

# Accept Compromise or All of L.A. Loses

■ **Charter reform:** If self-interest dominates and prevents cooperation, the entire city will be the poorer for it.

By **ERWIN CHEMERINSKY**  
and **JACKIE DUPONT-WALKER**

Will the City Charter reform process help to bring Los Angeles together or will our city's profound divisions doom charter reform? After more than a year of study and public hearings by the elected charter commission, it is clear that there is no consensus on virtually any important issue concerning how to revise the charter.

In recent weeks, the rhetoric has turned ugly as group after group has come before our commission and threatened to kill charter reform unless its view is embodied in the proposed document. Some leaders of homeowners' groups have testified that they will organize and defeat a new charter unless it creates elected neighborhood councils with decision-making authority. But some business leaders have declared that they will kill charter reform if elected neighborhood councils are proposed. Some labor leaders have indicated opposition if there is a significant increase in the powers of the mayor, while supporters of a stronger mayor have promised to oppose any proposal that does not meet their objective. Each group tells us that failure to follow its position shows the commission's bad faith and indicates that the commission has "sold out."

It is time to tone down the rhetoric; the threats are not constructive and not conducive to the compromises necessary to enact a new charter.

We must acknowledge and deal with our disagreements but recognize that our shared interests are greater than our differences. We are a city that is deeply divided by race, class, ideology and geography. But despite this, we all want the same basic things from government: a city with safe streets, good education and prosperity shared by all its residents. Charter reform is ultimately about de-

signing a city government that will better provide services for its citizens.

As a start, everyone involved in the process should agree to a few basic premises. First, it is imperative to recognize that all have an enormous amount to gain from charter reform and that all must compromise if reform is to succeed. If charter reform fails, the city will be left with an anachronistic document written more than 70 years ago and amended over 400 times. If charter reform fails, it is unlikely that there will be another such effort for many years. If charter reform fails, there is no reason to believe that another commission or another process could succeed. No group is likely to get all that it wants; all must approach the process in the spirit of compromise.

Second, it is important to recognize the forces that caused the current impulse for charter reform. Threats of secession by places such as the San Fernando Valley, San Pedro and Venice were the fuel. The new charter must address their concerns—shared throughout the city—

about a city government too removed and too unresponsive to the people. Increasing the size of the City Council or creating neighborhood councils or both have costs; but without such proposals, the cries that inspired reform will be unheeded.

Third, any proposal that helps some of our residents at the expense of others is unacceptable. Some proposals would allow a local area to keep a portion of the proceeds from new commercial developments in its vicinity.

This would exacerbate differences between the haves and the have-nots, as wealthy areas that can attract development would be better off and poor areas would have less money available for city services. No matter how well-intentioned, such a proposal is inconsistent with the vision of a single city committed to all of its residents.

After months of debate over charter reform, but with all decisions by the commission still tentative, it is time to bring the city together, both physically and psychologically, to consider the new City Charter and the vision of Los Angeles that it should reflect and embody. To this end, on Saturday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. the elected charter reform commission will hold a public Charter Convention at the Los Angeles Convention Center to allow residents from every corner of the city to discuss the proposed new charter.

Although the debate undoubtedly will be heated, we must proceed from the shared understanding that the city, and everyone in it, has much to gain from charter reform and much to lose if it fails.

*Erwin Chemerinsky is chairman and Jackie Dupont-Walker is a member of the Elected Los Angeles Charter Reform Commission.*

## To Our Contributors

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