

BALTIMORE CITY COUNCIL



CHARTER REVIEW SPECIAL COMMITTEE

26-0191

*Charter Amendment – Budget, Veto, and Board of
Estimates Reform*

Public Testimony

CITY OF BALTIMORE

Brandon M. Scott – Mayor
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CHARTER REVIEW SPECIAL COMMITTEE

The Honorable Ryan Dorsey
CHAIR

Attendance Sheet

5/20/2026

26-0191

Charter Amendment – Budget, Veto, and Board of Estimates Reform

SIGN IN TO TESTIFY			Position:		Check if Baltimore City lobbyist*
FIRST NAME	LAST NAME	ORGANIZATION AND/OR CONTACT INFORMATION	SUPPORT	OPPOSE	
Rachel	Kutler	JDFS	☒	☐	☐
Jennifer	Kunze	CWA	☐	☐	☐
			☐	☐	☐
			☐	☐	☐
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* IF YOU ARE COMPENSATED OR INCUR EXPENSES IN CONNECTION WITH THIS BILL, YOU MAY BE REQUIRED BY LAW TO REGISTER WITH THE CITY ETHICS BOARD AS A LOBBYIST. REGISTRATION CAN BE DONE ONLINE AND IS A SIMPLE PROCESS. FOR INFORMATION VISIT: [HTTPS://ETHICS.BALTIMORECITY.GOV/](https://ethics.baltimorecity.gov/) OR CALL: (410) 396-7986

#191

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments regarding the proposed legislation arising from the recommendations of the Charter Review Special Committee set for May 20th.

My concerns are informed by my participation in the public listening sessions, my review of the evolving legislative proposals, and the commitments publicly made regarding the Charter Review process. According to the Charter Review Special Committee webpage, the process was intended to be "transparent, community driven, and shaped by resident voices," with the stated goals of:

- Reviewing current Charter provisions and identifying structural challenges;
- Examining how government systems function across agencies;
- Collecting public input from residents across every district;
- Analyzing equity, transparency, and accountability gaps; and
- Producing recommendations for potential Charter amendments for the 2026 ballot.

Unfortunately, the process did not meaningfully reflect those commitments.

First, there was no comprehensive public review of the existing Charter provisions. Participants were actively discouraged from reviewing the Charter in advance because of its length and complexity. Rather than engaging residents in a substantive discussion of the Charter itself, the public was largely presented with selected provisions the Council sought to amend. Important recommendations previously advanced by the Charter Review Commission chaired by Kobi Little — including recommendations regarding referendum provisions — were not meaningfully incorporated into the public discussion.

Second, there was insufficient examination of how government systems currently function across agencies. Discussions did not address systemic issues such as agency stovepipes, operational inefficiencies, lack of accountability, or measurable performance outcomes. Without that analysis, it is difficult for residents to assess whether the proposed reforms address root causes or merely redistribute authority.

Third, the effort to collect public input across Baltimore's districts was inadequate. Despite recommendations that listening sessions occur throughout all Council districts, only four in person sessions were conducted citywide, including two within the Seventh District. Public attendance was limited, due in part to insufficient public notice and outreach. Rather than requiring each Councilmember to actively engage constituents and solicit district-specific feedback, the process largely consisted of presentations explaining the Council's priorities for reform, with limited opportunity for meaningful interactive discussion.

Equally concerning is the continued absence of equity analyses and fiscal impact studies related to these proposals. Residents repeatedly requested these materials during the listening sessions and legislative process, yet they have not been provided. Similar concerns arose during consideration of legislation such as the Housing Opportunities and Options Act (25-0066), where requested analyses were likewise unavailable. Without these studies, residents cannot adequately evaluate the intended or unintended consequences of the proposed amendments, nor determine which communities, neighborhoods, or stakeholders may disproportionately benefit or be adversely affected.

Fourth, changing Baltimore's charter is a major undertaking, and it should be approached thoughtfully and deliberately. The listening sessions did not allow for full engagement and was time limited as has been the public testimony regarding these bills. Limiting the public testimony to two minutes on a major initiative such as this when other public hearings have allowed longer public input is troubling.

I do appreciate the Council's decision to separate the proposed Charter amendments into individual bills rather than advancing them as a single package as proposed initially. Doing so allows residents to better understand the distinct provisions and preserves the public's ability to evaluate and vote on each proposal independently.

