

San Antonio Express-News

Proposition A will undermine democracy

By Linda Davila and Valerie Hartfield, For the Express-News Oct. 8, 2018

This fall, the biggest loser of the amendments proposed by the firefighters union will be local democracy. While much of the rhetoric focuses on the city's AAA bond rating and its capacity to govern, **COPS/Metro** is primarily concerned about the loss of San Antonio's democratic capacity.

COPS/Metro — a coalition of congregations, schools and unions working together on behalf of families — asked the city to drop the lawsuit on the evergreen clause and firefighters to drop the petition drive and return to the negotiating table. Neither side moved, and now the residents and voters of San Antonio are caught in the crossfire between “Go Vote No” and “Vote Yes” on the three charter amendments.

At its core, democracy is about negotiation and compromise. When practiced with political competence, groups with competing interests hash out their differences and arrive at mutually beneficial solutions. While democracy looks messy and does not always arrive at the correct conclusion, it does a more than decent job of getting everyone with a stake in the outcome at the table and hopefully making them a part of the solution.

Unfortunately, both the firefighters union and the city of San Antonio appear to have lost patience and abandoned the democratic process. Instead of negotiating, the city sued the firefighters, and they initiated a petition drive to fundamentally reshape the city's charter. Both parties pursued a zero-sum game of winners and losers.

Since its founding in 1974, COPS/Metro has sought to be at the negotiating table where differences can be worked out. The only time we initiated a petition drive for a referendum was in 2002 when the community was shut out of negotiations between the council and business interests over economic incentives for the PGA golf course. COPS/Metro leaders collected more than 100,000 signatures in 40



Verna Blackwell with Bexar County Democratic Women address the crowd. COPS/Metro has come out against Proposition A on the city ballot. Photo: Ronald Cortes

days, but we never took the issue to a vote. Once we got to the negotiating table, we worked out a compromise. That is the essence of democratic practice.

If successful, Proposition A (which will lower the number of signatures required on a petition) will open a Pandora's box of never-ending referendums that, when funded by big money, will ultimately undermine governance. Instead of calibrated decisions crafted through negotiation and compromise, every policy will be subject to recall. Instead of forged solutions where multiple sides can win enough to stay in the game, there will be clear winners and losers.

Politics in San Antonio may not be perfect, but it is far superior to what we see at the national level. In the end, the real winners will be those paid to collect the signatures and run the campaigns. This is not the city we want.

The member institutions of COPS/Metro will vigorously turn out the vote against Proposition A because it threatens to fundamentally undermine democracy in San Antonio. We hope you will vote against it, too.

Linda Davila of St. Timothy Catholic Church and Valerie Hartfield of Holy Redeemer Catholic Church represent COPS/Metro.