

Charter Reform Working Group



- ❖ Office of the Mayor
- ❖ Board of Supervisors
- ❖ City Administrator's Office
- ❖ Office of the Controller

January 30, 2025

Administrative Reminders

- Working Group meetings are open to the public and public feedback is welcome.
- We will have the opportunity for public comment at the end of the meeting and accept written feedback at CharterReform@sfgov.org.
- This Working Group is not a formal policy body. Any legislation put forward based on these discussion will be part of a full Board of Supervisors process, where the public is also welcome to provide input.

Agenda

- 1 Welcome and Introductions
- 2 Setting Up Today's Work
- 3 Values Statement Exercise
- 4 Topic 1: Ballot Measure Standards
- 5 Topic 2: Role of the City Administrator
- 6 Wrap-Up and Next Steps
- 7 Public Comment

Recap: 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



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

Working Group is discussing 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

Voter Initiative:

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

Submittal Deadline: July 6, 2026

Election
Nov 3, 2026

Recap: What Problem are we Trying to Solve?

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.



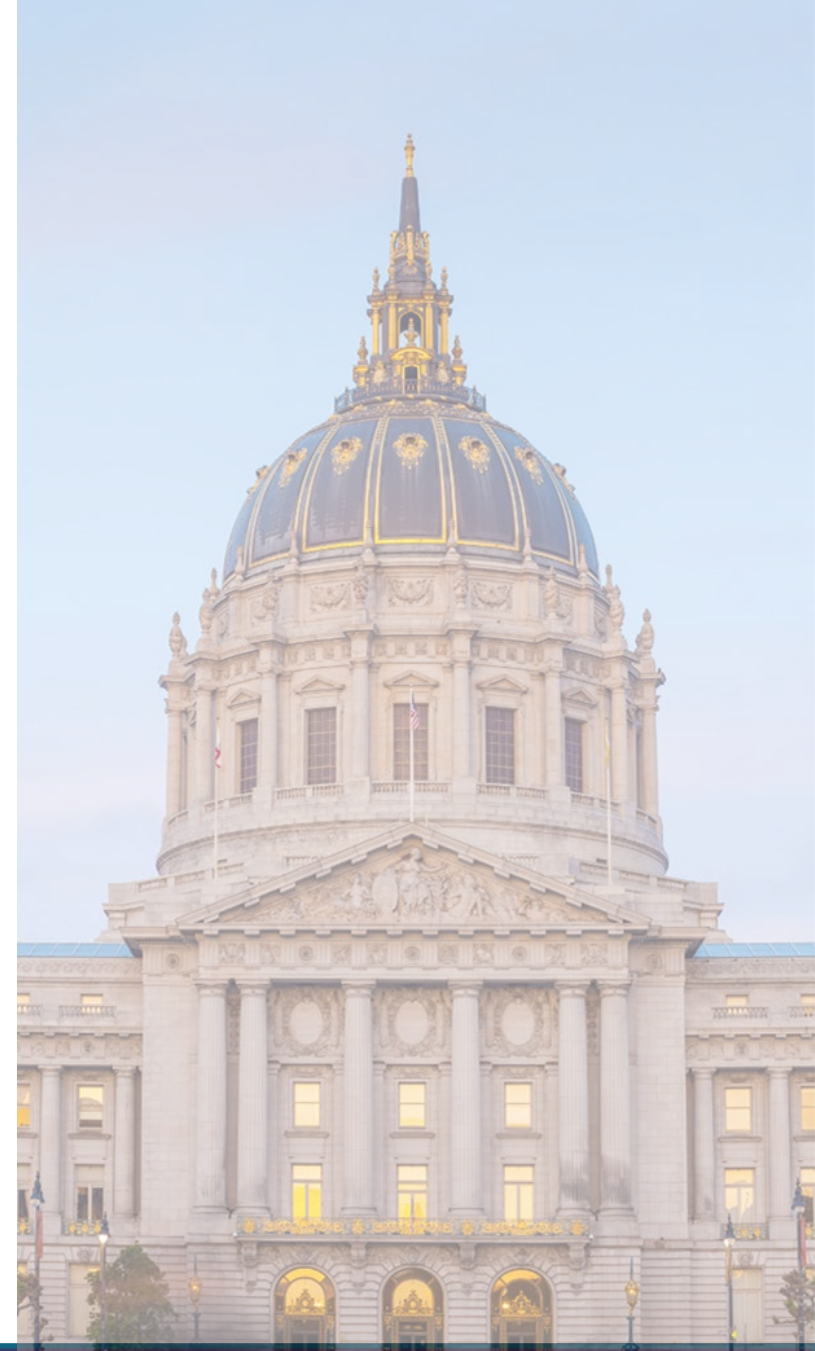
Struggling to efficiently serve vulnerable San Franciscans who rely on city services the most



