

Elected Panel Unveils Its Version of New Charter

■ **Reform:** Members are divided over whether to push their draft or a compromise with appointed panel.

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Setting the stage for a showdown next week, members of Los Angeles' elected charter reform commission released their version of a new city constitution Monday, amid signs the panel's members are sharply divided over whether to forward it to voters or adopt a compromise hashed out with members of the appointed charter commission.

The elected panel's work represents by far the most sweeping of the three competing government overhauls—one drafted by the elected commissioners, another by the appointed panel and a third proposed by a conference committee including members of both groups.

"This has been democracy at its finest," said elected Commissioner Bill Weinberger, who represents the Hollywood area. As he

and other commissioners unveiled their package, construction workers noisily worked in the background on the renovation of Los Angeles City Hall, which commissioners cited as a metaphor for their own labors.

"Just as we will have a new City Hall for the 21st century, we also will have a new City Charter for the 21st century," said elected commission Chairman Erwin Chemerinsky.

"Our charter is truly a bold, different vision," he added.

Among other things, the elected commission would allow voters to create a citywide system of elected neighborhood councils with some decision-making power, something untried in any other American city, but which proponents argue is well-suited to Los Angeles' sprawling nature. It also would give the mayor the unfettered authority to fire department heads, a power Mayor

Please see REFORM, B4

REFORM: Division in Panel

Continued from B1

Richard Riordan says is vital if the city's chief executive is to be held accountable, but one which opponents say would foster cronyism.

By contrast, the appointed commission would only permit neighborhood councils to be appointed, not elected, and would require any firing of a general manager to win the support of a majority of the City Council—in effect, preserving the existing system of council review. The appointed panel's document does adjust city power in other ways, however. It proposes a dramatically new system for planning and zoning, for instance, and gives the mayor the power to issue executive orders.

The compromise package would split the difference on mayoral firing power—the mayor would be allowed to fire a general manager, but that official could appeal to the council and get his job back if two-thirds of the lawmakers agreed. At the same time, it would eliminate the voter option for an elected neighborhood council system.

Faced with choices on those and a host of other issues, an unusual coalition of elected commissioners seem inclined to oppose the compromise and stick with their own work.

Some of the commissioners are leaning against the compromise package because they believe it fails to deliver the mayor enough power, while others, including some of those most critical of Riordan, dislike the compromise on neighborhood councils.

As a result, it is a deeply divided commission that will meet next week and cast a fateful vote on the future of charter reform.

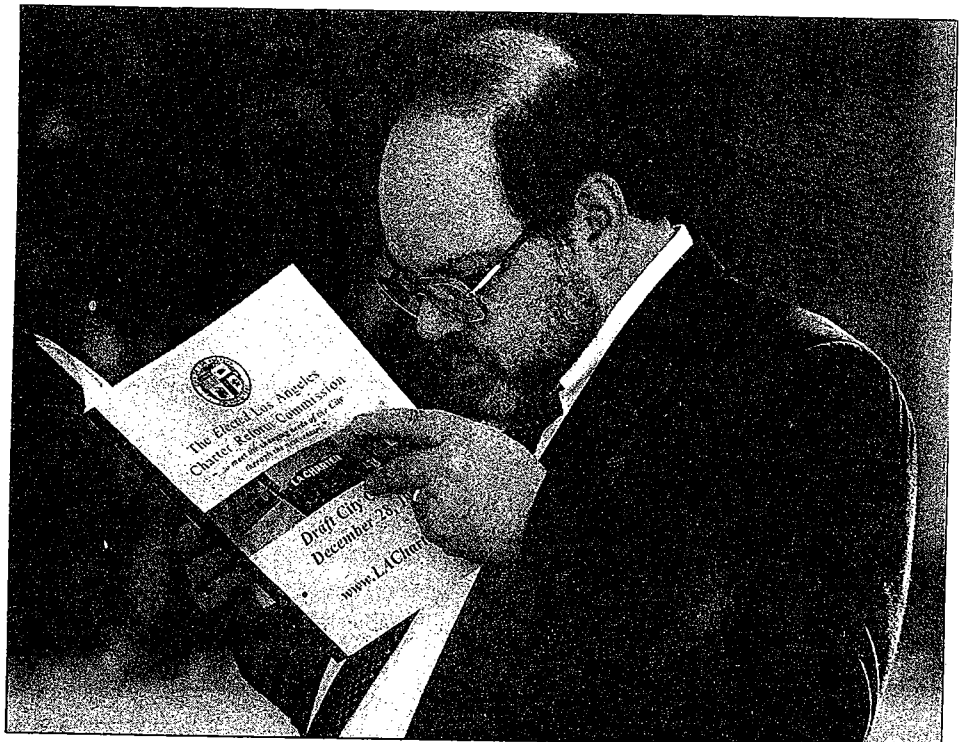
On Monday, some of those divisions were evident despite the air of celebration that greeted the completion of the commission's charter—at 138 pages, a vastly simplified and streamlined document compared with the 700-page charter it would replace.

