

SAN FERNANDO VALLEY SECESSION:

*How A Quest to Change the Law Almost Broke
L.A. Apart (and Whether it Still Could)*

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INTRODUCTION: SO CLOSE, BUT SO FAR . . .

A quarter of a century ago, then California Assemblywoman Paula Boland, a Granada Hills Republican, was oh so close to realizing what for decades indignant San Fernando Valley homeowners and business leaders had only dreamed of, tried, and failed: A new state law that would have eased the path for the San Fernando Valley — from Sunland and Tujunga on the east to West Hills — all 254 square miles of it, to legally secede from the city of Los Angeles.¹

The moment — August 22, 1996, in the state Senate — was decades in the making, forged by northwest Valley business leaders, who with Boland found a true believer in the halls of the state Capitol. They finally had a

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¹ "Map of Proposed San Fernando Valley Secession from City of Los Angeles, 2002," *Los Angeles Almanac*, accessed Dec. 5, 2021, <http://www.laalmanac.com/geography/ge30secession.php>.



A MEMORIAL DAY PARADE FLOAT SPONSORED BY VALLEY VOTE RALLIES IN SUPPORT OF VALLEY SECESSION IN THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY'S WOODLAND HILLS NEIGHBORHOOD, MAY 27, 2002.

Photo: Gary Leonard, Los Angeles Neighborhoods Collection / Los Angeles Public Library.

shot to lock in a legislative mechanism that would enable the Valley to get its “fair share” of services. If the state legislature passed her AB 2043, no longer would the L.A. City Council have veto power over applications to leave the city of 3.5 million. The Valley would have a clear path to creating its own city of more than 1.5 million people.²

Boland herself was part of the movement that years earlier had spurred the legal barrier in the first place. Sensing passage of an epic piece of legislation in her grasp, Boland had momentum — until she didn't. She needed 21 votes for it to pass. She got 19.³ Twenty-five years later, Boland is still

² Nancy Hill-Holtzman, “Valley Secession Measure Clears Assembly Panel,” *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 18, 1996, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-04-18-mn-59934-story.html>.

³ Nancy Hill-Holtzman, “Boland’s Valley Secession Bill Fails by 2 Votes in State Senate,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 23, 1996, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-08-23-mn-36935-story.html>.

indignant over what she says may have been the Valley's last and best chance to break away from L.A.

"It would have been a done deal, right now," said Boland of a new Valley city, reflecting on what might have been: local control over land-use, a suburban ideal.⁴

In the rubble of Boland's bill, a battle royale to break away from L.A. would ensue. It would lose.⁵ By then, the legal and political barriers to seceding and incorporating were immense, bolstered by nearly thirty years of state law that discouraged the kind of explosion of municipal incorporations seen in the 1950s. But the movement to secede would ultimately bring major legal change to how cities are born and break away in California, amplifying tensions between public choice and collective goods theory, and would prompt reform in local government in L.A. This paper examines the history and path of Boland's bill and the impact its fate had on future attempts to secede from the city of L.A. It then explores the likelihood of the San Fernando Valley ever seceding. This examination draws on my interviews with sources who led the movement for and against secession and on scholars who both studied the effort and who were involved in the city reform that responded to it. It concludes that current law, transformative demographic change in the Valley, city reforms prompted by secession, and still lingering distrust of potential secession leaders, make such a breakaway unlikely twenty years later.

PART I: DECADES OF NO "FAIR SHARE"

Boland's generation of Valley secessionists built on the success of west San Fernando Valley business leaders who in the early 1960s found traction informally agitating for a breakup from the city.⁶ Fueled by complaints

⁴ Interview with Paula Boland, Nov. 17, 2021.

⁵ A secession effort in Hollywood, Measure H, also was defeated. It was motivated by similar reasons. Noah Grand, "Valley, Hollywood secession measures fail," *Daily Bruin*, Nov. 5, 2002, <https://dailybruin.com/2002/11/05/valley-hollywood-secession-meas>. The L.A. Harbor area's three-year effort to break away failed after a commission found it could not be on the ballot in 2002.

⁶ Tom Hogen-Esch and Martin Saiz, "An Anatomy of Defeat: Why San Fernando Valley Failed to Secede From Los Angeles," *California Policy Issues* (Nov. 2001): 49, https://www.csun.edu/sites/default/files/Anatomy_of_Defeat.pdf.

of lackluster city service, a lack of adequate political representation and the need for control over land development, members of the Valleywide Better Government Committee (VBGC) were among early agitators. They failed to bring in their east Valley counterparts. But the inequities they complained of caught the eye of then L.A. Mayor Sam Yorty, himself a resident of Studio City in the southeast Valley.⁷ Yorty's rise to power in the 1960s was fueled by northwest Valley residents like Boland — conservative, White homeowners with a united zeal for having more control over land-use policy and who longed for a suburban ideal.⁸ By the time Yorty came around, residents had long transformed the Valley from an agricultural hub. But as the population grew, they were determined to maintain a small-town community vibe within the great metropolis.⁹

By 1975, Boland, along with fellow west Valley business people — future L.A. City Councilmen Hal Bernson and Greig Smith — would pick up the secession mantle under the name of Committee Investigating Valley Independent City/County (CIVICC).

“We were working on the breakup in the middle 1970s,” Boland reflected. “We had meetings constantly. It was just a community of people trying to strategize about how we could maybe break up the Valley. With a million and half people we certainly were not getting our fair share.”¹⁰

But in contrast to their 1960s progenitors — even the right-leaning Yorty — Boland's group had major political momentum on its side.

The Prop. 13 Connection

The same sense of anger and alienation that fueled the Valley's middle-class property tax revolt in 1978, and ultimately pushed Proposition 13 to

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The first organized secession movement in the Valley dates back to the 1920s, but efforts picked up steam in the post-World War II boom. It galvanized over complaints about zoning, parking, traffic and services. Tom Hogen-Esch, “Urban Secession and the Politics of Growth: The Case of Los Angeles,” *Urban Affairs Review* 36, no. 6 (July 2001): 788–89, https://www.csun.edu/sites/default/files/Valley_Secession.pdf.

⁹ Raphael J. Sonenshein, *The City at Stake* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 73–74.

¹⁰ Interview with Boland, Nov. 17, 2021.



LOS ANGELES MAYOR JAMES HAHN LEADS AN L.A. UNITED DEMONSTRATION AGAINST VALLEY SECESSION IN THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY'S LAKE BALBOA NEIGHBORHOOD, OCTOBER 26, 2002. THE OPPOSITION, AS REPRESENTED BY THE "VALLEY CITYHOOD" SIGNS, ATTEMPTED TO DISRUPT THE MARCH.

