

San Diego's Youth Commission set to reconvene today

Panel, which hasn't held meeting since 2024, has faced repeated struggle to draw members

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UNION-TRIBUNE

Melanie Yau wants to see a wider range of perspectives in San Diego government.

Angela Ortner wants to inspire other young people to get into public service.

And Sadie Wheeler sees chances to get young San Diegos more mental health resources.

These students are three of the new members of the San Diego Youth Commission, a city advisory body that aims to bridge the gap between young people in San Diego and the city's leadership.

The panel is convening today for the first time in more than a year, after repeated struggles to draw enough participation to function and even to draw enough interest from potential members to join at all.

But several new appointments have made the commission a reality once again.

"I'm really excited to have the meeting and see what happens," said Yau, a 17-year-old senior at

The Bishop's School in La Jolla.

Today, only 13 members serve on a commission that has 20 available seats. Vacancies still exist in Districts 3, 6, 7, 8 and 9, and in one seat that must be appointed by the mayor. The Mayor's Office says it's currently finishing interviews to fill that seat.

At today's meeting, the group will establish a chair and vice chair. But beyond that, their priorities will be up to the commissioners themselves.

"The intention is that they set their agenda," said Tara Ryan, the program coordinator of the Office of Child and Youth Success, which oversees the commission.

The youth advisory body is just one of several city boards and commissions that has faced setbacks due to chronic vacancies. A review by The San Diego Union-Tribune last year found nearly one in five positions on the city's boards and commissions was vacant, which could lead to delays in policymaking.

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Former youth commissioners have also expressed frustration over what they considered a lack of preparation for the role. “We were basically thrown in the water and told to swim,” one told the Union-Tribune in 2023; others said a lack of structure and turnout had stymied their success.

Mayor Todd Gloria reactivated the Youth Commission in 2021, but it has struggled to get off the ground.

The commission’s last meeting was held in August 2024 and was followed by repeated cancellations. No meetings were scheduled from July through December of last year due to a lack of quorum.

As current commissioners have been appointed, they’ve gotten training on city government, including meeting procedures and public meeting law — new material for the members, who range in age from their teens to their early 20s.

Ryan says the office has worked to keep the commissioners connected as new ones are added, including through a leadership retreat last spring and monthly emails. And next month, her office will begin hosting outreach events to fill the vacancies and prioritize partnerships with high schools in districts with open spots.

Hopes for reviving the Youth Commission are the latest development at the Office of Child and Youth Success.

Last year, its executive



Sadie Wheeler, a member of the San Diego Youth Commission, at her home in the University City area on Thursday. **SANDY HUFFAKER / FOR THE U-T**

director position was cut, and the office, with its three full-time employees, was consolidated under the Library Department’s Youth and Family Services Division. Ryan says most operations haven’t changed since, but the lack of an executive director leaves it with less direct access to city leadership.

The office also updated its two-year child and youth plan last fall, just over a year after its implementation, to clarify the office’s role in supporting the city’s other youth programming.

That plan focuses on education and career pathways, economic and workforce opportunities, youth empowerment, engaging activities and child care. “It just wasn’t as fleshed out or as detailed as it could be,” Ryan said.

Claire Snyder, director of programming at the nonprofit advocacy group

Youth Will, said better structure and support from the city’s youth office has been crucial to the commission’s growth in the last year. Her group partners with the office to host civic engagement workshops and share publicly the role the commission can play in city government.

The panel still faces challenges, Snyder said, including a long process for applicants to join and a steep learning curve for commissioners to get up to speed. The group is essentially just getting started, she added.

“Unfortunately, they haven’t been able to do a lot,” she acknowledged. Her group wants to “encourage folks to see the potential that the Youth Commission has if it was fully functioning.”

Sadie Wheeler, a 17-year-old senior at University City High School who joined last January, is eager to get started.

But she’s “skeptical” about the meeting this weekend and worries it might be canceled if people call out sick. Since she was sworn in as a commissioner about a year ago, the group hasn’t met at all.

“It’s frustrating when people say that they are available and then they’re definitely not available,” she said. “And I think that a lot of people just don’t really have the time to commit to the Youth Commission like they thought they did.”

While this first meeting will be largely procedural — establishing a chair and vice chair — she’s ready to talk with her fellow commissioners about how they envision the panel.

The commissioners have big plans for the group, too.

Along with pushing for more mental health resources for young people, Wheeler wants to help ensure that students in San Diego schools have access to menstrual products in restrooms.

Yau wants to host town halls where young people can share their thoughts directly with government officials, and wants to offer resources such as mentorship for military families like hers.

And Angela Ortner, a 21-year-old transfer student at UC San Diego, hopes she can help some of the younger commissioners navigate college applications and the job market.

“I know things I wish I would have known when I was a senior or junior in high school,” Ortner said. “So that’s something I want to bring to the table.”