TERRA LAWSON-REMER

CHAIR

SUPERVISOR, THIRD DISTRICT
SAN DIEGO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: **04/21/2026** **14**

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.

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, impartial 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.

- **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 creates a community-led Charter Reform Implementation Task Force that will be convened to guide implementation, upon voter adoption. The Task Force will also be charged with developing a "County Bill of Rights" to clearly communicate the public's expectations for transparency, accountability, access, and equitable service delivery under the modernized Charter (see Appendix for examples).

This action advances Charter reforms that respond to long-standing calls from residents and community leaders for stronger transparency, accountability, and independent oversight.

If approved, the ordinance will return for a second reading on May 19, 2026, 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.

RECOMMENDATION(S)
CHAIR TERRA LAWSON-REMER

1. Adopt a Resolution entitled RESOLUTION OF THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS PROPOSING AMENDMENTS TO THE CHARTER OF THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO ENTITLED "A TRANSPARENT, ACCOUNTABLE, MODERN COUNTY GOVERNMENT."

2. Approve the introduction of the Ordinance (first 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."

3. Submit the Ordinance for further Board consideration and adoption (second reading) on May 19, 2026.

4. If the proposed amendments to the County Charter are passed, create the Charter Reform Implementation Task Force (The Task Force), co-chaired by Jack McGrory and Dr. Kyra Greene. Each member of the Board of Supervisors shall appoint one additional member to serve on the Task Force. The co-chairs may appoint additional temporary or advisory members as necessary to ensure subject-matter expertise and effective implementation. The Task Force shall be staffed by the Office of County Counsel and shall operate for a two-year period following its establishment.

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 fiscal impact associated with today's actions and there will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years. There may be future fiscal impacts [related to Recommendation 4], which staff would bring back to the Board for consideration and approval.

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
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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 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.

1. Independent Ethics Commission with Oversight over Elected Officials

Unlike most of the nation's largest counties, San Diego County does not have an independent ethics commission to investigate allegations of misconduct and corruption by elected County officials. This measure strengthens public trust and confidence by creating an independent Ethics Commission to hold elected officials accountable for corruption and expose public officials who abuse their power.

Commission Structure (7 Members) and Authority

The Ethics Commission will consist of seven volunteer commissioners (5 appointed by the Supervisors, one each, and 2 appointed by County Counsel) who will be tasked with:

- Reviewing and substantiating ethics complaints involving County elected officials submitted by identified complainants
- Issuing public reports on their findings and recommendations

2. Transparency and Accountability in County Spending

San Diego County residents deserve to know how public dollars are spent—and decision-makers need timely, accurate information to govern responsibly. This reform replaces opaque financial practices with a modern transparency framework that allows both the public and the Board of Supervisors to see how money is used, identify problems early, and ensure corrective action is taken.

This measure requires:

- Public disclosure of all spending data in an accessible online format
- Annual financial and performance audits conducted independently
- Public release of all audit findings
- Oversight mechanisms to ensure corrective actions are implemented
- This replaces opaque financial practices with a transparent system that allows the public to see exactly how their money is used.

3. Independent Budget Analyst & Independent Program Auditor

Independent Budget Analyst

The County budget is not merely a record of appropriations, it is the product of assumptions, forecasts, and policy choices that determine which priorities are advanced and which are deferred. Under the current structure, nearly all fiscal assumptions, revenue projections, and cost models are developed by the County's CAO. As a result, the Board of Supervisors and the public often receive a proposed budget only after key policy compromises and analytical decisions have already been made.

This proposal establishes an Independent Budget Analyst (IBA) reporting directly to the Board of Supervisors. Modeled on the federal Congressional Budget Office, the IBA provides the Board with its own impartial fiscal expertise to support informed, transparent, and accountable budget decisions. The IBA allows the Board to move from reacting to a finished budget toward actively shaping fiscal priorities in an ongoing way, both in preparation for the annual budget and over the course of the year as budget adjustments must be made. By equipping elected officials with independent fiscal analysis, this reform strengthens governance, improves transparency, and ensures that major budget decisions are informed by a full range of options and assumptions.

