

Bel Air-Beverly Crest Neighborhood Council
DRAFT Initial Charter Reform Community Impact Statement
August 9, 2025

The Charter Reform process presents a critical opportunity to address longstanding structural failures in Los Angeles city government. While we support a comprehensive and thoughtful review of the City Charter, we recognize that the Commission is now operating on a **very compressed timeline**. The residents of Los Angeles should not be penalized by having meaningful reform foreclosed due to the delayed start of commission work. We urge the Commission to move boldly but retain those elements of the charter that remain foundationally important.

This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to revisit the assumptions, structures, and power dynamics that shape how our city is governed. We support a broad-ranging and ambitious approach to reform, even within this shortened timeframe, and we believe the Commission's recommendations should be grounded in transparency, accountability, and inclusivity.

At the same time, any proposed Charter changes must be capable of winning broad support across the city's diverse constituencies. Reforms must reflect not only good governance principles, but also the lived experiences of Angelenos in every neighborhood, particularly those who have historically been left out of decision-making.

Nowhere is the City's democratic deficit more visible than in the experience of Neighborhood Councils, which were established by the Charter to provide grassroots guidance to elected leaders. In reality, these Councils often struggle to secure a meeting with the very officials they were created to advise or to get speaking time at public meetings. This is more than a scheduling issue—it is a structural failure of representation and respect. A system in which community leaders must chase their representatives for a hearing on local issues or fight to speak at public meetings is not a functioning democracy. That dynamic must be reversed.

Neighborhood Councils were created in the last Charter reform as an afterthought to public demands for local voice. Over time, they have been treated as nuisances—consulted late, denied real influence, and too often ignored when their positions challenge City Hall consensus. Their structure today often mutes dissenting voices rather than elevates them. If Charter reform is to restore trust and equity in city government, it must deliver the role Neighborhood Councils were promised: empowered, respected, and engaged from the start—not the end—of the decision-making process.

Following are recommendations for specific changes our Neighborhood Council supports.

1. Government Structure

We support increasing the number of City Councilmembers to **at least 25**.

This change would:

- Improve **representation**, reducing the number of constituents per Councilmember (currently ~260,000) to a level more in line with New York (~170,000), San Francisco (~80,000), and Chicago (~53,000).
- Increase **accessibility**, allowing more responsive service and engagement with communities.
- Enhance **accountability**, lowering campaign costs and making it easier for new candidates to run viable races.

We recommend a **population-based formula** be embedded in the Charter to update the number of Council seats with each redistricting cycle.

We support the creation of an independent redistricting commission insulated from political influence.

2. Budgeting and Infrastructure

- **Adopt a Two-Year Budget Cycle** – Move from an annual to a biennial budget process to improve long-term planning, stability, and efficiency.
- **Roadway Condition Assessment** – Require a comprehensive, citywide assessment of roadway conditions—particularly in hillside areas—within six months of adopting a new charter.
- **Capital Infrastructure Plan** – Mandate the development of a Capital Infrastructure Plan, updated every two years, to identify and prioritize major projects. For all approved improvements, budget allocations must be set aside in advance and a schedule of major maintenance, including funding sources, must be included with every project proposed.
- **Address Deferred Maintenance** – The City faces an estimated \$10 billion in deferred maintenance that directly affects critical infrastructure. A comprehensive, fully funded plan is needed to remedy this backlog and prevent any new backlog from developing.
- **Fire Safety and Resilience** – Recent disasters have revealed severe infrastructure gaps that worsen wildfire risks. Despite state adoption of minimum fire-safe standards, the City is not in full compliance. The charter should require adherence to these standards and investment in infrastructure that protects lives and property.

3. Ranked Choice Voting (RCV)

Position: TBD

We recommend not taking a position at this moment.

4. Neighborhood Councils

Neighborhood councils are vibrant, inclusive forums where residents come together to shape the future of their communities. They should serve as trusted bridges between Angelenos and City Hall—amplifying local voices, surfacing real-world needs, and building consensus on solutions. Neighborhood councils can foster civic engagement, strengthen social connections, and work to ensure that city policies reflect the lived experiences of the people they affect. At their best, they are catalysts for positive change, turning community passion into tangible improvements and making local government more responsive, accountable, and effective.

As elected representatives of the citizens, Councilmembers should champion the priorities and interests of the neighborhood councils who are the eyes and ears of the neighborhoods. Neighborhood Councils repeatedly offer meaningful and thoughtful deliberation on topics central to City government which deserve due consideration by City Council Members. Under the current system, we have no indication of whether they are even read.

The obstacles to Neighborhood Council success include the dysfunction of the City overall and the failure to confer any real power to them. Now is the time to fix that.

We propose a **Charter amendment to elevate and protect the role of Neighborhood Councils**. Key reforms include:

- The Planning and Land Use Committees of Neighborhood Councils are one of the most important aspects of the existing Neighborhood Council system and stand as an example of the success of the current system. At these meetings, constituents regularly interface with applicants and their representatives and work through issues and revisions to project applications avoiding a great deal of unnecessary land use conflict. **All land use planning decisions should be required to come before the Neighborhood Councils and the findings resulting from those hearings should be given significant deference and weight by further decision-making bodies.**
- Planning and Land Use Committees of Neighborhood Councils should be retained and strengthened. The Commission should require that when a Planning Director, Zoning Administrator, Board of Building and Safety Commissioners, or Planning Commission makes a decision contrary to a Neighborhood Council recommendation, they must make a specific, written finding that such a decision would cause demonstrable harm to the public welfare and is clearly inconsistent with the community's adopted plans and priorities.
- **Standing to appeal** discretionary land use decisions and participate meaningfully in administrative proceedings.

