

BALTIMORE CITY COUNCIL



CHARTER REVIEW SPECIAL COMMITTEE

LO25-0038
Charter Review

Public Testimony

November 5, 2025 – November 19, 2025

From: Nate Golden

Sent: Wednesday, November 5, 2025 8:46 PM

To: Charter Review Committee (City Council) <charter.review.committee@baltimorecity.gov>

Subject: Charter Review Suggestions

To the Charter Review Committee,

My name is Nate Golden. I am a math teacher at Forest Park High School and the President of the Maryland Child Alliance. I am reaching out to the Charter Review Committee to advocate for the following changes to the Baltimore City Charter:

- Eliminate the Mayor's two appointees on the Board of Estimates
 - The powers of the board are instead shared equally by the Mayor, City Council President, and Comptroller
- Guarantee a floor vote for bills stalled in committee
 - Any bill not voted on in committee within 90 days can be automatically advanced to the floor.
 - Each Councilmember may trigger this override up to 3 times per calendar year
- Restore democratic control of the budget to the City Council
 - The Mayor must submit a draft budget, not a final proposal.
 - The Council can amend, add, and reallocate funds.
 - The Council adopts the final budget by majority vote.
 - The Mayor has no veto power over the budget (general or line item)

Eliminate the Mayor's two appointees on the Board of Estimates

Baltimore operates under one of the strongest "strong mayor" systems in the United States. The Mayor proposes the annual budget, holds veto power over all legislation including line item budget vetoes, and appoints heads of all departments.

On top of all of this, the Mayor essentially controls three of the five votes on the Board of Estimates through personal appointees. This means a single elected official controls both the proposal and approval of virtually every city contract and major expenditure. A better system would equally share power between the City Council President, Comptroller, and Mayor.

Guarantee a floor vote for bills stalled in committee

In previous City Councils, bills were permanently stalled in committee by either a committee chair or the City Council President, leaving voters with no clear information on where their representatives stood on important issues. While this has been less of a problem under current City Council leadership, nothing in the City Charter prevents these undemocratic decisions from happening again in the future.

This City Council has a chance to ensure government transparency is guaranteed in Baltimore City for decades to come by adding a provision to the charter allowing any bill not voted on within 90 days to advance to the floor. Each councilmember would be limited to three such overrides per year to ensure that the system is not abused.

Restore democratic control of the budget to the City Council

Every year hundreds of Baltimore voters flood to Taxpayer Night to lift up their concerns about the budget and every year their opinions are ignored. The Mayor has nearly unilateral control over the budget and the Mayor's office is nearly completely inaccessible to the everyday Baltimore resident. On the other hand, City Council members often have a much closer relationship with their constituents and voters are typically easily able to set up 1:1 meetings with their council representative.

The current structure is both unusual and less democratic than typical systems. In most governments, the executive proposes while the legislature appropriates and actually decides how public funds are spent. The reforms proposed above would restore a more appropriate balance of powers between the branches.

Importantly, this does not eliminate executive input, it simply ensures that spending decisions reflect the input of all elected representatives who answer directly to Baltimore communities and not just one citywide official.

Thank you for your dedication to improving Baltimore's Charter. I sincerely hope you will consider these reforms.

Best,
Nate Golden

From: Isaac Leal

Sent: Thursday, November 6, 2025 12:24 PM

To: Charter Review Committee (City Council) <charter.review.committee@baltimorecity.gov>

Subject: Amendment Ideas

General Charter Amendment Ideas

Isaac Leal

he/him/his

§ 6. Appointments of municipal officers.

(a) Appointment subject to confirmation. Except as otherwise provided in the Charter, the Mayor, **City Council President, and City Administrator, hereafter known as the Appointment Committee**, shall have the sole power of appointment of all municipal officers **by a two-thirds vote**, subject to confirmation by the City Council by a majority vote of its members; provided the Council shall take action on the nomination within the first [three] **two** regular meetings of the Council after the nomination is sent to it by the [Mayor] **Appointment Committee**. If the Council fails to take action within this time, then the person nominated shall be, by operation of this subsection, confirmed by the Council. If the Council, by the required vote and in the prescribed time, shall refuse to confirm the nomination, the [Mayor] **Appointment Committee** shall send to it another name for the office, who shall be subject to confirmation pursuant to this subsection.

(b) Terms of officers.

The terms of all municipal officers appointed by the [Mayor] **Joint Committee** shall expire at the end of four years [or at the end of the Mayor's term of office, whichever first occurs] **from the time of confirmation**, with the exception of the terms of the City Administrator, the Police Commissioner, and some members of the Board of School Commissioners, the Civil Service Commission, the Planning Commission, the Board of Municipal and Zoning Appeals, the advisory board established by Article X, Section 2 of this Charter, and those boards and commissions governed by State or federal law, or **wherever else prescribed otherwise in this charter**. The terms of the City Administrator, the Police Commissioner, and the members of these boards and commissions are prescribed elsewhere in the Charter or by other law.

(c) Removal – In general.

The [Mayor] **Appointment Committee, by two-thirds vote**, shall have the power to remove at pleasure all municipal officers, except members of boards and commissions established by Charter or other law, appointed by the [Mayor] **Appointment Committee** in the manner prescribed in this section and confirmed by the City Council; provided, however, that appointees holding office pursuant to the provisions of the Charter relating to the Civil Service may be removed from office only in accordance with such provisions.

(d) Removal – Boards and commissions.

Except as otherwise provided by law, the [Mayor] **Appointment Committee** may remove members of boards and commissions established by Charter or other law by majority vote of the members of the City Council. Removal shall date from the time of City Council approval.

(e) Term limits.

No person, except ex officio members, shall serve more than two consecutive full terms, in addition to any unexpired term served, on the same board or commission.

(f) Vacancies – In general.

Upon the vacancy in any office subject to this section, whether by resignation, removal, death, end of a term or otherwise, the [Mayor] **Appointment Committee** shall fill the vacancy by an appointment in the manner prescribed in this section for the remainder of the term, if any, of the former incumbent.

(g) Vacancies – Boards and commissions.

When a vacancy occurs on a board or commission established by this Charter, or other law, the [Mayor] **Appointment Committee** shall have, for [120] **60** days after the occurrence of that vacancy, the sole power of appointment to the vacant office. Such appointment shall be subject to confirmation by the City Council in the manner prescribed in this section. If the [Mayor] **Appointment Committee** fails to submit a nomination within the time prescribed in this subsection, the power of appointment shall vest and be held by the board or commission to which the vacancy shall apply, and that board or commission, by majority vote, shall certify the name of a person to the City Council for confirmation in the manner prescribed in this section.

CITY ADMINISTRATOR

§ 135. City Administrator: Establishment and Independence.

- (a) There is a City Administrator who shall be the chief administrative officer of the City.
- (b) Independence
 - (1) The Office of City Administrator shall operate as an independent entity within the executive branch, free from interference by elected officials, except as explicitly provided in this Charter.
 - (2) The City Administrator shall exercise sole authority over the administrative functions and operations assigned to their office.

(Res. 20-026, ratified Nov. 3, 2020, eff. July 1, 2021.)

§ 136. City Administrator: Appointment, term, etc.

(a) Appointment.

[The Mayor] A Committee composed of the Comptroller, Inspector General, and City Council President, thereafter known as the Committee, shall appoint the City Administrator without regard to political affiliation by two-thirds vote, subject to confirmation by the full City Council, [pursuant to Article IV, Section 6(a)].

(b) Qualifications.

- (1) The City Administrator must have, prior to appointment, at least 5 years of administrative experience that is sufficiently broad, responsible, and technical to function as the City Administrator.
- (2) The City Administrator shall also be thoroughly familiar with modern accounting methods and budget procedures.
- (3) In determining and assessing the qualifications for appointment as the City Administrator, the [Mayor] Committee must give full consideration to:
 - (i) the depth, breadth, quality, and importance of relevant experience and the degree of progression achieved;
 - (ii) the individual's education background;
 - (iii) evidence of the individual's demonstrated ability to accept and successfully meet increasing responsibilities; and
 - (iv) evidence of the individual's excellent character, professional reputation, and employment record.
- (4) To assure the selection of the most qualified individual available, the [Mayor] Committee may retain any recognized testing agency to evaluate and make recommendations concerning the qualifications of prospective appointees.

(c) *Term.*

[(1) Subject to paragraph (2) of this subsection, the City Administrator's term shall be coterminous to the Mayor.

(2) The City Administrator may continue to serve beyond the Mayor's term until a qualified successor is appointed and confirmed.]

(1) The City Administrator shall have a term of six years from the time of confirmation by the Committee.

(2) The City Administrator may serve multiple terms.

(d) *Salary.*

The City Administrator's salary shall be set in the Ordinance of Estimates.

(Res. 20-026, ratified Nov. 3, 2020, eff. July 1, 2021.)

§ 137. Relationship with Other Offices

(a) The City Administrator shall provide the Mayor and Committee with regular updates on administrative operations but shall retain full independence in decision making regarding the powers and duties enumerated in § 140.

(b) The City Administrator shall coordinate with the Office of Inspector General to ensure transparency and accountability in municipal operations.

(1) The Administrator shall report any findings of misconduct, inefficiency, or noncompliance to the Office of Inspector General for further investigation.

(c) The City Administrator shall submit quarterly reports to the City Council and Committee detailing:

(1) The status of municipal operations and service delivery;

(2) Progress towards achieving policy objectives; and

(3) Any significant operational challenges or recommendations for structural reforms.

§ 138. City Administrator: Removal.

(a) The [Mayor] Committee, by unanimous vote, may remove the City Administrator at any time.

(b) City Council may also remove the City Administrator by a 3/5ths vote with cause.

(Res. 20-026, ratified Nov. 3, 2020, eff. July 1, 2021.)

§ 139. City Administrator: Office administration.

(a) *Staff.*

The City Administrator may appoint employees to assist in his or her duties as may be provided in the Ordinance of Estimates.

(b) *Deputy City Administrator.*

(1) The City Administrator shall appoint a Deputy City Administrator who shall serve as the Acting City Administrator in the event that the City Administrator is temporarily unavailable for duty or if the position has been vacated.

(2) A Deputy City Administrator may not serve as an Acting City Administrator longer than [6 months] **60 days** without [confirmation by the City Council, pursuant to Article IV, Section 6(a).] **nomination by the Committee and confirmation by the City Council.**

(Res. 20-026, ratified Nov. 3, 2020, eff. July 1, 2021.)

§ 140. City Administrator: Powers and duties.

Except as otherwise provided in this Charter [and under the direct authority and supervision of the Mayor], the City Administrator:

- (1) administers the day-to-day operations of the City and oversees the delivery of municipal services;
- (2) exercises supervisory authority over all agencies, department directors, and municipal officers;
- (3) approves rules and regulations proposed by municipal departments and agencies;
- (4) supervises the preparation of the City's preliminary operating budget and participates in the development of the proposed Ordinance of Estimates;
- (5) **evaluates the performance and cost-effectiveness of all municipal operations, with the power to direct changes in administrative procedure as needed;**
- (6) **recommends structural reorganization of executive departments enumerated in Article VI of this Charter to improve operational efficiency when necessary;**
- (7) **issues directives binding on all executive departments enumerated in Article VI of this Charter to address inefficiencies, redundancies, or operational inconsistencies;**
- (8) **reviews departmental compliance with performance benchmarks in administration;**
- (9) **conducts audits and assessments of administrative outcomes and procedures;**
- (10) **recommends corrective actions to address deficiencies in administrative outcome and process when necessary; and**
- (11) **prepares and publishes an annual State of Administration report, outlining the performance of all executive departments and key operational initiatives.**
 - (i) **The report shall be made publicly available and submitted to the Mayor and City Council and Committee.**

[(5)] (12) advises the Mayor and Committee in the formation of policy and the implementation of plans to address demands for municipal services, enhance the quality of life, and strengthen the economic vitality of the City;

[(6)] (13) performs duties delegated by the Mayor and Committee that are not inconsistent with this Charter; and

[(7)] (14) performs any other duty as required by this Charter or required by ordinance of the Mayor and City Council.

(Res. 20-026, ratified Nov. 3, 2020, eff. July 1, 2021.)

§ 2. Members.

(a) Election and term.

(1) The voters shall elect the members of the City Council on the Tuesday next after the first Monday in November 2016, and on the same day and month in every succeeding fourth year.

(2) Their term of office shall commence on the Thursday next after the first Monday in December succeeding their election and shall continue for 4 years.

(b) Number.

The Council shall consist of [fourteen] **fifteen** members [in addition to the President].

There shall be [fourteen] **fifteen** districts with one member elected from each district.

(c) Districts.

The election of members shall be held by council districts, and no person is entitled to vote for any member of the City Council other than member for the district in which the voter is registered.

(d) Removal.

The City Council, by a [three-fourths] **three-fifths** vote of its members, may remove an individual member from office for incompetency, misconduct in office, wilful neglect of duty, or felony or misdemeanor in office, on charges preferred by the Mayor, the City Council's Committee on Legislative Investigations, or by the Inspector General, and after notice of those charges and an opportunity to be heard by the City Council are given to the individual member.

