Secession campaign kickoff

By Harrison Sheppard
Staff Writer

VAN NUYS -- San Fernando Valley secessionists sought to energize supporters and organize volunteers at a rally Saturday in preparation for a historic campaign this fall over the future of the city.

About 400 people attended the "Rally for the Valley," squeezing in elbow-to-elbow in a function room at the Airtel Plaza Hotel near Van Nuys Airport.

"Welcome to the beginning of the new city of the San Fernando Valley," Richard Katz, co-chairman of the San Fernando Valley Independence Committee, told the room of cheering supporters.

Katz and other leaders of the secession campaign -- Laurette Healey, Jeff Brain and Richard Close, along with Gene LaPietra of the Hollywood effort -- touted the benefits of a smaller city and emphasized the importance of having committed volunteers who give their time and money.

"We think this ground campaign we're going to run is ultimately going to be the most important part of our effort," said Gerry Gunster, a professional campaign manager with the firm Goddard Clausen Porter Novelli.

But secession opponents are also preparing to wage a grass-roots campaign, in addition to Mayor James Hahn's expected $5 million advertising effort. The city's municipal unions can muster hundreds, or even thousands of volunteers, while several City Council members are also organizing efforts within their own districts.

Larry Levine, co-chairman of the anti-secession group One Los Angeles, said he has a database of about 600 people who are willing to help.

When secessionists say they'll focus on a ground campaign, Levine said, it's a sign of trouble.

"That's a euphemism for 'We can't raise the money,'" Levine said.

"'I'm going to run a grass-roots campaign' means 'I don't have a choice.'"

He added that he doesn't believe the dissatisfaction with city services that secessionists say represents the feeling of the majority of Valley residents.

"We believe if you go door-to-door in this Valley,
Supporters of Valley Cityhood sign up as volunteers during the "Rally for the Valley". (Gus Ruelas / Daily News)

"I'm going to find people who are happy with the state of life in their community and the state of services they're receiving from the city."

Katz, however, said he remains confident that the pro-secession campaign can raise at least $4 million to remain competitive with Hahn.

The group's first fund-raising report, for the period ending June 30, listed only $75,000 in contributions, but since then, fund raising has increased. Valley car dealer Bert Boeckmann and attorney David Fleming each gave $50,000 recently and plan to give and raise six-figure amounts, while an Independence Ball held a week ago raised at least $30,000.

Hahn's L.A. United campaign has raised at least $1.9 million so far.

Secession campaign leaders said volunteers will mostly focus on Valley efforts, talking to their friends and neighbors, passing out literature, holding small receptions in their homes to talk about the issue. Katz said the campaign is in touch with other dissatisfied groups throughout the city, such as Westchester residents frustrated with Los Angeles International Airport, and is counting on them to do grass-roots efforts in their parts of the city.

At the rally, attendees thumbed through the campaign's first color brochures, as candidates for the new city's council and mayor worked the room and campaign workers signed up volunteers to staff booths at local malls.

Most of the candidates at the rally also expressed support for keeping rent control in the new Valley city, a particularly sensitive issue that has raised concerns among tenants and the elderly throughout the Valley.

Candidates and volunteers said they remain confident and think they have the energy and the ideas on their side.

"You're seeing a groundswell of activity," said Stefanie Spikell, a council candidate and businesswoman. "I've never seen a grass-roots movement move this way. This campaign is going forward."

She and others added that they are not discouraged by the council position's $12,000 salary.

"I frankly don't mind," said Terry Stone, also a council candidate. "I believe this is such an exciting thing to do, I'd work this job for free."

While most attendees said they felt revitalized by the rally, some remained skeptical.

Valley businessmen Daryl Smith, an African-American from Chatsworth, and J.D. Hernandez, a Latino from Arleta, were still at the Airtel long after the speeches ended, discussing whether cityhood would benefit minority communities in the Valley. Both said they had their doubts but were still open to listening. They came to the event to find out more.

Smith said he saw several minority members of the secession campaign speak to the group from the stage, "but I don't see it in the audience."

"I have some concerns, being a person of color."

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Is this a proposal for the whole Valley or is it for the more southwestern and affluent areas?" Smith said.

The pool of 121 candidates for Valley council and mayor does include some Asians, Latinos and African-Americans. For example, Realtor Mel Wilson, an African-American, kicked off his mayoral campaign just prior to the rally.

Wilson is a former president of the Southland Regional Association of Realtors and has served on the Los Angeles city Fire Commission and the board of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, among other groups.

"This campaign is about people -- you, me, our grandkids, our kids," Wilson said. "This campaign is about local control. It's about lowering our taxes. How would you like to have a tax break? It's about safer neighborhoods, safer parks, safer schools. It's about accountability -- again -- that we all strive for in our government. It's about reducing traffic congestion."