

# Maybe It's Not Perfect,<sup>2-5-99</sup> but This Charter Works

■ **Los Angeles:** The unified proposal gives residents a greater say and holds decision-makers more accountable.

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The Los Angeles City Council should adopt, without change, the unified charter jointly drafted by the elected and appointed charter commissions.

It's true that in some ways the document is too modest or slightly off the mark, and negotiations continue on several provisions. But were the council to send a second, alternative charter to the ballot, it would likely doom this opportunity for meaningful reform.

An up or down vote on a single new charter would put opponents in the uncomfortable tent of the anti-reform camp. But two opposing measures on the ballot, each much more detailed than typical ballot questions, would enable special interests to mount narrowly focused, money-driven campaigns to obscure the big picture.

The unified charter deserves council support because of the way it redefines key roles in City Hall as well as the relationships between elected officials and residents. It gives residents a greater say over the quality of life in their neighborhoods; it holds decision-makers more accountable for their choices; and it streamlines the way government works on a daily basis.

A good charter creates conditions in which decisions are informed by community participation. The unified charter would make civic decision-making everyone's business by creating neighborhood councils and a Department of Neighborhoods to address quality of life issues from the perspective of communities.

To counter legitimate concerns about myopic interests dictating community policy, these councils would consist of homeowners, tenants, local businesspeople, commercial property owners, social services providers, educators and others. Because neighborhood culture varies widely, the unified charter rejects a one-size-fits-all model in favor of flexibility.

The unified charter also could bring City Council members closer to their constituents by making districts smaller. Residents rightly demand that their City Council representatives be familiar with issues on their blocks, at their front doors. But this has become a quaint anachronism with 15 districts, each as populous as the city of Riverside.

The unified charter includes two related ballot questions that give voters the option to reduce the size of council districts by increasing their number either to 21 or 25.

The two charter reform commissions also applied the principle of inclusiveness to other critical areas. Five newly established area-specific planning commissions, whose members would be drawn from the regions where the issues arise, would make local land-use decisions. Regional issues, such as the expansion of LAX, would be made by a citywide planning commission. Contrast this with the current Planning Commission, whose five volunteer members try their best to reflect perspectives on very localized, as well as regional, matters from San Pedro to Sylmar.

For the first time, the city budget, the most important single expression of our collective priorities, would be opened to public scrutiny early in its formulation. Vigorous debate in the neighborhoods could replace the present, last-minute review by a small group of city staff and elected officials.

People familiar with the ways of local government should appreciate the way the unified charter holds top city bureaucrats and commissioners accountable for

achieving results. The city controller routinely would conduct performance audits of city programs; the mayor could remove commissioners unilaterally and dismiss general managers unless opposed by a supermajority of the council.

The unified charter eliminates red tape, too, consolidating the planning and land-use process, and lopping off an entire layer of bureaucracy.

Inside City Hall, there already is consensus support for many of the proposals, quiet contempt for some and open hostility toward others. But the only reform that could please everyone would be reform that didn't accomplish meaningful change.

The point of charter reform is to imagine a better Los Angeles and to design a system in which residents and their representatives can collaborate to make it real. The unified charter may not be everyone's idea of perfection, but it offers the best chance for the kind of local government residents can believe in.

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