(e) Term Limit.

A member of the City Council shall not hold office for more than 2 consecutive full terms of office and in no event shall hold the office for more than 8 years during any 12 year period. This provision shall not preclude an elected member from seeking other elected offices within Baltimore City after two consecutive terms as member. In the event that an elected member takes office as a result of a removal or vacancy as described in §§ 2 or 6 of this Article, that elected member shall only be eligible to hold that office for the remainder of the predecessor's unexpired term and 1 consecutive full term thereafter.

Editor's Note: The preceding subsection (e) was added by Initiative Ballot Question K, ratified November 8, 2022. The final sentence of Question K establishes that subsection (e) will be effective "beginning with persons elected in the 2024 Baltimore City Election."

(Initiative "Question K", ratified Nov. 8, 2022; Res. 99-016, ratified Nov. 2, 1999; Initiative "Question P", ratified Nov. 5, 2002; Res. 04-049, ratified Nov. 2, 2004; Res. 12-003, ratified Nov. 6, 2012; Res. 20-024, ratified Nov. 3, 2020.)

§ 3. President.

(a) Election, qualifications, duties, etc.

[At the same time that they elect the members, the voters shall elect from Baltimore City at large, a person to be the President of the City Council, who shall possess the qualifications required for the Mayor of the City.] **The City Council shall elect one member of the Council amongst itself as its President. The President of the City Council**

shall possess the qualifications required for the Mayor. It shall be the President's duty to preside over the City Council, vote on all questions and perform such other duties as may be prescribed by law. The salary of the President shall be set in the Ordinance of Estimates {read: shall be as provided in Article VII, §§ 117 through 125 of this Charter}.

(b) Removal.

The City Council, by a [three-fourths] **three-fifths** vote of its members, may remove the President of the City Council from office for incompetency, misconduct in office, wilful neglect of duty, or felony or misdemeanor in office, on charges preferred by the Mayor, by the City Council's Committee on Legislative Investigations, a verified petition signed by at least [20%] **10%** of the qualified voters in Baltimore City, or by the Inspector General, after notice of those charges and an opportunity to be heard by the City Council are given to the President.

(c) Term limit.

The President of the City Council shall not hold office for more than 2 consecutive full terms of office and in no event shall hold the office for more than 8 years during any 12 year period. This provision shall not preclude an elected President from seeking other elected offices within Baltimore City after two consecutive terms as President. In the event that an elected President takes office as a result of a removal or vacancy described in §§ 3 or 4 of this Article, that elected President shall only be eligible to hold that office for the remainder of the predecessor's unexpired term and 1 consecutive full term thereafter.

Editor's Note: The preceding subsection (c) was added by Initiative Ballot Question K, ratified November 8, 2022. The final sentence of Question K establishes that subsection (c) will be effective

"beginning with persons elected in the 2024 Baltimore City Election."

(Initiative "Question K", ratified Nov. 8, 2022; Res. 20-024, ratified Nov. 3, 2020.)

§ 4. Vacancy in presidency.

If it becomes necessary for the President of the City Council to fill the unexpired term of the Mayor, or in case of the death, resignation, removal or other disqualification of the President, the City Council, by a majority vote of its members, shall elect a new president **among its remaining members** for the unexpired term. [The person so elected as President may, but need not, be, at the time of election, a member of the City Council.]

§ 132. Powers and duties of the Department.

(a) In general.

The Department has the powers and duties specified in this section.

(b) Supervision of municipal buildings, related improvements.

(1) Unless otherwise provided by this Charter, the Director shall supervise all municipal buildings and related improvements made in Baltimore City or elsewhere by or for the City or any municipal agency.

(2) All plans and specifications for these municipal buildings and related improvements, including those involving engineering questions, shall be submitted to the Director for Approval.

(c) Construction, maintenance, etc., of buildings, related improvements.

(1) Unless otherwise provided by this Charter, the Department has charge of the construction, demolition, alteration, operation and maintenance of all municipal buildings and related improvements.

(2) To carry out these activities, the Director may enter and occupy any municipal property after giving due notice to the agency having control of the property. The Director shall restore any property so entered to the condition in which it was before the entry.

(d) Operational and Structural Oversight

(1) Alignment of Facilities with Operational Requirements

The Department shall manage and oversee the alignment of City-owned and leased facilities to ensure structural and operational consistency with the broader administrative framework of the City. This includes regular assessments of facility use to identify opportunities for enhanced efficiency, functionality, and resource optimization.

(2) Periodic Facility Assessments

(i) The Department shall conduct periodic reviews of City facilities, evaluating their functional necessity, operational footprint, and overall alignment with administrative objectives.

(ii) Recommendations from these assessments shall inform adjustments to ensure efficient use of facilities and to reduce unnecessary administrative burdens associated with maintaining surplus or underutilized assets.

(3) Consolidation of Administrative Assets

The Department shall ensure that administrative and operational assets are appropriately housed within City-owned or leased facilities, with emphasis on reducing redundancies, optimizing space utilization, and consolidating operations to achieve efficiency objectives.

(4) Structural Optimization Protocols

(i) The Department shall establish protocols for the reconfiguration, repurposing, or divestiture of facilities as necessary to align with operational needs and efficiency standards.

(ii) Any plans for facility expansion or continued use must demonstrate alignment with measurable operational benefits and resource sustainability.

(5) All operational resources, including physical assets under the Department's jurisdiction, shall be reviewed on a recurring basis to evaluate compliance with established efficiency benchmarks and structural performance standards.

[(d)] (e) – (f) {Repealed by Res. 14-016, ratified Nov. 4, 2014.}

(g) Fleet management.

(1) The Department is responsible for:

(i) the maintenance, repair, and operation of all motor vehicles and related equipment owned by the City, whether held for general service or assigned for the use of a particular office or agency,

(ii) the maintenance and operation of related garages, depots, and shops;

(iii) the inspection of all City vehicles and related equipment and the keeping of proper records about how these vehicles and equipment are handled and operated;

(iv) the assignment of these vehicles and related equipment for the use of officers and other agencies of the City; and

(v) the maintenance or the hiring of any hauling or passenger service needed by any municipal agency.

(2) This subsection does not apply to motor vehicles and related equipment of the Baltimore City Public School System, except to the extent requested by that department and agreed to by the Department of General Services.

(h) Assistance to other agencies.

On the request of the head of a municipal agency, the Director shall:

(1) supply estimates of the cost of work for building improvements and vehicles to be done for that agency during the next fiscal year; and

(2) perform services for the municipal agency of the same general character as those carried on by the Department, the cost of which shall be charged to the agency requesting the services and shall be paid out of the funds appropriated to it.

(i) Additional powers and duties.

The Department has the additional powers and duties as are prescribed by law.

(Res. 08-003, ratified Nov. 4, 2008.)

Article VII

§ 142. Consolidation of Offices into Executive Departments.

(a) Purpose and Intent.

(1) This section establishes the structural framework for the consolidation of all City offices, agencies, boards, commissions, and organizational units not expressly enumerated in the Charter into the Executive Departments defined within it.

(2) The consolidation process shall be conducted in an independent, nonpartisan manner to ensure, in order of priority

- (i) cost savings;
- (ii) elimination of redundancies; and
- (iii) alignment of structural efficiency.

(3) The City Administrator shall be tasked with executing this consolidation, exercising complete independence in their oversight and decision-making.

(b) Applicability and Scope.

(1) This section applies to all offices, agencies, quasi-agencies, mayoral offices, boards, commissions, and organizational units of the City that are not explicitly enumerated as Executive Departments under the Charter.

(2) Offices or agencies established pursuant to Federal or State mandates, or those governed by separate legal or statutory requirements, shall adhere to this section to the extent permissible by law.

(c) Consolidation Oversight and Execution.

(1) Independent Authority:

(i) The City Administrator shall oversee and execute the consolidation process in accordance with this section.

(ii) These City Administrator or assigned entities by the Administrator shall have complete independence in evaluating, determining, and implementing the appropriate consolidation of affected offices or units.

(2) Assignment to Executive Departments:

(i) The City Administrator shall determine the most appropriate Executive Department to absorb each office, division, unit, or subunit.

(ii) Consolidated offices or units shall function as divisions, bureaus, or subdivisions within their receiving department, subject to its internal policies and oversight mechanisms.

(3) Timeline for Implementation:

(i) All consolidations shall be completed within 24 months of the effective date of this section.

(ii) The City Administrator may authorize extensions for specific offices or units if additional time is required to ensure orderly integration, provided such extensions do not exceed six months.

(d) Administrative Reorganization.

(1) Reorganization Plan:

(i) Within 180 days of the effective date of this section, the City Administrator shall issue a Consolidation Plan.

(ii) The Consolidation Plan shall outline:

1. The offices and units to be consolidated;
2. The receiving Executive Departments for each consolidation;
3. Any administrative adjustments necessary to facilitate the process.

(2) Implementation Authority:

(i) The City Administrator shall have authority to:

1. Reassign personnel;
2. Recommend reallocation of budgetary resources;
3. Establish interim procedures to manage transitional operations.

(ii) The City Administrator shall issue binding directives and regulations to ensure compliance with the Consolidation Plan.

(e) Oversight and Accountability.

(1) Monitoring and Reporting:

(i) The Department of Audits shall conduct a comprehensive review of the consolidation process within 24 months to assess compliance with this section.

(ii) The findings of the review shall be submitted to the Mayor, City Council, City Administrator, and Board of Estimates, along with recommendations for any further structural adjustments.

(2) Annual Progress Reports:

(i) The City Administrator shall submit annual progress reports detailing the status of the consolidation process, including operational changes, resource reallocations, and any challenges encountered.

(3) Transparency and Public Records:

(i) All documents related to the consolidation process, including the Consolidation Plan and progress reports, shall be made publicly available, subject to applicable laws governing confidentiality and public disclosure.

(f) Supersession and Severability.

(1) Supersession

(i) This section supersedes any conflicting provisions of this Charter, ordinances, or administrative policies, except where preempted by Federal or State law.

(ii) All ordinances, resolutions, or administrative actions inconsistent with this section are hereby repealed or amended to the extent of such inconsistency.

(2) Severability

(i) If any provision of this section, or its application to any person or circumstance, is held invalid by a court of competent jurisdiction, the remaining provisions and applications shall not be affected and shall continue in full force and effect.

(g) Effective Date.

This section shall take effect immediately upon ratification.

§ 2. Removal; Vacancy; Absence.

(a) Removal.

The City Council, by a three-fourths vote of its members, may remove the Mayor from office for incompetency, misconduct in office, wilful neglect of duty, or felony or misdemeanor in office, on charges preferred by the City Council's Committee on Legislative Investigations, a verified petition signed by at least [20%] 10% of the qualified voters in Baltimore City, or by the Inspector General, and after notice of those charges and an opportunity to be heard by the City Council are given to the Mayor.

(b) Vacancy.

In case of vacancy in the office of the Mayor by death, resignation, or permanent disqualification, the President of the City Council shall be Mayor for the remainder of the term for which the Mayor was elected.

(c) Absence.

In case of, and during, sickness, temporary disqualification or necessary absence of the Mayor, the President of the City Council shall be ex officio Mayor of the City.

(d) Recall Elections

(1) The Mayor may be subject to a recall election if at least 10% of the qualified voters in Baltimore City sign a verified petition calling for the recall.

(2) The recall election shall be conducted as a special election, adhering to all applicable laws governing special elections, and shall be done as quickly as the law permits.

(3) The ballot shall include:

(i) The question: "Shall [Name of Mayor] be removed from the office of Mayor of Baltimore City?" or similar language therein; and

(ii) The options: "Yes" or "No."

(4) If a majority of the votes cast favor removal, the Mayor shall immediately vacate the office, and the President of the City Council shall assume the role of Mayor for the remainder of the term.

(5) If the majority votes against removal, the Mayor shall continue to serve their term uninterrupted.

(6) Only one recall election may be conducted against the same Mayor during a single term of office.

(7) A special public report on the recall process, including reasons for the recall and the election's outcome, shall be issued within 30 days after the recall election.

(8) The Mayor and City Council shall coordinate with the Board of Elections and other applicable entities to determine ordinance, rule, and regulation to establish a process for recall elections as a special election, and for establishment of the petition that enables a recall election.

§ 100. Civil Service Commission: Discharges, etc.; Reductions in force.

(a) Discharges, suspensions, reductions in pay or position.

(1) No person may be discharged from the Civil Service, reduced in pay or position, or suspended because of political opinions or affiliations, or for refusing to contribute to any political fund or refusing to render any political service. But nothing in this Charter relating to the Civil Service forbids the discharge, reduction in pay or position, or suspension of an officer or employee for any just cause.

(2) Whenever a non-probationary employee is discharged, reduced in pay or position, or suspended for more than 30 days, the appointing officer shall furnish a copy of the order of discharge, reduction, or suspension, together with a statement of the reasons for the action, to the employee and to the Commission.

