OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
SAN FRANCISCO

DANIEL LURIE
MAYOR

March 5, 2026

Greg Wagner
Controller
City Hall, 1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place, Room 316
San Francisco, CA 94102

RE: Proposed Reforms to San Francisco's Charter

Dear Controller Wagner,

San Franciscans have been clear: City Hall must work better. Over time, our Charter has grown longer, more rigid, and more prescriptive. Instead of serving as a framework for governance, it now operates as a procedural manual that locks in bureaucracy, diffuses accountability, and protects the status quo. The result is slower service delivery, wasted taxpayer dollars, and in some cases, incentives that enable corruption rather than prevent it.

We are grateful to you for facilitating the Charter Reform Working Group and to your office for your clear analyses of the challenges presented by our current Charter. Based on these analyses – and after extensive engagement with residents and stakeholders across the city –we are jointly proposing a focused set of reforms in three priority areas: modernizing city contracting, fixing our broken ballot process, and strengthening executive branch accountability. The detailed proposed Charter amendments are attached to this letter. These proposals are practical, balanced, and designed to improve how City Hall serves the public while maintaining a strong system of checks and balances.

I. Modernizing City Contracting

San Francisco's contracting system has become overly complex, politicized, and inefficient. Over $5 billion in annual contracts are governed by a maze of rules scattered across more than 100 sections of code. "Procurement" and "contracting" appear more than 9,000 times in City law, and the Board of Supervisors has adopted 21 procurement-related ordinances in the last five years alone.

The result is a system so complicated that the City has created 39 waivers just to allow essential purchases to move forward. It costs roughly $25,000 to conduct a single procurement process—even if the total value of the contract itself is only $25,000—and many contracts take six to twelve months to complete. More than 14 departments can be involved in approving a single contract. In extreme cases, overlapping approvals and layered rules have driven up costs dramatically, as illustrated by the widely cited $1.7 million Noe Valley public restroom.

This fragmentation also extends to technology purchasing, where departments operate redundant systems—five separate Microsoft contracts, 20 training systems, and 14 document management platforms—driving up costs and weakening efficiency.

To address these challenges, we propose professionalizing and centralizing contracting oversight with the City Administrator while preserving appropriate safeguards. The reforms would:

- Give the City Administrator sole authority to propose and modernize purchasing laws, subject to rejection by the Mayor or the Board of Supervisors.
- Empower the City Administrator to set citywide standards, ensuring consistency across departments.
- Strengthen centralized authority over technology and multi-department capital projects to reduce duplication and inefficiency.
- Increase the Board approval threshold for contracts to reflect inflation and reduce unnecessary delays.
- Extend the City Administrator's term to provide the stability needed to implement long-term operational reforms.

These changes restore professionalism to contracting and ensure taxpayer dollars are spent efficiently and transparently.

II. Fixing Our Broken Ballot Process

San Francisco's ballot qualification rules are looser than those of any other major California city. In November 2024, voters faced 15 separate measures, compared to one in San Jose and three in Oakland. Over the past 30 years, 74 percent of ordinances on the ballot were placed before voters by a minority of supervisors, the Mayor, or through signature drives rather than through consensus legislative action. 44 percent did not legally require voter approval.

San Francisco is the only major city that allows a minority of supervisors to place measures directly on the ballot. It also has the lowest signature threshold in California—just 2 percent of registered voters. These rules incentivize political gamesmanship, contribute to voter confusion, and in some cases result in flawed measures. In 2022, for example, a ballot measure intended to tax Amazon was later discovered to unintentionally tax hundreds of small businesses and could only be removed through court action, despite conflicting with the drafters' intentions.

We propose aligning San Francisco more closely with other California cities while preserving voters' ability to participate directly in lawmaking. The reforms would:

- Require the approval of a majority of the Board of Supervisors to place an ordinance on the ballot.
- Eliminate the Mayor's unilateral authority to place a measure on the ballot.
- Increase the voter signature threshold to 8 percent of registered voters, still below the statewide standard of 10 percent.
- Allow proponents to withdraw a flawed measure after it qualifies for the ballot.

These updates encourage coalition-building, deliberation, and higher-quality measures for voters to consider while reducing confusion and unintended consequences.

III. Strengthening Executive Branch Accountability

San Francisco's Charter now spans 548 pages, making it the longest of any major American city. More than 90 percent of City departments are embedded in the Charter itself, meaning even modest organizational improvements require voter approval.

Department heads oversee 99 percent of City staff and resources, yet the Mayor has direct hire-and-fire authority over only a small fraction of them. In recent instances involving serious ethical lapses, the Mayor lacked authority to immediately remove department heads. The Charter also requires the Mayor to directly supervise nearly 50 department heads—an impractical structure for a government with more than 30,000 employees. This structure diffuses responsibility and makes it difficult for voters to know who is accountable when services fall short.

We propose restoring clear lines of accountability within the executive branch while preserving oversight by the Board of Supervisors. The reforms would:

- Expand the Mayor's authority to hire and remove most department heads.
- Allow most commissioners to be removed at will by their appointing authority.
- Permit the Mayor to reorganize departments and adjust reporting relationships within the executive branch, subject to potential rejection by the Board.
- Authorize the use of Deputy Mayors to improve oversight and coordination.
- Preserve the independence of entities such as Ethics and Elections.

These changes ensure that when San Franciscans elect a Mayor, they know who is responsible for delivering results.

Together, these reforms modernize City Hall by restoring professionalism to contracting, improving the integrity and clarity of the ballot process, and strengthening accountability in the executive branch. We respectfully request that you share these proposed Charter amendments with the Charter Reform Working Group, and post them publicly on the Charter Reform web page. We look forward to working collaboratively with stakeholders to place thoughtful, balanced reforms before the voters.

All my best,

Daniel Lurie
Mayor of San Francisco

Rafael Mandelman
President, San Francisco Board of Supervisors