



The Scalpel Squad

The people, forces and money behind the latest plan to cut up L.A.

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As Angelenos contemplate civic surgery this fall, two questions are in order: Just who are these North-of-Mulholland crabgrass populists pushing secession, and what do they really want?

Valley Voters Organized Toward Empowerment

(VOTE), the noisy homeowner-business coalition behind the breakaway plot, officially formed in 1996. But leading members of the group have deep roots in three decades of Valley political crusades.

The secessionists might like to be portrayed as suburban Minutemen fighting a downtown colonial tyranny, but their actual political pedigree is much less inspiring. Scratch one of the leaders of today's secession movement and underneath you likely will find a recycled militant of the emotion- and race-charged battles to pass Proposition 13 in 1978 and to oppose school-busing integration plans. And some members go back to the failed secession attempt of the 1970s, when the Committee Investigating Valley Independent CityCounty (CIVICC), led by Valley Councilman Hal Bernson, tried to break off only the most-affluent sections of the San Fernando Valley from L.A.

Consider Paula Boland, a conservative Valley real-estate agent who made her political bones in the anti-tax and anti-busing movements of the 1970s. She inadvertently jump-started Valley VOTE in 1996, when, as a state assemblywoman, she tried to overturn a state law that gave the Los Angeles City Council veto power over any voter-approved secession.

Boland's bill failed, but not before attracting the attention of real-estate consultant Jeff Brain, who offered to drum up community support for Boland's legislation. Richard Close, an attorney and president of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association for more than 25 years, also saw an opening. He teamed up with a Woodland Hills attorney named Bob Scott, another CIVICC veteran, and convened a small meeting of Valley business people and representatives of homeowners associations that led to the formation of Valley VOTE in 1996.

Close had also been a leader in the Proposition 13 fight and in BusStop and figured that a homeowner-business alliance might be the best way to enlist bipartisan support for a new



secession movement. What he came up with is Valley VOTE, a political anomaly made of often competing political interests. It is a mongrel mix of business types, who have an eye on building projects on prized spots in the Valley, and NIMBY-ish homeowner groups, which loathe the development that has smothered their neighborhoods.

Given such an ideology steeped in school-integration and property-tax fights, it's easy to conclude that the breakaway movement is racially and class-driven (even though the Valley today is 59 percent nonwhite). "There's a tendency to look at Valley secession as wholesale white flight," says Tom Hogen-Esch, an urban-studies professor at California State University, Northridge. "There are those aspects, but it's too simplistic to say that it's simply that." Secessionist forces say they share a craving for local control and their own identity, and suffer from a long-festering sense of being snubbed by downtown.

USC legal scholar Erwin Chemerinsky agrees that the secessionist impulse is complex, but thinks race still underlies the impulse of some white voters, though many nonwhite voters now support breaking up the city. "Valley secession, if you trace it back to the 1970s, was West Valley secession, but that became politically unviable because it was too racist," he says, referring to CIVICC's plan to split off the west Valley but leave behind the Mexican-American and black populations in the east Valley. Today, the new Valley City would be 43 percent Latino, 9 percent Asian, 4 percent black and 41 percent white. Los Angeles is 40 percent Latino, with other minorities making up another 24 percent.

Larry Levine, a Valley resident and political consultant who volunteers with the anti-secession group One Los Angeles, thinks race played a major role 30 years ago, but "that doesn't hold up now." Valley VOTE's leadership is "old, graying, white Republican men," laughs Levine. Now it's about money, land rights, control and power. He points out that most Valley VOTE leaders are involved in real estate. VOTE leader Jeff Brain is a broker; Close's Santa Monica--based law firm, Gilchrist & Rutter, does real estate law.

Herbert Boeckmann II, who owns Galpin Motors, one of the biggest businesses in the Valley, has bankrolled Valley VOTE tactics behind the scenes, contributing \$25,000 of his own money and \$20,000 from his car dealership. He's also the most unabashedly ideological and conservative of the secessionists, a former California vice-chairman of right-wing televangelist Pat Robertson's 1988 presidential campaign, and a contributor to the Christian Coalition.

"Boeckmann views L.A. as captured by liberals, so if he separates off the Valley, he can have a right-wing paradise," where he's a major player, says Mark Siegel, a Valley resident. L.A. attorney and civic activist Connie Rice wonders about the financial incentives that drive someone like Boeckmann. "As a businessman, his power would be enormously magnified. He could own half that new City Council," she says.

Valley VOTE's two leaders are Richard Close, chairman, who represents homeowners' associations, and Jeff Brain, president, who represents business interests.