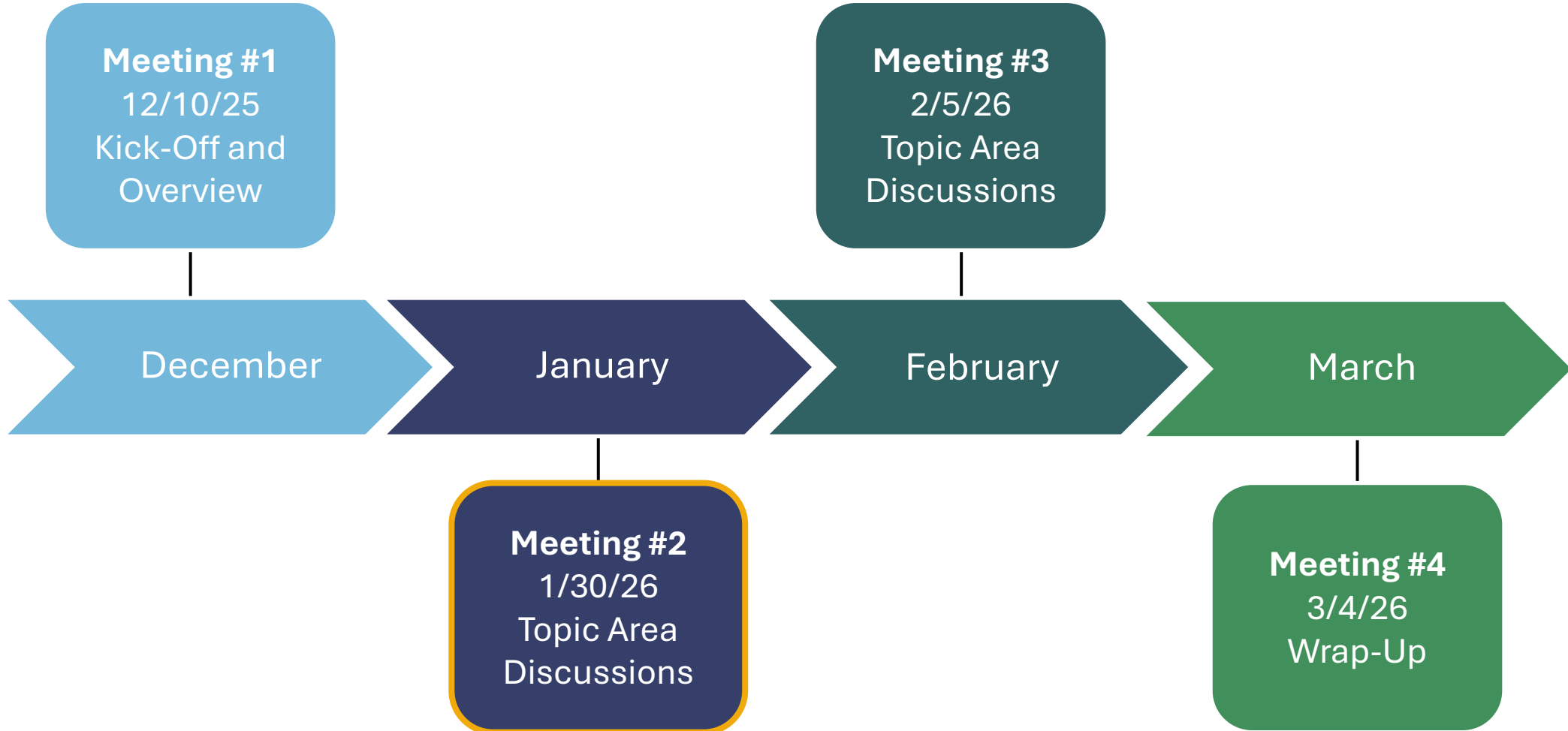
Diffuse accountability and problems holding elected officials accountable

