

Compromise Pretending It's Reform



The new charter offends few, excites few and offers little or no reform.

By RICHARD H. CLOSE

Your extremely bright and hard-working child arrives home from school with his report card. All the grades are C-minuses.

Should you praise the child for passing the courses? Or do you criticize him for not doing better?

That scenario parallels the dilemma all city residents face. Do we praise or criticize the proposed new city charter?

The problem with the charter proposal that will appear on our ballots is that there is very little, if any, charter reform. Is it charter reform to reduce the charter from 700 pages to 330 pages? Is it charter reform to potentially increase the size of the City Council at an annual cost of \$13 million a year? Is it reform to give the mayor more power?

We had hoped for (and been promised) real reform with a new city charter. We were told that there would be neighborhood councils with decision-making authority. Instead we got advisory councils with no authority and for which the members do not even have to live in Los Angeles.

One of the reasons that the downtown politicians allowed charter reform to proceed was to make San Fernando Valley secession no longer necessary. We were told that charter changes would reform the system and give Los Angeles residents the same involvement that exists in smaller communities.

Has this happened? The answer is clearly no.

It was recently revealed that the city paid \$800,000 in late charges to Pacific Bell. Will the new charter prevent this? No.

The city is spending nearly \$300 million to remodel the downtown City Hall. Will the new charter prevent this? No.

Decisions affecting your neighborhood

or business are mostly made downtown. To be heard you must commit to 4 to 6 hours of traveling and waiting. If you are lucky, you will be given 3 minutes to speak. The decision-makers usually are not from the Valley and do not know your community. Will the new charter solve this? No.

In a couple of months, you will have the opportunity to vote for the new charter. It will be advertised as charter reform. In reality, it is merely charter change.

I will probably vote for the measure because it is a little better than what currently exists. However, it is false advertising to call it charter reform.

How did we get so little from the two-year charter reform process? Most of the unpaid members of the two charter commissions (one appointed, the other elected) worked very hard and were very dedicated. If judged on their commitment and dedication, we would truly have a great charter.

However, compromise—not reform—became their central goal. Don't get any organized interest group upset. Give everyone a little something so they will support the new charter. Don't upset the

City Council, the unions or business groups.

We end up with a charter that will offend few people and excite few people. You will be asked to vote for charter compromise and it will be publicized as charter reform.

People are asking how the new charter will affect efforts to create a separate Valley city. The answer is that Valley cityhood efforts will be strengthened. Politicians were telling Valley residents and businesses that charter reform would solve all problems. The public would have more involvement in the city process. Decision-making would be localized. Business taxes would be reduced so Valley businesses could compete with the tax structure in surrounding communities.

None of that has occurred.

The public now realizes that if it really wants a higher quality of life, cleaner streets and more responsive government, the new charter is not the answer. The city of Los Angeles has a population of more than 3.6 million and a budget of more than \$4 billion per year. Even if the voters approve the new charter and expand the

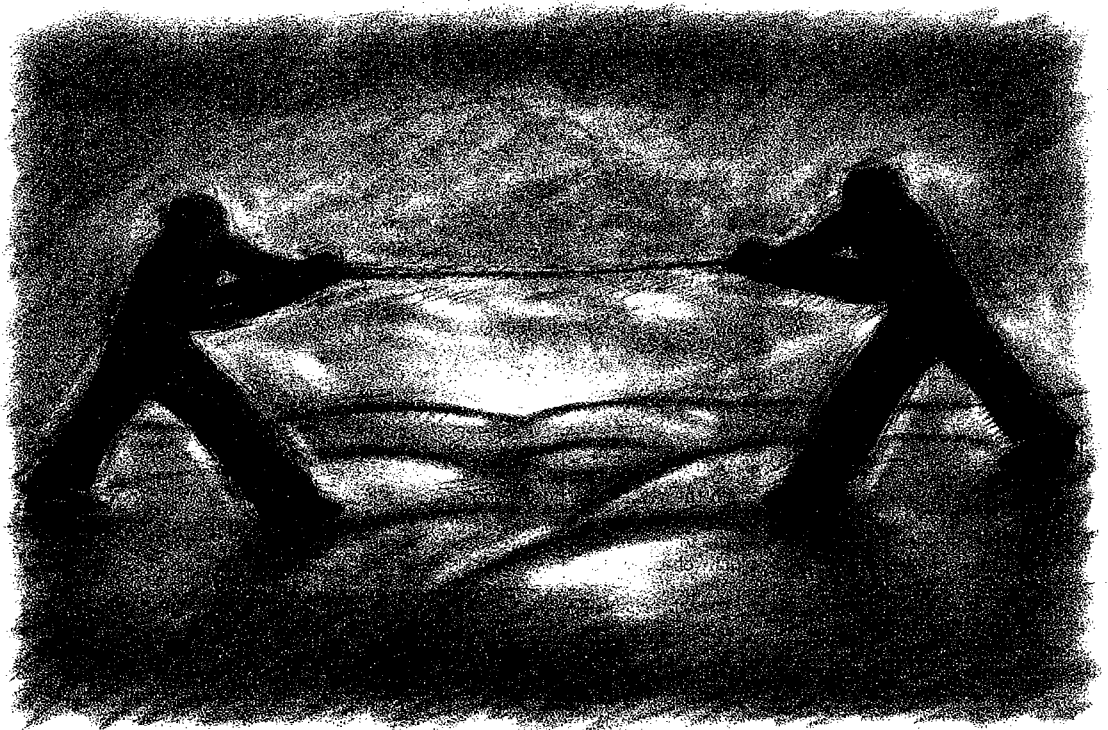
City Council to 21 members, the number of residents per council member will still be the highest in the country. In Burbank, each council member represents fewer than 20,000 residents. In Los Angeles, each council member represents more than 230,000 residents.

If a new city is formed, the elected officials and city employees will have one mission: Make the Valley a better place to live and work. The new Valley government would have a business license tax that would attract businesses, not push them to Burbank and Glendale.

The charter reform discussion convinced city residents that Los Angeles is mismanaged. The discussion by the two charter commissions convinced us that there is a need for significant change.

There once were two ways to reform Los Angeles city government: charter reform and secession. Now there is only one choice.

Richard H. Close is an attorney, chairman of Valley VOTE (Voters Organized Toward Empowerment) and president of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Assn.



PERRY PEREZ / Los Angeles Times