Charter Reform Working Group

❖ Office of the Mayor
❖ Board of Supervisors
❖ Office of the Controller

December 10, 2025

Welcome and Introductions

Mayor Daniel Lurie

Board President Rafael Mandelman

Working Group Member Introductions

Agenda

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4   Introduction to the City Charter

5   Current Efforts to Tackle These Problems

7   Q&A and Discussion

8   Closing and Next Steps

Working Group Purpose and Schedule

Greg Wagner, Controller

Working Group Purpose

1 Provide input on a set of potential Charter reforms to modernize and improve San Francisco's government

2 Enable more efficient and effective delivery of City services

What are the ways a Charter Amendment gets on the Ballot?

Considering and providing feedback on reforms that may end up on the November 2026 ballot.

Pathways to the Ballot:

Legislative Process:

Board majority or Mayor with Board approval may submit a Charter amendment for the ballot.

Introductions: May 2026

Election
Nov 3, 2026

Voter Initiative:

Voters may place a measure on the ballot by gathering signatures and submitting the petitions to City.

Submittal Deadline: July 6, 2026

What Problems Are We Trying to Address?

Greg Wagner, Controller

It is too hard to deliver services to the City and County of San Francisco. Government processes can be uncoordinated and inconsistent.

This leads to:

Difficulty effectively responding to big challenges

Decreasing faith in the public sector.

Struggling to efficiently serve vulnerable San Franciscans who rely on city services the most

Diffuse accountability and problems holding elected officials accountable

City Organization
The structure of government is difficult to change and authority is spread out, leading to difficulty holding officials accountable.

➢ Charter departments and their outlined functions **cannot be changed, renamed, or re-organized,** as service needs change, without voter approval.

➢ The Charter prohibits the Mayor from delegating department oversight, meaning he or she is responsible for managing **50+ department heads.**

➢ Many departments have **commissions that can hire and fire department heads** while the Mayor is responsible for oversight and policy; this leads to **a lack of clarity** in who the department head reports to and who is ultimately accountable for performance.

Potential next steps: Modernize the city's organizational structure by clarifying roles and responsibilities and strengthening accountability

Operational Efficiency

Departments are empowered to set their own operations and administrative policies, creating redundancies, delays in service delivery, and increasing costs.

➢ We lack a **consistent approach to common administrative services** across departments. For example, many departments manage their own capital projects or have different approaches to procurement, which leads to high costs, duplicative processes, inconsistent standards, and difficultly coordinating.

➢ The Charter mandates **very specific operational requirements** that do not allow us to adapt to changing needs, such as mandated service hours, performance metrics and issuing public notices in newspapers. However, what made sense 30 years ago may not make sense now.

Potential next steps: Make it easier to get things done by enabling clear, predictable operating procedures and clarifying department roles

Policymaking

San Francisco places more than twice as many ballot measures before voters than other large California cities, constraining policymakers' ability to lead, make decisions, and respond to new challenges.

➤ It is relatively easy to add ballot measures that introduce new restrictions each election; the November 2024 election included **15 local measures.** Other jurisdictions typically have far fewer.

➤ A 2022 tax measure was **abandoned** after proponents realized it might not actually tax the companies intended. The measure was removed via a court order.

➤ San Francisco is the only jurisdiction in California that allows a minority of legislators place a measure on the ballot.

Potential next steps: Evaluate how things get on the ballot and the quality of ballot measures.

Resource Management
Baselines are approved one at a time, sometimes for overlapping issue areas, without a big-picture view of the City's services and budget.

➢ **Over 30% of the general fund is restricted** for specific uses, compared to **only 15%** 30 years ago, limiting the ability to direct funding to new needs, challenges, and changing priorities.

➢ Since 1990, San Francisco voters have approved **over 20 new baselines**. Individually, each baseline mandates funding for an important service. Collectively, they significantly reduce budget flexibility.

➢ Each baseline has different **sunset provisions** or **administrative requirements**.

➢ As the General Fund is impacted, it hampers our ability to respond to changes at the federal level.