Core Responsibilities

The Independent Budget Analyst shall:

- Develop independent revenue, expenditure, and cost-growth projections
- Analyze and evaluate the assumptions underlying the CAO's proposed budget
- Model alternative fiscal scenarios, including conservative, baseline, and growth-based projections
- Provide fiscal analysis of policy proposals, budget requests, and reallocation options
- Identify tradeoffs and options for achieving Board priorities within available resources
- Track long-term fiscal conditions, staffing trends, and structural budget risks
- Publish clear, accessible fiscal analyses to inform the Board and the public

Relationship to the Executive Budget

The Independent Budget Analyst operates independently of the CAO and does not prepare or administer the County budget. Instead, the IBA complements the executive budgeting function by providing independent analysis before, during, and after budget development. The IBA serves solely at the direction of the Board of Supervisors and may not be supervised or directed by the CAO. Its role is to inform legislative decision-making, not to manage County operations. The IBA may engage in regular communication and information-sharing with the CAO's office to support accurate analysis and coordination, while maintaining its independence.

Independent Program Auditor

The County of San Diego currently evaluates many of its own programs through executive-branch offices. When the same organization designs, implements, and evaluates programs, there is an inherent conflict of interest that undermines credibility, rigor, and public trust.

The County's Office of Evaluation and Performance is currently within the executive branch. Performance measures conducted by the County on itself have not consistently produced the level of independence, transparency, or rigor needed to inform policy decisions by the Board of Supervisors.

This proposal transitions away from this model and instead establishes an Independent Program Auditor reporting directly to the Board of Supervisors. Like the Independent Budget Analyst, this office is designed to serve the legislative branch with objective analysis—focused not on managing programs, but on evaluating whether they work.

The Independent Program Auditor is structurally separate from all County departments and executive offices. It may evaluate programs administered by any County department.

County departments may not direct, limit, or interfere with the scope, findings, or publication of evaluations. This separation is essential to ensuring that program assessments are objective and credible. Independent evaluation allows policymakers to distinguish between programs that are effective and those that are merely well-intentioned. By separating evaluation from program administration, the County strengthens accountability, improves outcomes, and ensures that public resources are directed toward strategies that demonstrably work.

The Independent Program Auditor shall, when directed by the Board of Supervisors:

- Conduct independent evaluations of County programs, services, and initiatives
- Assess program effectiveness, outcomes, and cost-effectiveness
- Evaluate new program proposals and pilot initiatives
- Identify evidence-based alternatives and best practices
- Conduct follow-up evaluations to determine whether corrective actions or reforms achieved intended results
- Publish evaluation findings publicly to promote transparency and accountability
- Conduct evaluations as directed by the Board of Supervisors, including approval of the parameters and design of the evaluation, while preserving the Independent Program Auditor's professional independence over analysis, conclusions, and reporting

4. Public Accountability for Senior County Leadership

San Diego County operates under a professional management model in which the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) is appointed by, and accountable to, the Board of Supervisors, rather than elected by the public. The CAO hires senior leadership. This structure creates an inherent lack of public accountability, because the key leadership managing taxpayer dollars is appointed without any public input, without a public confirmation process or a clearly defined accountability mechanism to the Elected Board of Supervisors or the public. As the County has grown in size and complexity, senior department heads now exercise significant authority over budgets, services, and policy implementation.

This reform modernizes County governance by clarifying that while the CAO acts as Chief Operating Officer in managing day-to-day county operations and conducting recruitment, the

Board of Supervisors has an explicit, Charter-based role in confirming and, in some circumstances, removing the County's most senior appointed leadership—on behalf of the public.

Board Confirmation as the Final Step in the Appointment Process

Under this reform, the CAO retains authority to recruit, vet, and nominate department heads and key senior leadership. The Charter is amended to require that appointments to designated senior department head positions include a public confirmation process by the Board of Supervisors as the final step of the hiring process.

This process:

- Occurs after the CAO has completed recruitment and selection
- Encourages the CAO to seek community and Board member input earlier in the recruitment and selection, to set nominees up for a successful confirmation by the Board
- Provides a forum in which Supervisors and community members may ask questions and provide input
- Requires confirmation by a majority vote of the Board of Supervisors
- Enhances transparency without encroaching on executive administration
- Limits confirmation requirements to a clearly defined and narrow set of senior department heads and cross-County leadership positions
- Preserves the CAO's authority over daily operations, personnel supervision, and departmental management
- Applies only to roles with substantial Countywide authority, fiscal responsibility, or policy impact

Removal Authority as a Narrow and Serious Check

This reform establishes a restrained removal authority for confirmed department heads and senior leadership:

Removal may be effectuated only by a four-vote supermajority of the Board of Supervisors. Providing a limited removal authority ensures that the Board retains a meaningful accountability mechanism for non-elected, senior officials who exercise significant authority over major County departments and programs. Requiring a four-vote supermajority ensures that this power is used only in rare circumstances where there is broad consensus that continued service is no longer in the best interest of the County.

