

A bitter divorce on ethics reform

Eye on Sacramento and League of Women Voters joined forces to push City Hall

But after holding 10 public forums, the two groups disagreed on policy and tactics

Now, league is backing city plan, while watchdog group is mulling ballot measure

BY FOON RHEE

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The big ethics reform push in Sacramento boasted a major selling point: It brought together 23 politically diverse community groups, led by Eye on Sacramento and the local League of Women Voters.

Now that promising partnership is broken and bitter.

While the league is collaborating on an [ethics plan the City Council agreed to pursue](#), the watchdog group dismisses it as a sham, and may try to get its own package on the ballot next year.

The split could make it less likely that real ethics reform will materialize. So what the heck happened?

The untold back story spotlights a dilemma that often confronts good government types: Can you get more done by negotiating on the inside, like the League of Women Voters? Or is it more effective to lobby from the outside, like Eye on Sacramento?

It was a united front back in February, when the two groups launched a series of 10 public forums and their leaders – Craig Powell,

president of Eye on Sacramento, and Paula Lee, president of the county League of Women Voters – [jointly proclaimed a “special opportunity to bring citizen-driven ethics and transparency reform to city government.”](#)

As Powell tells it, the first sign of trouble came soon after the last hearing in late May, as the coalition’s executive committee started working on specific proposals. Besides Powell and Lee, it included Gary Winuk, former enforcement chief for the state Fair Political Practices Commission, and Nicolas Heidorn, soon to become the state lobbyist for Common Cause.

The others were far more open than Powell to cutting a deal with City Hall. Though they papered it over in public, “we had a real schism,” Powell told me.

For her part, Lee says the league is always willing to work with public officials if they show good faith. That meant talking privately with an ad hoc City Council committee that had been meeting behind closed doors for months. (Don’t get me started on [how completely hypocritical](#) it was for a panel looking at greater transparency to be meeting in private.)

Powell and Lee agree that the divorce became final over two irreconcilable differences. First, Eye on Sacramento wants a “sunshine” ordinance to cover negotiations on employee contracts – which unions adamantly oppose and the league is neutral about.

Second, Eye on Sacramento wanted to set the bar by publicly releasing reform proposals. The others didn’t want that while negotiations were still going on with the city.

On Sept. 2, Powell went ahead with a press conference to [unveil “four pillars” of reform at City Hall](#): an open government ordinance, a city ethics code, an independent ethics commission and an independent redistricting commission.

“I considered that meant he left the coalition,” Lee told me.

After that, talks with the city intensified, and a [framework backed by the league came out Sept. 10](#). Five days later, the [City Council gave its go-ahead](#) to draft detailed proposals to vote on by early next year.

Lee says the framework is excellent, and the league is now “partnering” with the city on a final plan the public can be happy about. Winuk says it’s a good package that he’s comfortable supporting.

But Powell bluntly says the league has been co-opted by the city and [is backing a weak version of ethics reform](#).

Eye on Sacramento may have a point that the proposed ethics commission isn’t independent enough. The mayor would appoint its members, with City Council confirmation. A compliance officer in the office of the city clerk, who is hired by the council, would be in charge of investigations and decide which cases go to the commission.

Winuk, however, says the ethics commission, similar to those in other major California cities, would be sufficiently independent.

Powell also makes a decent argument that the ethics code being discussed overlaps with existing regulations enforced by the FPPC, and doesn’t cover key concerns such as conflict of interest in council votes and the enormous “behests” that corporations and wealthy individuals are donating to politicians’ favored charities. Winuk says that the overlap was on purpose to bring a local focus to FPPC rules, and points out that the [FPPC fined Mayor Kevin Johnson](#) for not reporting his behests on time.

To push [the more ambitious reforms it wants](#), Eye on Sacramento will have to decide well before the end of the year whether to mount a ballot campaign. It won’t be easy to collect enough signatures, and without a unified front, Powell concedes an initiative will be even more difficult to finance and sell to voters.

He says he’s “very disappointed” in the league. “We will be a lot more careful about joining with other groups in coalitions, I can tell you

that,” he said.

Lee agrees it would be better if the two groups were united, but says that coalitions often split over tactics. “We still have the same goals,” she said. “We have a more collaborative approach. They’re more confrontational.”

If I had to bet, the “collaborative” version of ethics reform will win out. Whether that’s best for the cause of ethics reform in Sacramento – well, that’s another matter.

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