

## **West Hills Neighborhood Council City Charter Reform Recommendations**

The West Hills Neighborhood Council extends our sincere appreciation for your enormous responsibility. Reforming the City Charter is both technically complex and democratically consequential, and we recognize the diligence, judgment, and civic commitment required to undertake this work. At the same time, we must underscore the urgency of this moment. Neighborhood Councils—created to serve as the City’s eyes and ears—have been persistently under-resourced, underutilized, and structurally constrained in fulfilling their intended role. Neighborhood Councils **MUST** have equal powers with the support of and respect from government officials and agencies, especially when it affects each of the unique communities represented by Neighborhood Councils. Effective, durable reform is needed now. We respectfully submit the following recommendations for your consideration.

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### **I. Fiscal Transparency and Revenue Authority**

Los Angeles cannot build public trust or maintain essential services without full financial transparency. The City must update its four-year general fund budget outlook to reflect anticipated raises for city employees, ensuring projections are honest and aligned with real labor costs. The City also needs modern revenue tools for example, allowing City-operated asphalt-recycling facilities to sell reclaimed material, and taxing commercial users of the public right-of-way, such as autonomous delivery robots and autonomous vehicles like Waymo, that impose measurable wear on streets without contributing to their upkeep. These measures, paired with open and transparent labor negotiations that include meaningful public outreach before, during, and after bargaining, would strengthen fiscal resilience and reinforce a fairer, more sustainable revenue structure. The Charter must require that all City budget and financial data be publicly accessible in clear, searchable formats so residents can understand how public resources are allocated and spent.

City Controller Kenneth Mejia has repeatedly highlighted the lack of “budget conformity,” in which the adopted budget does not reflect actual spending or operational practices. His findings underscore the need for a Charter framework that guarantees transparent, accurate, and accessible financial information—not just for today’s obligations, but to ensure the City develops a long-term infrastructure plan capable of addressing deferred maintenance and future capital expenditures. Ensuring reliable fiscal data is essential for rebuilding public trust and enabling residents, Neighborhood Councils (NCs), and policymakers to make informed decisions.

To support these transparency reforms, the Office of the City Controller must be structurally strengthened. The Charter should provide the Controller with an independent budget, designate the Controller as the City’s Chief Financial Officer, and establish minimum professional qualifications for the office. The Charter should also clarify that the Controller’s audit authority includes performance audits of all City programs funded with public tax dollars, including those overseen by elected officials. Additionally, the Controller must be empowered to hire outside counsel when necessary, and the City’s Fraud, Waste, and Abuse function should be fully enshrined in the Charter.

A robust Reserve Fund should be created that can only be used during declared emergencies rather than to balance the budget, as currently practiced. Furthermore, the City of Los Angeles should be

fixing the problems that result in lawsuits and nuisance claims and the City Council should be providing visibility into the outrageous and inexcusable settlements they reach. The City should not be paying outside counsel when they already have capable internal attorneys.

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## **2. Democratic Representation by City Council**

The scale and diversity of Los Angeles demand a legislative structure proportional to its population. Expanding the size of the City Council and establishing district populations no greater than 150,000 residents (based on 2024 estimated population), like peer cities, would create more responsive representation. With today's population, considering Los Angeles is the second most populous city in the United States, this adjustment would result in roughly 26 council seats which is appropriate for our population. More reasonable district sizes promote constituent access, accountability, and more geographically relevant policymaking. The City Council must be more responsive and accountable to NC comments and suggestions.

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## **3. Ethics and Accountability Reform**

Los Angeles must modernize its ethics rules and enforcement mechanisms to reflect contemporary political and economic realities. Granting the Ethics Commission (EC) authority to place ordinances directly on the City ballot would introduce a meaningful check on Council inaction and allow the public to address urgent issues without undue delay. The EC plays a central role in maintaining integrity within City government. Expanding the EC from five to seven commissioners, including two selected through an open application process, would introduce new voices, reduce political influence, and reinforce public confidence.

A stable and predictable funding formula – tied to Consumer Price Index (CPI), new mandates, Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA), and step increases – is necessary to ensure the EC can fulfill its growing responsibilities. To keep contribution limits aligned with real economic conditions, the ECs should have the authority to adjust those limits using broader indicators – such as wage growth, disposable income, and poverty rates – rather than relying solely on the CPI.