Clarify Non-interference Clause

The Charter's non-interference provision was adopted to prevent individual Supervisors from directing or micromanaging County staff in day-to-day operations, a protection that remains essential to professional management. However, it was never intended to shield senior leadership from accountability or limit the Board's authority to oversee whether County policies, programs, and funding decisions are implemented effectively. This reform clarifies that while operational

independence is preserved, senior leadership remains accountable to the Board and the public for delivering results and responsibly stewarding County resources.

5. Modernizing the County Charter

Modernize structure and organization of County Charter

In addition to substantive governance reforms, this package requires of the Clerk of the Board that sections of the Charter that exist solely to record the history of prior amendments, implementation timelines, or transitional provisions be removed from the operative body of the Charter and instead consolidated into an appendix. Relocating these materials preserves the historical record and legislative intent while ensuring that the Charter's core text functions as a clear, forward-looking statement of governing authority and responsibilities.

Modernizing Charter Language to Support Inclusive Participation and Legal Clarity

This reform makes limited technical updates to the Charter's appointment language to improve clarity, consistency, and long-term operability, while preserving the original purpose, scope, and effect of the provision. These updates are intended to ensure the Charter remains clear, legally durable, and capable of consistent application over time.

6. Aligning Term Limits for All County Elected Officials with the State of California

This reform establishes clear and reasonable term limits aligned with California's legislative model. The Charter Reform establishes a limit of three four-year terms (12 years total) for all County elected officials.

This will be immediately effectuated for Supervisors by changing Supervisors' term limits from 8 to 12 years. In addition, the reform creates a framework providing that other Countywide elected offices shall be subject to the same 12-year term limit if enabling legislation is enacted by the State of California authorizing such limits.

This structure aligns San Diego County's governance framework with the broader Statewide legislative framework.

Allowing Elected Officials to serve up to twelve years provides sufficient time to develop expertise, oversee a large and complex County government, and guide major initiatives from conception through implementation, while safeguarding against entrenchment and encouraging the periodic emergence of new leaders with new ideas.

7. Public Input and the Charter Reform Implementation Task Force

To ensure these Charter reforms are implemented effectively and in a way that reflects community needs, this action convenes a Charter Reform Implementation Task Force upon voter approval of

the Charter reform package. Major governance reforms often succeed or fail based on how they are implemented, not just how they are adopted. This Implementation Task Force will provide practical guidance during the transition period, help draft implementation ordinances, identify implementation challenges early, and offer recommendations to support smooth rollout of new oversight, transparency, and accountability structures. This measure also directs the CAO to work with this Task Force, staffed by the office of County Counsel, to implement the charter reforms.

The Task Force will also develop a County Bill of Rights, to be adopted by the Board, that translates the modernized Charter's governance reforms into clear, plain-language commitments the public can expect from County government, covering transparency, accountability, access to information, and public engagement. The Bill of Rights will be informed by best practices from other jurisdictions.

The Task Force would operate for a two-year period following voter approval and is intended to support implementation, not to reopen or renegotiate the reforms approved by voters. Its role will be advisory, focused on helping the County translate Charter changes into effective practices, coordinating across departments as needed, and identifying opportunities to strengthen public understanding and operational effectiveness. By time-limiting the Task Force, the County ensures focused support during the critical start-up phase while avoiding the creation of a permanent advisory body.

8. Cost-Neutral Implementation

All reforms will be implemented with input from Task Force and are expected to be implemented with no additional cost to taxpayers. This measure relies on existing resources, modernizes outdated structures, and reduces inefficiency, duplication, and waste. For example, some existing County functions can be assumed by the newly established IBA/IPA (Independent Budget Analyst/Independent Program Auditor) office, resulting in net zero new staff hires. 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.

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)
1 - Ordinance Calling for Election
2 - Resolution Proposing Charter Amendments – Clean-up
3 - Resolution Proposing Charter Amendments – Clean-up (Information Copy)
4 - Summary of Proposed Ordinances