Photo: Gary Leonard, Los Angeles Neighborhoods Collection / Los Angeles Public Library.

victory, was still lingering.¹¹ The movement for Prop. 13 had its start in the Valley — leaning on its homeowner groups for fundraising and political support. Its earliest backers included Boland. Bernson himself, the San Fernando Valley Republican allied with Boland on secession, was elected to the L.A. City Council at the height of the anti-tax fervor.¹² Like secession, that fervor was rooted in mistrust of government and a sense that the

¹¹ Statewide voters approved Proposition 13 in 1978. It amended the California Constitution to cap property taxes at 1 percent of a property's assessed value, and it effectively decreased taxes by fixing a property's assessed value to its original price, adjusted for inflation at a maximum annual rate of 2 percent. *Cal. Const.*, art. XIII A, §§ 1–7 (Tax Limitation), https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=CONS&article=XIII+A.

¹² Staff report, "Former L.A. City Councilman Hal Bernson dies at 89," *L.A. Daily News*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.dailynews.com/2020/07/21/former-l-a-city-councilman-hal-berkson-dies-at-89>.

region was not getting its fair share.¹³ A similar fervor was fueling campaigns against public school busing.¹⁴

Boland, a Granada Hills real estate broker, herself was a Prop. 13 activist in the west Valley. She even opened up her real estate office for anti-busing phone campaigns.¹⁵ It was here where the political lines that would persist throughout the secession battle of the late '90s and early 2000s were clearly drawn.

Both movements, anti-busing and anti-tax, were direct challenges to the political establishment at the time. It was an establishment led by then L.A. Mayor Tom Bradley, an African-American mayor whose rise to power was fueled by a coalition of African Americans, liberal Jews, and still relatively nascent but growing Latino and Asian populations. Bradley's liberal administration would form powerful alliances with unions and also around downtown redevelopment. But it was happening as conservative agitators, fighting a court-ordered school integration busing plan for the Valley and lobbying for Prop. 13, were also fighting Bradley's agenda — from civilian police oversight to bond measures.¹⁶

With conservative support at their backs, CIVICC — now a coalition spurred by Boland and Bernson, among other Valley leaders — was joining with the south and west Valley chambers of commerce, plotting out a vision that this time actually had a chance of succeeding.¹⁷

The Veto: L.A. Gets the Law Changed “in the Middle of the Night”

A loophole in state law offered an opening for secession that centered on the city of San Fernando, one of the few in the Valley — along with

¹³ Sharon Bernstein, “Secessionists Taking Their Cues from the Past,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 4, 2002, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-oct-04-me-prop-134-story.html>.

¹⁴ Howard Blume, “School busing and race tore L.A. apart in the 1970s. Now, Kamala Harris is reviving the debate,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-busing-schools-los-angeles-harris-biden-20190628-story.html>.

¹⁵ Doug Smith and Lisa Leff, “Boland Gaining Political Clout on Secession Drive,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 1996, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-05-12-mn-3338-story.html>.

¹⁶ Sonenshein, *The City at Stake*, 75.

¹⁷ In the 1940s, the City Council rejected a borough plan when a secession bill floated by a group of Northridge ranchers failed in the state legislature. *Ibid.*, 74.

Glendale and Burbank — that had not joined L.A. when the Valley was annexed in 1915.¹⁸

“We were going to go to the city of San Fernando and have them annex us,” Boland said of CIVICC’s “stealthy” plan.¹⁹ The idea was that by annexing the Valley, the city of San Fernando would allow part of it to secede.²⁰ San Fernando narrowly rejected the plan. But as secessionists have subsequently told it, other business interests essentially double-crossed CIVICC, trying to get the city of San Fernando to annex Granada Hills and Mission Hills — without the rest of the Valley.

“That’s the double-cross that hurt the movement more than anything else,” Bernson later recalled.²¹ It hurt because it got L.A. officials’ attention.

“Sacramento got wind of it. In the middle of the night, they went and made it impossible” to break away, said Boland. “That’s why we didn’t get it there right on the spot.”²² In 1978, with heavy lobbying from Bradley and The League of California Cities, L.A. got the state legislature to amend what was then known as the Municipal Reorganization Act. Sponsored by Assemblyman John Knox (D-Richmond), the legislation required the Valley secession proposal to be approved by the Los Angeles City Council before it could become a reality.

In itself, the “dark of the night” law would be a major barrier in municipal detachment and incorporation for the next twenty years, giving statutory power to the city of Los Angeles (or any other city) to unilaterally veto a breakaway. Just like that, under state law, the L.A. City Council could veto any secession, dooming the chances of secession — for the moment.

The Fight to Change the Law: State v. Local Control

The state’s intervention was a first glimpse at what would become a secession movement defined by the ability of city political actors to influence state government — and hence legislation. While L.A. won the first round

¹⁸ Staff report: “1915–1916: Annexation spurred growth, *L.A. Daily News*,” Oct. 31, 2010, <https://www.dailynews.com/2010/10/31/1915-1916-annexation-spurred-growth>.

¹⁹ Interview with Boland, Nov. 17, 2021.

²⁰ Hogen-Esch, “Urban Secession and the Politics of Growth,” 790–91.

²¹ Phil Willon, “Valley Secession Roots Go Back to the 1970s,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 16, 1998, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-aug-16-mn-13780-story.html>.

²² Interview with Boland, Nov. 17, 2021.

in the Legislature, west San Fernando Valley secession leaders were galvanized around a sense that “you couldn’t fight City Hall.”²³

“Our taxes were outrageous . . . and we were a million and half people, which is bigger than most cities,” Boland said. “We weren’t getting our fair share of anything. The mayor never even showed up. Bradley was a joke, if he even knew his way out here.”²⁴

Boland was echoing early studies commissioned by CIVICC, including a 17-page report coordinated by Jackson Mayers, an economics instructor at Valley College, which concluded that Valley residents contributed 40 percent of the city’s taxes and received only 15 percent of the city’s services.²⁵ While the study garnered its share of scholarly criticism, it was clear that the movement to change the law would not die — and Boland and her allies would not give up. Flashforward twelve years, and the same fervor that propelled Bernson into the L.A. City Council fueled Boland’s rise to the state Assembly in 1990, representing the northwest Valley. It’s in Sacramento where she would battle to tear down the very L.A. law that she and her allies sparked in the first place.

Boland’s battle was happening against a backdrop of a rapidly changing city of L.A. — and Valley — many saw in a state of crisis. It’s that perception that only propelled her legislation to secede.