Recap: What We Heard Last Time

- Desire for **synthesized information** about Charter sections under discussion
- Interest in understanding how **San Francisco compares to its peers**
- Discussion of how the Charter should reflect **San Francisco's values**
- Request for more detail on the Working Group's **process and responsibilities**



Recap: Meeting Schedule

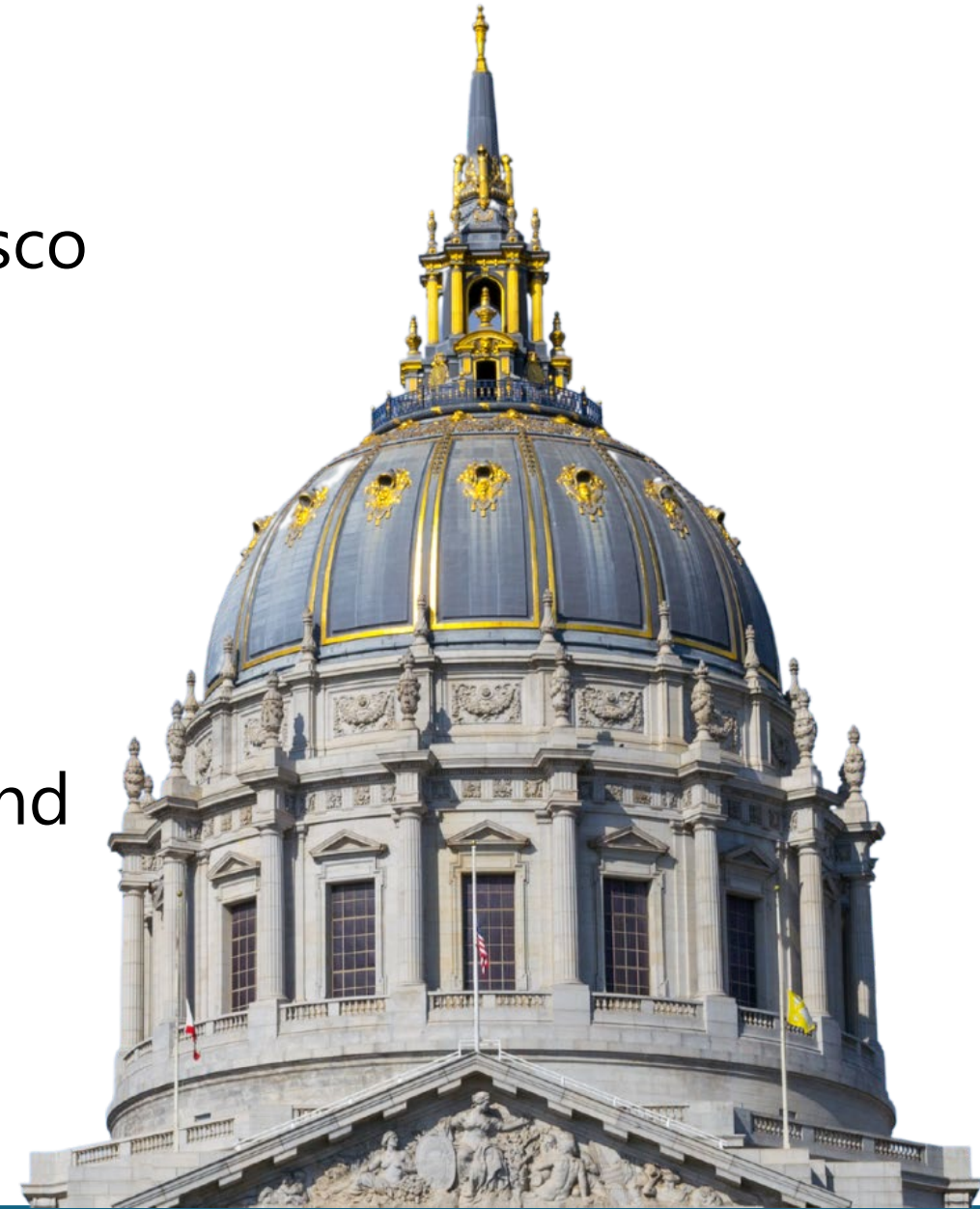


Values Exercise

Natasha Mihal

Written Values Exercise

- What are the key values that San Francisco should have in our Charter?
- Brainstorm throughout the meeting
- We will collect your written responses and present back next week



Ballot Measure Standards

Greg Wagner

Working Group Participation

- We want to hear from all Working Group members
 - During discussion, please raise your hand to participate and we will facilitate the discussion.
 - Give your fellow working group members an opportunity to address the group.
- If you have additional thoughts after today's meeting, please let us know by emailing CharterReform@sfgov.org.

