth, the authority to conduct evaluations and grant pay raises, is one he shares with a committee of top city officials. As a result, aside to the mayor dismissed all four items as doing little more than ratifying the status quo.

But appointed commission leaders, some of whom have grown openly irritated with Riordan's insistence on winning firing authority, complained that the mayor's office is ignoring other ways in which mayoral power will be enhanced. Under the proposed charter, for instance, the mayor would have the power to issue binding executive orders, and the City Council would lose its power to overrule city commissions and substitute its decisions for those commissions. Instead, the council would still have the power to veto commissions but would then send those decisions back to the commissions for reconsideration.

A Pivotal Week Ahead

Although seemingly arcane, that represents an important change. If the event, say, that a city commission rejected a contract, the City Council could continue to overrule the commission but would lose the power to award the contract itself—a power that critics say invites mischief.

The completion of the appointed commission charter sets the stage for a potentially pivotal week in the debate over how to reorganize Los Angeles government.

The chairmen of the two commissions, Kieffer of the appointed panel and Erwin Chemerinsky from the elected group, are scheduled to meet today to discuss possible compromises between their commissions. Both men have long pledged to do their best to arrive at a common charter endorsed by both panels, but talks between the groups have been stalled in recent months, in part by conflicting schedules but also by a sense that they remain too far apart on some key issues to reach a satisfactory compromise.

Panel Asks for Up-or-Down Charter Vote

As its appointed counterpart unveiled its draft charter, the elected Los Angeles charter reform commission moved Monday night to clear a path for its work to be considered by city voters next year.

Members of the elected panel unanimously approved a motion by Commissioner Dennis Zine urging the City Council to refrain from offering any charter amendments next April or June, so that the commission's rewrite of the city's constitution can face a clean ballot and an up-or-down vote.

An appointed panel of reformers also is producing its version of a new City Charter, and if the two commissions cannot agree on a single set of reforms, voters face the prospect of being asked to consider two charter proposals, each numbering in the hundreds of pages, on the same ballot.

So daunting is that prospect that city officials have yet to figure out how to print such a ballot—much less how to convince voters to read it.

The challenge would be worse, commissioners said, if other amendments are offered at the same time. Their request that the council keep the ballot free of other amendments is not binding. But commissioners said they hoped the council would agree that the new charter is important enough that voters should be allowed to consider it by itself.

"I think this will help with our efforts and the efforts of the appointed commission," Zine said, adding that a clean ballot will "not confuse voters any more than they're already confused."

Monday's vote is just one step in a complicated endgame as the two charter commissions begin to wind down their drafting and shift to the task of explaining the relevance of their work to residents.

So far, they have met with mixed results: The elected commission's meetings often draw a sizable and sometimes impassioned crowd of devotees, while the appointed commission recently sponsored a well-attended series of public meetings. At the same time, the elected commission's recent "constitutional convention" was sparsely attended.

—Jim Newton