

BALTIMORE CITY COUNCIL



CHARTER REVIEW SPECIAL COMMITTEE

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Charter Review*

Public Testimony

January 21, 2026 - February 3, 2026

From: Adam Golden
Sent: Monday, January 26, 2026 6:05 PM
To: Charter Review Committee (City Council)
Subject: Proposals for Budget Process Reform

Hello,

My name is Adam Golden, and I am a co-founder of the Maryland Institute for Progressive Policy (MDIPP). We launched our 2025 City Council Report today and shared it with all council members but wanted to make sure it got in front of the folks on this important committee.

Part II of our report concludes with the following thesis: the current budgeting process is undemocratic, and Baltimore would be better served by passing its budget as ordinary legislation. As such, we recommend the following amendments to the City Charter:

1. Eliminate the Board of Estimates, moving its fiscal and budgetary authority to the City Council and its procurement authority to the existing division within the Department of Finance.
2. Require that the budget is passed as ordinary legislation and remove the Mayor's line-item veto.
3. Provide the Council with adequate and professional budget staff.

I have attached to this email the 8 pages of the report that make up our recommendations for reforming the budget process. This includes a bit of history on the Board of Estimates and a discussion of the practical and political difficulties that hamper the Council's ability to exercise influence over City finances.

We appreciate the Committee's work on these important issues and look forward to further opportunities for public input.

Best,

Adam

Part III

Reflections: Empowering the City Council in the Budget Process



Reflections: Empowering the City Council in the Budget Process

The City Council ultimately had a successful year because of meaningful and positive changes it made in land use regulation, vacant property acquisition, and more. Many of Baltimore's most pressing problems, particularly material poverty and insufficient public infrastructure, however, are best addressed through public expenditure, i.e., money.

Baltimore's budget process is unique and, in our view, uniquely bad. More than a century ago, Baltimore adopted a charter that created the Board of Estimates, which was and is firmly controlled by the Mayor. The Board has near-unilateral authority over the City's finances, and until recently, the City Council was permitted only to remove items from the budget but could not add or replace them with its own priorities.

Such a system concentrating fiscal authority in the executive branch is irregular in American government—the federal Constitution provides Congress, not the President, with the power of the purse. The Board of Estimates is also at odds with representative democracy. While it is difficult for ordinary citizens of Baltimore to be heard by the Mayor and their unelected appointees, council members represent smaller numbers of people and are supposed to serve as our conduit into City affairs. With limited authority over financial matters, the Council, and thereby the people, is neutered in its ability to affect many of the most important issues in Baltimore.

Conversations about reforming the budget system, including changing the composition of, or outright abolishing, the Board of Estimates, have long been ubiquitous in City politics. In 2020, significant amendments to the City Charter were approved by voters and went into effect in 2022. Most importantly, Resolution 20-0025 permitted the Council to replace and add its own priorities into the budget, so long as they do not increase the total amount appropriated.

With three cycles to wield this new power, the City Council has made only minuscule amendments to the budgets drafted by the Board of Estimates—totaling just 0.14 percent of appropriations. Through conversations with those involved in the process and our own investigation, it appears practical and political limitations continue to make it difficult for the Council to exercise significant influence over the budget.

To better align fiscal authority with democratic accountability and enable the Council to exercise its proper role, we recommend that Baltimore amends the City Charter to:

- Eliminate the Board of Estimates, moving its fiscal and budgetary authority to the City Council and its procurement authority to the existing division within the Department of Finance.
- Require that the budget is passed as ordinary legislation and remove the Mayor's line-item veto.
- Provide the Council with professional budget staff.

Creation of the Board of Estimates

As some Americans, [particularly](#) upper-class professionals and those with corporate interests, grew tired of urban machine politics, the 1890s and the developing Progressive Era gave rise to a nationwide municipal reform movement. With its own [experience](#) with machine influences, Baltimore appointed a commission to draft a new charter in 1897. After a few months of deliberation, the Commission submitted what was [ratified](#) as the City Charter of 1898.