What Problems Are We Trying To Solve?

Policymaking

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



Today's Topics:

Pathways to the
ballot

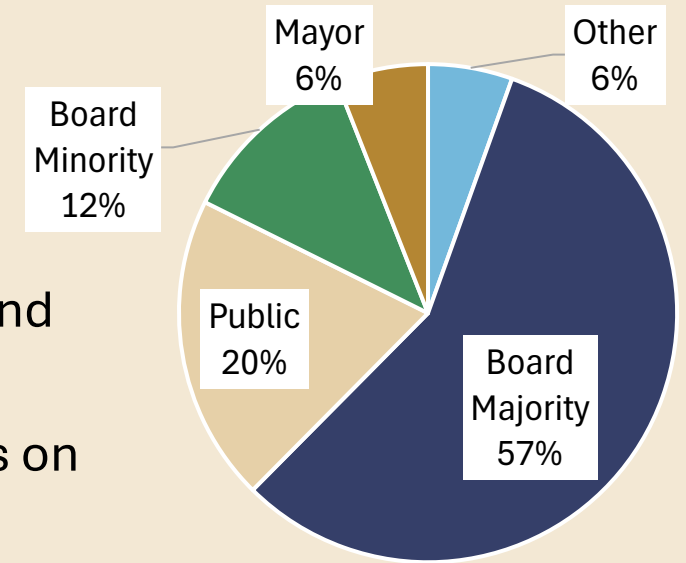
Improving ballot
measure quality

Ballot Measures

San Francisco places more than twice as many ballot measures before voters than other large California City, in part because it has lower thresholds to access the ballot.

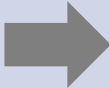
The way it is now:

- The Charter establishes the ability to place non-Charter measures, such as ordinances amending municipal codes, on the ballot. Pathways include:
 - **The Mayor or four or more members of the Board of Supervisors.**
 - **The public**, by gathering signatures.
 - Proponents cannot amend proposals once submitted and cannot withdraw them once qualified for the ballot.
- State law establishes the process to place Charter amendments on the ballot.
- A Board majority places most measures on the ballot, followed by the public.



Ballot Measures

How San Francisco compares to peers:

- San Francisco is unique in allowing a minority of legislators to access the ballot.
- San Francisco’s signature threshold for qualifying for the ballot is the lowest among California peers. 
- In 2014, California added a mechanism for proponents to amend measures before they make it to the ballot.

City	Signature thresholds for initiatives	Signature thresholds for recalls
San Francisco	2% Registered voters	10% Registered voters
Anaheim	10% Registered voters	10% Registered voters
Bakersfield	10% Registered voters	10% Registered voters
Fresno	10% Registered voters	10% Registered voters
Long Beach	10% Registered voters	10% Registered voters
Los Angeles	15% Mayoral votes	15% Registered voters
Oakland	10% Registered voters	10% Registered voters
Sacramento	10% Registered voters	10% Registered voters
San Diego	10% Registered voters	15% Registered voters
San Jose	5% Eligible voters	12% Registered voters

Ballot Measures

Reasons to consider Charter changes:

- Once approved, **most ballot measures can't easily be amended**, which constrains policymakers' ability to respond to new challenges.
- Lengthy ballots and frequent elections **cause voter fatigue, decreasing democratic participation.**
- Measures that are poorly written or not well thought out can qualify for the ballot, leading to **unintended impacts.**



Ways to Address these Problems



Raise **signature thresholds**

to ensure only the most impactful measures are on the ballot



Reduce **legislative and/or mayoral access**

to the ballot to ensure only the most salient measures are on the ballot



Create processes that **increase the quality** of ballot measures

to reduce the likelihood for unintended consequences



Allow **amendments to voter-approved ordinances** after a

certain amount of time has passed

to allow legislators to adapt over time



Raise Signature Thresholds

- San Francisco has **different signature thresholds** for Charter amendments (10%), recall elections (10%), and other non-Charter measures (2%).
- San Francisco's signature threshold for non-Charter ballot measures is 2%, **lower than our California peers**.
- In the past 30 years, **84 ballot measures** qualified via voter signatures.¹

