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## **Mayor Lee's Charter Reform Working Group Releases Recommendations Following Months of Community Engagement**

*Oaklanders participated in citywide listening sessions to inform and produce recommendations that will pave the way for a clearer, more accountable, and more effective city government*

**OAKLAND, CA** – The **Charter Reform Working Group** released its final recommendations earlier this month, capping a comprehensive community engagement process that brought hundreds of Oakland residents into conversations about how city government can work better.

Launched in August 2025 as part of Mayor Lee's 100-day plan, the Working Group – co-chaired by the **League of Women Voters of Oakland and SPUR** – spent five months gathering input from residents, experts, and stakeholders across Oakland through an inclusive, multi-faceted engagement process.

### **A Citywide Listening Process**

Over the past five months, more than 750 Oakland residents have participated in public listening sessions hosted by the League of Women Voters of Oakland and SPUR, in partnership with every City Councilmember to learn about the Charter and provide feedback that informed the final report. Dozens of current and former city staff, elected officials, and community organizations provided one-on-one interviews

to share their experience and expertise. The Charter Reform working group also reviewed 433 survey responses and conducted extensive research on governance models across the country.

"Oakland deserves a government that works – one that is transparent, accountable, and clear about who is responsible for what," said **Mayor Barbara Lee**. "For months, we've been listening to Oakland residents about how our city government can work better. Over 750 people have participated in community conversations, and we've held 15 'Talk of the Town' events in every city council district across the city. This has been a thorough, inclusive process, and the recommendations are shaped by the voices of Oakland residents who took the time to participate and engage."

In addition to in-person sessions, the Working Group launched a citywide survey, published educational materials including a short explainer video, and provided resources for community groups to host their own conversations about charter reform.

"At its core, charter reform is about making sure the voices of Oakland residents are heard and reflected in how our city government works," said **Ernestine Nettles, President of the League of Women Voters of Oakland**. "Over the past several months, Oaklanders showed up in large numbers to learn, ask questions, and share their lived experiences. The League is proud to help lead a process rooted in civic participation, transparency, and meaningful community engagement."

### **Expert Analysis and Community Input**

The Working Group brought together experts in public finance, ethics, labor, and local governance. The group examined how Oakland's City Charter – the framework for how city government operates – can be modernized to serve residents more effectively.

The Working Group focused on three key areas of potential Charter reform: clarifying the roles of elected officials, strengthening responsible city financial planning, and improving government accountability and transparency.

"SPUR's mission is grounded in rigorous research and thoughtful analysis to help cities function more effectively," said **Sean Elsbernd, President and CEO of**

**SPUR.** “Through this working group, we brought national best practices and data-driven research together with local input to support Oakland in evaluating how its Charter can better align accountability, decision-making, and service delivery.”

As the City moves into the next phase of review, the League of Women Voters of Oakland and SPUR will host two informational community sessions to help residents learn more about the Working Group’s final report and recommendations.

The programs are scheduled for:

- Tuesday, February 17 at 5:30 PM
- Monday, February 23 at 6:00 PM

Location details will be available at <https://www.mayorbarbaralee.com/charter-reform> when they have been confirmed.

“This working group reflects what is possible when we center community engagement and bring residents, experts, and stakeholders into the same conversation,” said **Council President Kevin Jenkins**. “I appreciate the months of outreach and thoughtful collaboration that shaped this report, and I look forward to working with the Mayor and my Council colleagues to review the recommendations and identify opportunities for action.”

“Reforming Oakland’s Charter is no simple task. I am grateful for the Mayor’s Charter Reform Working Group for launching this process, and taking many efforts to incorporate the voices of Oakland residents into their recommendations,” said **Councilmember Janani Ramachandran**. “I look forward to reviewing their recommendations, and co-authoring Council legislation that will pose the question to Oakland residents of how they want to see our government have a clearer structure for accountability with a pragmatic division of power.”

“Too often, residents see confusion over which office or department is in charge, whether it’s financial planning, housing, or public safety,” said **Mayor Lee**. “Our Charter needs modernization. The recommendations we received will help us create a system that delivers results and supports our frontline departments in moving forward critical services like public safety and safe and clean streets. This is about making Oakland’s government work for everyone.”

Mayor Barbara Lee will now work with City Council to review the Working Group's recommendations and consider next steps on potential charter measure reforms.

For more information, visit: <https://www.mayorbarbaralee.com/charter-reform>

[View the full reporter here.](#)

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## **Frequently Asked Questions: Oakland Charter Reform Recommendations**

### **Why was this Charter Reform process launched?**

Oakland's current form of government mixes elements of a strong-mayor system and a council-manager system. This hybrid structure has created confusion about who is in charge, who is accountable, and how decisions actually get implemented. Residents expect the Mayor to lead, but the Mayor lacks clear authority. Councilmembers are responsible for passing laws and budgets, but the current structure makes implementation and accountability unclear. The result is frustration, inefficiency, and declining public trust.