Potential next steps: Evaluate the impact of budget set-asides on the city's ability to deliver for San Franciscans

Introduction to the City Charter

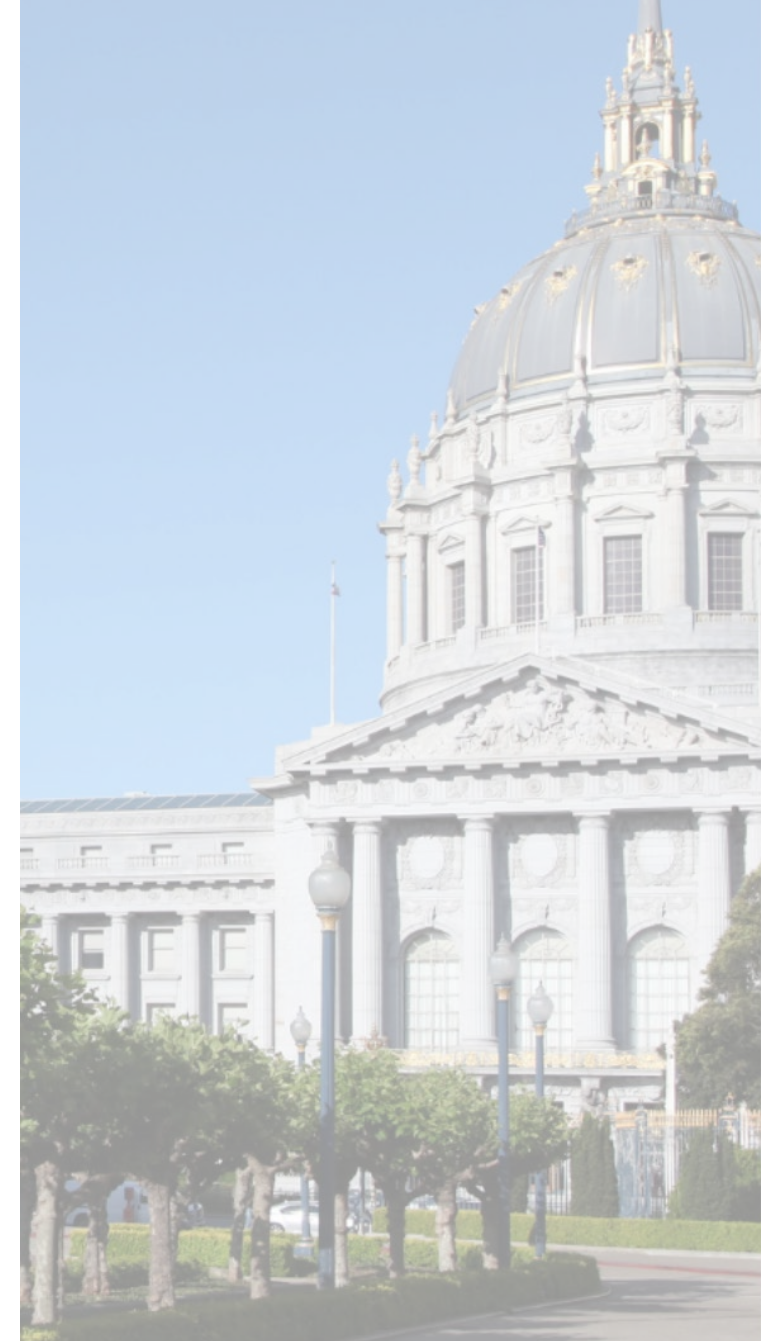## Jon Givner, Chief Assistant City Attorney

Charter 101

What is the Charter and why does it exist?

- **Acts as our local constitution**

  - A Charter establishes the structure of City government and the powers and duties of each arm of government

- **Grants us special power under state law**

  - Charter cities have the power to adopt laws affecting municipal affairs

- **Can't easily be amended**

  - The Charter can only be amended by the voters

  - Process is dictated in state law

History of the San Francisco Charter

- **1898 Charter**

  - Established "strong mayor" form of government

- **1932 Charter**

  - Progressive era reforms – Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) with oversight of most departments

