

# MAYOR'S WORKING GROUP ON CHARTER REFORM

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<https://mayorbarbaralee.com/charter>



## Purpose & Goals

Mayor Barbara Lee convened a working group to review and provide recommendations for reforming Oakland's Charter. The League of Women Voters of Oakland and San Francisco Bay Area Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR) were asked to co-facilitate the working group, with the objectives of:

- Better defining the role of elected officials
- Addressing responsible city financial planning
- Improving government accountability and transparency

Between August and December 2025, the Working Group engaged more than 750 residents through public meetings and listening sessions, conducted more than 60 in-depth interviews with current and former city staff, elected officials, and subject matter experts and researched governance models across the country.

## What is the problem with Oakland's existing Charter?

Oakland's current Charter assigns powers and responsibilities in ways that create confusion, undermine accountability, and prevent the city from addressing its most pressing challenges effectively.

- Residents elect a Mayor to lead, but the office holds limited authority.
- The City Council is held accountable for constituent concerns without the ability to hold the administration responsible for performance.
- The City Administrator is caught between unclear and conflicting priorities from multiple elected leaders.

It blends two different governance models — strong mayor and council-manager — without securing the benefits of either, resulting in a unique system that produces structural ambiguity and competing lines of authority.

## What are the two standard models for municipal government?

Most U.S. cities use one of two well-established governance models:

- *Strong Mayor*: The mayor is elected citywide as the chief executive, manages city operations, proposes budgets, and holds veto power over legislation and the final budget. The city council serves as the legislative branch, providing a check and balance.
- *Council-Manager*: The city council acts as the unified legislative authority and appoints a professional city manager who directs day-to-day operations and often proposes the budget.

## What does the Working Group recommend?

The Working Group recommends that while both systems are better than what exists now, Oakland should adopt a strong-mayor system with a clearly defined executive structure. Specifically:

- The Mayor would serve as the city's chief executive, responsible for city operations and service delivery.
- The Mayor would have veto power over all legislation, including budget decisions (the Council could override a veto with a  $\frac{2}{3}$  vote).
- The Mayor would retain a City Administrator, who would be confirmed by the Council to oversee core internal functions (finance, HR, IT, procurement, permitting).
- Deputy mayors or cabinet officials would oversee policy departments such as public safety, housing, and economic development.
- The City Council would be strengthened with a new independent analytical capacity to ensure a balance of power.

The Working Group found that strong-mayor systems work best when voters expect visible accountability, when disparities across neighborhoods require a citywide approach, and when political fragmentation makes collective accountability difficult — all conditions present in Oakland.

## How would the Mayor's role change?

Under the recommended strong-mayor system, the Mayor would:

- Serve as chief executive responsible for city operations and service delivery
- Have veto power over all legislation, laws, policies, and budget decisions
- Directly organize departments and appoint cabinet-level or deputy mayor officials to lead policy areas
- Nominate a City Administrator (subject to Council confirmation) for internal service functions
- Have discretion to delegate additional responsibilities to the City Administrator

## Would there still be a City Administrator?

Yes. The Working Group recommends the Mayor retain a City Administrator to oversee core internal functions — finance, human resources, information technology, procurement, and citywide systems like permitting and 311. This preserves professional administrative expertise for operational functions while giving the Mayor clear authority over policy departments. The City Administrator would be nominated by the Mayor and confirmed by the City Council.

## How would a strong mayor help with Oakland's budget crisis?

A strong-mayor system promotes fiscal discipline by improving coordination between the Mayor and City Council through veto power. Currently, the Mayor proposes a budget but has no authority to push back when the Council changes it, and the Council lacks independent analysts to evaluate the Mayor's proposals. Under the new model, veto power would encourage negotiation between branches before budgets are finalized, and a new independent Budget and Legislative Analyst office would give the Council the tools to do rigorous fiscal analysis.

## How does a strong mayor improve accountability and transparency?

A strong-mayor system increases accountability by clarifying responsibility. The current hybrid system diffuses authority and can actually make it harder to determine who is responsible when problems occur. Clear executive authority makes accountability more visible and attributable. The proposed structure includes meaningful checks and balances.

## What happens to the City Council's role and day-to-day responsibilities?

The City Council would remain Oakland's legislative branch, as it is now and day-to-day responsibilities would remain the same. The Council would continue to:

- Represent district residents
- Address constituent concerns
- Set policy and pass laws, and ordinances
- Review and amend the Mayor's proposed budget
- Confirm certain mayoral appointments
- Approve contracts

In addition, they would have the ability to:

- Conduct oversight hearings with strengthened powers, including the ability to subpoena witnesses and summon testimony
- Override mayoral vetoes with a two-thirds supermajority vote

A strong mayor system does not diminish the Council's role. The goal is to clarify and strengthen it to ensure a balance of power.

## What new analytical capacity would the Council have?

The Working Group recommends establishing a permanent, independent Budget and Legislative Analyst (BLA) office — similar to those in Los Angeles, San Diego, and the California legislature. This office would provide the Council with independent analysis of:

- Budgets and fiscal impacts
- How proposed policies may interact or conflict with existing policies
- Staffing implications of proposed legislation
- Operational capacity to manage proposed changes

This would significantly expand the Council's capacity to independently evaluate the Mayor's budget proposals and hold the administration accountable for performance.

## Would the Council's size change?

The Working Group recommends phasing out the single at-large Council seat, reducing the Council from 8 to 7 members. An odd number eliminates the current awkward and uncommon arrangement where the Mayor casts tie-breaking votes. This change also reduces the confusion about the at-large Councilmember's role when a strong Mayor already represents citywide interests.