With respect to the individual proposals:

Regarding procurement reform under Bill 26-0190, the proposal to eliminate the requirement to award contracts to the lowest bidder responsible may appear reasonable on its face. However, critical questions remain unanswered. What impact will this change have on minority-owned, women-owned, veteran-owned, and disadvantaged businesses? What evidence demonstrates that the current system is producing widespread deficiencies warranting such reform? What safeguards and accountability mechanisms will exist to prevent favoritism or preferential treatment in the awarding of contracts? During the listening sessions, residents requested the underlying business case and supporting data, yet no evidence demonstrating systemic abuse or projected taxpayer savings was presented.

Regarding Bill 26-0191 and the proposed reforms to the budget veto process and the Board of Estimates, the legislation appears intended to redistribute authority currently concentrated within the Office of the Mayor to the City Council. While the concentration of authority within any single office warrants periodic review, proposals of this magnitude require careful public scrutiny because they implicate the foundational balance of power within Baltimore's municipal government.

At present, the public has not been provided with sufficiently detailed examples demonstrating how the existing structure has materially harmed taxpayers, impaired fiscal oversight, or prevented effective governance. Nor has there been adequate explanation regarding how the proposed reforms would improve accountability, transparency, efficiency, or public trust, rather than merely transferring institutional authority from one branch of government to another.

Structural reforms involving veto authority and the Board of Estimates are especially consequential because they directly affect budgeting, procurement, contract approvals, and long-term fiscal governance. Absent appropriate safeguards, there is a legitimate concern that redistributing authority could simply relocate the same risks of centralized control, political influence, or diminished accountability from the executive branch to the legislative branch.

The public should therefore carefully consider several institutional risks inherent in this proposal:

- The potential erosion of separation-of-powers principles designed to ensure checks and balances between branches of government;
- The possibility that concentrated legislative control over budgetary or contracting functions could reduce independent oversight rather than strengthen it;
- The risk of politicization of procurement, appropriations, or project approvals based on district or political considerations;
- The potential weakening of executive accountability, where responsibility for operational outcomes becomes diffused among multiple actors;
- The increased possibility of institutional gridlock or fragmented decision-making during periods of fiscal stress or emergency response.

Before advancing this proposal, the Council should provide comparative analyses demonstrating how similar governance models function in peer jurisdictions, including both successes and unintended consequences. Residents deserve to understand whether comparable reforms elsewhere improved transparency and accountability or instead created new governance challenges.

Additionally, if the City determines that reform is warranted, alternatives and safeguards should be considered to prevent any branch from exercising unchecked authority. Such safeguards could include:

- Annual reporting and impact requirements
- Independent ethics and procurement oversight mechanisms;
- Clearly defined conflict-of-interest protections applicable to both executive and legislative officials;
- Enhanced transparency requirements for Board of Estimates deliberations and voting;
- Mandatory public disclosure of fiscal analyses and procurement scoring criteria;
- Sunset provisions requiring future evaluation of the reforms after implementation;
- Preservation of meaningful executive veto authority while establishing structured override standards;
- Expanded public reporting requirements regarding budget amendments, emergency appropriations, and contract awards.

Rather than framing the issue solely as reducing mayoral authority, the discussion should focus on designing a governance structure that maximizes accountability, transparency, operational effectiveness, and public confidence regardless of which branch holds authority at a given moment.

Because these proposed reforms affect the City's core fiscal and governance architecture, they merit deliberate public education, district-level discussion, independent legal and policy review, and rigorous examination before being presented to voters for constitutional-level approval.

Regarding Bill 26-0192 concerning minor privileges, the proposal may, likewise, appear sensible in theory. Nevertheless, the Council has not provided sufficient empirical or historical evidence supporting the need for these changes. Residents have not been provided with data regarding the frequency of existing minor privilege requests, geographic impacts by district or neighborhood, or the potential beneficiaries and burdens associated with the proposed modifications.

Most concerning is Bill 26-0199, which would repeal term limits. This proposal was not introduced during the public listening sessions. Residents repeatedly attempted to discuss referendum-related reforms, as previously recommended by the Charter Review Commission, but those discussions were dismissed and participants were instructed to advance referendum during the next voter cycle. The repeal of term limits was not presented to the public as a central issue during the engagement process. Baltimore voters previously approved term limits through the democratic process. Before revisiting that voter-approved reform, there should be substantial public discussion, careful evaluation of its long-term effects, and meaningful civic engagement regarding the implications for accountability, transparency, and fiduciary oversight. At present, that discussion has not occurred.

