

What Is the City Charter—and How Does It Affect Me?

Prepared by the San Diego Charter Review Committee

The Charter is the “Constitution” for the City of San Diego. Just as the United States Constitution serves as the “supreme law of the land” for our country, the San Diego Charter serves as the basic set of rules for our City government. The San Diego Charter limits City officials in much the same way that the Constitution constrains the officials of the federal government. They are not allowed to pass any law or act in any way the Charter prohibits.

The Charter establishes the boundaries that San Diego’s people have imposed upon their City government. It is the source of the City’s system of checks and balances, prescribing the relationship between the two branches of government: the Mayor and the City Council and the interaction of the City Attorney with both. The Mayor’s authority to recommend policies, the Council’s power to enact policy subject to Mayoral veto, and the Mayor’s control over the implementation of City policy are all established by the Charter as the City’s basic law.

The Charter Review Committee

The Mayor and City Council have recognized that there are a number of areas within the City Charter that require clarification or modification. Consequently, the Mayor and the Council have assembled a Committee of independent, qualified and broadly representative members of the community to take on the task of addressing the ambiguities and problems of the current Charter.

Mission Statement

The San Diego Charter Review Committee’s mission is “to determine modifications necessary to implement the Kroll report recommendations and other financial reforms; to clarify the roles and responsibilities of elected officials and the separation of powers under the strong mayor form of governance; to identify modifications that would improve the functionality of the strong mayor form of governance during the trial period; and to identify legislative tightening that would be required for effective permanent implementation of the Strong Mayor form of governance.” The Committee has established a work-plan to help achieve this important mission.

How Does the Charter Affect Me?

The Charter is the vehicle through which the people of San Diego limit and control the powers and responsibilities of their City government. If it is clear and consistent, it can allow voters to reward and punish City officials for their job performance. If it is vague, it makes it difficult for officials to act on behalf of the public. The City provides many services through responsible use of taxpayer dollars. If the Charter provides the opportunity for accountable leadership, the City can improve the quality and quantity of services delivered to the public. Otherwise, City officials are hamstrung in the performance of their duties, and cannot provide San Diego with the quality of public service that our City deserves.

Meeting Dates and Times

The Charter Review Committee and its three subcommittees are meeting every Friday from 9 a.m.-12 noon on the 12th floor of the City Administration Building, 202 C Street, San Diego, CA 92101. Please come in and make your voice heard.

We are also holding several public meetings throughout the City during evening hours so that we can elicit further public input on how the Charter can be improved.

The S.D. Charter Review Committee is online at <http://www.sandiego.gov/charterreview>

Historical Background

San Diego has had several different charters since this City became part of the United States in 1850. The City is presently governed under the terms of the Charter of 1931. This document has been amended hundreds of times in the past 76 years. The most significant changes increased the size of the City Council from six to eight members, provided for electing City Council members by district elections, and transformed the City from a Council-Manager to a strong Mayor-Council form of government.

Elected Offices

The Charter mandates the structure of City government. Among other things, this document establishes the number of officials who are elected to serve the public, the number of districts from which they are elected, which officials are to be elected citywide, and how much authority elected officials may exercise. The Charter also determines how City elections shall be conducted, including the process for redistricting.

Under San Diego's current Charter, the City is governed by a Mayor and City Council members elected by eight districts. The Charter also provides for the election of a City Attorney on a citywide basis. The City Attorney generally rules on the legality of ordinances considered by the Council and approves most contracts involving the City or any of its officers or agencies.

Appointed Offices

There are several important appointed officials whose roles and duties are prescribed by the Charter. The Chief Operations Officer (formerly, City Manager), Auditor and Comptroller, Treasurer, Independent Budget Analyst, and the chiefs of the Fire and Police departments, are all officers whose positions are established by the Charter. Some of these officers have their duties spelled out in great detail, such as the Auditor and Comptroller. Others have whatever powers are given them by a specific City ordinance, such as the Independent Budget Analyst.

There are several important boards and committees that are established by the Charter. The Charter provides for the Board of Administration of SDCERS, which administers the retirement system for City employees. The Charter provides for the appointment of a Civil Service Commission and specifies the powers of the Ethics Commission, which are authorized to oversee the integrity of the City's employment and governmental processes.

The Charter also establishes the manner in which other City agencies, boards, committees and departments may be created and staffed by the Mayor and City Council. For several agencies mandated by state law, such as the Centre City Development Corporation, the Charter sets up the method for appointing the City's representatives.

How Can I Get Involved?

Remember that the San Diego Charter cannot be changed without a vote of the people! This means there will always be public involvement. Your participation as San Diegans is critical. We welcome your involvement at every stage of this important process of Charter change.

Email the Charter Review Committee: Charterreview@sandio.gov

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