TERRA LAWSON-REMER

CHAIR

SUPERVISOR, THIRD DISTRICT
SAN DIEGO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: **5/19/2026** **24**

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT
MODERNIZING THE SAN DIEGO COUNTY CHARTER TO STRENGTHEN TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND INDEPENDENT OVERSIGHT (DISTRICTS: ALL)

OVERVIEW
San Diego County has grown into one of the largest and most complex county governments in the nation, managing more than $8.6 billion in annual public spending and delivering essential services to over 3.3 million residents. With that scale comes an even greater responsibility to ensure public dollars are used effectively and decisions reflect the needs of the people we serve. As the County has grown, public expectations for transparency, accountability, and independent oversight have grown as well, yet the County's governing framework has not kept pace with that reality.
For many years, community organizations, civic leaders, and residents across the region have consistently called for greater transparency, clearer performance reporting, and stronger independent oversight of County decision-making. Together, these concerns make it harder for the public to understand how decisions are made, whether programs are working, and how their tax dollars are being spent. These concerns point to a widening gap between the scale and complexity of County government today and the oversight systems designed to ensure accountability to the public.

Key decisions affecting County budgets, programs, and service delivery are often shaped through internal staff-level analysis, with limited independent capacity to verify assumptions, evaluate performance, or assess policy alternatives. This creates two related challenges: it makes it harder for the public to clearly understand how decisions are made and how public dollars are spent, and it limits the ability of the Board of Supervisors, acting on behalf of County residents, to provide informed, effective oversight of a large and permanent County bureaucracy.

This Charter modernization effort responds directly to those long-standing calls from residents and community stakeholders. Its purpose is to strengthen independent oversight, improve transparency

and access to information, and clarify accountability so residents can have greater confidence that County government is working effectively, efficiently, and in the public interest.

On April 21, 2026 (Item 14), the Board adopted Resolution 26-024 (Attachment 3) entitled, "A Transparent, Accountable, Modern County Government," that proposed amendments to the County Charter. The Board also introduced an ordinance calling for a special election to submit the Charter amendment to the voters. During the meeting, the Charter reform proposal was amended to (1) give the Board the option to appoint the County Public Defender by ordinance, and (2) authorize County Counsel to make technical modifications to the measure or ballot question to conform to the California Elections Code, other law, or the Registrar of Voters.

Today's action is the second reading of the ordinance, before being placed on the November 2026 ballot. Because these changes involve the County Charter, voters will have the final decision on how their government is structured and how accountability is strengthened.

Core Reform Priorities:

The proposed Charter updates establish core accountability tools designed to improve public understanding and strengthen effective oversight, including:

- **Independent Ethics Oversight** - Establishing independent ethics oversight applicable to elected County officials to ensure ethical standards are upheld through a transparent and impartial process that strengthens public trust in County leadership.

- **Independent Fiscal and Budget Analysis** - Providing the Board of Supervisors and the public with independent, nonpartisan analysis of County budgets, long-term fiscal impacts, and policy tradeoffs before major decisions are made so public dollars are protected and tradeoffs are clearly understood.

- **Independent Evaluation of County Programs and Services** - Creating independent capacity to assess program performance and outcomes, strengthening accountability for results and service delivery, and helping the County improve what works and fix what doesn't.

- **Transparency in County Spending and Performance** - Expanding public access to clear, timely, and usable information about County spending, operations, and program performance so residents can more easily see how their government is performing.

- **Modernization and Clarification of Charter Provisions** - Updating outdated or unclear Charter language to improve clarity and legal durability and align with state law.

- **Accountability for Senior Appointed Leadership** - Creating and modernizing confirmation, removal, and accountability requirements for senior leadership roles to strengthen transparency and public confidence. Gives the Board the option to appoint the County Public Defender by ordinance.

- **Clear and Reasonable Term Limits** - Aligning term limits for County elected leadership with California's 12-year legislative model by establishing a limit of three four-year terms for members of the Board of Supervisors and establishing a Charter framework that would apply the same three four-year limit to other Countywide elected offices if enabling legislation is ever enacted in the future by the State of California. This approach ensures immediate alignment for Supervisors while creating a consistent and standardized long-term accountability framework for all Countywide elected offices. This approach to term limits balances the importance of ensuring competence, expertise, and stability of elected leadership, with the value of encouraging new ideas and safeguarding against entrenchment.

- **Cost-Neutral Implementation** - All reforms will be implemented with no additional cost to taxpayers. This measure relies on existing resources, modernizes outdated structures, and reduces inefficiency, duplication, and waste. Over time, stronger oversight and clearer accountability are expected to yield long-term savings by preventing fraud, improving program effectiveness, and ensuring public dollars are spent as intended.

These reforms are designed to give residents, taxpayers, and their elected representatives stronger tools to understand, evaluate, and oversee how County government operates. The package is structured to be implemented without additional cost to taxpayers.

Today's action also establishes ongoing public and community engagement in the Charter Reform process, directing the CAO to share impartial factual information with the public about the impacts of proposed Charter changes so voters can make informed decisions.