Options for Discussion

1

Raise signature thresholds for voter initiatives that change Municipal Codes

From 2% to 10-12%

2

Raise signature thresholds for recall elections

From 10% to as high as 15%



Reduce **legislative and/or mayoral access** to the ballot

- The **Mayor or four or more members of the Board of Supervisors** can place ordinances on the ballot; **San Francisco is unique** in allowing a minority of legislators to access the ballot.
- **72 ballot measures** were brought by the Mayor or Board minority in last 30 years.¹

Options for Discussion

3

Raise threshold for Board of Supervisors to place ordinances on the ballot

From four Supervisors to higher threshold

4

Remove ability for Mayor to unilaterally place measures on the ballot

5

Raise threshold for Board of Supervisors to place Charter amendments on the ballot

Add Mayoral veto option for Board amendments, subject to override by 2/3 Board majority

6

Modify the Ethics Commission's ability to place measures on the ballot

Require a Board hearing and action on proposed Ethics measures



Create processes that increase the quality of ballot measures

- The public may place measures on the ballot by gathering signatures, however, **proponents cannot amend proposals** once submitted and cannot withdraw them once qualified for the ballot.
- Measures that are poorly written or not well thought out can qualify for the ballot, **leading to unintended impacts.**
- In 2014, California added a mechanism for **proponents to amend state measures** before they make it to the ballot.

Options for Discussion

7

Allow proponents to amend proposed initiatives before qualifying for the ballot

Create a process that mirrors the State's and includes public and legislative review periods

8

Make it easier for proponents to withdraw initiatives

Allow proponents to withdraw initiatives up to 120 days prior to the election



Allow amendments to voter-approved ordinances after a certain amount of time has passed

- Once approved, most ballot measures can't easily be amended, which constrains policymakers' ability to lead and make decisions.
- The Municipal Codes contain examples of voter-approved legislation that are no longer useful but cannot be amended to better serve San Franciscans.

Options for Discussion

9

Allow the Board of Supervisors to amend voter-approved ordinances after a certain amount of time after voter approval.

- During first six years, may be amended or repealed by supermajority of BoS and Mayor
- After six years, may be amended or repealed by BoS majority and Mayor

Impacts of These Options

Intended to:

- ✓ Reduce voter fatigue
 - Research shows that the longer a ballot is, the less likely a person is to vote.
- ✓ Ensure that only high-quality measures make it before voters.
- ✓ Provide pathways for outdated language to be removed from Code
 - Some sections of code were added before internet use was prevalent, such as the requirement that the Board notice meetings in the official City Newspaper.
 - Other sections are now out of compliance with state or federal law.

Not Intended to:

- × Remove citizen access to the ballot
 - × California peer cities with much higher signature thresholds still have many initiatives on the ballot; the November 2024 Los Angeles ballot had 7 measures compared to San Francisco's 15.
- × Remove valuable and impactful legislation
 - × The proposed bar to amend voter-approved ordinances is high, so that the authority to change voter ordinances would be used only in a public and transparent manner.

Options for Discussion

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Raise signature thresholds for voter initiatives that change Municipal Codes

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Raise thresholds for Board of Supervisors to place measures on the ballot

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Allow the Board of Supervisors to amend voter-approved ordinances after a certain amount of time after voter approval.

**City
Administrator**

Greg Wagner

What Problems Are We Trying To Solve?

Operational Efficiency

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



Today's Topics:

Role of the City
Administrator

Procurement

City Administrator

The City Administrator oversees some of the City's core operations, but the Charter limits their authority and does not fully protect the role from political influence.