(3) The employee may contest the action by:

- (i) requesting a hearing before the Commission; or
- (ii) initiating a grievance pursuant to an applicable grievance and arbitration procedure, if any, contained in an applicable collective bargaining agreement.

(4) Once an employee has chosen to contest an action by electing one of the procedures specified in paragraph (3) of this subsection, the employee is bound by that election and may not subsequently choose to follow a different procedure.

(5) In all cases, except one in which an employee elects to contest an action through a grievance and arbitration procedure under paragraph (3)(ii) of this subsection, the Commission may, and on the written request of the employee, the Commission shall investigate the disciplinary action. If the Commission finds that the intent and spirit of the provisions of this Charter have been violated in the discharge, reduction, or suspension, it shall report its findings to the Mayor; and the appointing officer shall take whatever action the Commission directs to rectify the violation.

Editor's Note: Section 2 of Resolution 06-017 states:

[T]his amendment applies only to grievance and arbitration procedures that, after the effective date of this amendment, have been adopted as part of a collective bargaining agreement to apply to employees who have been discharged, reduced in pay or position, or suspended for more than 30 days.

(b) Reductions in force – Reemployment preference.

Each person discharged for the purpose of reducing the force and without fault shall receive a certificate so stating and all persons so discharged shall be placed on the eligible list in the order of the length of their service in their classifications at the time of being laid off and in other classifications the civil service in which they may have served previously. The weight to be given to length of service in their last classification and in prior classifications shall be determined in accordance with the rules of the Commission. Persons so discharged shall have preference in the order of their seniority over others on the eligible list, subject, however, to the terms of the next subsection and to any

priority to which any person may be entitled by virtue of any preference to veterans or their dependents.

Editor's Note: For statutory requirements governing the proposal, adoption, and publication of administrative rules and regulations, see General Provisions Article, Title 4 {"Administrative Procedure Act – Regulations"}.

(c) Reductions in force – Seasonal and part-time employees.

In the case of classes of seasonal or part-time employees the Commission, after notice and a public hearing, may adopt rules excluding them from, or limiting the application to them of, the preference contained in the preceding subsection.

Editor's Note: For statutory requirements governing the proposal, adoption, and publication of administrative rules and regulations, see General Provisions Article, Title 4 {"Administrative Procedure Act – Regulations"}.

(Res. 06-017, ratified Nov. 7, 2006.)

(d) Efficiency Committee

(1) There is an Efficiency Committee (the "Committee") composed of:

- (i) The Inspector General, who shall serve as its chair;
- (ii) The President of the Civil Service Commission, who shall serve as its vice-chair;
- (iii) The Director of the Department of Human Resources;
- (iv) The Director of Finance; and
- (v) The City Administrator

(2) Independence

The Committee shall operate independently and have the authority to issue directives binding on all municipal agencies, departments, and offices concerning workforce efficiency and structural reductions.

(3) Powers and Duties

- (i) Conducts comprehensive, regular reviews of municipal staffing levels and classifications to identify redundancies, inefficiencies, and non-essential roles. The Committee shall prioritize evaluations of positions classified as managerial, administrative, or supervisory, as well as non-frontline and non-bargaining employees;
- (ii) Establishes and mandates specific workforce reduction targets for each municipal agency and department, ensuring alignment with fiscal discipline and operational priorities;
- (iii) Issues binding directives to implement reductions in non-frontline and non-bargaining positions, with compliance deadlines set by the Committee;
- (iv) Denies or revokes approval for any proposed position or action that would result in a net increase in non-essential staffing levels;

- (v) Collaborates with the Department of Finance to ensure that workforce reductions are reflected in the Ordinance of Estimates;
- (vi) Recommends adjustments to departmental budgets based on compliance with reduction targets;
- (vii) Monitor compliance with workforce reduction directives and position controls;
- (viii) Imposes penalties for noncompliance; and
- (ix) Submits an annual report to the Mayor, City Council, Inspector General, and Board of Estimates, detailing workforce reductions achieved, compliance by municipal agencies, identified areas for further efficiency improvements, and recommendations for additional workforce reduction measures.

(4) Procedural Safeguards

- (i) The Committee shall maintain records of all directives, approvals, and recommendations, which shall be made available for public review, subject to applicable confidentiality laws.
- (ii) Workforce reduction directives shall be implemented in compliance with Section 100 of this Article, including any applicable grievance or appeals processes.
- (iii) The Committee shall engage in good-faith coordination with collective bargaining representatives to ensure reductions do not violate collective bargaining agreements and prioritize non-bargaining employees for reductions.

(5) Prohibition on Workforce Expansion

- (i) No municipal agency or department shall establish, reclassify, or fill positions in non-frontline or non-bargaining categories without prior approval from the Committee.
- (ii) No municipal agency or department shall establish, reclassify, or fill positions in non-frontline or non-bargaining categories without prior approval from the Committee.

- (6) If any provision of this subsection is deemed invalid by a court of competent jurisdiction, the remaining provisions shall remain in full force and effect.

§ 3. President.

(a) Election, qualifications, duties, etc.

At the same time that they elect the members, the voters shall elect from Baltimore City at large, a person to be the President of the City Council, who shall possess the qualifications required for the Mayor of the City. It shall be the President's duty to preside over the City Council, vote on all questions and perform such other duties as may be prescribed by law. The salary of the President shall be set in the Ordinance of Estimates {read: shall be as provided in Article VII, §§ 117 through 125 of this Charter}.

(b) Removal.

The City Council, by a three-fourths vote of its members, may remove the President of the City Council from office for incompetency, misconduct in office, wilful neglect of duty, or felony or misdemeanor in office, on charges preferred by the Mayor, by the City Council's Committee on Legislative Investigations, a verified petition signed by at least [20%] 10% of the qualified voters in Baltimore City, or by the Inspector General, after notice of those charges and an opportunity to be heard by the City Council are given to the President.

(c) Recall Elections

(1) The President of the City Council may be subject to a recall election if at least 10% of the qualified voters in Baltimore City sign a verified petition calling for the recall.

(2) The recall election shall be conducted as a special election, adhering to all applicable laws governing special elections, and shall be done as quickly as the law permits.

(3) The ballot shall include:

(i) The question: "Shall [Name of City Council President] be removed from the office of City Council President?" or similar language therein; and

(ii) The options: "Yes" or "No."

(4) If a majority of the votes cast favor removal, the City Council President shall immediately vacate the office, and the City Council shall elect a new president following § 4 of this Article.

(5) If the majority votes against removal, the City Council President shall continue to serve their term uninterrupted.

(6) Only one recall election may be conducted against the same City Council President during a single term of office.

(7) A special public report on the recall process, including reasons for the recall and the election's outcome, shall be issued within 30 days after the recall election.

(8) The Mayor and City Council shall coordinate with the Board of Elections and other applicable entities to determine ordinance, rule, and regulation to establish a process for recall elections as a special election, and for establishment of the petition that enables a recall election.

[(c)] (d) Term limit.

The President of the City Council shall not hold office for more than 2 consecutive full terms of office and in no event shall hold the office for more than 8 years during any 12

From: Fran Weld

Sent: Tuesday, November 11, 2025 9:30 AM

To: Cohen, Zeke (City Council) <Zeke.Cohen@baltimorecity.gov>; Ramos, Odette (City Council) <Odette.Ramos@baltimorecity.gov>

Cc: Hasiuk, Ethan (City Council) <Ethan.Hasiuk@baltimorecity.gov>

Subject: Charter Review - San Francisco Example

Dear Zeke and Odette:

I am absolutely delighted that you are undertaking a review of Baltimore City's Charter. As I think I have mentioned to Zeke in the past, I was involved in similar efforts in both Oakland and San Francisco, and wanted to share a recently published report on San Francisco's charter reform efforts. [See link below]. This was authored by SPUR, a non-profit non-partisan urban policy think tank of which I previously served as board chair. Of course much of the specific content is different from what you will put forth for Baltimore, but I appreciated how they discuss why reform is necessary and helpful, simplify their recommendations, and develop a roadmap for implementation.

I hope you find this example useful as you launch your work.

Please let me know if I can be of any assistance and thank you for tackling this important topic.

Best,

Fran Weld



SPUR

POLICY BRIEF
NOVEMBER 2025

Charter for Change

**Empowering San Francisco's government
through charter reform**



Acknowledgments

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Acknowledgments

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We thank the advisory board members for sharing their time and expertise with us. Research and analysis for this report were aided by collaboration with staff from the San Francisco Controller's Office, City Administrator's Office, Mayor's Office, and City Attorney's Office and with other current and former staff and officials of the City and County of San Francisco. The findings and recommendations in this report are SPUR's and do not necessarily reflect the viewpoint of the advisory board members or others. Any errors are the authors' alone.

Edited by Melissa Edeburn and Ren Steen
Designed by Shawn Hazen
Copy edited by Valerie Sinzdak



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Executive Summary

From housing affordability to public safety to climate resilience, the City and County of San Francisco faces increasingly complex challenges that demand effective and responsive governance. Yet the San Francisco City Charter, the foundational legal document meant to serve as the city's local "constitution," constrains rather than enables effective governance. Many of its provisions have become outdated, duplicative, or overly specific. And because any change to the city charter requires a public vote at the ballot, even small corrections or updates are difficult to make.

The result is a government structure misaligned with modern governance needs. Critical city functions often require navigating byzantine processes that can take months or years to complete. Department heads often lack clear authority and struggle to adapt quickly to changing circumstances because they must navigate layers of overlapping bureaucracy. The charter's excessive procedural detail locks the city into organizational structures and administrative processes that prevent flexibility and continuous improvement.

Over time, well-intentioned amendments have made the charter resemble the Winchester Mystery House — impressive in scale but chaotic in design. It's easier to expand the charter with new provisions than to modify existing ones because many constituents are invested in preserving the amendments they fought to include. New requirements are added while older ones are rarely removed, often layering on top of each other in unintended ways. As a result, San Francisco's charter is 548 pages long, 183% longer than the City of Seattle's charter and 47% longer than New York City's.

The charter's complexity has led to a system where accountability is unclear, decisions are slow, and residents experience the consequences of delayed services. Diffused accountability means that residents cannot effectively engage with or hold government officials accountable. Charter mandates constrain operational flexibility and prevent the city from reorganizing in ways that could help address the city's structural budget deficit or better respond to resident needs. By choosing to modernize the charter, San Franciscans can design a governance structure that supports effective leadership, adaptable problem-solving, and meaningful accountability to the public.

San Francisco last comprehensively updated its charter 30 years ago; since then, voters have amended it more than 100 times. Today, policymakers and the public are considering changes to the charter to streamline the city's many commissions. As the mayor and Board of Supervisors consider these recommendations for the November 2026 ballot, SPUR recommends they take a broader approach to modernizing the charter. To create a governance framework that empowers leadership, ensures accountability, and allows the city to address its challenges, the reforms outlined in this report should be considered alongside the current effort to streamline the city's many commissions.

This brief recommends 10 charter changes to put before voters in November 2026 in order to improve governmental outcomes, access, and accountability.

Improve accountability by clarifying diffuse lines of authority.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Authorize the mayor to hire and fire most department heads.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Remove charter restrictions that limit mayoral staffing.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Empower the city administrator to act as the city's chief operating officer.

Drive better outcomes by improving the way the city sets and implements rules.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Empower the city administrator to improve the city's purchasing rules.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Fix the city's employee bargaining process.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Resolve issues through leadership rather than at the ballot.

Loosen restrictions that prevent adaptation and modernization.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Shift many departments from the charter to the administrative code.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Broaden existing charter provisions to permit more flexible reorganization of government.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Strike outdated, conflicting, or tactical responsibilities from the city charter.

