

Los Angeles Times

Proposed Koreatown redistricting debated

The large neighborhood is in four City Council districts. A proposal would divide it between two, but many residents hope it can be combined in a single district.

By Kate Linthicum, Los Angeles Times

February 1, 2012

Alex Cha stood before the Los Angeles City Council Redistricting Commission last week and told panel members: "As an Asian American living in the city of Los Angeles, I feel voiceless."

He had gone to the San Fernando Valley meeting to protest proposed new City Council boundaries that call for Koreatown to be divided between two council districts. Disappointment over the proposal has run deep in the neighborhood, where over the weekend ministers complained about it to their congregations, and volunteers gathered signatures on protest petitions outside local grocery stores.

In a biting editorial, the Korea Times attacked lawmakers for treating Koreatown like a "cash register" by taking campaign contributions from the neighborhood but not fighting for it.

For months Cha and hundreds of others had urged the commission to unite the neighborhood in a single district, which they argued would improve chances that the area would get the attention and services it deserves. For a community not known for its engagement with City Hall, it's been an impressive showing. One commissioner described it as Koreatown's political coming of age.

The proposed redistricting would split Koreatown, now divided among four council districts, between areas represented by Councilmen [Herb Wesson](#) and [Eric Garcetti](#). As activists prepare to fight the proposed boundaries — Cha expects 1,000 people to turn out for a public hearing on the draft maps Wednesday night — others are questioning whether the protest leaders are representative of one of the city's most diverse neighborhoods.

Korean immigrants moved into the area in the 1960s and 1970s, helping build it into the dense urban quarter it is today, with towering office towers, blocks of apartments and hundreds of restaurants and nightclubs.

But Asian Americans make up only 32% of the area's population, according to a Times analysis of 2000 Census data. With 53% of the population, Latinos make up the majority.

The interests of working-class Latinos are different from those of many Korean Americans, said Edward Park, the director of the Asian Pacific American studies program at Loyola Marymount University. Although Korean American business owners might care primarily about development issues, affordable housing may be a bigger priority to Latinos, he said.

He said he wished the Koreatown activists would focus on issues like housing and less on "who can we get elected to the City Council that looks like us."

The current political division of Koreatown makes life hard for everybody, said Grace Yoo, the director of the Korean American Coalition. "Instead of going to one person to get something done,

you have to go to four," she said. "And getting four different council members to sign off on something is not an easy task."

Some council offices don't always have Korean speakers available, Yoo said, which can discourage immigrants from getting help. "You're talking to limited-English people," she said. "They give up."

Yoo moved from Korea to Koreatown at age 3. An outspoken attorney, she did not conceal her scorn during remarks at the commission meeting where the proposed boundaries were revealed. She referred to about 60 older Korean Americans in the room as the people with "names that you're going to have difficulty pronouncing."

Helen Kim, one of two Korean Americans on the redistricting panel, voted against the commission's proposed district boundaries. Koreatown, with its potholes and lack of green space, "is really a very needy community," she said.

Korean immigrants traditionally have relied on families or church for assistance, she said. But as their American-raised children age, many are wondering why their community doesn't get more help, Kim said.

"I think the community finally understands that nobody else is advocating for them," she said.

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Los Angeles Times staff writer Victoria Kim contributed to this report.