Chemerinsky declined to comment specifically on next week's vote but reiterated his belief that charter reform is most likely to win voter approval if voters are presented with just one proposed charter. Since the most likely way for that to happen is adoption of the compromise, that has led most observers to conclude that Chemerinsky probably will support the compromise over the work of his own commission.

The panel's vice chairman, Chet Widom, also declined to say how he would vote, but Widom struck a markedly different tone.

"I'm still struggling with it," he said, "but quite frankly, I think this is a much better charter" than the compromise proposal.

The exact vote is impossible to predict, especially since a number of the commissioners have not committed to one side or the other,



ANACLETO RAPPING / Los Angeles Times

Steven E. Presberg, of the elected commission, reads newly released charter proposal at news conference.

City Charter at a Glance

There are hundreds of reform proposals in the charters written by the appointed and elected commissions, and dozens of areas covered by their proposed compromise. These are a few of the most closely watched.

MAYORAL FIRING POWER

Elected: Allow the mayor unfettered authority to fire general managers.

Appointed: Require any firing to be approved by a majority of the City Council.

Compromise: Allow mayor the power to fire, but department head could appeal to council, which could override by a two-thirds vote.

NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS

Elected: Main charter would create appointed councils with advisory powers only. Voters would have the option of approving elected councils.

Appointed: Charter would create advisory councils and a citywide Office of Neighborhood Empowerment.

Compromise: Neighborhood councils would be advisory and appointed.

CITY COUNCIL SIZE

Elected: Main charter would keep council at 15 members but voters would have the option of enlarging it to 25.

Appointed: Would increase to 21; no voter option.

Compromise: Adopts the approach of the elected commission.

but most observers now believe that at least six members of the 15-member elected panel are inclined to oppose the compromise. Another three or four seem to lean in that direction, and if they vote against compromise, that would provide more than enough votes to kill that package in favor of the commission's charter.

What could still tip that equation, however, is the debate about the political ramifications of presenting voters with a single unified charter as opposed to giving them two competing alternatives to consider.

Critics of the compromise argue

that two ballot measures would not undermine the chances of winning voter approval. Competing measures, that argument goes, might generate interest in charter reform and actually help win passage rather than hurt.

That has been the tack taken by Riordan and some of his closest advisors, including lawyer Bill Wardlaw and campaign strategist Bill Carrick. All three of them have been meeting with elected charter commissioners in an attempt to persuade them to stick with their charter as written rather than agree to the compromise package.

language in the compromise package that would give the council a veto power over mayoral firing decisions.

Chemerinsky said Monday that he has met with Riordan and the mayor's advisors but has reached a different conclusion about the likely political impact of two charters.

"I just disagree with their assessment," he said. "With two charters, I worry that all our differences will come to the surface. . . . I worry about how divisive that might become."

That conclusion grows from the view that competing charter proposals would fuel voter confusion and that confused voters would reject both measures. Proponents of that view want to reach a compromise in part so that the work of the two commissions will not have been in vain.

"I would hope that we would all . . . put aside individual differences on individual issues to come together in a unified campaign," said George Kieffer, chairman of the appointed commission. "Our unified charter would have a significant impact on the city government."

The two commissions are scheduled to meet next week and consider the question of whether to stick with their own charters or adopt the compromise. At the moment, the schedule calls for the elected panel to convene on Jan. 5 and the appointed to follow the next day.

If either commission rejects the compromise, that would end it. If both approve, the unified document would then be presented to the City Council, but its approval would not be needed because the elected commission has the power to place its recommendations directly on the ballot.

Voters will get their chance in June, when one or more of the