In line with the era, the Commission was wary of the decentralized elected power of the legislative branch and thus created the Board of Estimates. The Board was to be made up of the Mayor (elected by the people), the City Solicitor (appointed by the Mayor), the City Engineer (appointed by the Mayor), the Comptroller (elected by the people), and the President of the Second Branch of the City Council (elected by the people and chosen by the Council). The Commission believed that this composition, which gave de facto control to the Mayor through control of three of the five seats, would furnish a “safe and conservative financial policy” and protect against “extravagance and the reckless expenditure of public moneys.” The City Council was permitted only to eliminate line-item spending but not to add or replace eliminated funding.

Supplemental Appropriations

Outside the budget process, the Council also has diminished authority over supplemental appropriations—the spending of surplus funds after the enactment of the Ordinance of Estimates. The Charter requires the following steps to enact a supplemental appropriation: (1) recommendation by the Board of Estimates; (2) passage by the City Council (for excess revenues and unanticipated grants, a simple majority; for material changes or new programs, a three-fourths vote), and (3) approval by the Mayor.⁶⁴

In short, only the Board of Estimates can propose supplemental spending, with the Council’s role limited to approval or rejection. Supplemental appropriations are not an insignificant part of City spending—in FY 2025, the Board proposed \$231 million in supplemental appropriations. A full list of those appropriations can be found [here](#).

Under our proposed changes, the Council would be able to initiate and pass supplemental appropriations on its own accord, just as any other legislation, subject to any other restrictions imposed by the Charter, such as a balanced budget requirement.

2020 Reforms

While other [cities](#) that consolidated power in small executive groups have since returned to more standard legislative structures, Baltimore's Board of Estimates has survived more than 125 years. In 2020, however, the Council proposed several significant reforms to alter the budget process and distribution of fiscal authority. By authority in the state [constitution](#), the Council may propose an amendment to the Charter via a resolution, which, upon passage by a majority of council members, is then sent to the voters for final say.

Most notably, Resolution 20-0025,⁶⁵ which was approved by 75 percent of voters, [permitted](#) the Council to make line-item changes to the Ordinance of Estimates, including both subtractions and additions, so long as the changes did not increase the total amount appropriated. Voters also approved a resolution to [reduce](#) the threshold of votes needed to override a veto from the Mayor from three-fourths of members to two-thirds.

Other ambitious reforms, including removal of the requirement that the Board of Estimates initiate supplemental appropriations, elimination of the Mayor's line-item veto authority, and reduction in the size of the Board of Estimates through removal of the Mayor's two appointees, were ultimately scrapped by the Council.

Post-2020 Budget Cycles

Resolution 20-0025 gave the City Council authority to alter the budget in almost any way other than increasing the top line number. We expected and hoped to see the Council use this authority to make several and significant changes to the Board of Estimates' budget every year. That authority, however, has largely gone unused.

The changes approved in 2020 went into effect on July 1, 2022, the same date that fiscal year 2023 began. Thus, the Council has now had three opportunities, FY24, FY25, and FY26, to wield this new authority.

- In FY24, the Council, through various amendments, made \$6 million in changes to the operating budget and \$4 million in changes to the capital budget, including an increase to the Fire Department for additional vehicles and other upgrades, an increase to the Office of Information and Technology for installation and upgrades to CitiWatch cameras, various cuts to agencies with expected turnover and vacancies, and other smaller changes.
- In FY25, the Council did not propose or adopt a single amendment.
- In FY26, the Council proposed three amendments and adopted two, totaling about \$8 million in changes to the operating budget. These changes included about \$3 million to the Council itself for community-based organizations, \$2 million additional funds to the Mayor's Office of Immigrant and Multicultural Affairs, \$750,000 to the Department of Public Works for a zero waste curbside composting pilot, and other smaller changes again funded by eliminating vacant positions.

While some of this shuffling was undoubtedly impactful for the agencies affected, the Council is still almost entirely deferring to the Board's proposal—the \$18 million reallocated by the Council over three years accounts for only 0.14 percent of the total \$13.2 billion budgeted across the same three years.

Practical and Political Difficulties

Three hypotheses arise from the Council's limited use of its new budget powers: (1) the Council believes the Board of Estimates is nearly optimizing spending, (2) the Council is exercising its authority through soft or informal influence—getting the Mayor or Board to make concessions within the Board's proposal rather than via the amendment process, and/or (3) despite theoretical authority to significantly influence the budget, there remain practical and political difficulties mitigating the Council's ability to use its authority.

