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## **Los Angeles County: A Global Metropolis with a Rancho-Era Governing Body**

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**Reimagining Local Government Conference  
Chapman University**

**Los Angeles County: A Global Metropolis with a Rancho-Era Governing Body  
By Peter Hong**

**Deputy Chief Of Staff, California State University, Los Angeles**

In May of 1874, the notorious and celebrated Californio outlaw Tiburcio Vasquez set out for a heist. He planned to rob Alessandro Repetto, a sheep rancher in what is now Monterey Park.

Vasquez would begin from his hideaway at the home of Yiorgos “Greek George” Caralambo, a former U.S. Army camel driver, near today’s West Hollywood.

The long journey (roughly 15 miles) in the early summer heat would be have to be split over two days. So Vasquez and his men rode first to Piedra Gorda, the prominent rock outcropping now called “Eagle Rock” in northeast Los Angeles, next to Pasadena, where they camped for the night. The next morning, they rode the final nine or so miles to Repetto’s house.

Plans for the robbery went awry. A Sheriff’s posse got wind of Vasquez’s whereabouts and headed after him -- they had been tipped off by Francisco Temple, an original member of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. Vasquez fled Monterey Park, through what is now Pasadena’s Arroyo Seco and hid in the hills, before taking a brief refuge near the San Fernando Mission before being captured back at Greek George’s.

<http://www.kcet.org/socal/departures/the-hunt-for-tiburcio-vasquez-a-chase-through-a-transitioning-la.html>

I open with this tale mainly to give context to a remarkable fact of Los Angeles County government: Ten million people, spread over 4,000 square miles, are governed today by a Board of Supervisors with five members, just as it was during the earliest years of statehood in the Wild West. We can now fly across the country faster than it would have taken Vasquez’s band to go from Monterey Park to San Fernando through the Arroyo Seco, yet we maintain a government structure configured in the horse and telegraph days.

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors began in 1852 with five members at-large. Los Angeles County’s population at the 1850 Census was about 3,500. In 1872, two years before Vasquez’s failed Monterey Park heist, The Board was split into two districts, to better manage the population of 15,000.

By 1889, when Los Angeles spun off about 13,000 of its residents to create Orange County, the Board had its current five member, five-district configuration, with a population about 1/100th today’s (100,000 to 10 million).

My fellow panelist Tim Draper has said that California’s government “is stuck in the 1980s.” In the case of Los Angeles County, we in fact have the same government set-up we had in the 1890s.

Los Angeles County stands alone in the United States in having so many county residents governed by so few. Those in the know about government and politics (a much diminished group today) long have called the board ‘the Five Kings.’ That status has only become more entrenched as Los Angeles’ population, wealth and influence grow. The moniker is dated only

because two women now sit on the board, and the number could very well grow to four in the next election cycle, making “the Five Monarchs” a more accurate description.

Why run a county of ten million with an elected board whose size was set with a population of 3,500 and basic configuration came about for a population of 100,000 ?

No one else has been willing to try it. New York has 51 council members and five borough presidents. Each of them represents about 150,000 people versus two million for each Los Angeles supervisor. San Francisco’s eleven supervisors each represent about 76,000 constituents.

If Los Angeles was to have a board of supervisors proportionate to San Francisco’s, it would have 131 members; if we wanted to match New York, we’d have 67 supervisors. The comparison isn’t apples-to-apples: Los Angeles’ 88 cities do have their own city councils. But even if we were to isolate the City of Los Angeles, with its 15 council members and 3.9 million residents, adding the five county supervisors for a total of 20 reps would still be a ratio of close to 200,000 to one for Los Angeles residents.

## II. A Report Card

When discussing this conference with professor Smoller, he asked me to consider local government through four criteria: representation, engagement, deliberation and efficiency. How Los Angeles County does on these criteria requires a nuanced view. Since this is a university conference, I’ll give L.A. County grades on each, based entirely on my subjective judgement.

### 1) Representation -- F

This failing grade isn’t the fault of individual supervisors. It just doesn’t make sense to have a 2,000,000:1 representation ratio for county government; it’s by definition a failure of representation.

### 2) Engagement -- F on an absolute scale, B on a curve

Again, the F is because it’s simply impossible for an elected official to engage 2 million, much less 10 million constituents. BUT...an important caveat: due to an absence of abysmally low participation in government (blame both the structure and the lack of news media coverage), the small number of constituents who contact the offices of their Board of Supervisors members often receive very responsive constituent services. Members can also be easily accessible at public appearances and staff in field offices can be readily available for constituents. If, however, the public became more engaged with government, the system would rapidly be overwhelmed. If 10% of residents decided to contact their members in a year, each with a concern that would take 20 minutes to address, there is simply no way a board member’s office could deal with 200,000 such requests.

