

MAYOR'S WORKING GROUP ON CHARTER REFORM

Final Report
Jan 29, 2026



The Mayor's Working Group Purpose & Goals

Review and provide
recommendations for reforming
the Oakland City Charter to:

- Better define the role of elected officials
- Address responsible city financial planning
- Improve government accountability and transparency



Timeline

- **September-December 2025** - Conducted 14 community sessions across Oakland that engaged ~750 people; gathered community input through ~60 1:1 interviews, 433 survey responses; supported the working group in producing this report
- **January-February 2026** - Report has been completed and made available publicly. Hosting two sessions to discuss the contents of the report.
- **February-July 2026** - Mayor will work with the City Council to develop a ballot measure through the legislative process.
- **November 2026** - A measure proposing changes to the Charter could be on the ballot.

Background Context

Community input consistently emphasized that Oakland's governance challenges cannot be separated from the city's broader context.

- **Severe fiscal stress**, including a growing structural budget deficit and the resulting need for more effective use of resources.
- **Deep racial, wealth, and geographic inequities**, with historical disinvestment in neighborhoods and inequitable service delivery and infrastructure conditions.
- A history of mayors and professional administrators who have **lacked sufficient authority to lead decisively** under the current Charter.
- **A highly engaged civic culture**, characterized by a desire for direct access to decision-makers and strong activism around racial and economic justice, accountability, transparency, and the influence of money in politics.

Key Findings

- **Key Finding #1:** Misaligned authority creates a disconnect between public expectations and actual powers.
- **Key Finding #2:** Weak institutional alignment undermines long-term planning, fiscal discipline, and effective oversight.
- **Key Finding #3:** Organizational complexity leads to operational inefficiencies and a lack of accountability and transparency.

"Everyone is in charge, and therefore no one is in charge"

Two Approaches, Two Distinct Models

Council-Manager

- Council acts as unified legislative body - mayor sits on Council
- Council appoints professional manager to run city government
- *Examples: Berkeley, Sacramento, Long Beach, San Jose*

Strong Mayor

- Mayor is chief executive and runs city government
- Council serves as a separate legislative branch of government responsible for oversight
- *Examples: Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle*

History of both systems in Oakland

- **1931–1998: The Council-Manager** Era Oakland adopted a council-manager model to bring professional management and reduce corruption.
- **1980: District Representation** Voters passed Measure H, which tied Oakland City Council elections to individual districts, ushering in greater racial and political diversity on the council.
- **1984–1996: Failed Attempts at Reform** By the 1980s, dissatisfaction with weak mayoral authority led to reform efforts. Two attempts by Mayors Lionel Wilson and Mayor Elihu Harris to strengthen mayors powers narrowly failed.
- **1998–2004: The Provisional Strong-Mayor System** In 1998, Jerry Brown successfully championed Measure X, which passed with 75% of the vote and created a trial strong-mayor system for six years.
- **2005–Present: The Hybrid System** Brown's 2002 effort to make the strong-mayor system permanent failed. A Charter Review Commission then crafted a compromise that created structural ambiguity and competing lines of authority.

Oakland's Current Hybrid System

The Problem: Oakland blends both models without securing the benefits of either

- The Mayor doesn't serve on the council but lacks the powers of a strong mayor as they can't vote on the council or veto its decisions
- The City Administrator manages city agencies and operations, like in a council-manager system but serves at the Mayor's pleasure which elevates the Mayor's influence in ways more typical of a strong mayor government
- This confounding of elements from both models creates confusion and competing lines of authority

Recommendation #1: Choose One Coherent Model

Oakland must adopt either:

Option A: Strong Mayor

- Mayor as chief executive
- Council as legislative body
- Unified executive authority
- Separates administration and legislative branches
- Prioritizes the mayor's accountability to electors.

Option B: Council-Manager

- Council as unified authority
- Appointed city manager
- Mayor heads council
- Unifies political authority in the legislative branch
- Prioritizes administrative direction by an appointed city manager.

Both are nationally recognized best practices

Strengths of Each System

Strong Mayor systems work best when:

- Voters expect visible, executive leadership
- There are disparities across neighborhoods that require a citywide approach
- Complex intergovernmental challenges require a single, decisive voice
- Fiscal and administrative decisions require unified direction
- Political fragmentation makes collective accountability difficult

Council–manager systems work best when:

- Professional administration is prioritized
- There are fewer disparities across neighborhoods
- Political conflict is relatively low-intensity
- Councils are cohesive and capable of unified direction
- Residents expect collective, rather than individualized, political leadership

Recommendation #2: Adopt Strong Mayor System

The Mayor Runs the City

- Chief executive responsible for operations and service delivery
- Can veto laws and budget decisions (council can override with 2/3 vote)

City Administrator for Internal Functions

- Nominated by mayor, confirmed by council
- Oversees Finance, HR, IT, Procurement

Deputy Mayors/Cabinet Officials

- Deputy mayors or cabinet officials would lead policy departments and report directly to the Mayor (i.e. housing, public safety, infrastructure)

What we heard:

Strong Mayor systems work best when:

Severe fiscal stress



**Complex intergovernmental
challenges**

**Deep racial, wealth, and
geographic inequities**



Disparities across neighborhoods

Highly engaged civic culture



**Voters expect visible, executive
leadership**

**Need for sufficient authority to
lead decisively**



**Political fragmentation makes
collective accountability difficult**

Recommendation #3: Strengthen the City Council

Build Legislative Capacity

- Create permanent Legislative & Budget Analyst office to provide analysis of budgets, fiscal impacts, policy interactions, and staffing implications and give the Council enhanced oversight authority.

Return the Council to an odd number to prevent ties

- Phase out the at-large seat to create a seven-member council, an odd number that eliminates the need for mayoral tie-breaking and thereby maintains clear separation between legislative and executive functions.

Clarify the Role and Compensation of the City Council

- Full-time service is generally assumed clarify this, and align salaries and rules on outside employment accordingly.

Future Considerations

City Attorney & City Auditor

- Should these positions be elected or appointed?

Oversight Bodies

- Review rules for Police Commission, Public Ethics Commission, City Auditor

Financial Decision-Making

- Consider independent Controller, long-range financial planning requirements

These complex questions require deeper analysis beyond scope

Next Steps

Any Charter changes must be approved by Oakland voters

Path to the Ballot: Mayor Lee and City Council will determine which recommendations to advance in a ballot measure

Implementation: Thoughtful transition period needed for organizational restructuring

Living Document: Recommend Charter Review Commission or other means to update the charter at least every 10 years

Note: Charter reform creates conditions for improvement but cannot substitute for effective leadership and management

Learn More

Read the report and find all of the materials at:

mayorbarbaralee.com/charter

We all want an Oakland that works for everyone who lives here.