

Communication from Public

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Comments for Public Posting: My op-ed was published at CityWatchLA: "Why Charter Reform Must Put People First." I'd really appreciate it if you could take a read and share any thoughts you have. Link: <https://www.citywatchla.com/los-angeles/33164-op-ed-why-charter-reform-must-put-people-first>
Thanks so much, Lionel Mares, MPA



LOS ANGELES

Op-Ed: Why Charter Reform Must Put People First

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Written by Lionel Mares.

CHARTER REFORM - As our nation marks the 250th anniversary of its founding, I feel gratitude—and a sense of responsibility. That responsibility is simple: continue serving the people of Los Angeles with humility, perseverance, and urgency. This milestone is more than a celebration of America's birth. It is a reminder that democratic ideals do not sustain themselves. They require constant work to make the promise of equal citizenship real in daily life.

For the past nine months, I have been deeply engaged in Los Angeles's charter reform process. From the beginning, I urged the charter commission to advance meaningful reforms that strengthen our institutions and improve the lives of Angelenos—especially those who are poor, vulnerable, or too often overlooked. Public service is not a title. It is a commitment: to ensure residents have a voice and a fair chance to thrive.

Charter reform matters because it determines who is represented and how power is structured. It shapes how city government answers the people it serves. In Los Angeles, many residents share the feeling that their voices are not fully heard—and at times they feel left out of the process entirely. That is not just frustrating. It weakens trust in democracy, and it weakens the city's ability to deliver services residents can actually rely on.

That is why I urge both the Commission and the Los Angeles City Council to pursue reforms that produce measurable improvements in governance and in the delivery of city services—not reform as symbolism, but reform as results. If our institutions are supposed to reflect the people, then the people must be able to see themselves in representation and must be able to feel that their votes and their concerns count.

Two reforms deserve serious support: expanding the City Council and adopting Ranked-Choice Voting. These are practical tools, not radical ideas.

Ranked-choice voting gives voters the ability to rank candidates in order of preference rather than forcing a single choice. Under this system, if no candidate wins outright, votes can transfer according to voter rankings—so a voter's support isn't discarded when their first choice falls short. The result is elections that better reward coalition-building and broader public support, while reducing the distortions caused by vote-splitting.

Los Angeles is diverse, and our democracy should reflect that reality. Today, the City is divided into 15 City Council districts for roughly four million residents—meaning each councilmember represents an enormous number of Angelenos. A single representative cannot realistically respond to the needs of hundreds of thousands of people, especially when neighborhoods face different barriers and priorities. When representation is stretched that far, responsiveness suffers and accountability becomes harder for residents to access.

Other major cities have more districts because representation works better when it is closer, more accessible, and more accountable. Council expansion and Ranked-Choice Voting would help right-size representation to the scale and diversity of Los Angeles—strengthening the connection between residents and decision-makers and improving the fairness of election outcomes. In a city where too many communities already feel unheard, these reforms would bring decision-making closer to the people and make it easier for residents to participate as partners, not spectators.

Representation is not an abstract value. It affects everyday life. It influences who gets listened to, who gets prioritized, and whether city government responds to the needs of the people it is supposed to serve. When residents feel their voices are dismissed, the consequences show up in services—whether that’s in public safety, housing, sanitation, or the countless other issues that shape the quality of life across Los Angeles neighborhoods.

Finally, I also advocated for other meaningful reforms, including strengthening the office of the City Controller and the Ethics Commission. These reforms were intended to improve oversight and integrity—so that programs are evaluated rigorously and standards for conduct are not treated as optional. City Controller Mejía requested a protected budget and the authority to perform audits of programs administered by elected officials. Despite public support for these reforms, they were not advanced by the charter commission or the City Council.

That matters, because strong oversight is a cornerstone of democratic government. When controllers and ethics enforcement can do their work independently and effectively, residents can have more confidence that their tax dollars are used responsibly and that power is constrained by rules—not by convenience.

Los Angeles deserves a charter that makes democracy work in practice. The goal should be simple: residents should be able to participate, to be heard, and to hold officials accountable—through systems built to include them, not systems that accidentally exclude them.

At the 250th anniversary of our nation's founding, we should not only celebrate what democracy has been. We should commit to what democracy must become: stronger institutions, fairer representation, and constant effort to ensure equal citizenship is more than a promise. It is a lived reality.

(Lionel Mares is a good Government Advocate formerly with the Sun Valley Area Neighborhood Council.)