

April 9th, 2026

RE: Referral of Charter reform to the ballot

Honorable Councilmembers,

We are Oakland residents, community advocates, labor leaders, and business representatives who were honored to serve on the Charter Reform Working Group, and we stand behind the community engagement process and the final recommendations of our report. While we all have different backgrounds and life experiences, and don't agree on everything, we unanimously concluded that **Oakland needs structural change, and the City Council has an opportunity right now to make it happen.**

#### We Worked Independently with a Laser Focus on Oakland, Our City

Our process was designed to be inclusive of community feedback, combined with comprehensive study of other successful models, both of which led to our recommendations. Mayor Lee, in partnership with Council President Jenkins and Councilmember Ramachandran, convened the Working Group, set the initial goals, and then stepped back. This process was not engineered to reach a predetermined conclusion. SPUR and the League of Women Voters of Oakland, two nonpartisan organizations with a focus on good government, co-facilitated the work. We examined the pros and cons of both models for city governance without any prior ideological commitment to either.

Over five months, the Working Group conducted more than 60 one-on-one interviews with current and former city council members, city administrators, department heads, labor leaders, business representatives, and policy experts. We held 14 public community sessions across all council districts and administered a survey, ultimately engaging more than 750 Oakland residents. We were part of that process. We showed up. We listened and learned from everyday Oaklanders from all walks of life. The recommendations that emerged reflect what Oaklanders believe is needed to address the city's pressing needs.

#### There is Consensus on the Root Cause of Oakland's Governance Problems

Interviews, surveys, and direct conversations revealed a broad consensus. The core problem is that there is a misalignment between public expectations and the Charter-defined authority of the City Council, Mayor, and City Administrator. This is the formal root of Oakland's dysfunction. We have for many years operated with separate legislative and executive branches. However, we have lost the tools to ensure they work together effectively.

Aligning the Charter language with the right tools to support the already established system solves the problem. A system that establishes a truly strong mayor in charge of operations and a city council that legislates and provides effective oversight would create a balance of powers and the foundation for clear lines of authority and accountability. The mayor and the council would be set up to succeed in the roles they were elected to accomplish. A strong executive and a strengthened legislature are not competing ideas; they are two halves of a coherent, accountable system.

## The Proposed “Third Option” is a Confusing and Unique System That Doesn’t Solve the Underlying Problems

We also want to speak plainly about the supposed “third option” that former proponents of the council-manager model have put forth as an alternative. First, it is not really a third option. It keeps the core elements of council manager systems — placing the mayor back on the council and appointing a city manager to run the city. It creates a hybrid by giving the mayor a veto power.

This “third-option” is a negotiated local compromise that only exists in one city, Long Beach. It is not a replicable design standard recognized in scholarly research or advocated for by practitioners. It directly contradicts the advocates’ arguments that the City should adopt a model used by many other cities.

Veto power exists to balance authority between two distinct branches of government. The “third option” obscures the fact that giving a veto power to a mayor who is a member of the city council is fundamentally different. In a strong-mayor system, the mayor operates independently — fully empowered to run the city and deliver services — and uses the veto to ensure that policy decisions reflect real operational constraints. The council, in turn, holds override power as a counterbalance. Together, these checks create incentives for both sides to collaborate and align budgets and policies around shared goals.

Giving the veto to a mayor sitting as head of council does not foster that same productive interaction. Instead it creates an imbalance that is difficult to justify and harder to explain to the public. When the mayor supports a measure, that support counts as one vote. When the mayor opposes a measure, the veto raises the threshold for passage. That is not a balanced structure; it gives the mayor a tool for obstruction.

The Working Group’s recommendations were carefully tailored to develop a coherent system that balances operational realities, budget decisions, and policy. Diluting the proposal or substituting a unique system would repeat exactly the same kind of confusing structure that led to the dysfunctional governance system that exists today.

## Polling Data Indicates that Voters Support Our Recommendations

Importantly, whatever moves forward must have the support of voters. The polling data affirms the conclusions reached by the Working Group after extensive dialogue and engagement with residents. Three independent polls, conducted by different organizations, at different times, with different methodologies, have reached the same conclusion. A February 2026 poll by the East Bay Polling Institute found 64% of voters support amending the city charter to adopt a strong-mayor system. The 2025 Oakland Chamber of Commerce Pulse of Oakland Poll found 61% of likely voters in support, with half actively opposing a council-manager alternative, and only 13% choosing it as their first choice. A March 2026 poll released by SPUR and conducted by David Binder Research found 63% of likely November 2026 voters prefer a strong-mayor system, with 73% supporting mayoral veto power subject to a two-thirds Council override, and 72% supporting an independent Budget and Legislative Analyst Office. These show unequivocal support for the Working Group’s recommendations.

Conclusion

**More than 750 Oaklanders participated in this process. We were among them. We are asking you to respect the process and honor our commitment to a better Oakland for all. We urge you to advance a ballot measure that reflects the Working Group's recommendations and the will of Oakland voters.**

Oakland has a real opportunity to get this right. The process was credible. The community showed up. The evidence is clear and the public is ready.

We urge you not to let this moment pass.

Sincerely,

Fred Blackwell

Barbara J. Parker

Corey Cook

Ben Rosenfield

Zach Goldman

Ahmed Ali Bob

Mark Morodomi

Richard Fuentes