



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

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**OFFICE OF THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET ANALYST REPORT**

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**Date Issued:** October 2, 2023

**IBA Report Number:** 23-31

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# Response to Request on City Council Size and Population Representation

## OVERVIEW

During the Rules Committee meeting on July 26, 2023, Council President Elo-Rivera requested that our Office conduct a review of district sizes by population in other large cities to identify best practices, circumstances for increasing the number of districts, and associated tradeoffs. This request was made in response to Item 1, Sub-item K related to the consideration of a ballot measure to maintain effective representation by increasing the number of City Council and school board members. This report provides the requested review. Ultimately, our review found that there are various tradeoffs and no best practices for city council size and very few examples of automatic council expansions based on population in recent history. We also note potential staffing needs and operational costs associated with expanding Council.

## BACKGROUND

The size of the City Council has changed over time. According to "[A History of San Diego Government](#)", the original 1931 City of San Diego Charter created a seven-member Council, consisting of six Councilmembers and a Mayor. In 1988, voters approved changes to nominate and elect Councilmembers at the district level, whereas previously Councilmembers were nominated by district but elected citywide. In 1963, San Diego voters approved expanding the number of Council Districts from six to eight. In 2004, voters approved Proposition F, transitioning the City from a Council-Manager governmental system to a Mayor-Council ("Strong Mayor/Strong Council") form of government on a trial basis for five years. Under Strong Mayor, the Mayor was removed as a member of the City Council, leaving an eight-member Council. In 2010, voters approved Proposition D, which made permanent the new Strong Mayor/Strong Council form of government. As part of Proposition D, voters also approved the addition of a ninth Council District, to be established by redistricting following the 2010 Census.

The ninth Council District was first introduced as an option to address potential issues with tie-votes on legislative issues on an eight-member Council. As described in a report by the City Attorney to the then Committee on Rules, Open Government, and Intergovernmental Relations, dated January 24, 2006, changing to the Strong Mayor/Strong Council form of government

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resulted in an even number of Councilmembers, “increasing the likelihood of deadlock in votes on substantive city issues” ([RC-2006-3](#)). The report raised the idea of expanding the City Council to nine Councilmembers to allow for an odd number of Council seats, thereby avoiding tie-votes on critical issues. This issue was further analyzed in [IBA-Report 06-19](#), which presented additional options, such as a ninth “at-large” member. Proposition F (2004) amended the City Charter to allow for the possibility of a ninth Council District at the time: “However, the Council and the people reserve the right to propose amendments to the Charter at the November 2010 election or sooner to...consider increasing the number of Council districts to nine at the time of the next City Council district reapportionment which follows the national decennial census in 2010” (City Charter, Article XV, Section 255(b)). Hence, the addition of the ninth Council district approved by voters in 2010 was a response to a practical political challenge posed by an even-number Council, rather than a consideration of constituency size and alignment with population changes.

## FISCAL AND POLICY DISCUSSION

This section discusses best practices, new district creation mechanisms, tradeoffs associated with the size of city councils, and potential staffing needs and operating costs associated with expanding Council. To inform this discussion, we conducted a review of the eight largest California cities (including San Diego) and seven largest cities outside of California.

### *Are there best practices or standards for districts per population?*

According to the [National League of Cities](#), “While the number of councilmen is proportional to the population of the municipality, there is no national standard of proportion. In addition, the size of a council may reflect the complexity of services provided, the council’s workload, the diversity and size of the population, the political dynamics and preferences of the city.” Hence, the factors underlying the size of city councils and council districts are unique to each city.

District size by population for other city governments varies significantly. Based on the 2022 Census population estimates, the City of San Diego has a population of 1.4 million residents. With nine Councilmembers elected at the district level, each Council District represents on average 153,000 residents. Based on our review of the eight largest California cities, as seen in Table 1 below, San Diego has the second highest resident per district representative ratio, after the City of Los Angeles.

**Table 1: City Council Representation Ratios - California Cities**

City	Residents per District Representative	Population Estimates, 2022	City Council Size	District Representatives	At-Large Representatives
Los Angeles	254,816	3,822,238	15	15	
<b>San Diego</b>	<b>153,462</b>	<b>1,381,162</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	
San Jose	97,123	971,233	10	10	
Fresno	77,938	545,567	7	7	
San Francisco	73,494	808,437	11	11	
Sacramento	66,000	528,001	8	8	
Oakland	61,508	430,553	8	7	1
Long Beach	50,145	451,307	9	9	

As seen in Table 2, based on our review, the City of San Diego has smaller districts compared to other large cities outside of California.

**Table 2: City Council Representation Ratios - U.S. Cities**

City	Residents per District Representative	Population Estimates, 2022	City Council Size	District Representatives	At-Large Representatives
Los Angeles	254,816	3,822,238	15	15	
Houston	209,353	2,302,878	16	11	5
Phoenix	205,551	1,644,409	8	8	
New York	163,449	8,335,897	51	51	
Philadelphia	156,726	1,567,258	17	10	7
<b>San Diego</b>	<b>153,462</b>	<b>1,381,162</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	
San Antonio	147,291	1,472,909	10	10	
Chicago	53,301	2,665,039	50	50	

Although local governments are given discretion over district size, there are some limits pertaining to the variation *among* districts of a governing body established in case law. Past Supreme Court cases ([Brown v Thomson](#) 1983 and [Mahan v Howell](#) 1973) established that the population deviation among districts of a state or local legislative body must not exceed 10% to ensure equal representation and prevent an appearance of discrimination.

