

October 8, 2025

Commission Streamlining Task Force (CSTF)

City Hall, 1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place
San Francisco, CA 94102

Re: Sunshine Ordinance Task Force (SOTF): An important public resource

Dear Commission Streamlining Task Force members:

The Society of Professional Journalists' Northern California Chapter (SPJ NorCal), whose members serve as the eyes, ears and voice of the public, strongly urges that you recommend retaining the Sunshine Ordinance Task Force as a stand-alone body. The SOTF is established through Article IV, Section 30, of the Sunshine Ordinance (Administrative Code Chapter 67) — the nation's oldest and arguably strongest local government transparency law — which voters passed, 58% to 42%, in November 1999.

Members of the public need and deserve the oversight and enforcement of the Ordinance that only the SOTF has shown willingness to exercise. The SOTF educates City personnel about their mandates under the Ordinance and hears complaints, without charge, from members of the public who believe their sunshine-related rights have been violated.

The Board of Supervisors and the Ethics Commission also are empowered to hear and act on such complaints but they have staunchly refused to hold sunshine scofflaws accountable. The SOTF provides the only realistic alternative for members of the public to seek redress without having to sue the City.

For this reason, there is also a fiscal responsibility argument for retaining the SOTF. While the Budget and Legislative Analyst has said it is difficult to estimate how much the SOTF has saved the City in court costs, a 2016 case offers insight: A Superior Court judge that year ordered the Ethics Commission to provide a requestor with records that commission staff had withheld, *and* to reimburse his legal expenses of \$24,000. Multiply that by the 100 to 150 complaints the SOTF receives each year, and the savings add up to more than \$2.4 million a year.

Attached is a series of testimonials from former task force members who can speak to the public benefit of the SOTF.

We would be happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,

Laura Wenus

Thomas Peele

Co-Chairs, SPJ NorCal Freedom of Information Committee

SUNSHINE ORDINANCE TASK FORCE

Voting Seats Nominated by the
Society of Professional Journalists,
Northern California Chapter



The Northern California chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists nominates candidates to three seats on the Sunshine Ordinance Task Force of San Francisco — two journalists and one attorney. All three are voting seats. There is an additional seat for a professional journalist that we don't directly nominate, but is currently open.

People who have served on the Task Force or brought a case before the body shared their thoughts with us.





"The Sunshine Ordinance Task Force serves as a 'people's court,' fielding complaints from citizens who feel their Sunshine rights have been violated and reporting regularly to the Board of Supervisors on how government transparency can be improved.

"The Task Force does an excellent job, despite efforts by some in City Hall to hamstring the body and to weaken the ordinance, and it saves the City immeasurably in court costs.

"The 15 to 20 hours a month that Task Force-related work takes is time extremely well spent. I served from 2002 to 2014, including two years as Chair, and am glad I had that opportunity to help move Sunshine forward."

Richard Knee

Former Task Force member, freelance journalist and Sunshine activist

"Without an enforceable and enforced open-records law, which San Francisco is unique in possessing at the city level, there is no way the public would know about the fraud committed at the Hunters Point Shipyard by a Navy contractor, what Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility has called 'the biggest case of eco fraud in US history.'

"Whistleblowers had come forward but they were largely ignored until the Navy gave the City a presentation, and the only way the presentation, a public record, became public information was after I threatened a Sunshine Ordinance Task Force complaint against the Mayor's Office, which claimed that they'd deleted it or some other such ridiculous excuse.

"Without the Sunshine Ordinance and the Task Force, my only recourse would have been a lawsuit — something a freelance journalist cannot afford, and something a citizen should not be expected to fund just to obtain information that is rightly theirs. All other cities, states, and the federal government should implement accountability models to their public-records laws like San Francisco's Sunshine Ordinance."

Chris Roberts
Journalist



"In 2017, the Sunshine Ordinance Task Force unanimously supported my claim that the vote by the Police Commission to approve of tasers was in violation of the Brown Act because we, the people, were locked out of City Hall while the vote took place. After months of inaction from the Police Commission, it was only when NBC Bay Area responded to my concerns and came to a meeting that the Police Commission agreed to reconsider the vote.

"Then, President Bob Hirsch admitted that we were locked out but said it was the Sheriff's fault —and the Commission upheld the previous vote to approve the use of tasers. It is irrelevant whose fault it was: our rights were still violated.

"What I learned in this process is anyone on the Task Force needs to also be a strong advocate in city government for the respect of its decisions. Without legal teeth, there needs to be a call for ethical integrity among the boards and commissions when the people's rights are violated, as was the case in this decision.

"After the failure of the Police Commission to uphold the Task Force's decision, the Task Force took the unusual action of calling on the Board of Supervisors, the Ethics Commission and the District Attorney to demand the Police Commission support this decision—and yet none of them took any action."

Magick Altman
San Francisco activist





A 2017 City Hall meeting, at which the Police Commission voted on arming police with tasers. *Photo by J.P. Dobrin*

"The Sunshine Ordinance Task Force is a critical lever for anyone seeking information and looking to hold public officials and bodies accountable. Transparency and records access is critical to a healthy democracy and the Task Force does the work to insist on both.

"The San Francisco Zoo refused to share requested documents about the state of their animals' health, use of anti-psychotics, and a necropsy report after the death of a young and critically endangered rhino on loan to the San Diego Zoo. I took my case to the Task Force and, after several appearances, it unanimously decided that San Francisco Zoological Society was in violation of the city's Sunshine Ordinance and the California Public Records Act. I will use these findings to hold the zoo accountable and insist they hand over the records."

Justin Barker
San Francisco animal rights activist





"The Sunshine Ordinance Task Force lets ordinary citizens get a public hearing on crucial government transparency issues without having to hire a lawyer. That means they can force public agencies to answer for their failure to produce records without breaking the bank.

"That's important. It requires agencies to think through their denials of access and actually justify those denials under that law.

"And while the Task Force itself lacks enforcement authority, I found during my two years on the body that it is a force for good—a venue for meaningful citizen engagement and transparency. The attorney member is really essential to Task Force's function in that he or she provides essential insight and guidance on what the law says and how it applies to each case."

David Snyder, First Amendment Coalition Executive Director
Former attorney member of the Task Force, nominated by SPJ-NorCal

"The San Francisco Sunshine Ordinance and the Task Force it establishes are the first and still the best local open government instrument of their kind in the country, if not the world.

"Ordinary citizens can challenge city government when it denies access to meetings and records — without the expenses of hiring attorneys and suing. My only 'job' ever at City Hall was to serve on the Task Force as a founding member for 10 years.

"I found it a valuable experience in helping citizens, promoting transparency and holding city officials accountable."

Bruce B. Brugmann
Retired editor and publisher of the Bay Guardian
Former Task Force member



More information, past cases and recordings of meetings are available at sfgov.org/sunshine/

To apply for the Task Force, email a resume and statement of intent — why you are interested in serving and what you would bring to the Task Force — to spjnorcalfoi@gmail.com.

Exterior City Hall photos by Lauren Smiley. All photos in this packet are used with permission.