By the 1990s, the Valley’s once powerful aerospace and manufacturing bases — which powered its residential boom — were giving way to a job market consolidating around immigrant labor and lower-skill jobs. By 1990, one-third of the Valley’s 1.7 million residents were foreign born; only half were Anglo. The “Mestizo Valley” was rising.²⁶

“The Valley looked less like a post-World War II bedroom suburb and more like a sprawling, economically and ethnically fragmented city unto itself.”²⁷ And the change was not easy.

²³ Smith and Leff, “*Boland*.”

²⁴ Interview with Boland, Nov. 17, 2021.

²⁵ Willon, “Valley Secession.”

²⁶ Joel Kotkin and Erika Ozuna, “The Changing Face of the San Fernando Valley,” Pepperdine University and the Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley, 2002, <https://publicpolicy.pepperdine.edu/davenport-institute/content/reports/changing-face.pdf>.

²⁷ Jean-Paul R. deGuzman, “Resisting Camelot: Race and Resistance to the San Fernando Valley Secession Movement,” *California History* 93, no. 3 (2016): 28–51.

Once Again, Secession Thwarted

In the foreground was Prop. 187 — the 1994 measure that aimed to prohibit undocumented immigrants from using public services. And the region was reeling from the civil unrest that came in the wake of the beating of Rodney King Jr. and the subsequent acquittal of LAPD officers who beat him during a traffic stop. No longer was the Valley not just getting its fair share, but civil unrest, rising crime, poverty and immigration were fueling a rejiggered argument for local control. That's why Boland thought she had political momentum going into the Senate vote in August of 1996.

"I had gone to all the Democrats up there and talked to them before I even presented the bill. They understood it. They knew where I was coming from. They knew I would never lie to them," she said. "I had the voters on the Democratic side in the Senate. We'd locked it up in the Assembly."²⁸

August 22, 1996: Vote fails. 19 to 18, and she needed 21.

Once again, Boland's secession drive ended with last-minute politics and legal maneuvering, over which Boland still appears indignant.

At the time, a nascent Valley group — composed of Van Nuys and Sherman Oaks homeowners, the Valley Industry and Commerce Association, the San Fernando Valley Association of Realtors — was meeting. They called themselves VOTE — or Valley Organized Together for Empowerment. Their aim was to mobilize voters in support of Boland's bill.²⁹

Knowing they needed key Democrats to support a change in the law, the group engaged with then state Senator Bill Lockyer, D-Hayward, who opposed Boland's bill. Lockyer — who would become known as the "villain" who engineered the defeat — had offered amendments that would add a requirement to study the cost implications of Los Angeles and the Valley breaking up. He wanted to know what the respective tax bases would be and how services would be allocated. "This is a complicated issue that requires a revamping of California urban policy," Lockyer would say

²⁸ Interview with Boland, Nov. 17, 2021.

²⁹ Kate Folmar, "Group Forms to Back Secession Bill's Passage," *Los Angeles Times*, May 30, 1996, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-05-30-me-9989-story.html>.

at the time. “It strikes me, given the issue’s complexity, that this bill is more public relations than policymaking.”³⁰

For Boland, it was the end of a six-year battle in the Assembly for Valley cityhood. Without Democrats on board, “nothing was possible.”³¹

But it marked the start of a whole new coalition aimed at changing the law to make it easier to secede. From here on out, the battle would more formally amplify the tensions between state and local control and the limits of “self determination.” And it would test the power and strength of coalitions in Los Angeles while giving rise to the power of a previously obscure state agency that would determine the fate of secession.

PART II: A NEW FIGHT, NEW WARRIORS, THE SHADOW OF TIEBOUT AND “RIGHTSIZING”

History of California’s Municipal Organization Law / The Birth of LAFCOs

The legal barriers that had stopped San Fernando Valley secession for so long were baked into what by the mid-1990s was California’s long-established but often obscure set of municipal reorganization laws. It was a law rooted in the municipal incorporation explosion that occurred throughout 1950s.

The law did not come without considerable tension over who would get to control municipal incorporation and how easy should it be.

Incorporations in California exploded in the ’50s. The state saw fifty new city incorporations, fueled by migration, a doubling of the state’s population over twenty years, and freeway construction. In Los Angeles County alone, ten new cities formed in the single year of 1957.³² A watershed moment for that explosion in L.A. County emerged when the city of Lakewood incorporated. The city of Long Beach might have annexed it, but supporters of incorporation realized a new city could afford to incorporate

³⁰ Greg Lucas, “San Fernando Valley Wants to, Like, Secede from L.A./Little support for legislator’s bill, however,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Aug. 19, 1996, <https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/SACRAMENTO-San-Fernando-Valley-Wants-to-Like-2969446.php>.

³¹ Sonenshein, *The City at Stake*, 75.

³² State of California, *Growth Within Bounds: Report of the Commission on Local Governance for the 21st Century* (Jan. 2000), <https://calafco.org/sites/default/files/resources/GrowthWithinBounds.pdf>.

if it continued to contract with the county for its municipal services. Ultimately, 60 percent of voters approved the incorporation. Dubbed “The Lakewood Plan,” it was advertised by Los Angeles County and the new City of Lakewood as a more affordable means to successfully incorporate.³³

But it was also a key moment for Sacramento, by then looking for a way to deal with growth and urban sprawl in a rapidly growing Southern California. At the time, even as independent districts were on the rise, no state or regional agency was regulating or reviewing the formation of municipalities. And there was a lack of coordination among districts in dealing with common problems.

“It was entirely up to the local government and the voters to decide when new governments or boundary changes were needed.”³⁴

By the 1960s, lawmakers were faced with clear tensions. On one hand, you could see the shadow of Charles Tiebout’s “Theory of Local Expenditures” infusing the explosion of new and smaller cities across Southern California — the argument that municipalities were the rational result of market preferences among “consumer-voters.”³⁵ Essentially, it was a free-market model that Tiebout and many afterward — including secession supporters — said “rightsizes” a local government between taxes and services based on the preferences of its residents.³⁶ For this school of thinkers, the explosion of smaller, independent cities was a positive, rather than a negative result of free choices — public choice.³⁷

On the other hand, many urban planners and social scientists were concerned about duplication of government functions across regions and social inequities arising from what were permissive state statutes.³⁸

³³ Ibid., 15.

³⁴ Ibid., 25.

³⁵ Charles M. Tiebout, A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures, *Journal of Political Economy* 64, no. 5 (Oct. 1956): 416–24, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1826343>.

³⁶ Ronald Oakerson and Shirley Svorny, “Rightsizing Los Angeles Government,” *The Independent Review* IX, no. 4 (Spring 2005): 516, <http://www.csun.edu/~vcecn007/publications/OakersonSvorny.pdf>.