RECOMMENDATION 10

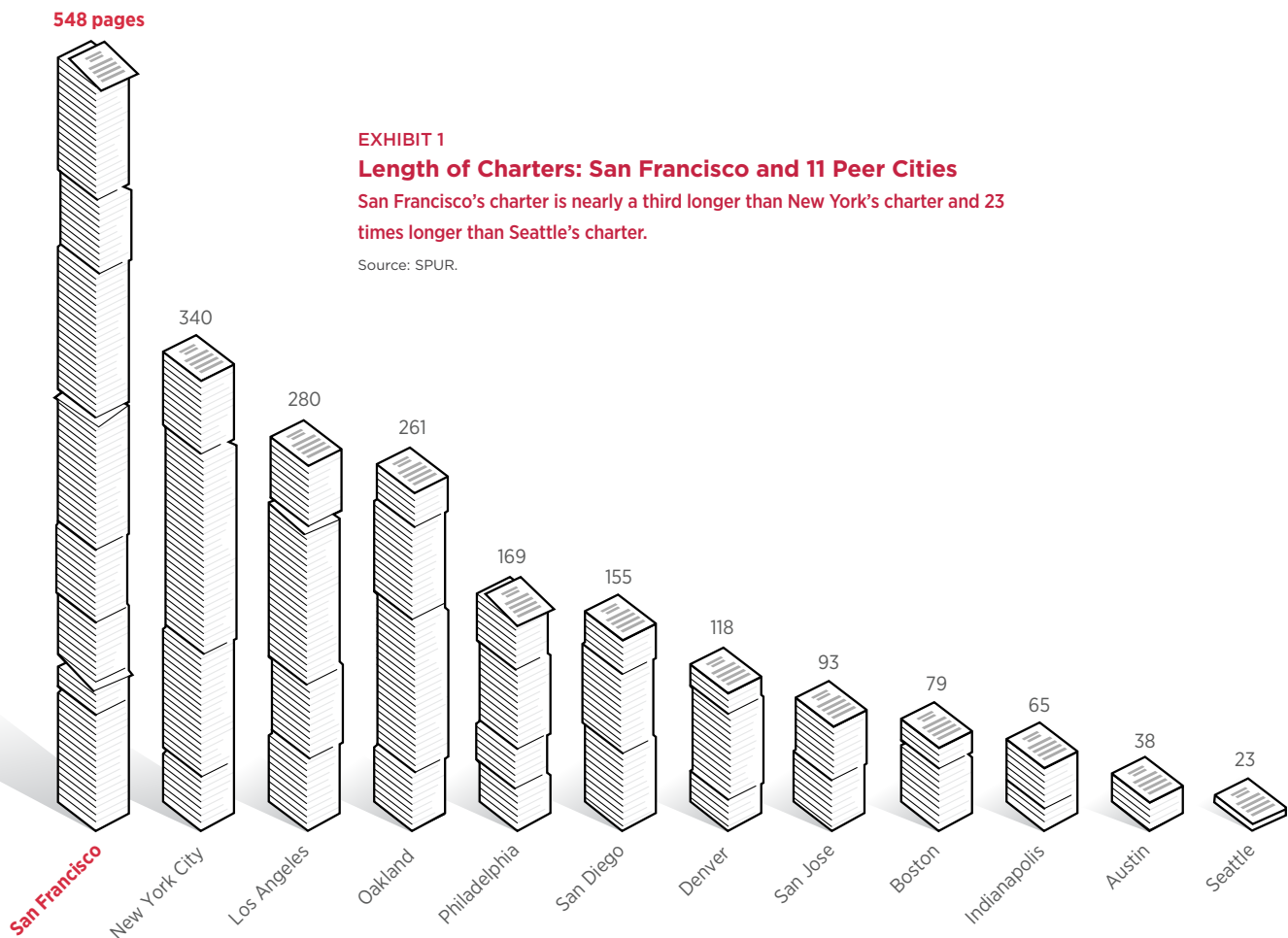
Restore flexibility to the city's budget to allow resources to be shifted to priority services.

Introduction

Background and History

San Francisco is one of approximately 130 charter cities in California. Under California law, there are two ways cities can be organized. “General law cities” get their power from the California Constitution and follow state law. “Charter cities” operate under a locally adopted city charter that defines their powers and structure.¹

As San Francisco’s “constitution,” the charter establishes the framework for the city’s government, outlining the authority and essential procedures used to provide public services



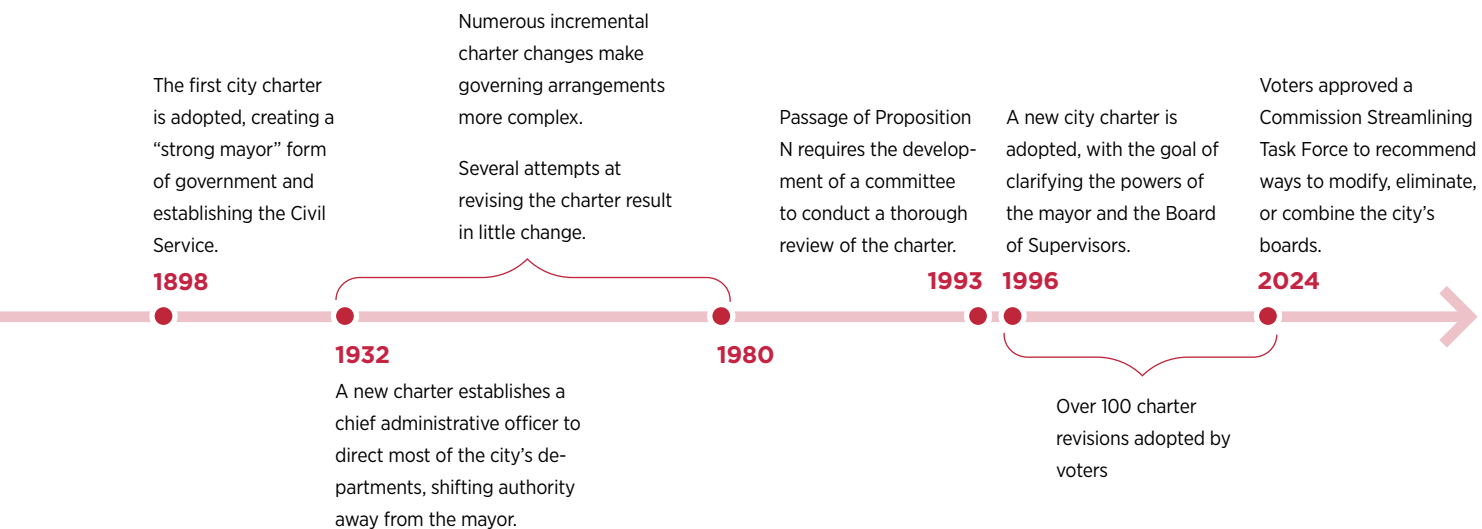
¹ California Lawyers Association, *An Introduction to Local and Regional Public Agencies in California*, <https://calawyers.org/section/public-law/publications/how-government-works/> (accessed on September 18, 2025).

and manage public assets. It defines how the city is organized and operates, and it establishes foundational processes for adopting laws, conducting elections, and managing city finances, human resource needs, and contracts for services. At 548 pages, San Francisco’s charter is one of the longest charters in the country (Exhibit 1).

San Francisco’s current charter was adopted in 1996, and voters have since approved more than 100 charter amendments through ballot initiatives that added new provisions but rarely removed or updated existing ones. As a result, the charter has grown significantly in length and complexity (Exhibit 2).

EXHIBIT 2 Timeline of Charter Reform

Source: SPUR, *Designed to Serve*.



SPUR’s 2024 report *Designed to Serve: Resetting the city’s governance structure to better meet the needs of San Franciscans* examined the practical effects of the charter. The report found that the charter creates an overly complex system characterized by fragmented management, diffused decision-making, and unclear lines of authority. This structure prioritizes oversight over outcomes, ultimately failing to effectively serve San Francisco residents.²

Many provisions that may have been useful when adopted have become outdated, duplicative, or overly specific. And because any change to the charter requires a public vote at the ballot, even small corrections require a lot of resources and political capital. Furthermore, once something is in the charter, eliminating it is difficult. Even when the provision no longer serves the greater good of the city, or the cost to maintain it exceeds its benefit, citizen advocates, elected officials, or both often feel strongly that it should be there. The path of least resistance is to leave it in place or add additional layers to achieve the new goal. Like the Winchester Mystery House, San Francisco’s charter has grown through endless additions with no coherent design.

² Nicole Neditch, *Designed to Serve: Resetting the city’s governance structure to better meet the needs of San Franciscans*, SPUR, August 2024, page 4, <https://www.spur.org/publications/spur-report/2024-07-31/designed-serve>.

Now is the time to consider ways to change the charter to better support the city government's ability to be responsive to the needs and expectations of San Franciscans. In November 2024, voters approved Proposition E — a measure establishing the Commission Streamlining Task Force to identify ways to modify, eliminate, or combine the city's charter-defined appointive boards and commissions with the goal of creating a more effective, efficient, and economical city government.³ In February 2026, the task force will offer recommendations to the Board of Supervisors, some of which will require voters to consider amendments to the charter in November 2026. The goal of SPUR's recommendations is to inform a broader public discussion of other charter changes that are needed to improve governmental outcomes, access, and accountability.

The City and County of San Francisco plays a vital role in providing for community well-being. Operational and policy decisions by the mayor and the Board of Supervisors affect community health, safety, and economic outcomes for everyone who calls San Francisco home. The city's governing structures must be evaluated to determine whether they're helping or hindering these outcomes. They must evolve to meet fiscal challenges, modern realities, changing circumstances, and new priorities. A well-designed charter should support and enable city leaders' ability to govern. It should clearly establish the foundational structure of city government while leaving operational flexibility to evolve as needs change. A modern charter should function less like a museum of past compromises and more like a living framework for effective governance.

This report presents 11 charter reform recommendations that can help the City and County of San Francisco's government function more effectively. These recommendations build on those in *Designed to Serve*, prioritizing leadership, empowerment, and accountability as foundational design principles.

Six Principles for Good Government

SPUR defines “good government” as government that upholds the rights of its people and supports their ability to thrive. Good government delivers programs and services that effectively meet the needs of the people it serves and ensures that its actions are transparent and responsive to public input. To realize this goal, leaders and government employees should have clear, effective rules for how to interact, know who is doing what, and support each other in achieving shared outcomes.

1 Clarity and Fairness: Good government has an established legal framework that is interpreted and enforced impartially. All governmental entities, staff, and elected officials respect and abide by established laws and rules of conduct. Rules and laws are applied in ways that are clear and fair. Legal guidance given to policymakers regarding the application of the law is clear and accurate.

continued →

³ City and County of San Francisco, “Commission Streamlining Task Force,” <https://www.sf.gov/commission-streamlining-task-force> (accessed on September 22, 2025).

2 Transparency: Good government is transparent. Information is accessible to the public, is understandable, and can be monitored. Key interests seeking to influence the outcome of decisions are known to the public. Communication is clear, allowing leaders to discuss issues thoroughly and make good decisions.

3 Accountability: Good government is accountable to the public for its decisions. Roles and responsibilities of governmental entities, departments, staff, and elected officials are clearly defined. Accountability includes fiscal accountability for tax dollars collected and spent.

4 Representation: Good government engages with the community it represents and is inclusive and equitable. It reflects the community members it serves. It equitably allocates resources, both time and money, to ensure that all residents have opportunities to improve or maintain their well-being and that economic prosperity and growth are shared. Good government balances all voices and is not subject to the undue influence of any group or political power. It listens and considers not only the loudest voices but also those without a voice, without organization, and without financial strength. It represents everyone, balancing often-competing interests for the greater good.

5 Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Adaptability: Good government delivers services to meet the needs of the public while making the best use of the resources available. It effectively leverages its time, talent, and resources to maximize benefits to its residents. It operates at a high level of competence and excellence, obtained through adequate funding, good management, and careful resource allocation. Good government is nimble and quickly adapts to address challenges as they arise.

6 Leadership: Good government has leaders at every level (elected, appointed, employed) who establish norms and values to instill respectfulness in all interactions. Good leaders insist on civility in decision-making and in all public engagement and discourse. They enforce and follow the rule of law. They motivate and inspire others, creating an environment of collaboration and success despite differences of opinion. They work through challenges and make tough decisions in a timely manner. They balance all interests, set realistic expectations, strive for the greatest public good, and trust in the process, accepting and implementing results they may not personally like.

Recommendations

A charter is a city's constitution, establishing its government's structure, authority, and most critical decision-making processes. A well-constructed charter can enable a government to work for those it serves and allow residents to hold it accountable for doing so. However, problems in the charter's structure can also impede progress on issues that residents care most about, hindering the ability of the public, elected leaders, and government staff to address them.

Charter reform can remove roadblocks to effective and accountable decision-making and pare back procedural requirements that impede a city's ability to adapt to today's challenges. In San Francisco, reform could enable the city to address its structural budget deficit, simplify and accelerate permitting processes, deliver projects with community-wide benefits, modernize infrastructure, increase the quality of transit service, and improve other public services residents rely on every day. If implemented, the following recommendations would increase the ability of elected leaders and government staff to address these issues. We propose that the mayor and the Board of Supervisors consider these recommendations as part of the current commission streamlining charter reform effort, which would place reforms before voters on the November 2026 ballot.

Improve accountability by clarifying diffuse lines of authority.

When authority is scattered across multiple officials and departments without clear lines of responsibility, it becomes nearly impossible for residents to know who to hold accountable when services fail. This diffusion of authority also prevents city leaders from effectively managing operations and delivering results. The charter should be revised to create clearer accountability for the mayor, the city administrator, and department heads.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Authorize the mayor to hire and fire most department heads.

Proposed amendments: Update charter section 3.100, 4.102 (see appendices A and B)

The mayor is the city's chief executive. Voters expect the mayor to have the authority to lead and, in turn, to be held accountable through elections. Current mayoral charter powers include administering most departments, preparing the budget, directing labor negotiations, managing emergencies, and introducing or vetoing legislation. However, one-off charter revisions have dispersed key management responsibilities across the government, leaving the mayor with less authority than the public assumes. In *Designed to Serve*, SPUR recommended aligning charter provisions with public expectations by

giving the mayor the authority, staffing, and resources needed to oversee city departments and the services they provide. The mayor’s office sets goals and manages the performance of city services. These services are provided through departments, each led by a department head responsible for translating direction into action. Ensuring clear and consistent lines of accountability between the executive office and these departments is crucial to delivering high-quality city services.

