



San Francisco Ethics Commission

25 Van Ness Avenue, STE 220
San Francisco, CA 94102-6053
ethics.commission@sfgov.org
415-252-3100 | sfethics.org

October 30, 2025

Members of the Commission Streamlining Task Force (CSTF)

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

Re: Proposed Changes to San Francisco Ethics Commission

Dear Members of the Commission Streamlining Task Force:

I am writing in response to the [October 24 memorandum from staff to the Commission Streamlining Task Force](#) regarding general administration and finance bodies, including the Ethics Commission. I want to acknowledge the hard work and meaningful engagement led by Task Force staff. These efforts have led to a set of recommendations that recognize the unique and important role the Ethics Commission plays in City government. I'm grateful that staff's recommendations emphasize the importance of the Ethics Commission's independence.

While we agree with and support the overall recommendation to keep the Ethics Commission and preserve its unique independent nature, we do have several concerns with aspects of the memo and its recommendations we would like to address with the Task Force.

Ballot Measure Authority is an Important Tool for the Commission

The staff memo recommends that the Task Force consider eliminating the ability of the Ethics Commission to directly place measures on the ballot for voters to consider. We strongly oppose this change, as the ability to place measures directly on the ballot is an important tool for ensuring the Commission can develop, enact, and administer effective ethics and campaign finance rules as an independent body. This authority allows the Commission to create and amend important City rules by directly engaging with the voters, without the potential for reforms to be politicized, delayed, or fully blocked by elected officials.

This is an authority that the Commission uses sparingly. As the staff memo states, the Ethics Commission has only placed five measures on the ballot in the 32 years since the Commission was created by voters. The Commission regularly works on legislation with the Board of Supervisors to strengthen or improve the City's rules, and a ballot measure is typically not necessary. However, the Commission's ability to place measures on the ballot helps ensure that any legislation sent to the Board of Supervisors is fully considered, because the Commission always has the option to go to voters if critical reform laws cannot be passed legislatively. This element of the Commission's powers was established by voters when the Commission was created, and it was intended to be an important channel for voters to enact reform laws.

We also disagree with the memo's suggestion that Ethics Commission ballot measures "may receive less public input and scrutiny than measures." The last ballot measure from the Commission was Proposition D, on the March 2024 ballot, for which the Commission engaged in an extensive, public deliberative

process before voting to place the measure on the ballot. [The process](#) that led to placing Proposition D on the ballot took more than two years and included: four interested persons meetings with staff and stakeholders, the publication of three detailed policy reports, 13 meetings with City bargaining units on the potential impacts of the reforms, discussion with the public at 11 public meetings of the Ethics Commission held at City Hall, and various other direct meetings between Commission staff and interested parties. This ballot measure underwent extensive public input and scrutiny during this time and was then approved by nearly 90% of voters.

Other jurisdictions regularly inquire with staff about the Commission's ballot measure authority and express a desire for similar authority in their jurisdictions. Frequently, other jurisdictions are only able to vote to send measures or legislation to their legislative body, where that body must then choose to act on the reforms. This often results in the legislative body ignoring the reforms or significantly altering or diminishing the needed reforms. This is one reason why San Francisco is often cited as a model for other ethics commissions around the country.

The ability of the Ethics Commission to place measures directly on the ballot, without Board approval, is an important policymaking tool that the Commission uses sparingly. It should be preserved.

"At-will" Removal Would Undermine the Independence of the Commission

The staff memo correctly recognizes the need for the Ethics Commission to deviate from the template in several ways "to preserve the Commission's independence from political influence and uphold its critical role as an impartial enforcer of the City's ethics and transparency laws." The memo further explains that "[p]olitical insulation is essential to maintaining public trust in the Commission's oversight of elected officials and City departments." We fully agree with these statements and believe they support the need to maintain for-cause removal for the Commission.

While the distributed appointing structure of the Commission does help protect against undue influence by appointing authorities, switching to at-will removal would severely undermine the independence of the Commission. At-will appointees can be removed at any time by the official who appointed them, which creates a dynamic in which the commissioner is more likely to be influenced in their official actions by the preferences of their appointing authority. This change would make Ethics Commissioners more subject to influence by the officials who appointed them. While this may not be a concern for some commissions, it is not appropriate for a commission that is responsible for independently applying rules to City officials.

The potential for influence by appointing authorities would particularly compromise the ability of the Commission to impartially enforce the City's ethics rules. An essential part of a commissioner's duties is to review cases, determine if violations have occurred, and issue penalties when appropriate. City officials who appoint commissioners can be respondents in these cases, as can their political allies or rivals. Allowing these elected officials to remove a Commissioner at-will would undermine the Commission's ability to effectively and impartially hear and conclude cases. Even if no influence was exerted, this change would lead to the appearance of potential conflicts in the eyes of respondents and the public. The quasi-judicial role of commissioners requires that they should only be able to be removed by their appointing authority for-cause. We believe it is vital that for-cause removal remain the standard for Ethics Commissioners.

Ethics Commission Should Remain Independent from Sunshine Task Force

We agree with the staff recommendation that the Sunshine Ordinance Task Force (SOTF) not be merged into the Ethics Commission. We agree that attempting to pull SOTF under the Ethics Commission's control would be burdensome, pull resources from other Ethics Commission priorities, and raise jurisdictional concerns. We support the staff's recommendation to keep SOTF independent from the Ethics Commission.

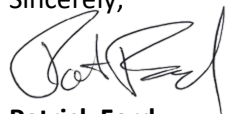
Ethics Commission Fulfills Required State Functions

The staff memo incorrectly states that the Commission is not responsible for any functions required by state law. The Ethics Commission fulfills multiple state law requirements for the City that aren't included in the memorandum. The California Political Reform Act (PRA) requires the Statements of Economic Interest (commonly known as the Form 700) to be filed with the City and County each year by more than 5,000 City officials. The Ethics Commission manages this process, supports these filers, receives the filings, and maintains the electronic disclosure system which the public uses to access these filings. Similarly, the PRA also requires multiple campaign finance related filings to be filed with the City and County, and these forms are currently received, maintained, and posted publicly by the Ethics Commission. The Ethics Commission also administers the city's Annual Ethics Training, which satisfies the state's ethics training requirements for local officials who take the training. Each of these functions is required by state law.

Thank you for your consideration and we look forward to working with you to address our concerns. We would also like to thank the staff for their thoughtful consideration of the work of the Ethics Commission and for recognizing the Commission's "unique purpose as a safeguard of integrity and accountability in City government."

If you have questions or would like to further discuss, please contact myself (patrick.ford@sfgov.org) or our Deputy Director, Zachary D'Amico (zachary.damico@sfgov.org).

Sincerely,



Patrick Ford

Executive Director

San Francisco Ethics Commission