³⁷ Sonenshein, *The City at Stake*, 81.

³⁸ Raphael J. Sonenshein and Tom Hogen-Esch, “Bringing the State (Government) Back in: Home Rule and the Politics of Secession in Los Angeles and New York City,” *Urban Affairs Review* 41, no. 4 (March 2006): 473, https://www.csun.edu/sites/default/files/LA_and_NY.pdf.

By 1959, then Governor Edmund G. Brown Sr. was concerned about “the lack of coordination and adequate planning” that “led to a multitude of overlapping, inefficient jurisdictional and service boundaries, and the premature conversion/loss of California’s agricultural and open-space lands.” In 1959, Brown appointed the Commission on Metropolitan Area Problems to study and make recommendations on the “misuse of land resources” and the growing complexity of local governmental jurisdictions.³⁹

The result was LAFCOs — local agency formation commissions. But it took compromise to get there. Just as the desire for municipal sovereignty was blanketing Southern California, there was considerable fidelity to Dillon’s Rule — the principle that local governments are creatures of the state. At first, state policymakers proposed a statewide commission that would oversee the process of incorporation, annexation and secession. But by 1963, state policymakers had worked out a compromise with local counties and cities: A LAFCO in each county. The agreement was fragile, but the new agencies were charged with reviewing and approving or disapproving proposals for incorporation, creation of special districts, and annexations. In reviewing these proposals, LAFCO was required to consider several factors, such as population, need for community services, and the effect of the formation or annexation on adjacent areas. After approval of a proposal by LAFCO, the affected jurisdiction would hold a protest hearing on the proposal and, if no majority protest existed, it would be put before the voters for approval or deemed approved if a vote was not required under the provisions of the statute.

By 1996 — as San Fernando Valley secession heated up — California’s legal framework for city incorporation was governed by the fusion of three laws rooted in the still relatively obscure LAFCOs: The Knox-Nisbet Act of 1963, which established local agency formation commissions (LAFCOs) with regulatory authority over local agency boundary changes; the District Reorganization Act of 1965 (DRA), which combined separate laws governing special district boundaries into a single law; and the Municipal Organization Act of 1977 (MORGA), which consolidated various laws on city incorporation and annexation into one law. MORGA also added legislative

³⁹ CALAFCO, *What is LAFCO’s History?*, The California Association of Local Agency Commissions, <https://calafco.org/lafco-law/faq/what-lafcos-history>.

intent language, which declared as state policy the encouragement of orderly growth and development of cities, the need for logical local agency formation, and the finding that a single governmental agency was better able to respond to community service needs. But LAFCOs had to consult three sets of laws to process different types of applications. In 1985 the Knox-Nisbet Act was renamed the Cortese-Knox Act, consolidating the laws into one act. The L.A. amendment that the city pushed through to save itself was part of MORGA. And it would stay that way until Valley VOTE picked up the cause for secession.

Valley VOTE/The Rise of a Coalition and Changing the Law

With the City Council veto law still embedded in the Cortese-Knox Act, Boland's loss marked the rise of Valley VOTE — an uncommon coalition in a city where up to that point business interests and conservatives had dominated the secession activists' ranks. A fragile alliance of homeowners associations and business associations emerged, led by Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association President Richard Close and business leader Jeff Brain. In contrast to previous secession attempts, it brought together HOAs and business on ground where they were often opposed: a "shared suburban land-use vision."⁴⁰ It was a vision that sought to protect single-family areas while creating high-end retail districts catering to middle-class tastes — and it would generate tax revenue. It was a vision that pushed poor residents and undesirable businesses to other areas.⁴¹ It still lamented lack of fair share and local control.⁴²

"But underneath it was much more about land-use," Hogen-Esch said.⁴³

Within a month after Boland's bill failed, the resurrected idea of secession grew into a coalition of 24 business groups and 17 homeowners

⁴⁰ Hogen-Esch, "Land Use in Los Angeles," 787.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² There is some scholarly disagreement on the message of "local control" in contrast to "fair share." Hogen-Esch and Saiz have posited that secessionists failed to embrace a larger vision of "multicultural suburbia." But Michan Andrew Connor posits that they were able to tap larger, more expansive minority partners in the coalition, by adopting "color-blind rhetoric." See note 69 below, Connor, "Color-Blind Rhetoric," 48–64.

⁴³ Interview with Tom Hogen-Esch, Nov. 8, 2021.

associations that supported VOTE. But they still needed a new law that would do away with the L.A. City Council veto.

Path to Changing the Law: The Bipartisan Alliance

By 1996, there had been few major changes to state incorporation law.⁴⁴ LAFCOs were obscure agencies, made up mainly of a hodgepodge of political appointees from local cities and counties dealing with relatively minor boundary changes.⁴⁵ The first major change to the law came in 1992, with the passage of the “revenue neutrality” provision. It required that in a secession, neither area could be financially harmed.⁴⁶

Lockyer, eyeing a run for state attorney general, apparently didn’t want to be the villain. Convinced state law had to be reformed, he’d been working with Brain and Close on how to craft a kind of compromise bill. He still wanted a citywide vote, and secessionists still embodied the “local control” angst of Boland’s bill, which was revived by her successor, Assemblyman Tom McClintock (R-Granada Hills).

Neither side was going to get what they wanted without a compromise. Nor was the city of L.A. going to walk away easily from the now twenty-year-old veto provision it had originally pushed into the law.

In 1997 — spurred by the San Fernando Valley secession movement — Assemblyman Robert Hertzberg, a key Democrat who represented Sherman Oaks, crafted a compromise.⁴⁷ It would become the next major change in state law, governing “special reorganizations.” The city of L.A.

⁴⁴ *Growth Within Bounds*.

⁴⁵ Sue Fox, “LAFCO feels heat from all sides,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 2002, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-may-21-me-method21-story.html>.

⁴⁶ *Growth Within Bounds*, 27.