The Charter should also close long-standing loopholes. Currently, lobbyist employers and clients may still give gifts to City officials even though lobbyists themselves cannot. This inconsistency undermines trust and should be corrected. Similarly, the ability of lobbyists and firms to bundle campaign contributions weakens the existing campaign finance restrictions and should be prohibited.

Because ethics violations remain inconsistently enforced, it is essential for the City to clearly assign prosecutorial responsibility – whether to the EC itself, the City Attorney, the District Attorney, or a dedicated independent office. The City must also ensure that enforcement processes and related funding are transparent to the public, including resources intended to deter nuisance litigation. Strengthening the legal infrastructure for NCs is equally important. While the City Attorney's office has historically supported NCs, assigned dedicated legal representatives who have a deep understanding of NCs' areas should be reinstated. This would provide consistent guidance and greatly enhance the

system's ability to function effectively. Together, these reforms would create a clear and enforceable ethics framework.

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#### **4. Transparency and Data Infrastructure**

A 21st-century city requires 21st-century data capacity. The current reliance on third-party vendors for essential datasets often leads to fragmentation, high costs, and barriers to transparency. Establishing a City Data Bureau would centralize data expertise, streamline operations across departments, and strengthen public access to information. Integrating an AI-driven search interface would further simplify how residents and staff locate and interpret City data.

Such a bureau is especially vital for complex processes such as redistricting, where accurate data and clear public visibility are indispensable. A permanent in-house team would reduce redundancy, improve analysis quality, and ensure consistent citywide data standards.

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#### **5. Infrastructure and Governance Modernization**

Los Angeles must overhaul how it manages the public right-of-way. Making Los Angeles Department of Transportation (LADOT) a Charter department with full responsibility for street and sidewalk construction, maintenance, and repair would create a unified and accountable structure for one of the City's most essential functions. The current multi-agency system diffuses responsibility, slows coordination, and complicates capital planning.

Replacing the Board of Public Works with a single reporting entity to the NCs would streamline oversight and eliminate the fragmented governance that has often impeded timely infrastructure delivery. To coordinate the City's complex capital programs, we recommend creating an Office of Infrastructure Management led by an executive chosen for demonstrated operational and capital-delivery expertise.

This Office should house the City's Capital Improvement Plan and the Charter should require two-year budget cycles and a five-year plan to bring predictability, transparency, and apolitical stability to long-term planning. Funding should be stabilized through dedicated revenues to LADOT, restoring service levels to a capacity that would insulate infrastructure maintenance from fiscal volatility.

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#### **6. Neighborhood Empowerment and System Reform**

Neighborhood Councils require clear authority and dependable support if they are to fulfill their chartered purpose. They should be empowered to take official positions on county, state, and federal legislation affecting their communities. Establishing an assembly of NCs would ensure that bottom-up, community-driven priorities reach the legislative agenda by allowing the assembly to select one

topic annually for an evening City Council meeting. Complementing this, there should be reforms that promote deliberation with City departments at a regional level. This could involve bringing representatives from various neighborhoods experiencing similar issues together with key decision makers and staff from appropriate City departments, allowing greater focus on regional solutions, sharing best practices, identifying common concerns and fostering more innovative and coordinated approaches to address issues across the City.

There should be no term limits for NC board members. Term limits would lead to the loss of institutional knowledge and experience that long-serving board members bring to their councils. Frequent turnover could disrupt continuity, delay long-term projects, and interrupt established relationships with City departments. The volunteer nature of NC service already makes recruitment challenging, and mandatory turnover could leave some boards without enough willing members to serve. It is difficult enough now to get community and stakeholders involved during the election process. Limiting stakeholders' ability to elect knowledgeable and effective representatives of their choice, reducing leadership continuity, and diminishing the strength of advocacy for underserved communities is already challenging. Term limits will affect continuity and community trust which are essential to the effective functioning of NCs.

The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE) must recognize that NC members are volunteers with limited time and competing personal and professional obligations. They cannot accommodate hours-long training sessions that extend well beyond what is necessary for compliance. Most required trainings can be completed within a half hour and if they were made interactive, they would be far more effective and retainable.