Through discussions with those involved and our own investigation, the primary concern seems to be the third: although the Council has authority to amend the budget, its initiation by outside authority, a rushed timeline, lack of professional budget staff, and political incentives to align with the Mayor make it difficult for them to do so.

The budget is initiated outside of the Council.

The budget process begins with the Department of Finance (DOF), which prepares a Current Level of Services (CLS) budget, aimed at determining the cost to carry out the same policies and to provide the same services as the prior year. Following the creation of the CLS budget, the Mayor issues guidance to agencies detailing the fiscal outlook and executive priorities. With this context, agencies prepare their own budget proposals and submit them to the Bureau of the Budget and Management Research (BBMR), a division of DOF, which makes recommendations to the Mayor. The Mayor then crafts a complete budget proposal and submits it to the Board of Estimates. The Board of Estimates, after hosting at least one Taxpayers' Night, adopts a budget proposal that is finally transmitted to the City Council.

In practice, using the CLS budget and agency proposals as a launch point means the budget largely makes itself through bureaucratic inertia. Year after year, regardless of who is in the Mayor's Office, Baltimore's budget looks remarkably similar. Instead of rigorously examining public expenditures, the process is structured to resist meaningful change and the budget mostly defaults to the status quo.

The budget timeline is rushed.

Another practical difficulty preventing the City Council from exercising its budgeting power is a rushed timeline. By charter, any ordinance, including the Ordinance of Estimates, must be read on three different days of the session.⁶⁶ For typical ordinances, the Council reads the bill upon introduction (First Reader), again after it has been returned from the assigned committee with a recommendation (Second Reader), and a third time when voting on final passage (Third Reader).

Because the Council typically meets only every two weeks and because committees need time to receive and review agency reports, educate themselves on the topic, and vote on a recommendation, the timeline for a typical ordinance from introduction to passage is months. In 2025, the average enacted non-budget ordinance took 134 days to get from First Reader to Third Reader.⁶⁷

For its most important bill, the Ordinance of Estimates, however, the Council usually has just 40 days to get from start to finish—the Charter requires that the Board of Estimates deliver its adopted budget 45 days prior to the beginning of the fiscal year and that the Council pass its version at least five days prior to that same date.⁶⁸ Though these requirements establish minimum deadlines, in practice the process typically adheres closely to them, with the time between introduction and final approval averaging just 37 days over the last three years.

The result is frantic—the Budget & Appropriations Committee met 16 times in the period covering May and the first weeks of June. This pace is hardly consistent with the deliberation required to review hundreds of pages of budget documents that ultimately direct billions of dollars in spending, let alone sufficient time to advocate for and come to agreement on substantial amendments.

The Council does not have dedicated budget staff.

The City Council is not just operating on a limited timeline; they are working without any professional budget experts. Much of Baltimore’s budget preparation is handled by the Bureau of Budget and Management Research (BBMR), which is part of the Mayor’s executive staff.

At the federal level, Congress, as the legislative branch of government, has the Congressional Budget Office as a counterpart to the President’s Office of Management and Budget. At the state level, the Department of Legislative Services is an agency dedicated exclusively to the General Assembly that assists with budget-related and other research.

In Baltimore, however, there is no City Council equivalent. This asymmetry again advantages the Mayor, making it difficult for the Council to effectively challenge budget appropriations.

The “strong mayor” system makes challenging the Mayor a gamble.

Proposing changes to the budget can also be politically risky for council members. A proposed amendment that differs significantly from the Mayor’s preferences may damage a council member’s relationship with the Mayor. In a “strong mayor” system like Baltimore’s, this can be costly, decreasing political capital and potentially jeopardizing future collaboration on legislative priorities or district projects. Thus, because the Charter gives the Mayor so much power, it encourages council members to fall in line rather than challenge the Mayor, even when they believe their proposed changes would benefit the City.

Our Proposed Reforms

The budgetmaking process would be more effective and democratic if it involved more genuine legislative deliberation and public debate. Although the 2020 reforms were a step in the right direction, they did not fix the underlying problem. The system needs a larger overhaul. We propose the following reforms to Baltimore's budget process.

