

Charter Groups Compromise

■ **Reform:** Panelists reject idea of empowering mayor to fire department heads, but win Riordan's support.

By JIM NEWTON
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Facing against the clock, leaders of two charter reform commissions hammered out a compromise package Wednesday, winning the support of Mayor Richard Riordan, who initially opposed compromise but agreed after winning a few key concessions.

The final vote of a special conference committee composed of members of Los Angeles' elected and appointed charter reform panels came at the end of a six-hour debate in which tempers some-

times flared, but which concluded with applause and hugs.

"I think we have a charter," appointed commission Chairman George Kieffer proclaimed after the committee unanimously approved the compromise.

Kieffer's counterpart, elected commission Chairman Erwin Chemerinsky, also expressed gratitude and relief at finally striking a deal that members of both commissions can live with. The final document, he said, "is better than either commission came up with by itself."

Hours later, the appointed commission, after prolonged debate,

approved the compromise package. Its unanimous vote moves the matter to the elected commission, which meets Monday to take up the proposal for a unified charter.

Only a few last-minute agreements made it possible for the package to go through Wednesday. The mayor's office, which had long insisted that the charter should give the next mayor the unfettered authority to fire city department heads, relented on that provision and dropped its insistence on letting voters consider that matter themselves.

Partly in return, the committee voted to give the next mayor the power to fire commissioners, without council interference, from ev-

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ery city commission but the ethics and police panels. In effect, that gives the mayor tighter control over most departments without directly allowing the chief executive to dump general managers.

"Everyone's come a long way," said Kelly Martin, Riordan's chief of staff. "We've negotiated very heavily the past several days. . . . This has been a collaborative process."

In order to be offered to voters in June as a unified charter, the compromise still requires the approval of the City Council and the elected commission. Neither is a sure thing, but most observers seem convinced that enough differences have been settled to make passage likely.

One sticking point will be whether the city should embrace a network of elected neighborhood councils, groups that would be selected community by community and given some decision-making authority. A few members of the elected commission strongly support those councils, as opposed to a system of advisory bodies whose members would be picked by caucus rather than through elections.

Under the deal struck Wednesday, the unified charter would include advisory councils, and the elected commission would drop a proposed ballot measure creating elected ones. That will surely anger supporters of elected councils, but they do not appear to have the votes to derail the compromise over the issue.

The other important obstacle in recent weeks was Riordan's insistence that effective city government required giving the mayor the ability to get rid of general managers without council interference. Riordan ultimately did not get that, but the compromise proposal strengthens the mayor's office in other ways, and he quickly endorsed the deal.

"Today's action represents a step in the right direction and results in a proposal which I can support and which I, in turn, can ask the voters

of Los Angeles to support at the ballot box in June," Riordan said in a statement. "I believe the consensus package achieves meaningful change and improvements in the way Los Angeles will be governed in the 21st century."

Although Riordan did not end up with everything he sought, neither did anyone else. Indeed, some of the commissioners who voted for the package Wednesday did so only after noting that they did not favor all aspects of it.

"I don't like the package," Chemerinsky said bluntly, "but I'm going to support it and urge you to support it."

The reason, Chemerinsky said: Only under the delicately balanced set of compromises can voters be presented with a single reformed charter. And Chemerinsky, like some other commissioners, is convinced that if voters face competing proposals in June, they may reject them all.

The committee did endorse one voter option, however. Members of both charter commissions have long struggled with the issue of City Council expansion, with a few members of the elected panel arguing against it and other members of both panels divided largely between expanding the council from 15 members to 21 or 25.

The compromise would eliminate the option of voters preserving the status quo, except by defeating the entire charter proposal. Instead, the ballot would include the main charter and would be accompanied by a separate measure allowing voters to choose expansion to 21 members or 25 members.

A representative of the city attorney's office questioned the legality of that approach, since it means the only way a voter can keep the council at its current size is to reject the entire charter. But Chemerinsky, who also is a noted constitutional scholar, responded that he believes the approach will withstand any challenge. In addition, commissioners directed their staff to draft language protecting the rest of the charter in the event that a court strikes down that section.