- All departments must provide a representative to attend a Board or Committee meeting when requested by a Neighborhood Council.
- Early access to budget and policy decisions before actions are finalized by departments or commissions.
- **Required responses** to Neighborhood Council input, published in a public dashboard or report explaining how feedback was considered or why it was not adopted.
- **Independent budget and staffing** via a strengthened Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, protected from political influence by Councilmembers or the Mayor.
- A minimum of one member of every sitting commission must be a sitting Neighborhood Council member.
- **Guaranteed speaking rights:** Neighborhood Councils must be **allocated a minimum of three minutes** speaking time **with an active Community Impact Statement**, both at City Council and its committees. This time **must be scheduled as a separate agenda item and must not be subject to time limits placed on general public participation.**
- City Council, Board and Committee actions must proceed on a timeline allowing for Neighborhood Council participation. It's impractical for Neighborhood Councils to obtain a CIS if an item has been agendaized for the first time with 72 hours notice. This is unacceptable.

Members of our Council have been barred from speaking publicly at City Council and committee meetings on matters that affect only our own jurisdiction. This silencing of Neighborhood Council voices directly contradicts the Charter's intent and represents a breach of democratic norms. Neighborhood Councils must no longer be treated as advisory boxes to check, but as **early and essential voices in shaping policy.**

5. Transparency Rules

Currently, Councilmembers and their staff routinely exchange positions outside the formal public hearing process and develop consensus in ways that are not transparent. This practice—combined with the City's past deletion of Google Chats containing important communications for over a decade—has eroded public trust. It is one of the main reasons there is so little deliberation during City Council and committee meetings, and why the overwhelming majority of items pass unanimously without substantive debate.

Robust, open deliberation is essential to a functioning democracy. When decisions are shaped in private, the public is harmed and opportunities for corruption increase. While open discussion may take more time, it is the work City Councilmembers are elected and paid to do.

Proposed Charter Amendments for Transparency:

- **Prohibit Back-Channel Position Sharing** – Ban the sharing of Councilmembers' comments or positions outside the public hearing process for quasi-judicial land use decisions.
- **Record All Virtual Meetings** – Require that all virtual meetings of Council or committees be recorded and preserved.
- **Retain and Archive Communications** – Mandate that text messages on both personal and governmental devices be retained for at least two years, as required by state law, and produced upon request under the California Public Records Act.

6. Area Planning Commissions (APCs)

We recommend either eliminating the Area Planning Commissions (APCs) or fundamentally reforming their appointment process. While originally intended to localize land use decisions, APCs have failed to serve the public and instead operate as:

- **Extensions of Mayoral and Council Control** – Politically appointed commissioners often lack ties to the communities they represent, have little area-specific expertise, and take direction from the Mayor or local Councilmember rather than exercising independent judgment.
- **Ineffective Appellate Bodies** – APC members are not required to have training in land use law or planning, even when reviewing quasi-judicial decisions.
- **Rubber Stamps for Staff** – Commissioners frequently defer almost entirely to staff recommendations, undermining the independent oversight they are meant to provide.

Los Angeles deserves a land use process that is technically sound, legally defensible, and genuinely responsive to community concerns. APCs should be free from political influence, include members with relevant subject-matter expertise, and avoid conflicts of interest. Their composition must not be dominated by voices aligned with the developer community.

7. City Commissions Generally

We call for a **Charter-mandated, case-by-case review** of all City commissions, guided by the following reforms:

- **Clear public interest criteria** to determine whether a commission continues, is restructured, or is sunsetted.
- **Political reform**: The Charter should prohibit commission seats from being used as rewards for political donors, campaign surrogates, or insiders lacking relevant expertise. Mayoral appointments are particularly susceptible to this behavior.

- Undated letters of separation must not be required for commission appointment.
- **Cost transparency:** The Charter Reform Commission should evaluate the **full cost of maintaining each commission**, including administrative support, legal staffing, stipends, and opportunity costs.
- **Mandatory Neighborhood Council representation** on commissions that impact land use, policing, public ethics, and budgeting.
- **Minimum subject-matter expertise requirements** for all commissioners dealing with complex or regulatory issues (e.g., zoning, law enforcement, financial oversight).
- **Appointment transparency:** All nominees should file public statements of qualification and disclose any conflicts of interest prior to confirmation.
- **Regular reviews or sunset clauses** to prevent outdated or redundant bodies from persisting indefinitely.

Commissions must exist for the public's benefit—not as political currency.

8. Land Use

- **Independent Appeals Process** – Appeals of land use decisions should no longer be heard by the City Council's Planning and Land Use Management (PLUM) Committee. As a political body, the Council should not be the forum for determining appeals that should be based on law and planning principles, not political influence.
- **Restore the Board of Zoning Appeals** – Consider re-establishing the Board of Zoning Appeals to provide an impartial, expertise-driven review of contested land use decisions.
- **Preserve Rule 245E** – Rule 245E is an essential safeguard, allowing correction of erroneous decisions by unelected bodies. Concerns about misuse of the 245 motion should be addressed through strong ethics reforms rather than by eliminating this relief mechanism.
- **Housing Policy** – Deregulation alone will not solve the housing crisis. Effective solutions require a balanced approach that addresses affordability, infrastructure, and community impacts.

9. Ethics and Accountability

To improve integrity and public confidence in City Hall, we support the following Charter reforms:

- **Automatic suspension** of elected officials indicted for felony corruption or abuse of office, with mechanisms for temporary or interim representation.
- **Clear and enforceable rules** on how and when an elected official can be removed or replaced.
- **Expanded disclosure requirements** for gifts, outside income, contracts, and appointments.
- **Strengthening the Ethics Commission's independence**, funding, and enforcement authority and insulating it from political considerations.
- Providing the Commission with an enforcement mechanism for misdemeanors and felonies.