Neighborhood Councils need practical, accessible training on everything from navigating City processes to sharing proposals with other councils and advancing ideas to the City through Community Impact Statements (CIS). These trainings should be easy to find, intuitive, and widely available. To support this, DONE should build a significantly improved and more functional website where NC members can quickly access training materials, step-by-step guidance, and practical resources for core NC procedures and applications.

DONE must be restructured as a facilitative rather than directive agency. DONE should not impose discretionary policy constraints or interfere in local decision-making. Instead, it should operate with transparency and accountability by publishing regular performance dashboards tracking election logistics, funding approvals, and service delivery – a facilitative role. Its budget should provide equitable support across all NCs. In summary, the role of DONE should be to help NCs and to make things easier by providing support, not dictating direction. NCs should be setting policies, not DONE.

Board of Neighborhood Commissioners (BONC) also requires modernization. Seats should be reserved for NC-elected or regionally nominated commissioners to ensure deeper community understanding and direct system experience. Annual "State of the Neighborhood Council System" reports should measure election turnout, grievance resolution timelines, board retention, and overall system health. Regular evening meetings held across multiple regions would further democratize access and ensure that commissioners engage directly with the communities they oversee.

These reforms would return NCs to their original purpose ensuring that local civic participation is respected, supported, and genuinely woven into City governance. They would also reaffirm the system's core identity as grassroots, bottom-up, decentralized model of engagement, rather than a top-down hierarchy that sidelines community initiative.

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## **7. Strengthening Community Participation and Access**

Civic participation is strongest when it is accessible. City Council and Planning and Land Use Management (PLUM) committee meetings should be held at times and locations that allow maximum public engagement, particularly evenings and weekends in or near the communities affected by the agenda items. Improving hybrid broadcast quality, translation services, and accommodation accessibility is essential to inclusive participation.

Neighborhood Councils must receive timely notice of City decisions that affect their communities. It should be more visible and easier to subscribe via email to receive content for Council Files, City Council meetings, Committee meetings and motions. Content should be released and received within a 48-hour time period. City departments should be required to send representation to NC committee and Board meetings within 60 days' notice.

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## **8. Land Use, Local Authority, *Appeals*, and Planning**

Neighborhood Councils possess local knowledge essential to sound planning. Control and authority over zoning and planning decisions should reside with the City and the communities directly affected by those decisions, not solely with City departments. This approach ensures that land-use policy reflects actual neighborhood conditions and needs rather than imposing one-size-fits-all outcomes. Neighborhood Councils must therefore be granted equal authority in land-use matters, as diminishing or bypassing local input can produce unintended consequences, including declining property values that weaken the property-tax base. A lack of meaningful community participation may also disrupt public-school enrollment patterns, increase traffic congestion, and place additional strain on public transportation systems, underscoring why sound planning depends on local knowledge and accountability.

Consistent with this authority, Neighborhood Councils must not be excluded from filing appeals to City Planning or Building & Safety, and all associated filing fees should be waived. When City departments deny NC recommendations, written findings must directly address each specific issue with the opportunity and full consideration given to NCs for their responses.

City Planning must assign case numbers promptly for every project application received (ministerial included) and subsequently post all documents and information for the NCs and the public to view. Each case should include an option to subscribe via email for updates. This would allow NCs and residents to review, consider and respond to information appropriately.

Commissions, including the Area Planning Commission (APC), should be restructured or dissolved if unable to acknowledge and support NCs and their respective communities. Commissioners must be

free from political influence, have no past or present conflicts of interest, and demonstrate relevant experience with unbiased expertise.

City departments and commissions must further recognize that effective land-use governance begins with and utilizes ongoing public participation.

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## **9. Strategic Collaboration and Ongoing Evaluation**

Charter reform must establish processes for continuous improvement. The City should mandate regular review of engagement tools, oversight structures, and communication systems. Neighborhood Councils should have the authority to initiate system reviews, assess public communication strategies, and recommend improvements to City processes.

Ongoing evaluation ensures that reforms remain relevant and responsive as Los Angeles evolves.

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## **Closing Statement**

Neighborhood Councils can fulfill their foundational purpose only if the City Charter recognizes the partnership formed by NCs and the City of Los Angeles. This partnership is essential to restoring trust and ensuring that the civic engagement in Los Angeles is substantive rather than symbolic.

We consider these suggestions critical to the survival of all Neighborhood Council Systems.

Submitted by

**West Hills Neighborhood Council**