More broadly, the Council's legislative efforts continue to proceed without the equity analyses and fiscal impact studies repeatedly requested by residents. The absence of those materials undermines public confidence and limits the ability of taxpayers to make informed judgments about the consequences of these proposals.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge that advancement of these bills be paused until Baltimore residents are provided a full and meaningful opportunity to review and discuss the proposals district by district through publicly noticed community hearings; until comprehensive equity analyses and fiscal impact studies are completed and made publicly available; until an independent comparative legal and governance review is provided evaluating how similar

reforms have functioned in other similarly situated jurisdictions; and until residents are afforded sufficient time for informed public comment before any proposal is advanced for placement on the ballot.

While I believe Baltimore is on the right track in its review of the Charter, I believe that the approach is unnecessarily precipitous for reforms of this magnitude. Only through a transparent, deliberate, and genuinely participatory process can the City ensure that any Charter amendments reflect the informed consent and long-term interests of Baltimore's residents and communities.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit comments regarding these important matters.

Linda Batts

From: doneill1952

Sent: Wednesday, May 20, 2026 11:42 AM

To: Testimony <Testimony@baltimorecity.gov>; Dorsey, Ryan (City Council) <rd@baltimorecity.gov>; Bullock, John (City Council) <John.Bullock@baltimorecity.gov>; Blanchard, Zachary (City Council) <zachary.blanchard@baltimorecity.gov>; Jones, Jermaine (City Council) <jermaine.jones@baltimorecity.gov>; Ramos, Odette (City Council) <Odette.Ramos@baltimorecity.gov>

Cc: Cohen, Zeke (City Council) <Zeke.Cohen@baltimorecity.gov>

Subject: Re: Testimony Regarding CCB 26-0190, 26-0191, 26-0192 and 0198

Please see my testimony below in relationship to the previously proposed City Charter amendments, which have now become CCB 26–0190, 0191, and 0192. Please include my this email in the testimony files for each of these bills.

I would also like to state my opposition here to 26–0199. The citizens of Baltimore have spoken quite clearly on the question of term limits in the very recent past with over 70% of them voting in favor of them. The fact that the previous charter amendment that created those term limits was initiated by someone we don't like or generally agree with is immaterial and no reason to seek to overturn that vote. Implicit in the introduction of the current bill is the message that the voters are not capable of understanding what term limits are and of forming their own opinion as to how they feel about these. That message is insulting to all voters, and, frankly, we deserve better.

Regardless of who initiated the previous amendment, even a broken clock is right twice a day, and, in this case, the voters have made it very clear that they think it is right for there to be term limits applied to elected city officials. I strongly urge this committee members to not vote in favor of CCB 26-0099 and to respect the clear message that voters have already sent on this issue.

I also encourage you to vote no on the other 3 bills for all of the reasons stated below, but, primarily because the process for creating these bills was seriously flawed. They should be delayed to permit community education on these topics and to seriously obtain voters' input in the shaping of each of these bills. Only after that input has been obtained, should the actual legislation be developed.

Thank you for considering my input. And thank you for including my testimony in all of the pertinent files.

Deb O'Neill

On Apr 26, 2026, at 8:20 PM, doneill1952 wrote:

I am writing to express my opposition to CCB 26– 0172 moving forward at this time.

This bill proposes to make changes to the City Charter, which is referred to as the People's Bill. But it is not being treated by this committee as if it is the principal bill protecting the rights of the citizens of Baltimore. Their focus seems to be primarily on the rights of the City Council and the Mayor.

Community Input

While, I have heard city politicians make passing reference in community meetings to the charter review that is underway now by the Charter Review Special Committee, there has been no discussion at the community level by elected officials of the actual changes being proposed.

Instead, there have been several "Listening Sessions," three of which occurred after the bill was already drafted. Because of when this bill was drafted, you cannot pretend that those last 3 sessions led to the input provided by the community members who attended them actually being considered by the committee for incorporation into the final draft bill.

A related issue is how those listening sessions were held. Instead of a single Townhall session where every participant had the chance to hear and build upon comments made by their fellow citizens, we were segregated into discreet groups cut off from others. There was no attempt to capture the points raised in each group and bring these to the group to discuss as a whole before adjourning, so you got disjointed and disconnected comments, with no attempt to consolidate that input and come up with overall input and suggestions from the entire group. This had the effect of watering down our input.

And, based on the timeline provided at the committee's 03/18 meeting, it is clear that the legislation was already being drafted and finalized by the meeting that I attended on 03/25. Given that fact, you cannot realistically claim that the input any of us provided at the 03/25 and 04/08 sessions and the virtual listening session held in April constituted an actual effort on the part of the committee to obtain input to shape the bill from the community.

