

Charter reform proposal released

By Rick Orlov
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After 18 months of study and public hearings, Los Angeles' elected Charter Reform Commission released its draft City Charter on Monday, saying it would make government more efficient and accountable.

Critics said the recommendations, which could go to city voters as early as June, fall short of meaningful reform to the 75-year-old charter.

Commission Chairman Erwin Chemerinsky hailed the 138-page document as a new constitution for Los Angeles.

"The people's commission presents to the voters a new charter, which makes city government more efficient, accountable and responsive," said Chemerinsky during a news conference at City Hall. "This is designed to be a constitution for the city, not a blueprint of operations."

Critics said the panel's proposals are tepid.

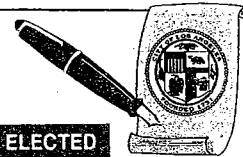
"It's not right to call this charter reform," said Richard Close, chairman of the Valley Voters Organized Toward Empowerment, which is pushing for an exploration of a Valley city separate from Los Angeles.

"This is just like one big amendment to the existing charter. We wanted to see neighborhood empowerment, reform of the pension and civil service system, and none of that is happening," Close said.

Indeed, the elected panel made concessions in drafting a charter. The panel initially supported forming elected neighborhood

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Here are some of the key differences between the existing City Charter and the ones proposed by the appointed and elected commission:



PROPOSAL	EXISTING	APPOINTED	ELECTED
Size	700 pages	360 pages	138 pages
Council size	15	Voters choose from 15 to 25	Voters choose from 15 to 25
General manager hiring	Mayor appoints with council confirmation	Mayor appoints with council confirmation	Mayor appoints with council confirmation
General manager firing	Mayor removes with council approval	Mayor removes subject to council override	Mayor proposes with council OK
Reorganization of departments	Council power	No position	No position
City Council role	Legislative and executive	Legislative	Legislative
Planning	1 citywide panel	Create area panels and 1 citywide panel	Five area panels and 1 citywide
Living wage	No position	No position	Included



Gus Ruelas/Daily News

Flanked by elected charter reform commissioners, Erwin Chemerinsky releases the panel's proposals.

Critics say draft falls short of meaningful reform

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councils with power over development, but it settled on advisory councils, each deciding how to select members. The panel also proposed a separate ballot measure to ask voters whether to approve elected councils, which also would be advisory.

The recommendations released Monday could change more as the elected and appointed Charter Reform Commissions work to adopt a compromise so that a single plan is presented to voters.

Several members of the elected panel have indicated they are loath to compromise and made their point again Monday.

Commissioner Dennis Zine, elected from the San Fernando Valley, said he believes the elected panel's charter could head off Valley efforts to secede from the city of Los Angeles.

"I come from the Valley, where there is secession frenzy," Zine said. "I believe this proposal is the only one that can answer secession. It brings the decisions to the community. If this doesn't pass, I'm convinced it will further propel secession."

Commissioner Bennet Kayser said he would be reluctant to support any other charter reform effort.

"We were elected by the people to come up with a charter for the next century, and I think we've done it," Kayser said. "We are calling for a sharing of power. Los Angeles has one council member for every 250,000 people — the largest council districts in the country. We want to give people power by breaking that up."

Mayor Richard Riordan was unavailable for comment Monday, but he has said he backs the elected panel's proposal over the appointed commission's or the consensus charter.

Bob Scott, chairman of the local issues committee for the Valley Industry and Commerce Association, said he is concerned that the compromise proposal could lead to confusion and ultimately defeat charter reform altogether.

"It's not that people shouldn't have a choice, but it leads to confusion, and that means people will either stay home or vote no," he said.

One feature of the draft is to boost the authority of the mayor's office — as Riordan has called for — and more clearly define the executive functions of the mayor and the legislative job of the City Council.

The elected panel's charter would:

- Give the mayor the right to hire department heads, subject to

council confirmation, but give him sole authority over firing.

- Keep the council at 15 members within the new charter, but include a separate ballot proposal allowing an increase to 25 members.

- Create a Department of Neighborhoods and ask voters whether neighborhood councils should be elected, with a budget and wide authority over planning issues and delivery of city services.

- Create five area planning commissions — including one in the Valley — and one citywide panel to deal with land use. Allow the City Council to veto decisions by commissions by a two-thirds vote, but not be permitted to substitute itself for any commission.

- Ease recall procedures for all elected officials and reduce the number of signatures required to run for city office from 500 to 250.

- Require the Controller's Office to conduct audits of all city agencies, because commission members believe it would result in greater oversight. That is now the duty of the city administrative officer.

Councilman Joel Wachs and former Councilman Marvin Braude praised the work of the commission, with Wachs particularly enthusiastic over its

proposals regarding neighborhood councils.

"If that is approved by voters, it will be the most significant reform of this century," Wachs said. "I am particularly pleased that you recognize this will cost some money to be effective. But it is a small price to pay if you consider how disenchanted and disenfranchised people feel today."

But Close said the neighborhood council proposals carry little weight. "That's not what we expected, and this will do little to counter what we're doing in seeking a study on cityhood," he said.

The elected Charter Reform Commission was created when Riordan qualified a ballot measure after the City Council decided to appoint its own panel in response to the Valley drive for a study on creating a new city.

A fundamental difference between the two is that the elected commission can submit its proposal directly to voters in next June's election, while the appointed panel must go through the City Council.

Copies of the proposal are available on the Internet at www.lacharter.com.