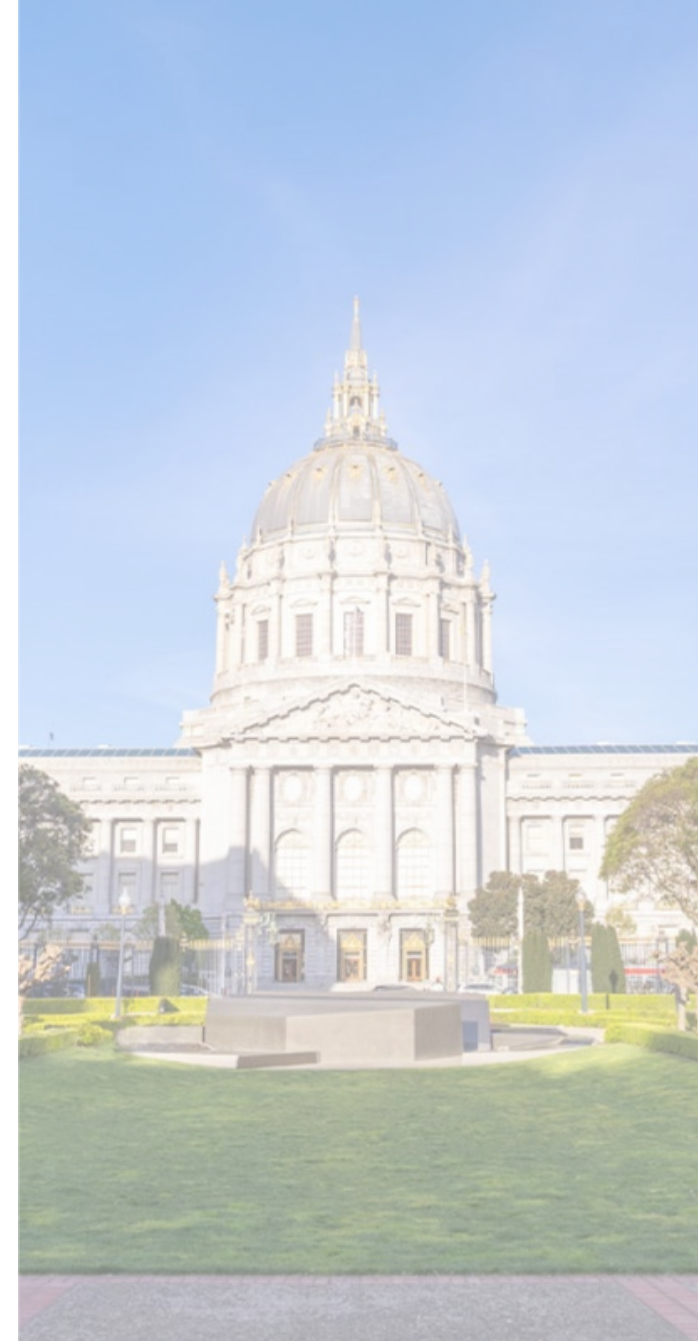
The way it is now:

- The City Administrator oversees a mix of basic operations (e.g., procurement), public services (e.g., 311), and smaller departments (e.g., Entertainment).
- Departments maintain significant autonomy over most core operations, even in areas where the City Administrator issues rules and guidance.
- The City Administrator is appointed by the Mayor to a **5-year term**, subject to Board confirmation, and **may be removed** by the Mayor **for any reason**, with Board approval.

City Administrator

Changes over time:

- Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) created in 1932 Charter.
 - Re-assigned oversight of most departments from the Mayor to CAO
 - 10-year term, only removable for cause
 - Part of a nationwide movement to professionalize government
- Replaced by a City Administrator in 1996 Charter
 - Shorter term, removable for any reason
 - Reduced authority



City Administrator

Reasons to consider Charter changes:

- The City Administrator's Charter responsibilities don't reflect current realities of the office or the City's org chart.
- Many core operational functions are fragmented across departments, leading to inconsistent approaches and inefficient delivery.
- Excellent service delivery for long-range, cross-departmental work requires shared standards and clear expectations across City departments guided by professional, apolitical decision-making.



One Example: Procurement



Procurement laws are administered by **12+ departments**, independent of any larger, shared operational frameworks.



The **City Administrator** may propose some procurement rules but **lacks the authority to compel consistency in administrative policies**.



Some **departments** have special charter authorities that allows them to **set their own procurement rules with little procedural oversight**.

This results in a system that:

Delays service delivery

Obscures accountability

Favors well-resourced firms

Reduces transparency and increases risk

Why Modernize Procurement Processes?