Changes to Timelines

With regard to the actual proposals, I am opposed to any that reduce timelines for the public providing input on any actions. Any proposals that reduce timelines for City Council or mayorial actions will do that.

In the hearings I have attended, I have heard a lot of talk about what kind of timeframes the Mayor and City Council need. I heard zero discussion about what timeframes citizens need to be properly informed and have reasonable time to respond. This IS the People's Bill and any effort to reduce the time we have to participate as involved citizens hurts the democratic process in Baltimore and should be rejected.

Budget Proposals

I have extensive Federal government budget experience having formulated, justified and managed a billion dollar annual budget for a large Federal agency. Based on that experience;

- 1). I am opposed to removing the current cap for contingency funding. Instead, a new cap should be specified. Any other approach is simply writing a blank check for what can become a slush fund without proper oversight and controls. Voters need to know exactly what they are voting for, and that means that a new cap must be specified in the charter.
- 2). I support creating the possibility for non-lapsing funds to be created under very limited and clearly specified conditions. I oversaw the facilities budget for my Agency and non-lapsing funds are requisite for large construction projects. But these should be allowed only very rarely and under strict guidelines.
- 3). I believe you are also considering establishing earmarks for the funding of certain specified budget items. I strongly support these. In a recent discussion about a possible legislative change, we were told that increased fees would go to pay for a specific service. Without the ability to earmark the increase for those fees for that use, that promise cannot be fulfilled, so this simply becomes another way for the city to add to its general fund, which we oppose.

Contract Proposal

I also have extensive experience developing the technical requirements for multimillion dollar Federal contracts, which were awarded using a “best value” evaluation process. My duties included developing the weighted evaluation and submission criteria and leading the technical evaluation team. Because of this experience, I am well aware of the strengths and weaknesses of both evaluation processes - low bid, versus best value.

While I think that best value is a better evaluation criterium, I am seriously concerned that changing to this approach will not solve the problems you are describing of bidders gaming the system by submitting unrealistically low bids, which you are accepting.

Any contract evaluation process you use **MUST** include an evaluation for cost realism, and your evaluating team and Contract Officers **MUST** be empowered to throw out bids that are unrealistic. Without that change, no approach you use is going to yield bids that are accurate. And the problem you are describing with using low bid is a lack of this cost realism analysis taking place.

Additionally, the best value selection approach **REQUIRES** a structured evaluation process that does **NOT** permit awards to higher bids that do not clearly show **WHY** they should be chosen over lower/lowest bid.

The situation you are describing, where there is neither a cost realism evaluation nor a process for showing why a higher bid is a better choice, does not exist at this time. You need to go back to the drawing board and develop guidelines for evaluating bids under a best value system. And those guidelines must include how to evaluate for cost realism. Until you have done that, there is too much danger of allowing higher bids to be selected for all the wrong reasons, so I do not think you are ready for this change at this time and I oppose it until the processes required to ensure that higher bids are not chosen based on personal relationships and other improper considerations have been developed.

Summary

Because of the limited opportunity for communities to be informed about and provide input on these proposed changes, I ask that you hold off on a vote in this committee on these proposed charter changes until you can do proper outreach for community input. And once that input is received, I ask that you properly incorporate it into the proposed bill before taking a final vote at the committee level.

Thank you for considering my input.

Deb O'Neill

From: Carolyn Carey <cacalion70@gmail.com>
Date: Wed, May 20, 2026, 1:09 PM
Subject: Charter Review Committee
To: Charter Review Committee (City Council) <charter.review.committee@baltimorecity.gov>
Cc: <Testimony@baltimorecity.gov>

05/20/2026

Greetings Chair Ryan Dorsey:

During the City Council Meeting on May 11, President Cohen indicated that Charter Amendment Bill 26-0172 would be returned to the Charter Review Committee (CRC). Since then, three bills have been introduced and assigned to the CRC: 26-0190 (Budget and Procurement), 26-0191 (Veto), and 26-0192 (Minor Privileges). I understand these bills are scheduled for a hearing today, May 20, 2026, at 1:00 p.m.

Regarding these developments, I would appreciate clarification on the following:

1. What is the current status of the remaining components of Bill 26-0172?
2. Are non-lapsing funds included in that specific package?

Thank you for your assistance with this matter.

Best regards,

Carolyn Carey