⁴⁷ The Valley VOTE secession movement was happening as political power in L.A. was shifting to the Valley. Hertzberg, who would become the speaker of the Assembly in 2000, “provided legitimacy to the idea of lowering the state’s threshold for secession.” (Sonenshein and Hogen-Esch, 477). But even as Wilson signed his and McClintock’s legislation, Hertzberg noted . . . he wasn’t a secessionist. What he was interested in was reforming L.A.’s charter. Amid the push for secession was a concurrent push for reforming L.A.’s city charter that became more intense as secession got closer to becoming reality. Moreover, as Sonenshein and Hogen-Esch note, the Valley became the centerpiece of Richard Riordan’s 1993 and 1997 mayoral campaigns, as well James Hahn’s victory in 2001. Hertzberg himself could see the emerging influence of the Valley on the horizon.

would join, on three conditions: 1) that the removal of the council veto applied to all California cities, 2) that a majority vote of both the city as a whole and the area seeking separation was required, and 3) that secession had no negative fiscal impact on the remaining city.⁴⁸ It broke the legal “logjam.”⁴⁹

The result — The Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act — would be the next major change to state law regarding incorporations. It eliminated the city’s unilateral veto power and replaced it with the requirements that secessions win concurrent majorities city-wide (including the seceding areas) and in the seceding area itself. It also defined “special reorganization” — which up to then was sparsely mentioned in state law, and which defined a whole new process for the obscure LAFCOs.⁵⁰ Moreover, any breakaway that did cause harm would have to be made whole by payments from the new city to the remaining city.⁵¹

But in a way, Governor Pete Wilson faced a tension similar to that faced by Brown back in the 1960s. This time the tension was over who gets to claim “home rule” — the urban core — cities like Los Angeles — or territories who want to break away and start their own city.

Opponents of the bill — like the League of California Cities — argued that elimination of the veto power would once again give rise to an exodus from urban cores — leading to the same kind of explosion in the 1950s that state law aimed to control.

But by then, the shadow of Tiebout’s theory had become a rationale that made it from the courts to state law. You could see it emerge in some form in foundational reorganization cases.⁵² Proponents saw it as a fundamental

⁴⁸ Sonenshein, *The City at Stake*, 77.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² See *Bd. of Supervisors v. Loc. Agency Formation Com.*, 3 Cal. 4th 903, 924 (1992), where the Court upholds the constitutionality of the Cortese-Knox Local Government Reorganization Act against Equal Protection claims that it precluded county residents from voting to confirm a municipal incorporation unless they lived in the territory to be incorporated. “To frustrate the endeavor of individuals to fix the unit of their local governance . . . would be to stifle that self-determination. The seeds of democracy lay in the Greek city-state; we would be reluctant to stay the fruition of that democratic expression in the city of today. Neither the state nor federal Constitution sanctions such negation”

right of self-determination, and, conjuring Tiebout's language, the ability of residents — "consumer-voters" to vote with their feet. "This is Independence Day come in October," McClintock said at the bill-signing. "It's common in history for people to lose power to the government. It's a rare instance when government loses power to the people."⁵³

With the stroke of Governor Wilson's pen, the threshold for secession was lowered, and LAFCOs would play a huge role in whether a city could secede.⁵⁴

In assessing "home rule" in Los Angeles and New York city, Sonenshein and Hogen-Esch argue that secessionists in both cities were successfully "leapfrogging" traditional legal and political constraints within their cities. They expanded "the scope of the conflict" by forming political coalitions that allied with state leaders. In the end, the power of the city itself was diluted, and "Dillon's Rule" still casts a shadow over municipal self-determination.⁵⁵ That in itself was a huge victory.

The Battle Had Just Begun

Even with the legal change in place, as Richard Close would say, it was just the beginning. An epic battle for the future of L.A. ensued over the next five years — underpinned by arguments over local control for the Valley,⁵⁶

⁵³ Nancy Hill-Holtzman, "Governor Signs Secession Bill," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 13, 1997, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1997-oct-13-mn-42262-story.html>.

⁵⁴ Many other political chips were in the right places to make this happen. And they would be advantageous as the battle to get secession onto the ballot ensued. Larry J. Calemine, an early member with Boland of CIVICC, was executive officer of the nine-member LAFCO in Los Angeles — five years as executive officer and five years as alternate commissioner. Another alternate commissioner was Richard Close of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association. And while the city of L.A., by law, had only one pick for the board, its one commissioner was Hal Bernson, who worked tirelessly with Boland back in the '70s on secession. Bernson had been at LAFCO for several years at that point. Citizens Economy Efficiency Commission, LA County, Presentation by Larry Calemine, <http://eec.lacounty.gov/Portals/EEC/Presentations/2000/10-05-00percent20Presentation.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Sonenshein and Hogen-Esch, 488.

⁵⁶ On December 9, 1999, Valley VOTE submitted roughly 205,000 signatures to LAFCO. On March 15, LAFCO announced that enough signatures had been validated to meet the 25 percent threshold (132,000). Hogen-Esch and Saiz, "Why the Valley Failed to Secede," 2001.

versus unifying control of the city of L.A.⁵⁷ Valley VOTE's goal was to get the question of Valley cityhood onto the November 2002 ballot. LAFCO — whose role became amplified through the legal reform — would play a much larger role than it ever had as dueling cost estimates and feasibility reports volleyed back and forth.⁵⁸ Secessionists would double down on the rightsizing arguments as a large anti-secession coalition of unions, politicians, labor and downtown business leaders cascaded across the city.⁵⁹ In 2002, LAFCO approved the San Fernando Valley Proposal for Special Reorganization. Voters would have a say. Ballot Measure F was scheduled for the fall 2002 election, giving Los Angeles residents the opportunity to vote on the issue. They'd be able to name the new city, too. "Camelot," was among the potential names.

Voters: The Final Say

On November 5, 2002, Los Angeles voters defeated secession. In the San Fernando Valley, it was close — 50.7 percent (136,737) yes and 49.3 percent (132,831) no. But in the rest of the L.A., it was a landslide against — 19.5 percent (68,813) yes and 80.5 percent (283,914) no. Citywide, it was 33 percent yes to 67 percent no. There would be no Valley mayor, and the 14 Valley council seats designated by LAFCO would not happen.

The name "San Fernando Valley" easily won as the new city's name — beating "Camelot" and "Rancho San Fernando." Boland, who was running

⁵⁷ The LAFCO comprehensive financial study was the biggest such study it had ever undertaken by that point, with the state legislature allocating \$1 million for the study. Leah Marcal and Shirley Svorny, "Support for Municipal Detachment," *Urban Affairs Review* 36, no. 1 (Sept. 2000): 94, <http://www.csun.edu/~vcecn007/publications/SupportForMunicipalDetachment.pdf>. Extensive reports from Valley VOTE and the city of L.A. would ensue. LAFCO decided a new Valley city's design should be akin to a contract city, where the Valley would essentially hire the city of L.A. to provide municipal services for a year, and, to compensate L.A. for lost tax revenue, the Valley would have to pay an "alimony payment" — with estimates ranging from \$56 million to the city's number of \$153.8 million.

⁵⁸ One city report, in 2001, raised issues over the legality of the authority a Valley city would have to collect tax revenues and share in water and power service at existing rates. Patrick McGreevy, "City Report Says Secession Not Viable," *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 2001.