Procurement is one of the City's main pain points. When we think about improving procurement, we have an opportunity to **build the kind of City government** that delivers more effectively for San Francisco:



A government that is easy for **small businesses and nonprofits** to work with



Reduce internal bureaucracy and frustration for employees



A government that is responsive & **evolves** based on learnings



Effective service delivery for San Francisco



Transparent, ethical processes that result in **best value** for San Francisco

Ways to Address these Problems



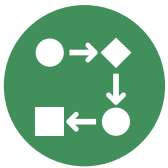
Grant the **City Administrator** more **authority** over citywide administrative functions

to create operational efficiencies and improve service delivery



Change how the City sets **procurement rules**

to centralize accountability for purchasing processes and allow for simplification, standardization, and modernization of procurement rules over time



Streamline the **contract approval process**

to reduce contracting timelines for non-controversial, non-discretionary products



Increase the **City Administrator's independence**

to insulate core City operations from day-to-day politics



Grant the City Administrator more authority over citywide administrative functions

- **The City Administrator** has **limited Charter authority** over basic City operations
 - Additional duties assigned by the Mayor or by ordinance
 - Some Charter duties are out-of-date
- **Departments** independently make **major operational decisions**

Options for Discussion

1

Grant the City Administrator authority to issue citywide rules and regulations

For technology, real estate, fleet, and capital project delivery, especially where there are interdependencies

2

Grant the City Administrator authority to directly manage some citywide functions

Such as technology, real estate, fleet, and capital project delivery, especially where there are interdependencies



Change how the City sets procurement rules

- The **Board of Supervisors** frequently **adopts laws** impacting City procurement (22 new laws introduced since 2021).
- The **City Administrator** may propose rules but **lacks the authority to compel consistency** in administrative policies.
- The City has created **39 carve-outs** to contracting rules for high priority work

Options for Discussion

1

Grant the City Administrator sole authority to propose changes to purchasing laws

Including goods, services, grants, and/or construction, in consultation with the Mayor and Board of Supervisors

2

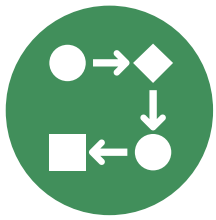
Clarify that all departments must continue to comply with citywide purchasing rules

Including departments with special authorities listed in the Charter (e.g., MTA, PUC)

3

Permit changes to outdated voter-approved Administrative Code sections

Related to the City's official newspaper, physical posting of solicitations, and required terms in City contracts



Streamline the contract approval process

- The Board of Supervisors **must approve** most grants and contracts **over \$10 million**
 - Threshold set in 1988; valued at \$27 million in 2026
- **Increases contract timeline** by approximately **six weeks**

Options for Discussion

4

Reset the threshold for contracts requiring Board approval based on 2026 dollars

From \$10 million to \$25 million, and adjust automatically with inflation

5

Re-define the universe of contracts that require Board approval

For example, exempt certain commodities contracts



Increase the City Administrator's Independence

- **Currently** appointed to a **5-year term**, and removable **for any reason**
- May also be recalled by the voters
- **Prior to 1996**, served for a **10-year term**, and could only be **removed for cause**
 - Same appointment and removal process as the Controller

Options for Discussion

1

Increase the term of the City Administrator

From 5 to 10 years, consistent with the Controller

2

Raise the threshold to remove the City Administrator from office

From at-will to for-cause, subject to 2/3 Board approval

Impacts of These Options:

Intended to:

- ✓ Create a **consistent citywide approach** for **basic operations**
 - ✓ Ex: more consistent procurement practices across departments (e.g., consistent tech, documents, etc.)
- ✓ **Professionalize basic operations** by taking them **out of the political realm** to make them more routine and efficient
 - ✓ Ex: Do not require the Board of Supervisors to approve contracts for basic City needs like fuel, water treatment chemicals, etc.

Not Intended to:

- × Place the City Administrator in charge of **specialized assets**
 - × Water and sewer infrastructure
 - × Muni buses
- × Add more bureaucracy to the process for procuring the **goods, services, and construction** through a **fair and transparent process**

Possible Reform Ideas

Options for Discussion

1	Grant the City Administrator authority to issue citywide rules and regulations For technology, real estate, fleet, and capital project delivery, especially where there are interdependencies
2	Grant the City Administrator authority to directly manage some citywide functions Such as technology, real estate, fleet, and capital project delivery, especially where there are interdependencies
3	Grant the City Administrator sole authority to propose changes to purchasing laws Including goods, services, grants, and/or construction, in consultation with the Mayor and Board of Supervisors
4	Clarify that all departments must comply with citywide purchasing rules Including departments with special authorities listed in the Charter (e.g., MTA, PUC)
5	Permit changes to outdated voter-approved Administrative Code sections Related to the City's official newspaper, physical posting of solicitations, and required terms in City contracts
6	Increase the threshold for contracts requiring Board approval From \$10 million to \$25 million, and adjust automatically with inflation
7	Re-define the universe of contracts that require Board approval For example, exempt certain commodities contracts
8	Increase the term of the City Administrator From 5 to 10 years, consistent with the Controller
9	Raise the threshold to remove the City Administrator from office From at-will to for-cause, subject to 2/3 Board approval