Richard Close

The Pacific Ocean is across the street from the law offices of Gilchrist & Rutter in Santa Monica,

where Richard Close is a real estate attorney. He's sitting in the sixth-floor conference room, pausing a lot between questions about why he's so intent on breaking up the nation's second largest city.

In 1978, the world's property-tax-cut champion gave Close his big start in community organizing. "Howard Jarvis was a very charismatic person, but he really didn't have a full grasp of all the facts," Close explains. "I was the young attorney who maybe didn't have the charisma, but had the information." Close became the co-chair of the Proposition 13 campaign.

Close seems most at home when he's running a meeting of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association (SOHA). He comes alive with smiles and witticisms. He's been association president for 25 years. "I can't find anyone else to take it," he shrugs. And why should he? SOHA is the veritable mother of all L.A.-area homeowner groups, the virtual Mecca of Valley homeowner fundamentalism -- and votes.

He is well aware of the Valley's disproportionate share of the citywide electorate; he estimates it to be as high as 51 percent. The huge number gives secessionists a good advantage, and it makes his move last year to win over reluctant politicians to agree to study secession now appear almost brilliant. "Isn't that what ultimately moved the process forward?" I asked him. Close, after much silence, almost giggled at the political hat trick he pulled off. "Oh. Oh," he says, as if figuring it out for the first time. "I guess you're right."

Mark Siegel, a Valley resident and political consultant, first met Close as Prop. 13 gathered steam in the mid-'70s. "There were a lot of fanatical senior citizens, right-wingers -- and Richard. He was always the most articulate of the group, better at explaining the technical side. He's low-key as a personality."

Close's critics blast him for complaining about a lack of public services in the Valley given his key role on Prop. 13 -- a measure estimated to have shorn California of \$100 billion in public revenues since 1978. "He's made a professional career out of saying no and taking people down the toilet with him," fumes one. "Look at what a27 happened to the city and the schools after Prop. 13."

Close has continued to lead the charge against city bond measures, most recently Proposition F in 2000, a \$532 million measure to repair old fire stations and animal shelters and build new ones.

"He does say no a lot," agrees Siegel. "He was one of the people who kept the Olympics out of the Valley. It was 'It will upset our quiet little valley.'" Siegel calls Close "the guy that kept Ventura Boulevard in Sherman Oaks from looking like Ventura Boulevard in Encino" with its glut of high-rises and snarled traffic.

Jeff Brain

The chemistry between Close and Brain suggests that they spend no more time together than they must; at meetings where you'd expect a polite collegial spark, they all but ignore each other.

Brain, whose critics suggest he often falls short of living up to his name, sometimes seems to speak without having thought much about what he's saying. At a meeting of the Local Agency

Formation Commission last December, Brain persisted in the fiction that all he wanted was to debate secession and that he wasn't necessarily in favor of it. Then he went on to say: "May God bless our country, may God bless our new city and may we have harmony."

He, like Close, complains about the Valley not getting its fair share, but scorns city efforts to head off a split by providing more services as "legal bribery. It's not going to solve what is really wanted, which is local control."

Brain is Valley VOTE's only paid staff member. With an average annual organizational budget of around \$30,000, Brain isn't paid much, but says he is in it for the cause. "This is not a Valley issue," he insists. "This will significantly affect all residents by making all of L.A. much more responsive, with much more local control. Council districts will shrink by half."

The Daily News' Ron Kaye, an enthusiastic secessionist, calls Brain, who didn't have much of a political profile until he joined Valley VOTE, "a little guy who wants to be a big guy."

Brain has twice run for office in L.A., and lost both times. In 1995, he ran for the 5th District seat on the City Council, and in 1997, he ran for charter reform commissioner. Both times, of course, he hammered away on his theme that the Valley is not getting its fair share. More than one observer wonders if Brain would have continued as tenaciously with Valley VOTE if he had won either election.

Brain periodically suffers high-visibility gaffes. Last summer, a Los Angeles Times story reported that Brain owed \$57,500 in back taxes to local, state and federal government, along with the more damaging revelation that he had moved from his beloved Valley to Glendale in 1999. A later story revealed that he bought up five Web-site domain names likely to be used by One Los Angeles, the anti-secession group, apparently to make sure they couldn't use them. Then it emerged that, despite his Glendale residence, he registered to vote in Los Angeles, using the Valley VOTE office address.

Brain recently moved back to L.A. after his three-year Glendale residence. He tries to explain away his small-town exile. "It's good to see what small government is like," he says, praising the clean streets and swift police response time in the town of 200,000, a fraction of the size of the proposed Valley City of 1.4 million.