⁵⁹ Outgoing L.A. Mayor Richard Riordan and incoming Mayor James Hahn both opposed secession.

for the northwest Valley council seat also won easily. But it was a moot point. Despite the mammoth effort to change the law, the result was that the giant city of L.A. would remain intact.

A Huge Victory in Itself, but It Could Have Been More . . .

Despite losing at the ballot box, secessionists had achieved a mammoth victory in changing the law. Despite being far outspent financially and “facing enemies on all sides” — including a downtown establishment coalition highly organized against — they were able to go beyond local coalitions to include state legislators, who built a bipartisan alliance to lower the legal threshold of secession. Moreover, they shaped the state commission that was tasked with studying fiscal feasibility and whether breakaways should go to the electorate.⁶⁰

“Given all the constraints, and the difficulties of it, they made a heck of a run at it,” Sonenshein said.⁶¹

Hogen-Esch echoes Sonenshein: “They rewrote local boundary change law that had been in place since the 1960s It’s amazing what they were able to accomplish.”⁶² In fact, the results in the Valley reflect how close the effort came to why that change mattered. If secessionists had created a broader coalition, it might very well have changed the result — at least in the Valley, and might have left them with more political clout than they had. That’s because the depth of support was surprisingly strong in much of the Valley.

In 82 percent of the 685 Valley precincts, Measure F garnered more than 40 percent support.⁶³ It was soundly defeated in only five heavily Latino northeast Valley districts, where Latino union and political leaders had waged robust campaigns against it. It also failed in heavily liberal

⁶⁰ It was also the first time that secession has been presented in the context of governmental reform, rather than a series of suburban complaints. Sonenshein, *The City at Stake*, 80.

⁶¹ Interview with Raphael Sonenshein, Nov. 18, 2021.

⁶² Interview with Hogen-Esch, Nov. 8, 2021.

⁶³ Tom Hogen-Esch, “Elite and Electoral Coalitions: An Analysis of the Secession Campaign in Los Angeles,” Paper presented at 2003 Western Political Science Association Meeting, Denver (April 2002), 17, https://www.csun.edu/sites/default/files/Elite_and_Electoral_Coalitions.pdf.

and Jewish Studio City and Sherman Oaks.⁶⁴ Hogen-Esch noted that, had a more “diverse elite coalition emerged within the Valley, particularly among Latino and Jewish groups, unions and the Democratic Party, the results may have been quite different.”⁶⁵ Indeed. As Sonenshein notes, the Valley was included in the city’s tally of votes. So theoretically, a hugely enthusiastic pro-secession Valley turnout could have overcome the citywide vote.⁶⁶

But the movement “never really incorporated those growing areas of the San Fernando Valley” where L.A. city services were highly valued, he added.⁶⁷

Not all agree — including Boland and Close, both of whom say they were mindful of embracing communities outside of White, home-owning Valley-ites.

“It’s not true,” Boland said.⁶⁸ “It was to be abundantly fair, to have the east side of the Valley not feel isolated whatsoever,” she added, remembering the drawing up of district maps for the new city. Scholars have disagreed on the extent to which secessionists missed the opportunity to build a larger tent for their movement.

Michan Andrew Connor argues that Valley activists did craft a “color-blind rhetoric” of “local control” and community empowerment that won Latino support.⁶⁹

But Jean-Paul R. deGuzman pushes back, arguing that secessionists underestimated the extent to which Latinos, Blacks and Asian Americans in the Valley saw their fates inextricably linked to the rest of Los Angeles.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Interview with Sonenshein, Nov. 18, 2021.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Interview with Boland, Nov. 17, 2021.

⁶⁹ Michan Andrew Connor, “These Communities Have the Most to Gain from Valley Cityhood: Color-Blind Rhetoric of Urban Secession in Los Angeles, 1996–2002,” *Journal of Urban History* 40 (2014): 48, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274635306_These_Communities_Have_the_Most_to_Gain_from_Valley_Cityhood_Color-Blind_Rhetoric_of_Urban_Secession_in_Los_Angeles_1996-2002.

⁷⁰ deGuzman, “Resisting Camelot,” 29.

Twenty years later, this leads to the question of whether this matters — as L.A. and the Valley grow and change — and whether conditions are ripe for a new secession attempt to take root.

PART III: COULD IT STILL HAPPEN?

When it came to secession, Richard Close spoke like a man on a mission.⁷¹ Until his death in early 2022, he continued to head the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association, which nearly twenty years after the secession ballot box loss, remains a powerful force among Los Angeles interest groups.⁷²

The angst of twenty years ago is still there — along with the factors that fueled a massive movement. “Right now the Valley represents only about a third of the City Council, so two-thirds of the decisionmakers do not live in the San Fernando Valley,” he said. “That’s dangerous and it’s not fair to the residents of the San Fernando Valley. That was the argument then, and that was the argument now.”⁷³

Yes. Secession could still happen, he said.

But could it?

Ironically, the very law that his coalition of homeowners and business groups brokered, to lower the secession threshold is the very law that would have to be struck down, Close said — at least the part where the whole city gets to vote.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Close passed away not long after I spoke with him. Dakota Smith, “Richard Close, leader of Valley secession movement, dies at 77,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 31, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-01-31/richard-close-sherman-oaks-homeowners-association-dies>; Elizabeth Chou, “Richard Close, influential San Fernando Valley political player, dies at age 77,” *L.A. Daily News*, Jan. 31, 2022, <https://www.dailynews.com/2022/01/31/richard-close-influential-san-fernando-valley-political-player-dies-at-age-77>.

⁷² Elizabeth Chou, “Homeless housing proposal has some worried in Sherman Oaks,” *L.A. Daily News*, Aug. 24, 2018. <https://www.dailynews.com/2018/08/24/homeless-housing-proposal-has-some-worried-in-sherman-oaks>; Jay Caspian Kang, “How Homeowners Associations Get Their Way in California,” *New York Times*, Oct. 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/14/opinion/california-housing-renters.html>.

⁷³ Interview with Richard Close, Nov. 9, 2021.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

“When we got started, state law gave the City Council the authority to prevent any Valley cityhood. We were able to get that law changed. And it now provides that if the Valley majority and the whole city votes for secession, then it happens. One of the first things we need to do in a new movement is to convince the Legislature to eliminate that second hurdle,” he said.⁷⁵ But that would not be easy today.

On the legal front, a movement today would need to have allies in Sacramento who would change the law — much like they did in 1997 — and a governor who would sign that bill. Wilson, the governor who signed the compromise bill that eliminated L.A.’s veto power, had long been attuned to the wishes of secessionists. After all, they helped elect him. And voter discontent was strong twenty years ago. It’s not clear that’s the case now — at least to push through a law that would eliminate L.A. voters’ voice.