Under the current charter, the mayor’s fundamental executive authority ranges from complete to none (Exhibit 3). The mayor has full appointment authority over only 4 of 63 department leaders. In many cases, commissions or the Board of Supervisors control appointments or share responsibility, blurring accountability.

EXHIBIT 3
Current Mayoral Authority
for Department Head
Appointments and Removals
 Under the current charter, the mayor has no direct authority to appoint or remove 94% of department heads.

Source: SPUR.

AUTHORITY LEVEL	PROCESS	DEPARTMENTS
Full	Mayor has complete authority	4 (6%)
Partial	Mayor must select from the relevant commission’s short list	21 (33%)
Partial	Mayor appoints, confirmed by Board of Supervisors	9 (14%)
Partial	Mayor selects from commission short list, confirmed by Board of Supervisors	2 (3%)
None	Board of Supervisors or other commission/board appoints	18 (29%)
None	Elected by voters	9 (14%)
Total		63 (100%)

Reforms: The charter should be amended to allow the mayor to directly hire and remove executive branch department heads. This change would align accountability with public expectations, ensuring that voters can hold the mayor responsible for results. Department heads outside the executive branch, including elected officials and other independent city officers, should remain subject to alternative charter-determined processes.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Remove charter restrictions that limit mayoral staffing.

Proposed amendments: Update charter section 3.100 (see Appendix A)

San Francisco’s government employs more than 35,000 people and spends \$15 billion annually. Managing an organization of this scale and breadth requires a chief executive to implement effective management structures. Yet the charter prohibits deputy mayors or similar roles and legally prohibits delegation, leaving the mayor with more than 50 direct reports. These restrictions, rooted in historical concerns about unelected “acting mayors,” hinder effective management and reduce the mayor’s ability to establish and manage a cohesive agenda.

Other large U.S. cities with strong-mayor forms of government, such as Boston, New York City, and Washington, D.C., have deputy mayors who manage portfolios of departments and offices. Deputy mayors, or similar roles, can reduce a mayor’s number of direct reports and improve

coordination of departments. For example, the Washington, D.C., Mayor's Office has five deputy mayors who cover specific policy areas. The deputy mayors report to the city administrator, who acts as the chief operating officer. Delegating authority to deputy mayors or other senior staff members in the mayor's office streamlines the overall reporting structure and provides a clear chain of command and accountability.

Mayor Daniel Lurie has established a new organizational structure for the Mayor's Office that assigns responsibility for coordination within policy areas to a set of chiefs.⁴ But absent a change to the charter, these chiefs lack clear management authority over department activities. Changes to the charter are needed to build on and codify the benefits of the current mayoral office restructuring.

Finally, the cap on compensation for any member of the mayor's office is the only explicit salary restriction in the charter. This operational specificity does not belong in the city's constitution.

Reforms: Charter constraints on the mayor's executive authority should be removed to allow the mayor to attract and retain candidates with deep management experience to coordinate efforts across the city and advance a strategic agenda. The charter should be amended to remove the ban on any member of the mayor's staff serving as a deputy or otherwise supervising any department director. Lastly, the prohibition on mayoral staff making more than 70% of the mayor's salary should be eliminated.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Empower the city administrator to act as the city's chief operating officer.

Proposed amendments: Update charter section 3.104, 4.132 (see Appendix A)

The city administrator is established in the charter as an apolitical professional tasked with managing the city's long-term administrative and operational responsibilities. However, the 1996 Charter limited the city administrator's authority and shortened their term to five years. This change weakened the city administrator's authority over certain citywide operational supports, such as purchasing and capital planning.⁵ These supports are critical to the success of all city services, but their ownership is fragmented due to the current charter. When departments disagree on matters such as technology, purchasing, or operational standards, the city administrator often lacks the authority to make binding decisions, thereby stymying efficient and effective service delivery. Our *Designed to Serve* report recommends that the city administrator be empowered to serve as the city's chief operating officer, responsible for coordinating and managing operational support functions across departments.

Lack of clear central authority for cross-departmental support functions extends to technology, real estate, asset management, multi-departmental capital program delivery, and other areas. Needs in each of these areas will evolve, making flexible administrative processes crucial.

⁴ "Mayor-Elect Daniel Lurie to Restructure Office of the Mayor," press release, December 11, 2024, https://lurieforsof.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Press-Release_Mayor-Elect-Daniel-Lurie-To-Restructure-Office-Of-The-Mayor-1.pdf.

⁵ Voters passed Proposition E, which created the role of the city administrator. In many jurisdictions, the role is designed to support the daily operations of a city and to coordinate activities across departments, but in San Francisco, it has often served as a catchall for emerging initiatives with no natural home. As a result, the current portfolio of the City Administrator's Office is a mix of departments, programs, and agencies serving widely different functions and constituencies.

Reforms: The charter should be amended to allow the mayor, as the chief executive, to assign citywide operational responsibilities above and beyond those core responsibilities specifically assigned in the charter to the city administrator — subject to rejection by the Board of Supervisors within 30 days. This charter amendment would allow a given mayor to delegate management of future citywide issues by giving the city administrator charter authority to establish policy and to lead in assigned areas, thereby bypassing any conflicting rules in the charter or code. To provide the needed organizational and operational continuity to sustain this work, the charter-defined term for the position should be restored to 10 years, while retaining the current authority for the mayor to remove the city administrator with concurrence of the Board of Supervisors.

Capital project delivery offers a concrete example of how fragmented authority affects city operations. The following case study shows how the charter's approval structure delays infrastructure work and drives up costs.

Charter Reform in Practice: Streamlining Charter-Mandated Approvals to Modernize Infrastructure

With its diffuse layers of oversight, the charter can create a maze of requirements that can impede the city's ability to adapt its built environment to new needs. These requirements slow public construction projects and drive-up project costs, reducing the resources available to address the city's growing backlog of infrastructure upgrades.

The charter mandates approval from multiple officials and bodies for most construction projects, often requiring sign-off from as many as five entities — typically, the mayor, the Board of Supervisors, the relevant commission, the Planning Department, and the Arts Commission — before work begins. The mayor and board cannot override these requirements for high-priority projects, creating potential stalemates when scope or cost concerns lead to withheld approvals.

Several charter approval requirements apply uniformly, regardless of a public project's scale — a minor modification to a small facility triggers the same approvals as a major new facility project. If set in administrative code rather than the charter, these requirements could be tailored to project size and impact, avoiding unnecessary delays and deadlocks. By restoring charter authorization for the city administrator to coordinate large-scale capital programs that require careful coordination of multiple departments, the city can better avoid other bottlenecks. This approach — used in the past to remove the Embarcadero Freeway and restore public access to the waterfront, including new park, transit, and utility infrastructure — will be crucial for complicated projects necessary to the city's future, whether to modernize infrastructure or adapt to climate change.

Drive better outcomes by improving the way the city sets and implements rules.

Rule-making processes should be realigned to ensure that they are helping the city meet its goals. Current charter provisions force too many decisions to be made at the ballot, bypassing the city's legislative process, which is grounded in practices that enable elected representatives to seek compromise and collaborative action. To encourage a collaborative legislative process and lasting solutions, these charter provisions should be eliminated. Additionally, rules that govern how the city buys goods and services and operates its human resources should be modernized.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Empower the city administrator to improve the city's purchasing rules.

Proposed amendments: Update charter section 3.104 (see Appendix A)

All city departments rely on shared support functions — finance, real estate, capital planning, technology, and other support services — to perform their work. The charter gives the controller clear authority over many financial functions, enabling coordination, citywide standards, and enforcement. By contrast, the city administrator's authority over other shared support functions is weaker, particularly for contracting. Currently, the charter charges the city administrator with managing purchasing procedures, the mayor and board with establishing purchasing laws, and some departments with managing certain types of contracts.

This diffuse responsibility creates several critical conflicts: The city administrator manages rules they do not control. They are charged with this citywide responsibility, but 40% of what the city buys is exempted from their oversight. And the mayor and board, barred by the charter from interfering in individual contracts, nonetheless define the rules under which contracts are awarded.

These conflicts have contributed to the creation of the maze-like procurement processes described in SPUR's *Purchasing Power* report, which cites 9,000 references to "contracts" or "procurement" scattered across more than 100 code sections.⁶ The result is a system that is hard for businesses to navigate and frustrating for staff to administer and that increases the cost of contracting — SPUR estimated each solicitation costs the city at least \$22,000 to \$28,000.⁷

That system gets more complex each year due to the proliferation of new board-adopted rules. In 2023, as supervisors worked to repeal a policy that would simplify purchasing rules by eliminating a single requirement, they adopted other legislative requirements that created multiple new compliance requirements for many city vendors and the departments that administer their contracts.⁸ The result is a constantly evolving policy landscape, wherein a lack of clarity, transparency, and accountability breeds a culture of distrust that, in turn, leads to real and

⁶ Nicole Neditch, *Purchasing Power*, SPUR, April 2025, page 5, <https://www.spur.org/publications/spur-report/2025-04-17/purchasing-power>.

⁷ Neditch, *Purchasing Power*, page 26.

⁸ Nick Mordowanec, "San Francisco's Boycott of Republican States Backfires," *Newsweek*, May 10, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/san-franciscos-boycott-republican-states-backfires-1797137>, and Josh Koehn, "Nonprofits Targeted by New Law to Verify Eligibility for Taxpayer Money," *The San Francisco Standard*, February 14, 2023, <https://sfstandard.com/2023/02/14/supervisor-safai-sf-nonprofits-verify-eligibility-taxpayer-money/>.

perceived waste and disparities in the system, on which all city services rely.

Reforms: Achieving better outcomes will require the city to change not just the rules, but how the rules are made. The city charter should be revised to empower the city administrator to manage the city's purchasing activities in two ways. First, charter carve-outs exempting several departments and types of contracts from city administrator oversight should be eliminated, permitting the city administrator to establish effective and consistent citywide policies and procedures. Second, the city administrator should be granted sole authority to propose changes to the city's purchasing laws in consultation with the mayor and board and should vet these draft rule changes through a public review process. Once proposed, the rules should take effect, unless rejected by the mayor and a majority of the board, within 60 days. Notably, the charter already provides similar models for other functions, including the city controller, treasurer, public utility commission, and municipal transit agency, as illustrated below.

Insulating Some Government Decisions from Politics

San Francisco's charter assigns the mayor and Board of Supervisors authority to direct and oversee government services, set city policies and laws, and propose and adopt budgets. While these fundamental powers are reserved for elected policymakers, the charter and certain state laws assign other responsibilities to professional administrators, often with key protections to ensure certain activities are insulated, to varying degrees, from more political decision-making. The following administrators carry out their responsibilities independently of the mayor and board.

- The controller establishes the city's accounting and other financial procedures and is assigned sole authority to propose financial policies that govern the city's core financial practices.
- The treasurer is responsible for investment of the city's pooled funds, and the retirement system board is charged with management and investment of the city's retirement fund assets.
- The public utility commission proposes utility rate changes, which take effect unless rejected by the mayor and board.
- The municipal transit agency is delegated the authority to set and change transit routes, modify transit fares, and establish policies regarding the use of city streets.

SPUR's recommendation to empower the city administrator to revise the city's purchasing rules, subject to rejection by the mayor and board, is consistent with these other charter rule-making processes.

RECOMMENDATION 5**Fix the city's employee bargaining process.**

Proposed amendment: Update charter section 8A.104 (see Appendix A)

The charter establishes the method by which the city negotiates labor contracts with its employees. The current binding arbitration system, in which an independent mediator resolves contract disputes and reaches a decision that is legally binding for both the city and labor unions, is unique in California for non-safety employees and has yielded significant stability, trading some control of the bargaining process by both the city and its unions for a nearly 50-year period without employee strikes. However, recent decisions by the California Public Employment Relations Board (PERB), which the California Court of Appeals subsequently validated, have created significant imbalances in that system, likely leading to higher labor costs and possible future employee strikes.⁹ San Francisco's charter needs to be revised to reduce these risks.

In other California cities, many fundamental workforce issues are subject to collective bargaining. In San Francisco, the charter directly governs key elements of the relationship between the city and its employees, creating a human resources management framework that has historically provided important benefits. By setting the rules of this relationship in the charter, the city has avoided the need to negotiate separately with its 40-plus employee labor organizations on many matters that affect the entire workforce. The result has been greater equity across employee groups and reduced administrative complexity.

The charter established a unique binding arbitration labor negotiation process whereby an independent arbitrator sets the terms of a new labor agreement when negotiations reach an impasse. This system has achieved many benefits for city management, employees, and the broader public. The independent arbitrator's ruling binds both parties, with each relinquishing a fundamental authority typical in bargaining systems in other cities: the city forgoes an ability to unilaterally impose a labor contract, while labor unions forgo the ability to strike. This process has prevented strikes that would disrupt city and county services, avoided protracted negotiations that would create financial uncertainty for employees, and allowed budgets to reflect known employee wage costs — a major variable in the city's annual budget process.