  - Accretion of Charter amendments over time

- **1996 Charter**

  - Shifted some authority from CAO back to the Mayor

- **Charter amendments since**

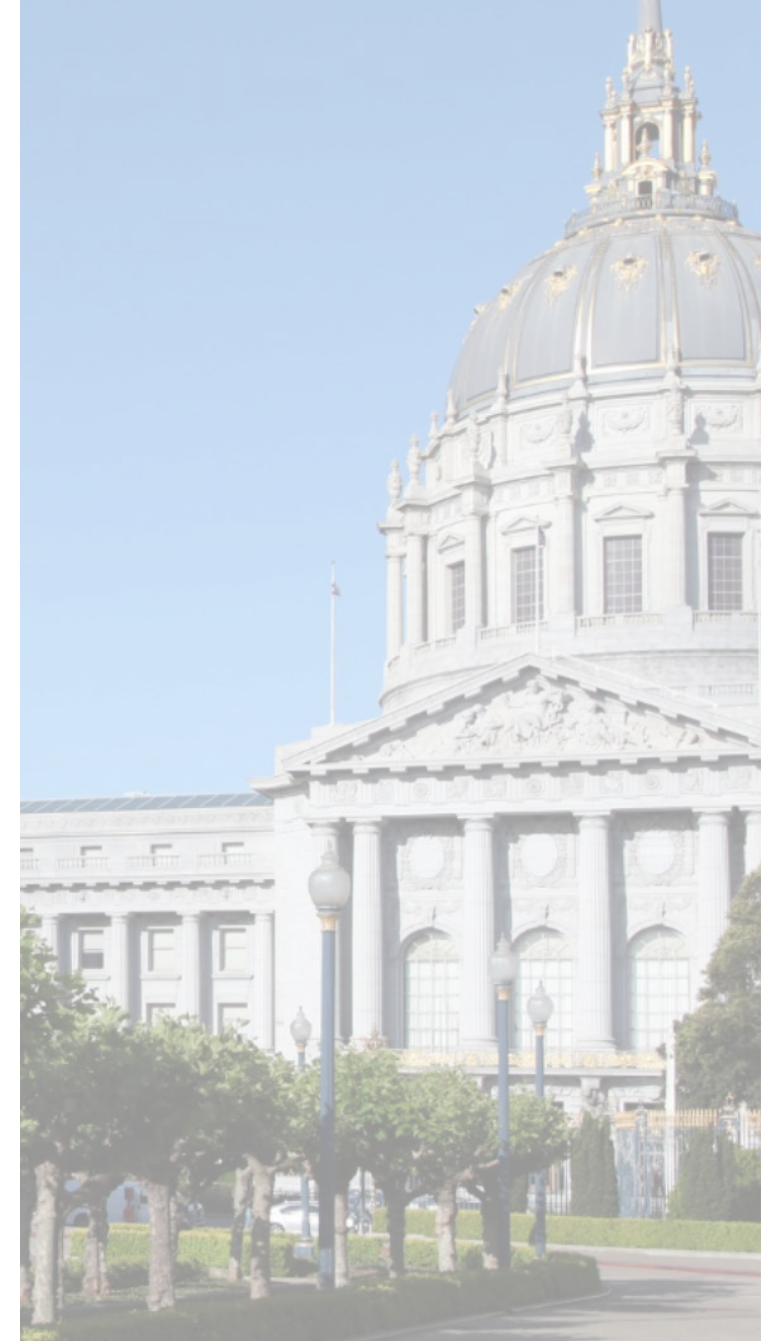 - New departments and commissions; spending baselines; exclusive authority for SFMTA

Policymaking 101

Why set policy in the Charter?

- **Legal hierarchy**

  - The Charter supersedes other local laws and policy directives (ordinances, resolutions, executive directives, etc.)

- **Permanence and legitimacy**

  - Once established in the Charter, policies are very difficult to change and can only be amended by the voters

- **Establishes and constrains the authority of policymakers**

  - The Charter grants powers/authorities that could otherwise be established by ordinance

Structure of San Francisco Government in the Charter

- **Legislative Branch – Board of Supervisors**

- **Executive Branch**

  - Departments with commissions

  - Departments without commissions

- **Departments with Elected Department Heads**

- **City Administrator and Controller**

- **Additional Departments**

Current Efforts

Carmen Chu,
City Administrator

Current Efforts

1 Streamlining Commissions (Proposition E, 2024)

2 Simplifying Procurement

3 Capital Project Delivery

4 Aligning Technology

1) Streamlining Commissions

Overview of Purpose

Purpose
- 2024 Prop E measure established a Task Force to make recommendations to the Mayor and BOS about ways to modify, eliminate, or combine the City's appointive boards and commissions to improve administration of government

Requirements
- Est. February 2026 - Finalize Report
- March 2026 - Draft legislation (non-charter items/ charter items)
- Board of Supervisors must hear report

Who
- Members: Chair Ed Harrington (BOS), Andrea Bruss (CAT), Sophie Hayward (CAO), Sophia Kittler (MYR), Natasha Mihal (CON)
- Staffing: CAO and CON

Resources
- www.sf.gov/commission-streamlining-task-force
- CommissionStreamlining@sfgov.org
- Active mailing list

