

Faced with a chance for radical change, L.A. voters choose to stay the course

Los Angeles Times, by Dakota Smith, Matt Stevens, Ben Poston, and Doug Smith, Contact Reporters, March 8, 2017, 8:50 a.m.

Measure S was defeated after a heated battle over the future of L.A. development. Measure H rebounded from an early deficit to reach two-thirds majority.

Los Angeles voters offered a strong endorsement Tuesday to policies that have brought denser development and a more urbanized lifestyle to a city once famous for its tracts of tidy single-family homes.

Mayor Eric Garcetti, who has championed greater development in Hollywood, downtown and other parts of the city as well as expanded mass transit service, was easily reelected, while Measure S, a slow-growth measure pushed by people opposed to some of Garcetti's development policies, was voted down.

Here are four key takeaways from election night:

L.A. will continue its denser development path

The election was billed as a referendum on decades of planning policies aimed at adding mid-rise and high-rise development along major boulevards and transit lines as part of a larger effort to get Angelenos to drive less and provide more housing in a time of rising rents and a shortage of dwelling spaces.

Much of L.A.'s establishment — politicians, labor unions, business groups — opposed Measure S and cheered its defeat.

"Defeating Measure S has spared our city from a future that would've meant fewer jobs, fewer funds for critical public services, fewer new homes for those who desperately need them and even less affordable rents," said Rusty Hicks, executive secretary-treasurer of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor.

Measure S targeted the long-standing practice of changing city rules to permit buildings that are taller or denser than the established restrictions would ordinarily allow.

It would have imposed a moratorium lasting up to two years on building projects that require zone changes and other alterations in city rules. It also targeted the controversial practice of "spot zoning" by barring Los Angeles officials from amending the General Plan — a document that governs development across the city — to make way for individual projects in areas where they otherwise would be banned.

Much of the debate revolved around whether Measure S would help or hurt tenants as rents continue to soar. Backers of the ballot measure argued it would combat luxury towers that were displacing longtime renters.

Opponents countered it would squelch housing production and accelerate evictions by blocking development on land that isn't zoned for housing.

The election results "seem to indicate that people understood the devastating impact that Measure S would have on our community if it passed," said Gary Toebben, president of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce.

There's at least some political will to help ease homelessness

Along with development and crime, homelessness is one of L.A.'s most pressing issues.

And Tuesday's Measure H vote seemed to indicate voters are willing to put money behind solutions.

The quarter-cent sales tax increase in Los Angeles County to fund anti-homelessness measures appeared to earn the two-thirds majority needed for passage early Wednesday.

Measure H would generate about \$355 million annually for homeless programs over 10 years, backers say. The tax increase would raise the sales tax rate to 9% across most of Los Angeles County and up to 10% in a few communities.

“Measure H revenue will enable the most comprehensive plan to combat homelessness in the history of Los Angeles County,” said Phil Ansell, head of the county’s Homeless Initiative.

This marks a key second victory for forces trying to make even a small dent in the homelessness problem.

In November, Los Angeles voters overwhelmingly approved a \$1.2-billion bond measure to build housing for the chronically homeless.

Voters favored the status quo

If Tuesday’s election is any indication, L.A. voters liked the status quo.

Garcetti was a leader in opposing Measure S. He won a second term by a landslide, facing token opposition.

Garcetti spent more than \$3 million trying to burnish his image for an election he stood little chance of losing. His goal was to win not just another term, but also a solid affirmation of hometown support for a potential run for higher office. He governs a city of nearly 4 million people but is barely known outside Southern California.

In his campaign, Garcetti stressed his record raising the minimum wage, cutting business taxes and backing ballot measures to expand public transit and house the homeless.

Only one of Garcetti’s challengers, Democratic political operative Mitchell Schwartz, posed a minimal threat. Schwartz spent nearly \$700,000 on the contest, much of it for final-week mailings to voters. It has been many decades since that kind of small-scale campaign has succeeded in an L.A. mayor’s race.

Eight City Council seats also were at stake in Tuesday’s primary, with incumbents across the city each holding a lopsided lead over their challengers as votes were tallied through the evening.

Not a lot of people voted

Voter turnout was very low. So while Garcetti won by a blowout, the total number of voters was far from a record.

With Tuesday’s low voter turnout, however, it’s possible that Garcetti will have won fewer votes than other mayors, such as Tom Bradley.

Preliminary voter turnout numbers should be available Wednesday, but final results probably won’t be seen for several more days.

The trickle of voters at city polling stations captured the city’s prevailing attitude toward the election: indifference.

“Four people in line at my polling place is four more people than I thought would be at my polling place, so that’s something,” USC graduate student Alex Amadeo wrote on Twitter.

The city’s elected officials normally serve four-year terms. But because of a shift in the election calendar, winners of this year’s elections will serve 5 1/2 years. Starting in 2020, city elections will coincide with state and federal elections. That should increase voter participation.