RECOMMENDATION(S)
CHAIR TERRA LAWSON-REMER

1. Consider and adopt the Ordinance (second reading) entitled:

   AN ORDINANCE CALLING A SPECIAL ELECTION TO BE CONSOLIDATED WITH THE STATEWIDE GENERAL ELECTION ON NOVEMBER 3, 2026 FOR THE PURPOSE OF SUBMITTING TO THE VOTERS AMENDMENTS TO THE SAN DIEGO COUNTY CHARTER ENTITLED "A TRANSPARENT, ACCOUNTABLE, MODERN COUNTY GOVERNMENT."

2. Authorize the Chair to file a ballot argument and any rebuttal and to determine other voters and/or associations that may join in signing.
3. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to provide residents with impartial, factual information regarding the proposed Charter amendments and their potential implications for County governance. These efforts may include, but are not limited to, an impartial website summary, public forums, social media, tele-town halls, and other forms of community outreach designed to ensure residents have clear, accessible, and accurate information to make an informed decision on the proposed measure.

4. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer, County Counsel, and the Clerk of the Board of Supervisors to support all activities related to the actions described in this Board Letter, including, but not limited to, consolidating Charter annotations into an appendix and working with the Charter Reform Implementation Task Force to support implementation of the approved reforms.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT
This action supports the County's commitment to equitable service delivery by strengthening transparency, accountability, and independent oversight of County government operations. Ensuring that public resources are managed effectively and that performance information is accessible to all residents supports more equitable outcomes across all communities served by the County.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT
This action supports the County's long-term fiscal and operational sustainability by establishing independent oversight mechanisms and improving access to budget and performance information. Strengthening accountability structures and evidence-based decision-making supports responsible stewardship of public resources over time.

FISCAL IMPACT
There is no immediate fiscal impact associated with today's recommended action. The proposed Charter reforms are intended to be implemented using existing resources and are designed to be cost-neutral. Over time, strengthened oversight and accountability are expected to reduce inefficiencies, prevent waste, and improve the effective use of public funds.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT
The proposed Charter reforms do not create new regulatory burdens or costs for businesses. By improving transparency, fiscal discipline, and government effectiveness, the reforms are expected to foster a more stable, predictable, and competitive local economic environment.

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT
N/A

BACKGROUND
San Diego County's governing structure hasn't kept pace with the size, complexity, or expectations of the region we serve today. The County now manages more than $8.6 billion in public spending and delivers services to more than 3.3 million residents, yet key decisions and oversight still operate through outdated systems that lack independent review, full public disclosure, and clear accountability to the public.

As the County has grown, residents and community leaders have raised persistent concerns about limited independent oversight, closed-door decision-making, and insufficient public visibility into how major budgetary and programmatic choices are made. Modernizing the County Charter is

necessary to ensure that transparency, accountability, and independent oversight keep pace with the County's scale, complexity, and public responsibilities.

This reform package brings the Charter into the 21st century by strengthening independent oversight, creating clear lines of responsibility, and ensuring residents can see and trust how decisions are made, all without new net cost to taxpayers.

On April 21, 2026 14, the Board adopted a resolution entitled, "A Transparent, Accountable, Modern County Government," proposing amendments to the County Charter. The Board also introduced an ordinance calling for a special election to submit the Charter amendment to the voters.

Today's action is the second reading of the ordinance, before being placed on the November 2026 ballot. Because these changes involve the County Charter, voters will have the final decision on how their government is structured and how accountability is strengthened.

During the meeting, the Charter reform proposal was amended to (1) give the Board the option to appoint the County Public Defender by ordinance, and (2) authorize County Counsel to make technical modifications to the measure or ballot question to conform to the California Elections Code, other law, or the Registrar of Voters.

Today's action also directs the Chief Administrative Officer to conduct a civic engagement and public education initiative to provide residents with full, factual information regarding the proposed Charter amendments and their potential implications for County governance, transparency, and accountability. Given the complexity and opacity of County government, the public would be well served by a civic engagement initiative that supports public understanding of the County Charter and the proposed Charter reforms. These efforts may include, but are not limited to, public forums, town halls, tele-town halls, digital and written informational materials, and other forms of community outreach designed to ensure residents have clear, accessible information to make an informed decision on the proposed measure.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's action supports the County of San Diego's 2026-2031 Strategic Plan initiatives of Sustainability, Equity, and Community by advancing transparency and accountability through independent oversight of County budgets, programs, and operations; fostering the implementation of proven best practices in government performance evaluation and public reporting; and supporting engagement by expanding access to information and decision-making processes for all residents, particularly those who have historically had limited ability to participate in or influence County government.

SUBJECT: MODERNIZING THE SAN DIEGO COUNTY CHARTER TO STRENGTHEN TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND INDEPENDENT OVERSIGHT (DISTRICTS: ALL)

Respectfully submitted,

TERRA LAWSON-REMER
Supervisor, Third District

ATTACHMENT(S)
Attachment 1 Ordinance
Attachment 2 Summary of Proposed Ordinance
Attachment 3 Resolution 26-024, adopted on April 21, 2026 (14)