However, PERB's recent decisions leave interest arbitration in place while potentially permitting strikes. This means that the city is bound by an arbitrator's decision — giving up the ability to impose a labor contract — while labor unions retain the ability to strike. This has introduced an imbalance in the system: the city will be bound by an arbitrator's decision with no recourse, while a union could attempt to strike if it doesn't agree with the decision. This dynamic will disadvantage the city in future negotiations, potentially leading to higher future employee costs, periodic strikes, or both.

Updating the city's bargaining system will require carefully constructed changes to the charter. Due to other court rulings, any charter changes impacting the terms and conditions of public employment are subject to negotiations with public employee unions before they are placed on

⁹ Joe Eskenazi, "State Axes SF Rules Outlawing Public Employee Strikes," *Mission Local*, July 26, 2025, <https://missionlocal.org/2023/07/strike-san-francisco-perb/>.

the ballot. In other words, the city could not move forward with any changes to the charter without discussing these changes extensively with all labor organizations.

Reform: The city should immediately launch a labor-management working group to modernize the city's bargaining structure, setting a timeline to move changes forward in a future ballot measure. The process should be used to identify benefits and problems with the city's system, study options from elsewhere, and build consensus among a broad array of constituents for a structure that better meets the needs of the city government and its employees.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Resolve issues through leadership rather than at the ballot.

Proposed amendment: Update charter section 14.101

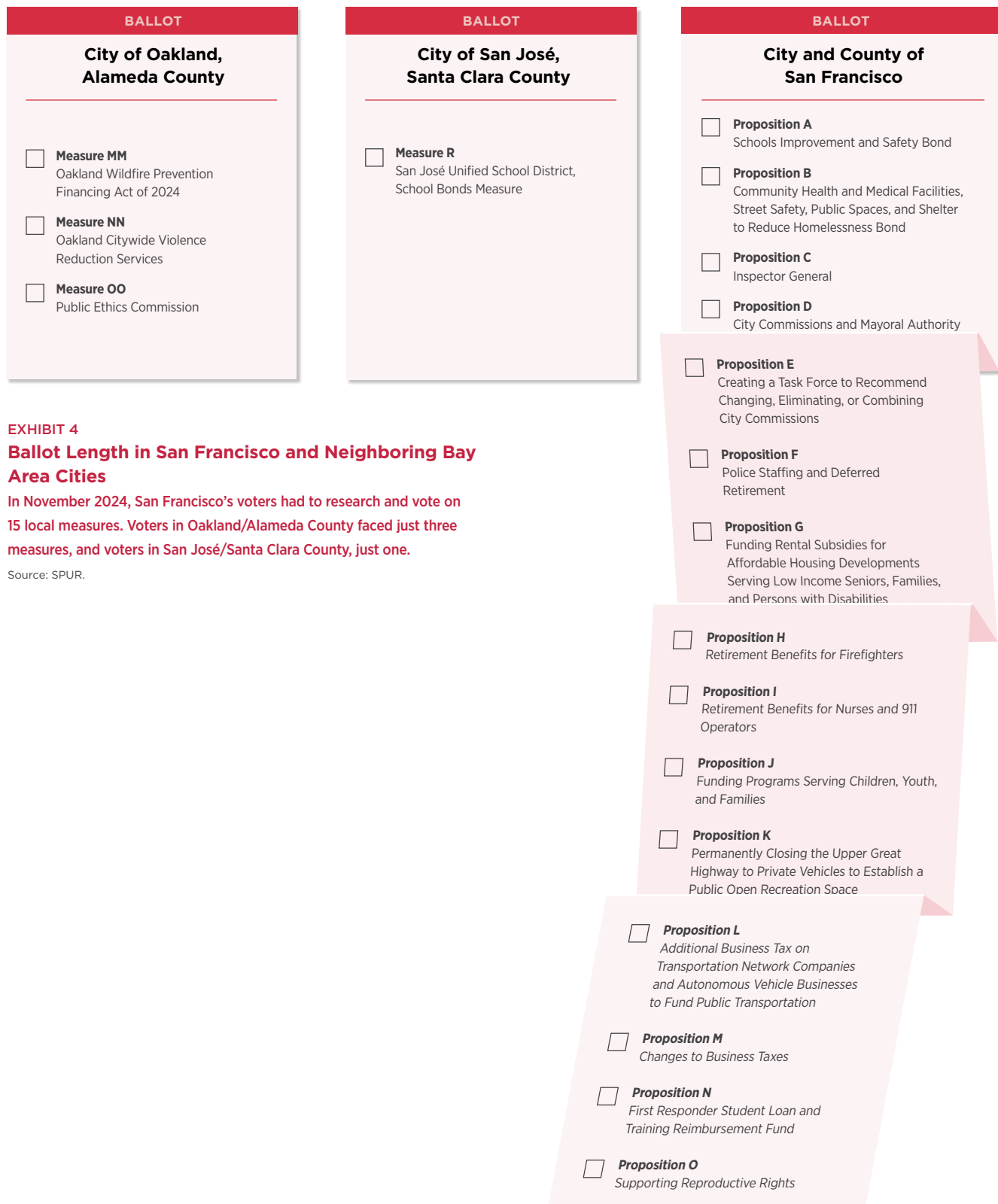
Each election, San Franciscans vote on a longer list of ballot initiatives than is typical elsewhere in California. Voters are regularly asked to weigh in on more than a dozen initiatives in a single election, often on complex technical matters better suited to policymakers. Many of these initiatives do not require voter approval under state and federal law. They could be accomplished through collaboration between the mayor and the Board of Supervisors through the legislative process. In *Designed to Serve*, SPUR notes that this problem is rooted in the charter, which sets a lower bar for taking an item to the ballot than it does for passing legislation.

The process that the charter establishes for passing legislation requires the collaboration of elected leaders to adopt policies and laws. This process includes public review, analysis of policy outcomes, and discussion of financial impacts. Most city laws can be adopted by a board majority, subject to mayoral veto, a standard practice that promotes consensus.

But the charter allows shortcuts not found in other cities. The mayor alone or a minority of the board — just 4 of 11 supervisors — can place many laws directly on the ballot, bypassing normal approval and mayoral veto. Additionally, signature requirements for citizen initiatives are unusually low: only 2% of registered voters are required to qualify non-charter laws for a vote through the initiative process, compared with 8% to 20% of registered voters in other California cities. These shortcuts result in crowded ballots (Exhibit 4). Since 2015, 29% of measures submitted to San Francisco voters required no voter approval and could have been adopted legislatively.

Too often, the result is not a problem-solving process but a political process in which the goal is winning a campaign rather than negotiating a solution to an identified problem. And because any changes to voter-adopted laws will also require voter approval, future ballots are likely to be even longer than past ballots. Consequently, ballots in San Francisco could continue to grow, containing a dozen or more complex and sometimes competing measures.

Reform: The charter should be revised to raise the bar for placing a measure on the ballot. We recommend increasing the signature requirement for non-charter measures to be more on par with the requirement in other California charter cities. The charter should also be amended to align with the standard legislative process of requiring a majority of the Board of Supervisors, subject to mayoral veto, to place legislation on the ballot.



State Reforms Could Support a Higher Bar for Putting Charter Measures on the Ballot

Unlike local ordinances and ballot measures, charter amendments have a voter threshold governed by state law and follow different qualification and approval processes established by the State of California. Therefore, the state should consider reforms that parallel this report's recommendation to raise the bar to place measures on the ballot in the City and County of San Francisco. Two such reforms would be establishing higher signature thresholds for charter amendment initiatives and allowing mayoral veto authority over legislatively referred charter amendments. Because San Francisco is California's only combined city and county, the state should grant it unique authority for charter amendment procedures, including allowances for the mayor to participate in the legislative process through veto authority, as is the norm for most non-charter legislation. These state-level reforms would enable San Francisco to more easily maintain consistency in its governance process while ensuring that fundamental changes to city operations receive careful consideration and reflect voter consensus.

Loosen restrictions that prevent adaptation and modernization.

San Francisco's charter has grown into a nearly-600-page procedural manual that locks the city into certain organizational structures and processes, limiting operational flexibility. Even small changes require voter approval at the ballot. To help elected leaders more effectively organize the city to meet residents' needs, the charter should allow reorganization of city departments, loosen voter restrictions on certain funds, and eliminate or streamline dozens of procedures.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Shift many departments from the charter to the administrative code.

Proposed amendments: Update charter sections 4.100–4.141, 5.100–5.106, 7.100–7.102, 8.100–8.103 (see appendices A and C)

For city government to meet residents' needs, it must be organized in a way that is effective, efficient, and responsive to its constituents. Because the current charter locks most of the city's organizational structure in place, other service delivery models are difficult to consider, and even minor changes require a ballot measure. The charter limits the mayor's ability to organize departments to better collaborate and resolve issues. And it assigns outdated, overly specific, and conflicting procedures to departments that do not belong in the city's constitution, preventing a

more responsive delivery of government services. The organizational structure should be resilient and adaptable to meet emerging challenges and opportunities.

The National Civic League's *Model City Charter* recommends that a charter protect the ability of city leaders to reorganize departmental functions to adapt to new challenges: "An administrative code adopted by the council is the appropriate place for the details of departmental organization ... this allows for change without necessitating a charter amendment."¹⁰ San Francisco's charter does not protect this ability. It locks 51 of 58 departments in place. The city's practice of enshrining nearly all departments in its charter is unique among major city peers (Exhibit 5).

EXHIBIT 5

Peer-City Comparison of Charter-Established Departments

San Francisco has nearly nine times more charter-established city departments than Boston and nearly double the number of San José.

Source: SPUR.

	TOTAL NUMBER OF CITY DEPARTMENTS	PERCENTAGE OF DEPARTMENTS FIXED IN THE CHARTER
San Francisco	58	88%
Boston	20	10%
Los Angeles	41	17%
San Diego	57	19%
Seattle	44	20%
Oakland	25	32%
Denver	43	41%
San José	23	48%

Several departments do require unique independence or authority that can only be bestowed by a charter, including those managed by independent elected officials or select citywide officers, as well as several departments that provide independent oversight functions. For example, the charter creates legal authority for departments managing ethics and elections oversight to operate with a degree of independence from the mayor and board; these departments can only be legally created in a charter. The Controller's Office is vested with certain oversight and financial authority that, absent establishment in the charter, would instead vest in the mayor and board. The Planning Department is granted the authority to establish and manage the city's general plan, which would be more limited in the absence of charter-authorized authority. But the vast majority of departments established in San Francisco's charter do not require this sort of charter-granted legal authority.

Reforms: The charter should be amended to shift most departments to the administrative code. This shift would not change the departments' current legal authority or functions. It would enable the city's elected leaders to adapt the city's organizational structure to meet new priorities and challenges without the need for voter-adopted charter revisions.

The charter's departmental rigidity affects how residents and businesses interact with city government. As explained below, obtaining city permits illustrates how locked-in organizational structures prevent the city from adopting more effective service delivery models.

¹⁰ National Civic League, *Model City Charter*, 9th edition, 2021, <https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/model-city-charter-9th-edition/>.

Charter Reform in Practice: Unlocking Departmental Flexibility for Better Permitting

By locking nearly 90% of the city's organizational structure in place, the charter discourages policymakers from seeking better models to deliver city services. As one example, multiple city departments play a role in permitting processes in San Francisco, making these processes difficult for residents and businesses to navigate and staff to administer. To open its doors, a new storefront business might have to deal with 11 city departments.^a

While San Francisco has co-located services at PermitSF, the underlying departmental silos remain intact, contributing to the city's notoriously complicated and slow permitting process. Many cities, including Seattle, Austin, Portland, and New Orleans, organize permitting services into a single city agency. None of these cities embeds permitting structures in their charters.

By shifting select departments out of the charter and into the administrative code, policymakers could more readily consider and test different models for delivering services — whether to make permitting more user-friendly or to improve countless other city services.

^a Nicole Neditch, *Designed to Serve: Resetting the city's governance structure to better meet the needs of San Franciscans*, SPUR, August 2024, page 4, <https://www.spur.org/publications/spur-report/2024-07-31/designed-serve>.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Broaden existing charter provisions to permit more flexible reorganization of government.

Proposed amendments: Update charter section 4.132 (see Appendix A)

The charter was revised in 1996 to allow the mayor to reorganize executive branch functions, subject to rejection by the Board of Supervisors within 30 days. These provisions were designed to permit more flexible changes to the city's organizational chart, but they do not apply to functions explicitly established in the charter. While code-established programs within departments may be transferred from one charter-authorized agency to another, the relationships among those agencies cannot be altered.

Through the annual budget process, the city has periodically consolidated departments into larger "agencies." Departments organized into agencies remain legally separate entities with powers and responsibilities established in the charter or administrative code; yet they gain access to shared resources and enjoy lower costs through shared administrative functions. The city's Human Services Agency, for example, is composed of three distinct departments, which

are managed as a single entity for financial and other purposes.¹¹ This organization has enabled the agency to operate more efficiently, with shared business support functions and with greater overall scale to shift resources to emerging problems. Boston and Indianapolis similarly organize departments into formal “cabinets” to better coordinate services.

