

Valley leaders mourn reform

Commissions say no
to giving panels power

By Patrick McGreevy
Daily News Staff Writer

Outraged by the elected Charter Reform Commission's rejection of empowered neighborhood councils, many homeowner and civic leaders from the San Fernando Valley and elsewhere in Los Angeles declared Tuesday that meaningful reform is dead and threatened to boycott a planned citywide convention.

Several leaders of a citywide group called The Coalition said they will devote more of their energy to other alternatives, including a study of cityhood for the Valley, as a result of the commission's decision Monday not to give neighborhood councils power over land use and other local issues.

"These commissioners have their own agenda and what the public says is not important to these people," said Richard Close, president of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association and chairman of Valley Voters Organized Toward Empowerment, a group seeking a study of the ramifications of Valley cityhood.

Close and other leading backers of decision-making councils said they would boycott the Constitutional Convention the elected reform commission has organized for Nov. 7.

Diana Plotkin, chairwoman of the Westside Civic Association, said she is urging the thousands of homeowners who are part of her group to skip the event.

"It's a waste of time," she said. "They (commissioners) are not interested in listening to what we have to say. They just want to sell us their plan."

"I personally would not encourage anyone to vote for charter reform because it's a waste of time. It's business as usual. Everybody knows we already have advisory councils."

The chairman of the elected charter commission, Erwin Chemerinsky, said it is too early to give up on reforming the charter, the

Valley activists may skip charter reform convention

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city's constitution, because the commission has until March to decide what to place on the June ballot.

"I would encourage everybody to remain at the table and stay involved in the process," said Chernerinsky. "Nobody should take their ball home and say, I'm not going to play anymore."

The elected Charter Reform Commission, which will place its recommendations for a new charter on the city ballot in 1999, voted Monday night at a meeting in Hollywood for a charter proposal that would authorize communities in each of the 15 council district to seek city approval to form neighborhood councils that would have only advisory powers on land-use issues and discretion over a small, unspecified pool of money.

The selection of neighborhood council members would be done at caucuses and would not be limited to residents or even voters, allowing business people, noncitizens and others to participate.

A separate ballot measure approved by the commission would allow for elected neighborhood councils with advisory power, but a proposal to give them decision-making authority over planning matters was rejected — for the third time in two weeks.

Some commissioners said privately they were heavily lobbied before Monday's meeting by representatives of Mayor Richard Riordan and the Los Angeles Business Advisors, a group representing the downtown corporate community, to drop the idea of elected and empowered neighborhood councils.

George Ross of Arco, a corporation represented in LABA, hailed the commission action as "a step in the right direction" that might help result in one united charter proposal.

"We're really happy that the elected commission is starting to move in that direction," Ross said. "We're feeling pretty good."

LABA officials have said they fear that elected, empowered neighborhood councils would create another level of bureaucracy that could stymie development.

"You're going to have an incredible double layer of government," Ross said. "It's going to be a real mess."

One potential political advantage of the commission's action is that it increases the likelihood that the panel will be able to agree on one charter proposal with the city's appointed Charter Reform Commission, which had previously supported creation of advisory neighborhood councils.

"It certainly moves the commissions closer together," said George Kieffer, chairman of the appointed commission. "I'm hopeful."

However, Kieffer said there are still some differences between the two panels. The appointed commission provides more flexibility in the creation of the neighborhood councils, leaving the process of how panel members will be selected up to the City Council.

Kieffer disputed those who say there will be a backlash by voters to any charter that does not allow neighborhood councils to decide land-use matters.

"Just the opposite," he said. "I think the vast majority of citizens are going to want to see advisory councils."

Chernerinsky and fellow Commissioner Bennett Kayser noted that the panel voted 6-3 on Monday to support decision-making powers on land-use issues, just two votes short of the majority needed to place it on the ballot.

"That's hardly a failure," Chernerinsky said. "We have made no final decision. We easily could change our minds between now and March."

Kayser said he believes there is still a chance the panel will get the eight votes necessary Monday to include some limited land-use decision-making in a separate ballot measure from the main charter.

"I'm confident there will be some form of front-end land-use authority," he said.

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Jeff Brain, president of Valley VOTE, also plans to boycott the convention.

"I think this decision they made signals the death of charter reform," said Brain, a member of The Coalition. "There will be many people now who will be realizing that if they want reforms it will have to be through cityhood, not charter reform."

Julie Butcher, chairwoman of the union representing 10,000 blue-collar city workers, said her goal will remain neighborhood councils with authority over planning issues. She said it was "foolish" to boycott the charter convention.

"We should continue to be part of the struggle," Butcher said.

However, state Sen. Tom Hayden, D-Los Angeles, another member of The Coalition, said through a spokesman that he might organize a demonstration at the convention to let commissioners know he will not participate.

"The message would be this is charter fraud," said Rocky Rushing, a spokesman for the senator.

Backers of the proposal said that including decision-making in a separate measure would make it easier for business interests to kill that alternative.

Even neighborhood empowerment activists who plan to attend the convention said they have little hope of swaying the commission and believe charter reform is all but dead for them.

"I am very disheartened," said Bill Powers of the United Chambers of Commerce of the San Fernando Valley, who attended the elected commission's meeting Monday to urge support for empowered neighborhood councils.

"This commission has put a fork in charter reform. It's a done deal. If you are not going to empower neighborhood councils, why bother?"

Powers told the commission that it would regret its decision to side with downtown business interests.

"You guys have been lobbied and you are, I am afraid, caving in to it,"

That sentiment is shared by former Valley Rep. Bobbi Fiedler and her husband, Valley activist Harry Coleman, who attended the meeting to support strong neighborhood councils. Neither plans to attend the convention.

"I'm not going to bother going. It's a complete waste of time," Fiedler said. "They (commissioners) know who they have to be loyal to and they are serving their masters."

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