- Eliminate the Board of Estimates, moving its fiscal and budgetary authority to the City Council and its procurement authority to the existing division within the Department of Finance.
- Require that the budget is passed as ordinary legislation and remove the Mayor's line-item veto.
- Provide the Council with professional budget staff.

With these changes, the Council would debate appropriations in public and bring discussions about specific spending decisions out from behind closed bureaucratic doors. This system would also allow the Council to pass and champion legislation that appropriates funding, instead of being almost exclusively confined to regulatory matters. Finally, it would align our political system with the democratic ideals that Baltimore residents expect and deserve, one where their elected representatives can meaningfully influence the City's fiscal priorities.

Under the new system, the budget process would begin with council members engaging with their dedicated budget staff. The Council could elect to use a CLS-type budget as a baseline, or, alternatively, practice zero-based budgeting, re-evaluating the efficacy of every dollar spent each year. Working with budget experts, council members could propose their own budgetary priorities based on constituent needs and their policy goals. The budget would then be debated publicly in council meetings and committee hearings, with adequate time for meaningful input from residents, advocacy groups, and subject matter experts. In the end, the Council would vote on the budget as it does other legislation, with the Mayor retaining veto power over the entire budget (though without line-item veto), subject to override by a two-thirds council vote.

Similar to the federal Congress, the Council would be able to authorize new programs at any point in the year but would separately fund those programs in the annual Ordinance of Estimates. Certain expenditures required by existing City Code, such as pensions or union contracts, would automatically be included in the baseline budget. However, the Council could separately amend or repeal mandatory spending provisions through the normal legislative process, other than benefits already accrued. Ultimately, the budget would be entirely at the discretion of the City Council, with the Mayor's approval or rejection in full, rather than subject to line-item subtractions.

Procurement Authority

Procurement responsibilities currently held by the Board of Estimates should be transferred to the Department of Finance which already has a procurement bureau. Most major cities require Council approval for contracts exceeding a certain dollar threshold, with thresholds typically ranging from \$100,000 to \$1 million. For example, in Atlanta the Council must approve contracts of \$300,000 or more while in New Orleans there is a \$1 million threshold plus multi-year contracts regardless of amount.

Rather than setting a specific dollar amount in the charter, the charter should simply permit the Council to establish a threshold by ordinance as is done in [every other county](#) in Maryland.

Conclusion

In many ways, the City Council had a busy and productive year. The new Department of Consumer Protection and Business Licensing will make Baltimore friendlier to both businesses and consumers. The enacted ordinances of the Housing Package will have longstanding consequences for affordability and livability in our city. The proposed bills to address the vacant property crisis, which we are hopeful will eventually become law, can add new tools to the City's battle with blight. Other enacted bills will protect pregnant workers, mitigate food deserts, and make other small but meaningful improvements.

Too many in Baltimore, however, are still struggling. Roughly one out of five residents lives in material poverty, and many more are under financial distress from rising rents and the increased cost of basic necessities. The City leads the world in opioid deaths and lags behind on public infrastructure and community spaces.

A budget is a statement of values, and if real change is to come from our local government, significant changes must be made to the City's financial priorities. At present, however, the City Council—our elected representatives and primary conduit for public input—has little say over fiscal and budgetary matters. The charter amendments proposed in this report are intended to empower the City Council, and thereby the people of Baltimore, over the things that matter most, ideally sparking citywide conversations about how we can all come together to fight for a Baltimore where all can thrive.

From: Nate Golden
Sent: Tuesday, February 3, 2026 12:35 PM
To: Charter Review Committee (City Council)
Subject: Special Elections

To the charter review committee,

Article III Section 6 of the Baltimore City Charter establishes that when a council seat becomes open mid term, the City Council shall fill the seat via appointment of a majority vote of its members. The current council defines this process more granularly in Chapter 5 Section 11 of the adopted City Council rules.

However, if Baltimore is to be a true representative democracy, then no person should serve on the City Council without a vote from the people. I am writing to the Charter Review committee to advocate for Article III Section 6 to be amended so that if there is a council vacancy mid term that the position be filled with a special election.

Best,
Nate Golden