1) Streamlining Commissions

Summary

Engaged Process

- 19 public meetings held
- 57 public commenters on average in most recent meetings
- 45 engaged regularly through listserv
- 550+ public feedback received (email, letters, surveys)
- 1,200+ website views per month

Key Considerations

- Duplication or overlap
- Accountability
- Active/Inactive
- Flexibility to adapt and be responsive
- Public input

Point-in-time Summary of Recommendations (Nov 2025)

- 150 bodies in-scope
- 27 required by state or federal law
- 68 recommended for elimination
- 18 recommended to move to administrative code
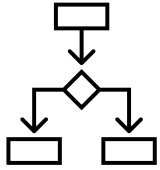- 21 recommended to keep in charter
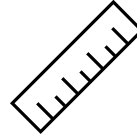
1) Streamlining Commissions

Timeline for Actions

Jan 2025

Appoint all members of Task Force

Kick off public hearings

Mar

Gather information

May

Develop templates

Provide guidance for staff on reports

Sep–Nov

Public hearings and decisions based on topic areas

Dec–Jan

Deferred recommendations

Review and provide feedback on draft recommendations

Feb 2026

Submit final report to Board of Supervisors and Mayor

Mar 2026

Submit final legislation to Mayor and Board of Supervisors / hold required public hearing on task force recommendations

Nov 2026

Election

2) Simplifying Procurement

Challenges:

Fragmented Authority
Oversight, program administrators

Legislation, Rules and Regulations
Legal requirements, complex processes

One Size Fits All
Risk mitigation

Uneven Information and Processes
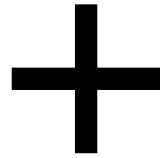Distributed implementation

Data and Tools Gaps
Limited shared systems, systems do not meet modern business needs, difficult to access data

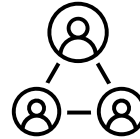**Efforts: Launched Gov Ops in aftermath of COVID-19 to simplify and speed contracting**

- **Repealed 12X** Restrictions
- Passed **Open for Business legislation**
- **Simplified subscription purchases** and **Government-to-Government** contracts
- Created the **Supplier Finder**, a sourcing tool for City departments
- Revamped **OCA's Term Contract List,** helps staff find what they need on OCA agreements
- **ServiceNow applications** to track processes
- **Combined pre-contract tech reviews** into LogicGate, reducing duplicative data entry/tracking
- **Hosted first-ever Small Business Workshop** to support businesses and nonprofits who want to work with the City
- Launched **Citywide Contracting Forum** for procurement staff, garnering 300+ attendees at first four forums

3) Capital Delivery

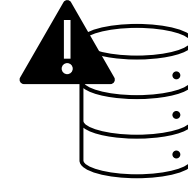**Challenges:**

＋ Delivery-side issues →

Coordination Challenges
Projects span multiple departments; collaboration varies

Uneven Information and Processes
Distributed implementation across six departments
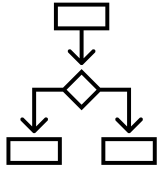
Data and Tools Gaps
Limited shared systems, systems do not meet modern business needs, difficult to access data

Efforts: Recent SFCTA review of major transportation project delivery; CAO launched in-depth literature review and focus sessions with practitioners on the ground / staff who do the work

- Improvement opportunities include clearer accountability and decision-making, establishing shared standards, and a unified framework for how capital projects are delivered.

4) Aligning Technology

Challenges:

Fragmented Authority
Missed opportunities, siloed decision-making, negatively impacts on interconnected systems
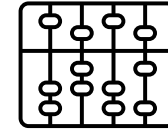
Legislation, Rules and Regulations
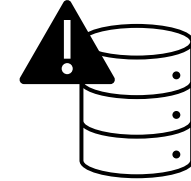Processes in conflict with pace of technology change

Uneven Resources
City investment not prioritized based on risk and impact

Variability Has A Cost
Proliferation of tools without citywide strategy

Data and Tools Gaps, Underinvestment
Technology debt, systems do not meet modern business needs, systems lack modern infrastructure, difficult to access data