***Are there examples of automatic “triggers” where when a population increases a certain amount, a new district is created?***

Based on our review of other large cities, we found three examples where expansions of a city’s legislative body were automatically tied to population increases – two were historical examples pre-dating the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century:

- **Philadelphia (1796):** Starting in 1796, Philadelphia had a bicameral city council, the size of which varied over time, presumably in proportion to the population. The city council started with 32 members between the two chambers and reached up to 190 members in subsequent years. By 1919, the council was replaced by a 21-member unicameral council.
- **New York City (1936):** In 1936, New York City adopted a system of proportional representation with a fixed quota of 75,000 votes for each council representative. This led to fluctuations in council size dependent on voter turnout. In 1947, New York City’s proportional representation system was abolished and replaced with one member elected from each district based on plurality vote.
- **Houston (2011):** In more recent history, Houston announced the addition of two new council districts following the 2010 Census count in 2011. Houston’s City Charter included a provision adopted in 1979 that required two new Council districts be added once the population grew to 2.1 million individuals, which occurred with the 2010 Census.

Our review identified some examples where cities automatically adjusted city council sizes based on population changes, but only one example from recent decades, suggesting that such automatic mechanisms are rare in modern day, especially among larger U.S. cities.

***What are the tradeoffs associated with changing the size of a legislative body?***

Our Office conducted a literature review to determine the main tradeoffs associated with changing the size of a local legislative body. Research on the impacts of local government district and city

council sizes in the U.S. is limited. Below we summarize the key findings from our review, largely based on a thorough analysis of restructuring the New York City government from 1989<sup>1</sup>:

- **Representativeness:** Larger councils and smaller districts may be more likely to lead to fairer representation of ethnically, racially, or religiously defined communities. Assuming more representatives would come from diverse backgrounds, a larger council could allow for a more vigorous public forum with robust dissent, as well as opportunities for strong leadership to manage more members. An expanded City Council with newly defined districts could enhance competitiveness of elections, increase membership turnover (in the short term), and shift institutional norms through introduction of new members to a potentially more representative body. Larger councils could also increase representation of African American and Hispanic populations<sup>2</sup>, as well as women<sup>3</sup>.
- **Responsiveness and accountability:** Smaller districts are generally found to strengthen local ties to communities and constituencies. This can result in more responsiveness and accountability if members have more time for constituent and community services and voters can stay better informed. However, if smaller districts result in more homogenous constituencies, members may have less room to compromise on critical issues and adopt a stronger local focus, rather than a broader policy perspective. A well-staffed, structured, and effectively led council could help promote a citywide perspective grounded in strong institutional expectations.
- **Public participation in government:** Public participation is thought to increase with a larger council since individuals' perceptions of influencing government might increase.
- **Concentration of governmental power:** Because power is more diffuse in larger legislative bodies, larger bodies may need to delegate power and become more leadership dominated. This contrasts with smaller bodies, where any given member has more power and independence.
- **Decision-making:** For larger councils, decision-making could improve because of the greater expertise among members and wider availability of expert staff, depending on the staff size of each district. More members resulting in fewer committee assignments could allow for a deeper expertise in a few select policy areas. However, smaller districts may also result in more myopic local-oriented perspectives.
- **Efficiency and effectiveness:** Generally, there is a tradeoff between efficiency (more likely in smaller councils) and thorough consideration of all possible alternatives (more likely in larger councils). Smaller councils could be more efficient and effective since they do not require the degree of consultation, debate, and discussion that large councils would for decision-making. With more members, sessions tend to be longer, and factionalism could increase. However, if large councils have more formalized structures, strong leadership, and more specialized committees, larger legislatures could consider procedures aimed at fostering productivity.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Muzzio and T. Tompkins. "Finding the Mean: On the Size of City Councils," in F. Mauro and G. Benjamin (eds.) *Reemergence of Municipal Reform*, New York: Academy of Political Science, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> D. Taebel. "Minority Representation on City Councils: The Impact of Structure on Blacks and Hispanics." *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (June 1978), pp. 142-152.

<sup>3</sup> U. Kjaer, K. Dittmar, and S. J. Carroll. "Council Size Matters: Filling Blanks in Women's Municipal Representation in New Jersey." *State & Local Government Review*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (December 2018), pp. 215-229.

***Potential Staffing and Fiscal Implications***

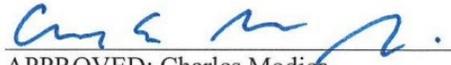
Expanding the number of Council Districts could also potentially increase staffing needs and operating costs for City Council. The FY 2024 Adopted Budget provided each Council Office up to 15.00 FTE positions (including the Councilmember),<sup>4</sup> and on average \$2.2 million.<sup>5</sup> Whether additional funding and staff are needed depends on how Council would budget for one or more new Council Districts. For instance, Council could expand the total City Council operating budget to provide the same budget to each new Council District (i.e., on average \$2.2 million and 15.00 FTE positions). This approach could also result in additional costs for new office space and equipment, higher demand for Council administrative and information technology services, and other associated costs. Alternatively, Council could slightly reduce the budget and staff size of each Council Office to fund potential new Council Districts and thereby avoid significant impacts to the City Council’s total operating budget and staff size.

**CONCLUSION**

Our review found that there are (1) no best practices for city council size, (2) very few examples of automatic council expansions based on population in recent history, and (3) various tradeoffs associated with council size. Adding new Council Districts could also potentially result in additional staffing needs and operating costs. Ultimately, the size of council reflects a variety of factors, such as complexity of services provided, workload, diversity and size of population, the local political context, and preferences of the city.



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<sup>4</sup> Note that 5.00 of the total 15.00 FTE positions per Council Office were added as unfunded positions in the FY 2023 Adopted Budget, and brought forward as unfunded positions in FY 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Each Council Office also received a minimum of \$150,000 in funding for Community Projects, Programs, and Services (CPPS).