“They would have to go back up to Sacramento and find some way to lower the threshold for secession, and I just don’t see that happening in Sacramento, coming out of a two-thirds Democratic-controlled Legislature,” Hogen-Esch noted.⁷⁶

Moreover, what has been clear over nearly fifty years of California state incorporation law is that “special reorganization,” despite lowering the threshold for secession, is still an uphill climb in comparison to municipal incorporation.

“A secession is not supposed to be easy,” Sonenshein said.⁷⁷ This is not like a referendum. Or a proposition on the ballot. This isn’t like putting in a bond measure for mass transportation. This is breaking up the second largest city in the country. Cracking it right down the middle and saying we’ll figure out how to distribute the assets later on. “If a city can break up because people in an area just want to get out, that’s a pretty hard way to run a city. Basically, the cities would have breakups nonstop.”

Moreover, as Sonenshein and Hogen-Esch have observed, it tweaks the angle on the debate between public choice and collective goods theory. Secession is different from the traditional issue of movement between cities, because the issue is “no longer a question of whether there should be many

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Interview with Hogen-Esch, Nov. 8, 2021.

⁷⁷ Interview with Sonenshein, Nov. 18, 2021.

cities available so that dissatisfied city residents can opt out and move away. It is about whether big cities themselves should even exist.”⁷⁸

Framing in such terms makes it hard to imagine that parts of contemporary L.A. would seek a breakup.

The Power of Reform in Response to Secession

The secession movement itself spurred reforms that in theory brought downtown L.A. government closer to once disconnected neighborhoods. This in itself could make secession less likely.

“Charter reform [in L.A.] was a direct response to secession,” said Sonenshein, who between 1997 and 1999 was executive director of the City of Los Angeles Charter Reform Commission.⁷⁹ “I mean, there were other fish being fried like the power of the mayor and stuff like that. But the creation of the neighborhood councils was a direct response to secession. After that, I think what you started to see was a more sophisticated sense at City Hall that they needed to be more attentive to the San Fernando Valley both politically and in terms of services. In that sense, you could say the secession movement shook some things loose.”

It was secession that provided the spark that when fused with then Mayor Richard Riordan’s own desire for more formal authority, provided the energy for charter change that for some years had been simmering.⁸⁰ Faced with the breakup of the great metropolis, voters by a 60 percent majority passed a new charter on June 8, 1999, the first comprehensive charter revision in twenty-five years.⁸¹ The new charter’s Section 900 created a system of Neighborhood Councils,⁸² advisory boards that gave residents a public forum on issues in communities from Chatsworth to San Pedro. Their power was not binding, but the goal was that they “include representatives of the many diverse interests in communities and . . . have an

⁷⁸ Sonenshein, *The City at Stake*, 81.

⁷⁹ Interview with Sonenshein, Nov. 18, 2021.

⁸⁰ Sonenshein, *The City at Stake*, 57–71.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² The neighborhood councils have grown to a system of 99, each serving about 40,000 people on issues including development, homelessness and emergency preparedness. Thirty-four of them are in the Valley. City of Los Angeles, <https://www.lacity.org/government/popular-information/neighborhood-councils>.

advisory role on issues of concern to the neighborhood.”⁸³ The revisions also created area planning commissions, quasi-judicial bodies with power to make determinations and recommend zone changes or similar matters referred to them.⁸⁴ “The Neighborhood Councils have made a difference,” Hogen-Esch said. “There’s greater possibility for participation. The regional planning commissions probably have some die-hard followers who otherwise might be frustrated by the long commutes to L.A.” But others are less certain that L.A. city reforms have worked.

“Right now, who are making the decisions?” Close lamented.⁸⁵ Two-thirds of the decisionmakers are outside the Valley. They’ve never heard of these areas. If I represent San Pedro, why would I care about Northridge? But if we had a city council made up of Valley residents, these issues would be decided by Valley voters.”

With regard to neighborhood councils, Close bemoaned the lack of any binding power. Boland sees neighborhood and regional commissions as ineffective, plagued by low voter turnout, low participation and led by “wannabes.”⁸⁶

Still, with such reform, city officials had something they could point to, to offer some sense of government responsiveness — a reason secession was not necessary.⁸⁷

The Power of Change

The Valley is also a different place than it was 20 years ago. The demographic landscape that was fertile ground for secessions decades ago is waning.

“That revolt was strongest among homeowners, White voters and among conservative voters, who don’t represent the majority of the Valley,” Sonenshein said.⁸⁸

⁸³ Los Angeles Charter, art. IX, https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/los_angeles/latest/laac/0-0-0-3722.

⁸⁴ City of Los Angeles, Department of City Planning, “Area Planning Commissions,” (Jan. 22, 2022), <https://www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=da2e20211f8c4c2ca94a6c49e0b5e091>.

⁸⁵ Interview with Close, Nov. 9, 2021.

⁸⁶ Interview with Boland, Nov. 17, 2021.

⁸⁷ Sonenshein and Hogen-Esch, “Politics of Secession,” 478.

⁸⁸ Interview with Sonenshein, Nov. 18, 2021.

As of the 2020 Census, 762,316 — 41.5 percent — of the Valley's 1.84 million residents are Latino — near parity with 834,146 Whites in the region.⁸⁹ In 1990, when Boland took office in the state Assembly with a goal of breaking the Valley away, 56 percent of the population was White and Latinos comprised 32 percent of Valley residents. Today, 45.4 percent of the Valley is White.

With the change came profound political shifts — particularly in the northwest Valley, where movements like Prop. 13 and secession drew much of their support.

In 2019 — following the departure of L.A. City Councilman Mitch Englander — a race for City Council's northwest Valley seat pitted progressive Loraine Lundquist against John Lee, the presumed heir apparent to the succession of right-leaning elected officials from what was known as the city's most conservative seat. But the race was exceedingly close. In the runoff election, the final tally separated the candidates by only 50 votes. Lee would go on to win the seat in the general election, but for many observers it signaled that the politics of the northwest Valley — Porter Ranch, Northridge, Granada Hills, West Hills and parts of North Hills and Reseda — were changing.

Since 2000, the number of Republicans in the district has dropped from 37 percent of registered voters to 24 percent in 2018, while Democrats remained around 44 percent of voters.⁹⁰

The Power of History

History suggests that secession is unlikely, though it leaves the door open.