### 3) Deliberation -- D

Again, this grade is dictated largely by structural impairments. The massive size of districts means members are trying to squeeze in whatever engagement they can with whatever fraction of 2 million is possible. Then there are the required check-ins with 36 departments containing 100,000 employees. This leaves time for one board meeting a week, and no committees. Brown Act rules further constrain contact between members. The result is that members have little time to engage other members, and must struggle

even to find time to hear the information gathered by their respective staffs. Even when intentions are good (and they usually are) thorough deliberation and analysis is often what must be sacrificed when five people represent 10 million.

#### 4) Efficiency -- A

This is the surprising paradox of the Los Angeles County board. With five members, three votes gets it done. The board's size can also be an antidote to excess partisanship. There is no aisle to cross when five people sit around a shoehorn, and there is no party machinery or discipline -- no whips, leaders or speakers. Also, the large size of the districts mean members typically have served on city councils, the legislature and even congress before joining the board. They are veteran politicians who have crossed paths with each other for many years. The close relationship between conservative Mike Antonovich and liberal Mark Ridley-Thomas is testament to this relative absence of partisanship, which de-clutters decision making. So, while the configuration of the board limits innovation and engagement, members are able to act decisively on matters such as fiscal policy, department head performance, labor relations and capital projects.

### **III. Media Coverage of Local Government: Back to the Telegraph Age ?**

As we wonder, perhaps with some despair, how to reimagine metropolitan governments, Los Angeles County also presents an optimal case study in another problem facing large metro areas: the same growth and fragmentation which has strained governing bodies also overwhelmed the 20th century models of news media organization.

In the 1980s, the Los Angeles Times had a City-County government bureau of more than 15 reporters, more than triple the number today. Regional newspapers also had full-time government teams, as did the Korean language and Spanish language papers and broadcast stations.

Local television and radio stations had full-time reporters at City Hall and the Board of Supervisors, and also kept full-time reporters in Sacramento. LAUSD Board meetings were routinely covered by multiple reporters from several outlets.

The multiple press offices in the County Hall of Administration --once full enough to be the scene of occasional but lively Friday afternoon cocktail hours-- have been mostly empty for about a decade now, as is the case in the Superior Court, Los Angeles City Hall and the City Halls of multiple localities such as Pasadena, Glendale and Long Beach that once had competitive press corps.

Today, the decimation of local media is such that it would be safe to say there are fewer than 10 full-time reporters still working in Los Angeles news organizations with a thorough understanding of Los Angeles government -- there are certainly fewer than 20.

I blame some of the decline on the revocation of federal public interest broadcast content requirements in 1987. When TV covered City Hall and the County Supes, it generated interest that fueled demand for print coverage. But even if that standard had remained, the eclipsing of over-the-air television by pay TV and the Internet, with their inherent fragmentation, could very well have killed off interest in government coverage through market forces.

Whatever the cause, the consequences are clear. We have been in a news media drought in local government coverage for at least 15 years -- we've lost a generation, if not two, of citizens who are literate in the workings of government.

New technology actually lowers the threshold to produce such content. It wouldn't take too much for even a private citizen or a collective to go to government meetings and put together a blog on local policy matters. I've seen examples of this in places like San Francisco, or Honolulu, where there are a few examples of public access television being used effectively to inform communities of interest.

Yet in Los Angeles, the long period of news starvation combined with the daunting scale of local government are severe barriers. Ask a Los Angeles resident not only who their County Supervisor is, but what the Board of Supervisors is, and it's likely only a small minority will be able to answer either question. The same goes for their city council or school board members. If a governing structure is spread too thin or is too complex for a person to understand, what would make them want to read, watch or listen to media reports about government ?

Furthermore, when news gathering resources are scarce, reporters have little time to cover the nuts-and-bolts daily stories, of hearings and community meetings and votes. These incremental reports develop in both the audience and the reporter an understanding of the nuances of policies and issues facing communities and governments. Instead, the one or two reporters a news organization has will focus on one or two major issues a year -- typically a system failure that rightfully needs to be exposed. But the cumulative result of such coverage is a loss of faith in institutions, without the corresponding wisdom needed to reform those institutions in order to restore faith. The gutted media gives only half the equation.