Reforms: While the city’s use of the agency model offers several benefits, it remains informal in important ways, with each department head in an agency legally reporting directly to the mayor or a commission. To allow improved use of the agency model or other similar organizational options, the charter should be revised to permit the mayor to modify reporting relationships among executive branch departments.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Strike outdated, conflicting, or tactical department responsibilities from the city charter.

Proposed amendments: Update numerous charter sections (see Appendix A)

Core charter design principles have been eroded by decades of voter-approved charter amendments, often creating operational rules and procedures that mandate a given department’s work. While many of these provisions were created to codify the will of voters, together they create a web of conflicting and outdated requirements that distract departments from their core work.

These operational provisions and their impacts are varied. Many establish minor requirements that muddy the legibility of the charter for residents seeking to understand the city’s fundamental authority, powers, and organization. Others create requirements to resolve a problem that may no longer exist. Yet others conflict with one another or embed ineffective processes in the charter, worsening the quality of city services. In all cases, these requirements take time and effort to administer — resources that are therefore not available for other priorities.

The purpose and goals for the Fire Department, for example, are established in three sentences, with details regarding how it will meet those goals established in the administrative code. In stark contrast, the goals, purpose, procedures, and restrictions governing the Municipal Transportation Agency span 16 pages. These provisions, adopted over time through charter amendments, create a complicated web of requirements that sometimes work against the interests of the agency’s customers.

Reforms: Operational rules and procedures should shift out of the charter into the administrative code, where they can be amended without an election required to implement even small changes. The mayor and Board of Supervisors should then conduct a proactive review of these codified procedures and adopt legislation to delete outdated provisions and more finely tailor others to meet clear policy goals. This process should be repeated over time, continually adapting city codes to meet changing priorities and circumstances — a process that is not possible if these procedures are enshrined in the city’s constitution.

¹¹ City and County of San Francisco FY25–27 Proposed Budget, May 2025, https://media.api.sf.gov/documents/70_CSF_Proposed_Budget_Book_June_2024_Final_REV1_0525v2_UM14gFg.pdf.

The appeals process outlined below demonstrates how charter-mandated operational requirements, layered over time, can work against broader community goals, delaying impactful large-scale projects.

Charter Reform in Practice: Speeding Up the Delivery of Low-Risk, High-Benefit Projects

The right of residents to appeal an official government action is a core protection, but in San Francisco, that right has sometimes ended up discouraging widely beneficial projects, such as the construction of new housing and transit infrastructure.

The charter creates a unique right of appeals for nearly all permits and licenses that the city issues, and it defines nearly all permits and licenses as discretionary actions. Consequently, almost all projects are subject to California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) review. CEQA appeals have sometimes been used to halt projects, such as affordable housing developments and bus and bicycle lanes, that serve many residents. Additionally, a single individual can typically appeal a single project to three city bodies: the Planning Department, the Board of Appeals, and the Board of Supervisors. The more bodies that can act on an appeal, the greater the risks are that a project could encounter delays, thereby increasing project costs. Although actual appeals are infrequent and rarely result in project changes (Appendix D), the very possibility of appeals-related delays may encourage developers to scale back projects with community benefits or even chill the pursuit of such projects.

San Francisco's charter should better balance individual rights and community benefits. If appeals procedures were struck from the charter and instead established in the administrative code, the mayor and Board of Supervisors would be empowered to adapt them to create this balance. They could adopt legislation to make appeals procedures less onerous for projects with few risks and wide community benefits and continue to refine these procedures as priorities and circumstances change. The result would be a less risky path to construct new housing and other projects that could support community outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION 10**Restore flexibility to the city's budget to allow resources to be shifted to priority services.**

Proposed amendment: Update charter sections 8A.105, 16.106–16.110, 16.123–1–10, 16.128, 16.129, 16.131, 16.132, F1.113 (see Appendix A)

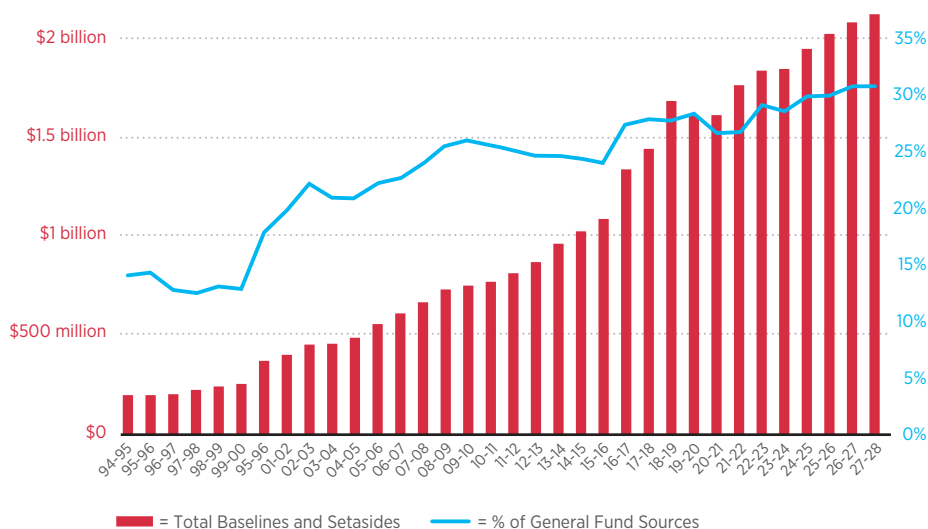
As community needs evolve and service delivery methods change, elected officials must adapt by reallocating resources through the city's budget. Yet this necessary responsiveness faces a significant constraint. Of San Francisco's \$16 billion budget for the 2024–2025 fiscal year, only 18% is discretionary spending.¹² The remaining 82% is heavily restricted in part by a variety of charter-mandated baselines and set-asides — binding funding requirements that require a portion of the city's discretionary revenue to be spent on specific uses each year. Set-asides reduce discretion and choice, not just for government officials, but also for citizens. As economic, environmental, political, and technological change occurs, set-asides lock in choices that may no longer make sense.

The mayor and Board of Supervisors are hamstrung in responding to financial challenges and changing service priorities by ever-increasing voter-mandated baseline and set-aside requirements (Exhibit 6). They have eroded the fundamental authority for elected officials to determine the city's spending.

EXHIBIT 6**Voter-Required Baseline and Set-Aside Spending Over 30 Years**

Baseline and set-aside spending is projected to account for more than 30% of the general fund budget in the 2027–2028 fiscal year, up from approximately 15% in the 1994–1995 fiscal year.

Source: SPUR.



The prevalence of spending restrictions in the charter is unique to San Francisco. San Francisco's charter currently has 19 binding spending requirements compared with just 2 in Los Angeles's charter and 1 each in the charters of Santa Clara County, Oakland, and San Diego. The charters of San José, Sacramento, and Alameda County have none.

While each of these requirements was adopted to protect a necessary public service at the time, they reduce resources available to meet other needs and create a downward financial spiral.

¹² Nicole Neditch, "Balancing San Francisco's Budget, Part 2: Revenues and Expenditures," SPUR, May 20, 2025. <https://www.spur.org/news/2025-05-20/balancing-san-franciscos-budget-part-2-revenues-and-expenditures#:~:text=Certain%20revenues%20within%20the%20General,25%20Budget%20Is%20Truly%20Discretionary>.

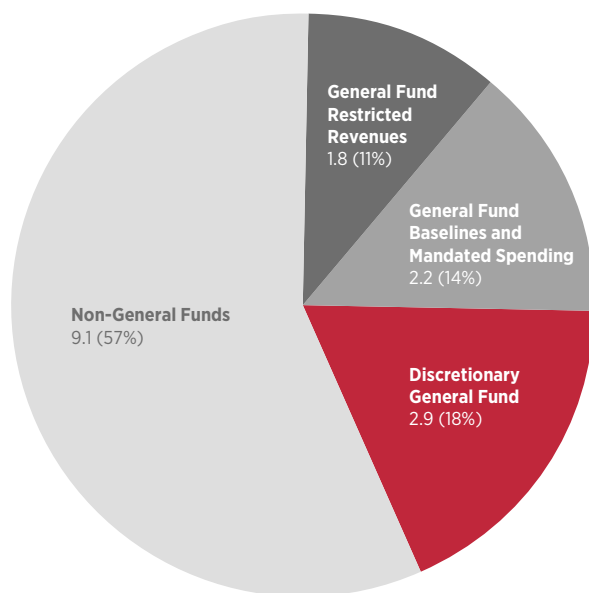
As the list of specific protected services grows, the portion of the city's budget determined through the annual budget process is reduced, and the city's ability to manage financial challenges and adapt to changing needs is further diminished. As the city faces a structural budget shortfall exceeding \$1 billion annually in the coming years, the mayor and board have only 18% of the city's total annual resources available to shift to priority needs and challenges (Exhibit 7).

EXHIBIT 7

Discretionary Budget as a Portion of Total Budget

Only 18% of the city's budget remains discretionary for the mayor and Board of Supervisors to allocate to emerging priorities.

Source: SPUR.



Reforms: Charter-mandated set-asides should be reconsidered to allow city legislators to shift resources as needed, an especially important consideration in times of financial deficit. The city has a range of options to restore varying degrees of financial flexibility to the city's budget (Exhibit 8). From least flexibility to most flexibility:

Reduce requirements in deficit years. Several voter-adopted baselines have a “recession trigger” that permits the budget to freeze or reduce mandated spending levels in years when the city faces a large projected deficit. These provisions could be applied to all baseline requirements, allowing some reallocation of funds in hard financial times.

Broaden eligible uses within service categories. Each baseline requirement defines the services that are eligible and ineligible for these diverted funds. For example, specific new services are eligible, but not current services — a requirement that can lead to the perverse need to add new programming while cutting other critical programming during hard budget times. Broadening the categories of services eligible for funds would allow more flexible programming within the categories as circumstances and priorities change.

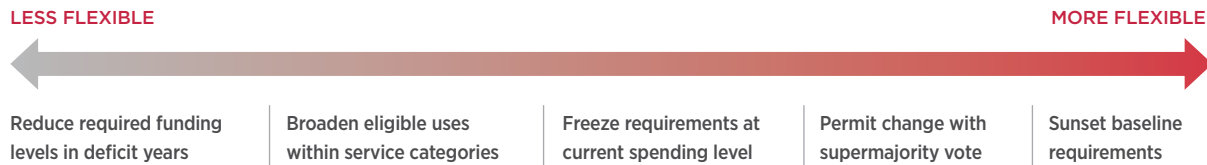
Freeze baselines at current spending levels. Most charter-mandated spending requirements grow over time by formula as the budget grows. Leaving existing baselines in place but freezing these allocations at their current values would increase spending flexibility while minimizing impacts on current baseline services.

Permit changes with a supermajority vote. Preserving the current baseline requirements while permitting the mayor and Board of Supervisors to amend, but not eliminate, them with a two-thirds vote would allow for adjustments to these requirements in response to evolving financial and operational conditions.

Sunset current mandated baselines and set-asides. Sunsetting all existing baselines and set-asides would restore the greatest flexibility to the city's budget. Doing so would restore authority for elected leaders to make resource allocation decisions, with limited exceptions, through the annual budget process, consistent with standard practice in other local governments.

EXHIBIT 8**Options to Increase Baseline
Funding Flexibility**

Source: SPUR.



What's Next?

SPUR's recommendations reflect a more holistic view of reforms to the city's charter than the changes to city boards and commissions that the mayor, Board of Supervisors, and other stakeholders are now contemplating as ballot measures. Taken together, SPUR's recommendations could remove roadblocks to effective and accountable decision-making and streamline procedural requirements that impede the city's ability to adapt to challenges, address the structural budget deficit, and improve public services that residents rely on every day.

The changes SPUR recommends would lay the foundation for future updates. Moving departments from the charter to administrative code doesn't on its own solve issues of overlapping functions or confusing processes. It just makes it easier to address those problems and allows for changes to be made by city leadership rather than going to the voters. Like the charter, the administrative code is riddled with overlapping and duplicative direction. Efforts like the partnership between San Francisco City Attorney David Chiu and Stanford's Regulation, Evaluation and Governance Lab to use technology to modernize municipal code show promise.¹³

Amending the Charter

Any proposed changes to the charter will ultimately be decided by San Francisco voters. Charter amendments appear regularly on ballots during statewide general elections, primaries, and municipal elections. They can be initiated through two mechanisms, each with different requirements. Through a **legislature initiative**, the Board of Supervisors can place charter amendments on the ballot by a majority vote, following a process that includes public hearings, financial and policy analysis, and review of the initial proposal with potential revisions. Through a **citizen initiative**, residents can petition for charter amendments by gathering a specified number of valid signatures from registered voters. In San Francisco, a charter amendment requires 10% of registered voters' signatures. Once circulated for signatures, a citizen initiative cannot be amended prior to submission to the voters, reducing flexibility to respond to further public feedback and analysis.