In 1976 and 1978, the northern L.A. County communities of Saugus, Agua Dulce, Newhall, and Canyon Country tried to break away into Canyon County I and Canyon County II. In 1977, El Segundo and Hermosa Beach tried to break away into South Bay County and Peninsula County. And there were similar attempts in Santa Barbara, Fresno, and San

⁸⁹ United States Census Bureau, San Fernando Valley CCD, Los Angeles County, California (2020 Decennial Census), <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/profile?g=0600000US0603792785>.

⁹⁰ Olga Grigoryants, "John Lee takes lead in race to represent Council District 12 and may elude runoff," *L.A. Daily News*, Mar. 3, 2020, <https://www.dailynews.com/2020/03/03/john-lee-takes-early-lead-in-race-to-represent-council-district-12>.

Bernardino counties.⁹¹ The attempts had “remarkably similar patterns”:⁹² better representation, expanded local control over land-use and stronger services at lower tax rates. Each one got to a vote — what Hogen-Esch noted was an achievement in itself and shows such issues fuel the effort to bring attempted secessions to a vote. But in each case at the county level, a concurrent majority was needed. Voters countywide rejected the measures, in effect illustrating their fear of a loss of tax base.⁹³ This shows that while a successful secession is formidable, it’s not out of the realm of possibility for the Valley, where so much of the city’s voting power resides.⁹⁴

The Power of Trust

Future secessionists would need to find ways to pierce layers of distrust among communities of color to expand their coalition and voting strength. As it is, many Latinos in the Valley’s northeast area, despite reasons for being an agreeable audience for the idea of secession, have worked within the city’s current system to invest in leaders from the area. By 2000, Latinos — who by then were 42 percent of the Valley’s population⁹⁵ — were beginning to see a generation of Latino leaders come onto the scene. Richard Alarcon had gone from L.A. city councilman, representing the Valley’s 7th District and its heavily Latino population in the northeast San Fernando Valley, to state senator. Alex Padilla would follow in Alarcon’s footsteps in the L.A. City Council, ultimately becoming the council’s first Latino president (and later U.S. Senator). Since 2013, Nury Martinez has represented the area — and was elected City Council president in 2019. For years, Latino Valley leaders had been battling for the day when they had some representation downtown at City Hall. That battle was rooted in the northeast San Fernando Valley, where Latinos had good reason for being open to arguments from secessionists.⁹⁶ By the end of the twentieth century, Pacoima had the highest unemployment

⁹¹ Hogen-Esch and Saiz, “An Anatomy of Defeat,” 41.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ deGuzman, “Resisting Camelot,” 30.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

rate in the San Fernando Valley, at 9.6 percent.⁹⁷ More than 30 percent of Pacoimans fell under the poverty line. Housing shortages, healthcare inequities that blanketed the northeast Valley, and a crumbling infrastructure were all reasons why many organizers in the Valley decried the northeast Valley as “nothing more than a ‘forgotten stepchild.’”⁹⁸

But many saw those conditions as a result of the actions of the very generation who were leading the secession. Irene Tovar, then a community organizer who as head of the Latin American Civic Association opposed the secession, like Boland grew up in the Valley, but in a very different part: Pacoima. She pointed to “two Valleys” in the 1950s and 1960s — “There was a northeast Valley and the west Valley and the west Valley was White Valley.”

“We knew if there was a new city, the leadership that was advocating for secession were the ones who never helped us,” Tovar said.⁹⁹ They were the ones who segregated us. They were against the things we represented as a community. Remember, there had been two Valleys that would have been reinforced more because of their leadership. We’d have a better chance of succeeding in a city of Los Angeles like it is now versus a Valley city. The leadership, . . . we knew who they were. They dominated its politics, its social life, its cultural life. And we were left out of that — the opportunity for betterment for our community. I was very outspoken against it.”¹⁰⁰ She still is.

“It’s almost the same issues today,” she said.¹⁰¹ “We’d still be left with a city that has a lot of poverty. A lot of homeless. It would reinforce poverty.”

Any movement would have to disassociate itself from a difficult past that prompted much distrust among minority–majority populations and find ways to gain trust.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Interview with Irene Tovar, Nov. 16, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ It was Tovar, then the head of the Latin American Civic Association, who said just before a meeting on Valley secession in 1999 that “there are racial implications to secession. . . . We’re not just going to follow like sheep.” Miguel Bustillo, Latino Activists Planning Summit on Secession, *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 3, 1998.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Tovar, Nov. 16, 2021.

CONCLUSION

Policymakers still reference the Valley's distinctiveness from the rest of L.A. when pushing for change at city and county levels. The Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association — and Close — loomed large in the city's recent fractious redistricting debate. Even on the county redistricting level, L.A. City Councilman Paul Krekorian made an eleventh-hour plea to the redistricting commission to keep the Valley “whole” in one supervisorial district. The commission was reapportioning boundaries based on population change in the 2020 U.S. Census. He told the commission:

The Valley has for the last century had a distinctive identity, and today we have distinctive issues around public transportation planning, air quality, water quality, public health, housing — all issues that the Valley as a whole has common interests in, and yet we don't have any guarantee that a resident of the Valley, despite having 2 million people living here, will have a representative on the Board of Supervisors or on the Metro board.¹⁰²

Hogen-Esch suggests that a new secession movement could resurface. “This is something that definitely rears its head every generation or two,” he said. But taking hold today will be a challenge. Not only will this group need to change the law. It will have to broaden itself.

“If there's a reincarnation of Valley secession it will have to be from a whole broad spectrum of Valley interest groups.”¹⁰³

Paula Boland, still living in the Valley, continues to lament the lack of “fair share.” For Boland, the Valley may have lost its chance.

“You don't have the passion we had over twenty years ago.¹⁰⁴ There was a cohesiveness in the Valley — there was an understanding,” she said. “People might say they want to do it, but I don't see the commitment that there would ever be enough people to get together and work, and believe in it and do it.”

¹⁰² Ryan Carter, “LA County Redistricting: Map debate takes an 11th-hour turn for San Fernando Valley,” *L.A. Daily News*, Dec. 4, 2021, <https://www.dailynews.com/2021/12/04/la-county-redistricting-map-debate-takes-an-11th-hour-turn-for-san-fernando-valley>.

¹⁰³ Interview with Hogen-Esch, Nov. 8, 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Boland, Nov. 17, 2021.

Still, the movement changed the law enough to make secession at least a possibility, which in itself was a significant victory. If a movement did take root today, a coalition would have to emerge able to circumvent an exclusionary history, and engage and neutralize coalitions set up to fight secession. It would also have to be broad enough to negotiate with Sacramento legislators to change the law of concurrent majorities. Given reform that has taken place in L.A., and lingering distrust within minority communities, that kind of cohesion is not likely.

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