We will have to create vibrant, probably smaller, government structures to generate public interest in participation. Citizen-driven news coverage would likely follow greater participation, and hopefully would give rise to more coverage by--and audience growth for-- what's left of major news outlets.

#### **IV. Big Problems and Baby Steps**

The failures of local government in Los Angeles are plainly visible to anyone who drives through downtown Los Angeles, past the rows of tents set up along and below bridges by the multiplying numbers of homeless residents. Such encampments are also growing in the Arroyo Seco, where Tiburcio Vasquez made his run from the law, and along the San Gabriel river.

Both the City and County of Los Angeles recently announced plans to address homelessness. Even the architects of the plans do not see them as complete solutions, because they are limited to the maladies of homeless individuals rather than the diseases of local government that fail to foster equitable, living wage economic growth.

Poverty kills. In South Los Angeles, homicides are the leading cause of premature death. Countywide, homicides are the leading cause of death among youths.

Homicides and homelessness can understandably seem like problems too big to solve.

But even in school districts, most of which are small enough so that residents should feel empowered to achieve change, Los Angeles residents are too often paralyzed. The state's perplexing school funding model has scared off participation. In too many communities, the neighborhood public school is a parent's option of last resort.

There is in many affluent communities a paradox among the privileged. Pasadena, where I live, is a prime example of this phenomenon. The city has 140,000 residents, including a large number of wealthy and politically influential residents. Yet even many of those residents with abundant money and clout don't feel they can accomplish something as seemingly modest as reforming their local school system to suit their needs. We will pay tens of thousands of dollars annually for private school tuition, because we perceive it as yielding more reliable results than financing political reform campaigns.

Another example: the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority has been on a massive building spree since the passage of a sales tax increase in 2008, but has failed to transport more substantially more passengers.

Anyone who rides the system, which is plagued by frequent breakdowns, delays and bus route cancellations, knows why. It probably took Tiburcio Vasquez between two to three hours to get from Hollywood to Eagle Rock on horseback in 1874. Tracing that route on Metro today would take anywhere from 90 minutes to two hours, depending on waiting and transfer times for buses and trains. An average bicycle rider could easily make the trip in comparable time, according to Google Maps and my own experience as a transit and bicycle rider in Los Angeles.

Like vast swaths of the Los Angeles Unified School District, transit use in Los Angeles has become the realm of the poor. Metro's surveys show the average median household income of bus riders is under \$15,000, and that of train riders is just below \$20,000, compared with the L.A. County median of \$55,000.

Reforming Metro might be a viable demonstration project for broader re-imagining of local government. Metro's governing structure is another Los Angeles anomaly. Twelve of its 13 members are elected officials -- the five County supervisors, the Mayor of Los Angeles and six other mayors and city council members. Each of these officials represents their home constituencies.

Transportation needs, however, follow the travel patterns of people, not the boundaries of cities. Passengers often live in one jurisdiction and work in another -- they need trains and buses that take them between those places.

Metro board members, on the other hand, must staunchly defend the political needs of one city or supervisorial district, or pay dearly at election time. For that reason, every other major metro area in the United States governs its transit authority with appointed boards, or with dedicated transit authority boards whose members are elected from special transit districts, not the simple boundaries of existing cities and counties.

In Los Angeles, Metro board members, as mayors, county supervisors or council members, focus on construction projects that would bring jobs and capital investments to their districts. This role has become even more pronounced with the dissolution of redevelopment agencies under Governor Brown. Public works job creation is a

traditional, laudable objective of those in their positions. It just isn't the best approach to creating transit systems designed to move people rather than create construction jobs or kickstart commercial real estate development in a member's locale.

Fellow panelist Myron Orfield cites Portland's Metro as a potential model for other regions to emulate. It serves as a transit, parks and land use authority for a multi-county region. Portland Metro is governed by a Mayor and six council members, representing 250,000 constituents each. Such a body in Los Angeles County would require 40 members, which might be too large, resulting in factionalism and partisanship.

Perhaps a first step in Los Angeles might be re-configuring our Metro (the transit agency) into five Portland-style Metros (though focusing strictly on transportation at the outset) with eight members each, and one "Metro Mayor" to offset parochialism. Who knows ?

We won't know what might be effective or even possible until we start asking questions and begin a longer-term conversation. It would require a great deal of thought when there isn't public recognition of a problem. Our first challenge is to spark that conversation and sustain citizen interest, to ignite the public's imagination so they might re-magine local government. That, I hope, will be a challenge we make to ourselves when we leave this conference.