Efforts: Build a modern, secure and easy-to-use technology foundation that supports better services for residents and helps staff do their jobs.
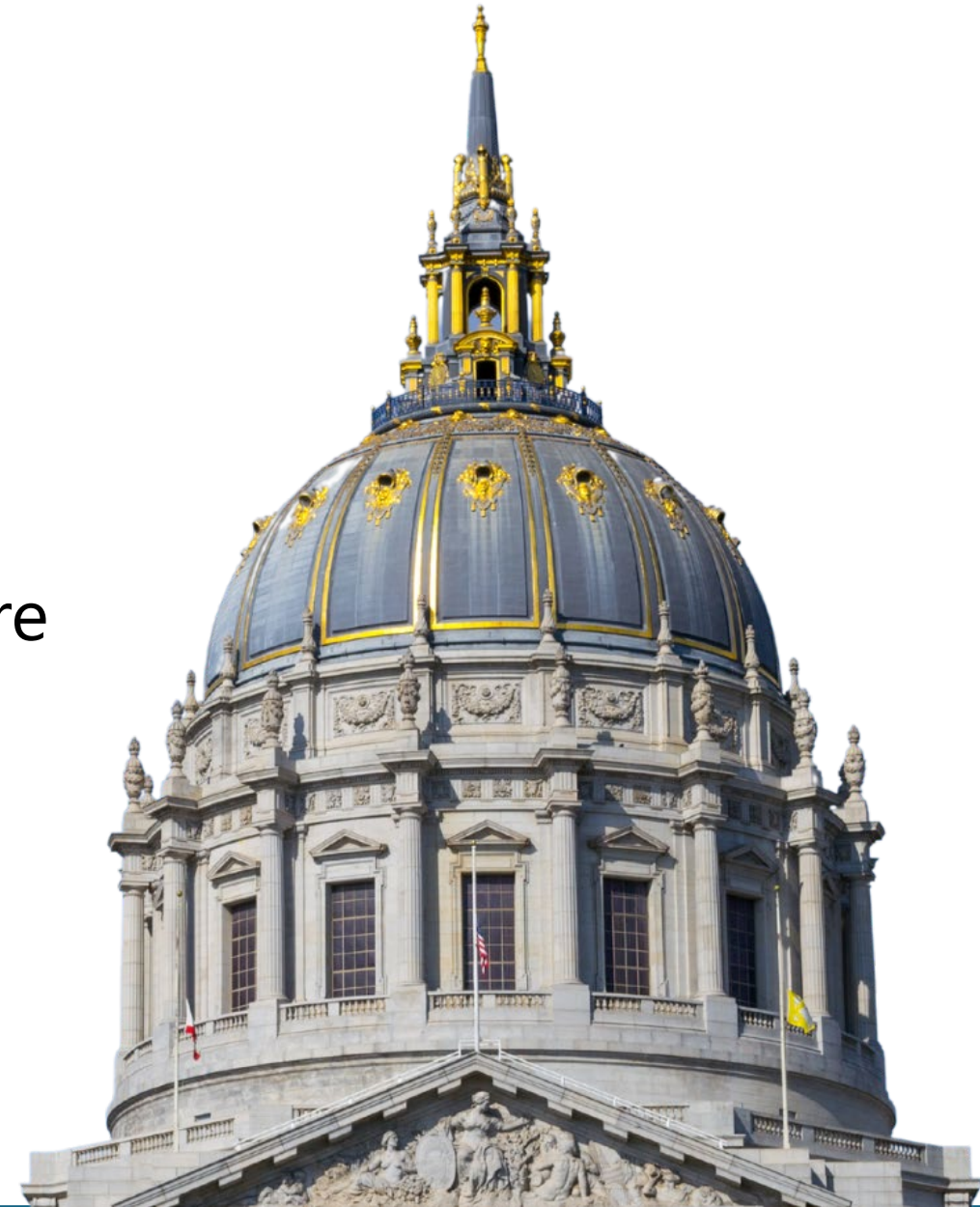
- Currently gathering baseline information and identifying opportunities for better alignment
- Convening IT leaders to develop roadmap with concrete actions to accelerate technology improvement for the City: unified data platforms, enabling core backbone infrastructure, best in class tech stacks for our common cross departmental needs, training, standards, best practice IT delivery models, better online services designed around the needs of residents, not internal processes

Q&A and Facilitated Discussion

Greg Wagner, Controller

Discussion Questions

1. Do you have any questions for our presenters?

2. What resonated with you on today's presentation?

3. Does this list look right to you? Are there any ideas that should be added?

4. Where have you seen examples of the challenges created by our Charter structure?

Closing and Next Steps

Greg Wagner, Controller

Closing and Next Steps

- Stakeholder discussions over the coming weeks and months.

- Reconvene in the new year as a group in late January or early February.

  For questions and any public comment, please email charterreform@sfgov.org