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Author

Gordon, Richard

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If Traditional Channels Can't Produce Reform, A Constitutional Convention May Be a Means of Last Resort

Richard Gordon*

Cities Counties Schools Partnership

The need for a constitutional convention is determined not by the severity of the budget hole, or by the breadth of issues that need to be addressed, but rather by the willingness of those controlling traditional positions of power to make the changes that are necessary.

In July of this past year, over 500 local government leaders gathered in Sacramento for a two-day summit hosted by the Cities Counties Schools Partnership. These representatives of community government came together,

for the first time, out of shared frustration with and a loss of confidence in our state government. If this dysfunctional state is going to be repaired, it will be necessary for disparate interests to align themselves in this common cause of change.

However, there are great difficulties we face in developing a constituency for reform. For one thing, the groups that hold the most sway in Sacramento have a vested interest in preventing structural reforms that weaken their influence. The initiative process, which was meant to shift some measure of power from interest groups that run Sacramento back to the people, has unfortunately become another political tool mastered by those same interests, making it a tough path for reform. If meaningful reform is made impossible through these conventional channels, then a constitutional convention may be our means of last resort.

*Richard Gordon is a member of the Board of Supervisors in San Mateo County and Chair of the California Cities Counties Schools Partnership.

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Regardless of procedure, our goals are the same. First, the relationship between Sacramento and local governments, which actually provide direct services to Californians, must be reformed. This means aligning revenue and responsibility—stepping back existing unfunded mandates and giving community governments the flexibility to fund whichever programs best address their unique local problems.

Second, our leaders in Sacramento must be given flexibility and predictability as well. Living year-to-year on fluctuating personal income tax revenues is no way to budget. If a more reliable revenue source cannot be secured, our state must move to a two-year budget cycle and attach performance measurements and outcomes to all expenditures. It must have an enforceable reserve policy and protections from further budgeting by initiative.

Desperation in Sacramento and across California has given these goals a chance to be achieved through traditional means, but for those dedicated to restoring the promise of California, all paths must be on the table.