The Charter Reform Working Group was asked to study these issues and recommend a clear, workable structure that aligns authority with responsibility and improves accountability to Oakland residents.

### **What is the central recommendation of the report?**

The report recommends that Oakland choose one coherent form of government and move away from the current hybrid system. After evaluating national best practices and extensive community input, the Working Group recommended that Oakland adopt a strong-mayor system, paired with a strengthened City Council and clearer separation of roles.

This approach provides clear executive leadership while ensuring robust legislative oversight and accountability.

### **What does a “strong-mayor” system mean?**

In a strong-mayor system, the Mayor serves as the city's chief executive, responsible for running city operations and delivering services. The City Council serves as the legislative branch, responsible for passing laws, approving the budget, and overseeing the Mayor's administration.

This model creates a clear separation of powers, so residents know who is responsible for results — and elected officials have the tools they need to do their jobs effectively.

### **Why does the report recommend a strong-mayor system and strengthening City Council for Oakland?**

The Working Group concluded that a strong-mayor system best fits Oakland's needs because:

- Residents already expect the Mayor to be accountable for citywide performance
- Oakland faces complex challenges that require unified leadership, including budget deficits, public safety, homelessness, and infrastructure
- Clear executive authority improves coordination, fiscal discipline, and crisis response

The recommended changes align authority with public expectations.

### **Does this mean the Mayor would have too much power?**

No. The recommendations are designed to balance power, not concentrate it unchecked. While the Mayor's executive authority is clarified and strengthened, the City Council is also significantly strengthened to serve as a true legislative and oversight body.

A strong mayor system only works when paired with a strong, independent City Council — and the report recommends both.

### **How would the City Council be strengthened under this proposal?**

The report recommends several major changes to strengthen the Council's ability to legislate, oversee, and hold the executive branch accountable:

- Independent legislative and budget analysis: Creating a permanent, professional legislative analyst office to provide unbiased fiscal and policy analysis, similar to those in Los Angeles and the California Legislature
- Stronger oversight authority: Explicit Charter authority to conduct hearings, compel testimony, and subpoena records when necessary
- Clear legislative role: Clarifying that Councilmembers focus on policymaking and oversight, rather than being pulled into day-to-day administrative problem-solving

These changes give the Council tools to evaluate policies, monitor performance, and protect the public interest.

### **What role would the City Council play under a strong-mayor system?**

Under the recommended model, the City Council would:

- Pass laws, policies, and the city budget
- Oversee the Mayor's administration and city operations
- Hold hearings and investigate issues of public concern
- Override a mayoral veto with a two-thirds vote, preserving checks and balances

The reforms included in the report empower the Council to function as a strong legislative branch.

### **Would the City Council be full-time?**

Yes. The Working Group recommends clarifying expectations around City Council service, including consideration of full-time status.

This includes:

- Prohibiting outside employment to avoid conflicts of interest
- Aligning Council compensation with comparable strong-mayor cities using objective benchmarks

A full-time council with adequate support improves policy quality, fiscal oversight, and accountability.

### **How does this improve budgeting and fiscal accountability?**

The recommendations strengthen coordination between the Mayor and City Council by:

- Clarifying the Mayor's authority within the budget process, including veto authority, to prevent unrealistic or unfunded commitments
- Providing the Council with independent budget analysis to evaluate fiscal impacts
- Clarifying responsibility for implementation

Together, these changes improve trust, discipline, and long-term financial planning.

### **What did community members say they wanted?**

Across differences in opinion about governance models, residents consistently asked for:

- Clear accountability for citywide outcomes
- Stronger mayoral authority to deliver results
- Fewer layers of bureaucracy and clearer decision-making
- A citywide approach to addressing inequities across neighborhoods

The recommendations respond directly to these priorities while preserving professional expertise and democratic checks and balances.

### **What problem does this ultimately solve?**

The reforms address a system where “everyone is in charge, and therefore no one is in charge.” By clearly assigning executive authority to the Mayor and strengthening the Council's legislative and oversight role, Oakland can move toward a government that has:

- Fewer layers of bureaucracy, including eliminating duplicative roles in the Mayor's office and the City Administrator's office, which slow down decisions and confuse responsibility;
- Stronger mayoral authority to ensure a citywide approach to service delivery; and

- A structure that can allocate resources across districts with very different needs to reduce disparities.

The goal is not more power for any one office — it is clearer accountability and better governance for Oakland residents.

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