While both mechanisms lead to an initiative for the public to vote on at the ballot, they have different processes and timelines, and each comes with trade-offs. Legislature-initiated measures offer a faster and more cost-effective pathway to the ballot because they don't require the substantial time, money, and organizational capacity involved in gathering thousands of signatures. While no official data on signature payment rates exist, estimated costs per signature in California

¹³ Office of the City Attorney, *City Attorney Introduces Legislation to Modernize Municipal Code with Technology*, June 5, 2025, <https://sfcityattorney.org/2025/06/05/city-attorney-introduces-legislation-to-modernize-municipal-code-with-technology/>.

have nearly doubled since the COVID-19 pandemic, hovering from \$12 to \$14 per signature.¹⁴ Local ballot measures often cost even more per signature than statewide measures, in part due to the smaller voter pool from which to gather support. Citizens may also face technical challenges in drafting legally sound and technically accurate charter language without the expertise that government officials typically have access to. Despite the resource-intensive nature of citizen initiatives, they allow residents more direct power to propose grassroots ballot measures.

The Commission Streamlining Task Force created by Proposition E (2024) will make recommendations to revise charter-created commissions and advisory bodies by February 2026. The mayor and the Board of Supervisors will debate the merit of placing some or all of them in charter amendments for voters' consideration. These potential amendments would be considered in public legislative sessions at the board in the spring and summer of 2026, prior to a board vote to place them on the November 2026 ballot. SPUR recommends that these upcoming legislative discussions take a broader view of modernizing the charter to improve the city's effectiveness. We suggest that the recommendations outlined in this report also be put forward as charter amendments for voters' consideration in November 2026. SPUR's recommendations and those that come from the streamlining task force are interrelated and should be considered together.

Maintaining the Charter's Integrity

In an ever-changing local, state, and federal environment, San Francisco's city charter requires regular review and maintenance. The recommendations in this report focus on strengthening San Francisco's governmental accountability, lines of authority, and outcomes by improving charter-defined rule-making, structures, and processes. They do not address electoral systems, campaign finance, human resources, and voting procedures, which are also set in the charter. These areas would benefit from a separate, dedicated reform process.¹⁵

Once voters pass reforms enabling the charter to better uphold the principles of good governance and aid service delivery to San Franciscans, the question becomes: how does the city guard against piecemeal amendments that again impede effective governance?

Unlike many other cities, San Francisco has no process to regularly review the charter to prevent the accumulation of conflicting and outdated provisions. Following the completion of current charter reform efforts, the city would benefit from periodic assessments of the charter's effectiveness in enabling good governance and establishing clear procedures for ongoing charter refinements that preserve the integrity of voter-approved reforms while adapting to changing needs.

The success of any charter reform ultimately depends on a commitment to maintaining those improvements. San Francisco's governance will be strengthened by both the immediate reforms and the long-term stewardship that upholds charter clarity and a more effective government.

¹⁴ The estimated costs are based on Ballotpedia's cost-per-required-signature report, using a campaign's total spending on signature gathering relative to the number of valid signatures required. In 2024, \$42.3 million was spent to collect signatures for five initiatives, accounting for 25% of all signature-gathering costs in California in that year. See, Ballotpedia, "Ballot Measure Signature Costs, 2024," [https://ballotpedia.org/Ballot_measure_signature_costs_2024#:~:text=The%20average%20cost%20per%20required%20signature%20in%202024%20was%20\\$14.87,per%20required%20signature%20was%20\\$12.70](https://ballotpedia.org/Ballot_measure_signature_costs_2024#:~:text=The%20average%20cost%20per%20required%20signature%20in%202024%20was%20$14.87,per%20required%20signature%20was%20$12.70).

¹⁵ Like the charter, San Francisco's legal systems should be subject to periodic review to avoid the accumulation of narrow rules that hinder the broader outcomes they were meant to support. The city should simplify its planning code and update civil service and human resources procedures. Additionally, it should clarify and streamline environmental, tax, and administrative codes to better achieve its goals and improve its overall functionality.

Appendix A: Summary of Charter Sections for Recommendations

SECTION	AMENDMENT DESCRIPTION
1. Authorize the mayor to hire and fire most department heads.	
3.100	Add authority for mayor to appoint or remove department heads unless specified otherwise in the charter.
4.102	Remove requirement for commissions to nominate and remove departments heads.
4.102	Add allowance for commissions to make recommendations in these processes at the request of the mayor.
2. Remove charter restrictions that limit mayoral staffing.	
3.100	Remove prohibition on supervisory delegation by the mayor.
3.100	Remove prohibition on deputy mayor or other similar titles.
3.100	Remove mayor's office salary restrictions.
3. Empower the city administrator to act as the city's chief operating officer.	
3.104	Extend term of the city administrator from five to 10 years.
4.132	Add ability for mayor to assign additional citywide responsibilities to the city administrator beyond those assigned in the charter.
4.132	Add ability for mayor to modify or withdraw citywide responsibilities previously assigned under this section.
4.132	Add provision that this authority may supercede other departmental jurisdictional authority assigned by the charter.
4. Empower the city administrator to improve the city's purchasing rules.	
3.104	Add provision establishing that rules governing procurement and contracts shall supercede other departmental charter provisions.
3.104	Add provision establishing sole authority for city administrator to amend city contracting, procurement, and vendor management laws.
3.104	Add provision stating that any proposed changes to those laws shall be subject to a public hearing.
3.104	Add provision that proposed changes to those laws shall be deemed approval unless rejected by the mayor and board within 90 days.
5. Fix the city's employee bargaining process.	
8A.104	Amendments to be determined through recommended labor-management process.
6. Resolve issues through leadership rather than at the ballot.	
14.101	Raise signature threshold requirement for initiative petitions to the level of peer cities and counties.
7. Shift many departments from the charter to the administrative code.	
4.100–4.141	Remove, modify, or shift departments to the administrative code, as specified in Appendix C.
5.100–5.106	Remove, modify, or shift departments to the administrative code, as specified in Appendix C.
7.100–7.102	Remove, modify, or shift departments to the administrative code, as specified in Appendix C.
8.100–8.103	Remove, modify, or shift departments to the administrative code, as specified in Appendix C.
8. Broaden existing charter provisions to permit more flexible reorganization of government.	
4.132	Add ability for mayor to modify reporting relationships within and between executive branch departments.
9. Strike outdated, conflicting, or tactical responsibilities from the city charter.	
Examples: Overly broad or poorly defined procedural requirements that belong in code	
Remove uniform appeal allowance of city licenses and permits to the Board of Appeals, establish more tailored appeal procedures in code	
Remove capital project approval requirements for all projects by the Arts and Planning Commissions, establish more tailored approvals in code	
Revise police and fire disciplinary processes to eliminate three-step disciplinary process: chief acts, subject to appeal to the commission	
Remove clauses that define all permits as discretionary acts, establish more tailored application in code	
Examples: Narrow and overly restrictive detailed operating requirements that belong in code or procedural documents	
Require annual transit goal setting, shift specific goals to code	
Leave requirement to maintain cable car operations in charter, but shift operating protocols and details to the administrative code	
Remove 48.7 hour firefighter workweek maximum, below peer city averages, and establish through labor contract negotiations	
Remove requirements for specific staff positions (below the department head) from charter and establish through code and budgets	

Examples: Specific and details report and audit requirements that belong in code

Combine three department annual report requirements into a single report, and establish report details in the administrative code

Shift requirements for the Controller to complete certain specific audits to the administrative code

Shift all methodological and procedural details regarding police staffing report to the administrative code

Examples: Establish core department purpose and authority in charter, shift operating protocols to code

Municipal Transportation Agency - Numerous operating protocols, definitions, and procedures that belong in code (19 charter pages)

Planning and Historic Preservation - Numerous operating protocols, definitions, and procedures that belong in code (7 charter pages)

Public Utilities - Numerous operating protocols, definitions, and procedures that belong in code (6 charter pages)

Police Accountability and Sheriff Oversight - Numerous operating protocols, definitions, and procedures that belong in code (5 charter pages)

SECTION	AMENDMENT DESCRIPTION
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10. Restore flexibility to the city's budget to allow resources to be shifted to priority services.

	Charter required baselines and set-asides include:	Amendments required for different recommended options across all charter-mandated baselines:
8A.105	- Municipal Transportation Fund baseline requirements	- Add sunset of all charter baselines at a future date and delete existing requirements thereafter.
16.106	- Library, parks, arts, and culture baselines and set-asides	- Add allowance to reduce baseline funding requirements by 10% with board and mayor approval of a finding of fiscal necessity.
16.107	- Recreation and parks open space set-aside, fund, and baselines	- Eliminate existing deficit trigger allowances in select baselines, replaced by the above allowance.
16.108	- Children and youth services fund and baselines	- Add allowance to modify eligible uses within a voter-adopted service area with approval of two-thirds of the board and the mayor.
16.109	- Library set-aside, fund, and baseline	
16.110	- Affordable housing trust fund and baseline	
16.123-1-10	- Public education fund and baselines	
16.128	- Seniors and adults with disability set-aside and baseline	
16.129	- Street tree maintenance baseline	
16.131	- Student success school set-aside and baseline	
16.132	- Affordable housing fund and baseline	
F1.113	- City services auditor baseline	

Appendix B: Authority for Appointing Department Heads

The mayor has full appointment authority over only 4 out of 50 department leaders. SPUR recommends the following authorities for appointing and removing department heads.

Direct Mayor Appointment / Removal:

Planning
 Municipal Transportation Agency
 Public Utilities
 Port
 Recreation and Park
 Airport
 Arts Commission
 Health
 Public Works
 Social Services
 Environment
 Human Rights
 Entertainment
 Status of Women
 Building Inspection
 Homelessness
 Small Business
 Juvenile Probation
 Fire
 Police
 Libraries
 Children, Youth, and Their Families
 Aging and Adult Services
 Economic Development
 Emergency Management
 Early Childhood Education
 Child Support Services
 Technology
 Rent Board
 Community Investment & Infrastructure
 Film
 Victim & Witness Services
 Board of Appeals

Other Appointment / Removal:

Elected

Mayor
 Board of Supervisors
 Assessor
 City Attorney
 District Attorney
 Public Defender
 Sheriff
 Treasurer
 Unified School District
 Community College
 Courts

Independent Oversight Function

Retirement
 Health Service System
 Civil Service System
 Elections
 Ethics
 Police Accountability
 Sheriff Oversight

Shared Appointment of Citywide Officers

Controller
 City Administrator
 Human Resources

Other Appointment Process

Administrative Services (City Administrator)
 Adult Probation (Courts)
 Fine Arts (Independent board)
 Asian Art (Independent board)
 War Memorial (Independent board)
 Law Library (Independent board)
 Academy of Sciences (Independent board)

Appendix C: Departments to Shift to the Administrative Code

San Francisco establishes most of its departments in the city charter. SPUR recommends moving many of them to the administrative code.

Required in Charter:

Mayor	Sheriff	Health Service System	Public Utilities
Board of Supervisors	Treasurer	Civil Service System	Port
Assesor	Controller	Elections	Recreation and Park
City Attorney	City Administrator	Ethics	Fine Arts
District Attorney	Human Resources	Planning	Asian Art
Public Defender	Retirement	Municipal Transportation Agency	

Move to Administrative Code

Airport
Arts Commission
Health
Public Works
Social Services
Administrative Services
Environment
Human Rights
Entertainment
Status of Women
Building Inspection
Homelessness
Small Business
Juvenile Probation
Adult Probation
Unified School District
Community College
Courts
Film
Victim & Witness Services

Remain in Charter with Modification

Police Accountability
Sheriff Oversight
Board of Appeal

Move to Administrative Code with Modification

War Memorial
Law Library
Academy of Sciences
Fire
Police
Libraries
Children, Youth, and Their Families
Aging and Adult Services

Currently in Code

Economic Development
Emergency Management
Early Childhood Education
Child Support Services
Technology
Rent Board
Community Investment & Infrastructure

Appendix D: 2023 Planning Application and Appeals

The charter's overly broad appeals processes create risks for all projects but are seldom used and rarely result in project changes.

Projects submitted	16,745
Projects appealed	38
Percent of all projects	0.23%
Appealed to one body	32
Appealed to two bodies	5
Appealed to three bodies	1
Total appeals*	55
Average per appealed project	1.5
Appeal final outcomes	
Appeal denied	16
Appeal withdrawn	10
Appeal pending	7
Appeal granted (in whole or part)	5
As percent of appealed projects	13%
As percent of all projects	0.03%
Appeal timelines	
Median appeal timeline (in months)	4
Maximum timeline (in months)	14
Appealed project value	
Median	\$355,000
Under \$200,000	38%
Over \$1,000,000	25%
Over \$10,000,000	3%



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year period. This provision shall not preclude an elected President from seeking other elected offices within Baltimore City after two consecutive terms as President. In the event that an elected President takes office as a result of a removal or vacancy described in §§ 3 or 4 of this Article, that elected President shall only be eligible to hold that office for the remainder of the predecessor's unexpired term and 1 consecutive full term thereafter.