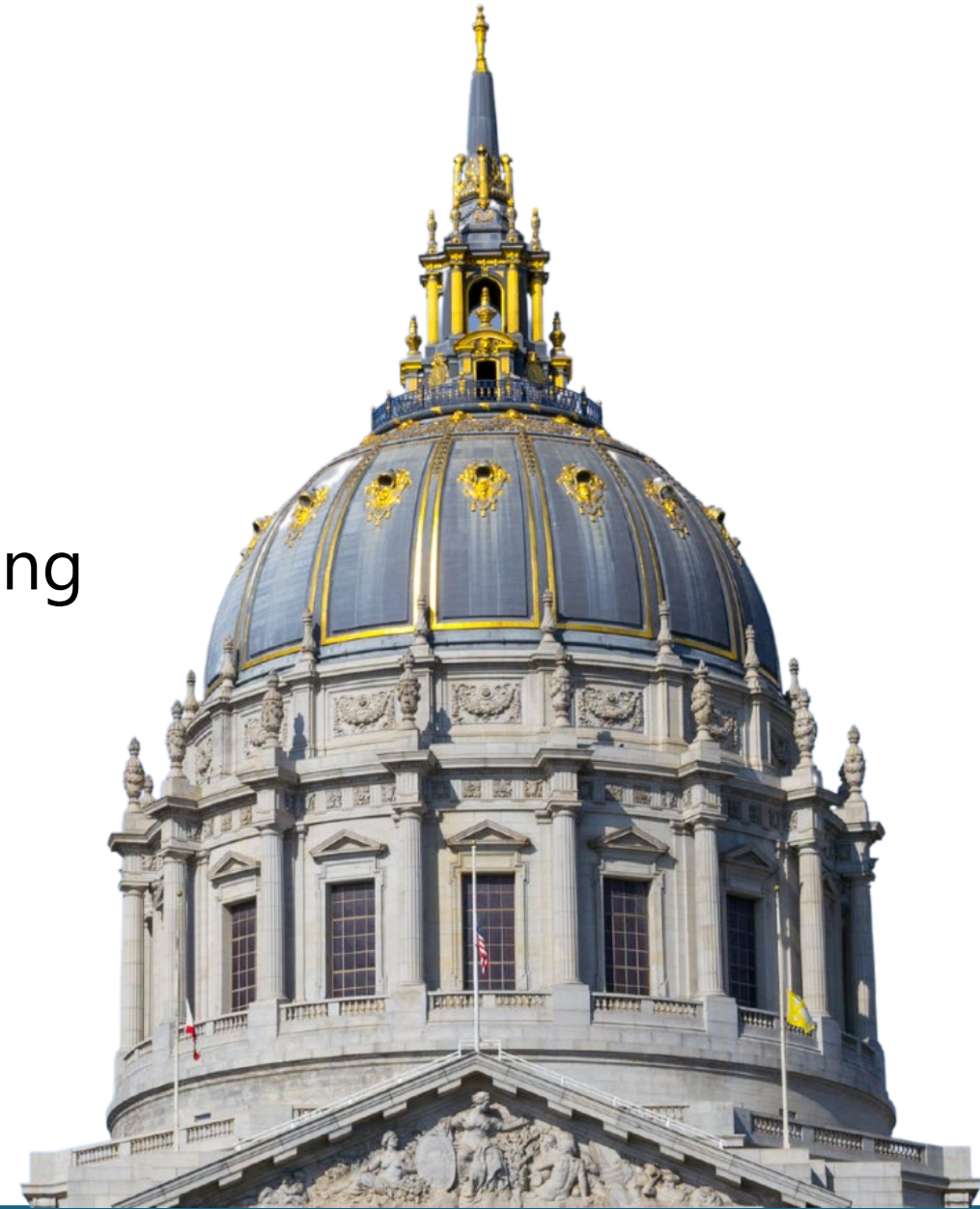
Closing and Next Steps

Greg Wagner

Closing and Next Steps

- **Thursday February 5, 2026:** topic area meeting
- **Wednesday March 4, 2026:** final meeting and wrap-up

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



Public Comment

