

Permitting Progress

How charter reform can help San Francisco speed delivery of housing, transit, new businesses, and more



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The findings and recommendations of this report are SPUR's and do not necessarily reflect the views of those listed here. Any errors are the author's alone.

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Executive Summary

San Francisco's permitting system determines what gets built, how quickly businesses can open, and whether public infrastructure projects move forward or stall. It's the primary system through which the city enforces its planning, building, and land use codes. When permitting works well, it protects public safety and well-being while enabling housing, transit, and economic activity. When it does not, the consequences are felt across the city in delayed permits and construction, abandoned projects, and a growing sense that government is an obstacle rather than a partner.

Today, San Francisco's permitting system is not working well. A new storefront business must secure 17 separate permits from seven city departments, according to a SPUR report, *Charter for Change: Empowering San Francisco's Government Through Charter Reform*. The process can take months or years and cost tens of thousands of dollars, regardless of a project's size or complexity. According to a 2026 policy analysis report by the city's Budget and Legislative Analyst's Office, San Francisco has been among the slowest and least predictable major cities in the United States in permitting housing developments, despite state reforms and our urgent, worsening housing shortage. Public infrastructure agencies face similar hurdles: a single appeal can delay a bus lane or housing project for years.

These problems are structural: they are embedded in the city charter, in voter-adopted ordinances that cannot be amended through legislation, and in an overzealous appeals framework that applies the same level of procedural scrutiny to a backyard deck as to a high-rise development with 400 apartments.

In January 2025, Mayor Daniel Lurie's first executive directive was to launch the PermitSF initiative. PermitSF has begun to address the permitting system's structural problems through targeted legislation, operational improvements, and a new digital permitting portal. Early results, according to SF.gov's permit performance metrics, are promising. Within a year:

- More than 600 restaurants registered for outdoor dining through a streamlined process.
- Live online dashboards began tracking permit approval times, which are rapidly decreasing.
- The city began accepting online applications for common permit types.

But PermitSF can't fix every problem in the permitting system. While it can cut red tape and encourage cooperation among departments, it cannot reshape departments whose boundaries are set in the charter, reform voter-adopted ordinances that stymie beneficial development, or more carefully tailor appeals processes that the charter mandates.

Building on SPUR's prior San Francisco governance work (*Charter for Change, Designed to Serve: Resetting the City's Governance Structure to Better Meet the Needs of San Franciscans*, and

Purchasing Power: Nine Recommendations to Improve San Francisco's Procurement Process and Make It a Core Part of the City's Strategy to Deliver More Equitable Services), this report examines how the charter hamstrings the city's permitting functions. It proposes charter reforms that would finally give the city's elected leaders tools to modernize and improve permitting through the normal legislative process, rather than through ballot campaigns. The recommendations address departmental flexibility, "ballot box planning," and appeals processes.

Unlock departmental flexibility to enable better ways of organizing permitting.

The charter freezes the structure and function of 88% of the city's departments, making reorganization impossible without a ballot measure, according to SPUR's 2024 report *Designed to Serve*. This rigidity prevents the city from consolidating overlapping permitting functions or testing new service delivery models. Shifting certain departments and commissions to the Administrative Code would enable policymakers to develop better ways of organizing permitting operations.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Shift the Building Inspection and Arts departments from the charter to the Administrative Code.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Shift restrictive department roles and procedures from the charter to the Administrative Code.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Expand the affirmative authority of the mayor and Board of Supervisors to establish and structure departments.

End ballot box planning by restoring the legislative process.

Voter-adopted land use ordinances spanning nearly four decades (from shadow restrictions to office development caps to formula retail bans) cannot be amended through legislation, even when they are outdated or counterproductive. Giving the Board of Supervisors the ability to amend these ordinances would allow them to reflect current needs.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Resolve land use and permitting issues through leadership and the legislative process rather than at the ballot.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Recognize that some voter-adopted land use ordinances are outdated and create a clear pathway for policymakers to reconsider them.

Create tailored appeals that balance individual rights and community benefits.

The charter grants a near-universal right of appeal, giving residents the standing to challenge almost all permits and licenses the city issues. If a resident appeals, the city has an opportunity to revoke a permit or license even though it has already been issued. In 2023, appeals changed the outcome of just 0.03% of projects, according to a SPUR analysis. Yet the threat of delay was sufficient to discourage projects with significant community benefits. Changing charter-required appeals processes to create tailored appeals rights would better balance individual and community benefits.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Move appeals procedures out of the charter and into the Administrative Code.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Empower the mayor and Board of Supervisors to legislate tailored, tiered appeal rights, rooted in project type and risk, by removing from the charter the broad, default right of appeal for all city-issued permits and licenses.

These recommendations are designed to work together. Shifting departments to the Administrative Code gives the city flexibility to reorganize. Enabling the Board of Supervisors to amend voter-adopted ordinances restores the legislative process as the primary venue for policy refinement. Replacing blanket appeals with tailored, risk-based procedures reduces unnecessary delay without eliminating meaningful public review. Together, these recommendations, if placed on the ballot and approved by voters, would create a governance framework that supports continuous improvement, one in which the city's leaders can adapt permitting to changing needs without mounting a ballot campaign for every adjustment.

How the City Charter Hamstrings Permitting

San Francisco's local government is the primary gatekeeper determining what, where, and how the city's buildings and infrastructure can change. The General Plan and planning codes govern most of the urban built environment, together setting the balance of residential, commercial, and public uses across the city. These foundational documents shape how neighborhoods grow, how land is used, and how competing priorities are weighed against one another.

For new buildings, the city's codes establish rules governing permissible heights, density, setbacks, and other physical characteristics. At their best, these rules support neighborhoods that evolve in ways that promote residents' health and well-being.

For other kinds of applicants — from public transportation agencies to private small businesses — additional local codes set rules that govern how physical or use changes may affect an adjacent sidewalk, how a restaurant kitchen must be configured to meet health and safety standards, and how a redesigned building entry ensures safe evacuation and access for people with disabilities.

The city's sprawling permitting system is the primary mechanism for enforcing these codes. When a private or public actor seeks to change a property's use, form, or impact — whether initiating construction or opening a business — a series of permits is triggered. Each permit has its own requirements. An applicant must demonstrate compliance with all applicable codes and receive approval from each relevant department before proceeding.

Over many decades, the permitting system has become overly complex and unevenly enforced. City officials can rescind permits even after they have been granted. The entire permitting process can take months or even years, costing tens of thousands of dollars in fees, lawsuits, and professional services — regardless of the project's size or complexity.

As SPUR documented in *Designed to Serve* and *Charter for Change*, San Francisco's charter (the foundational legal document that establishes the structure and authority of the city's government) was designed to set broad governing principles.¹ In practice, however, many voter-adopted amendments have transformed it into a rigid operational manual that constrains the city's ability to deliver services effectively. Because any change to the charter requires a public vote, even small corrections or updates demand significant resources and political capital.

These constraints are especially acute for the city's permitting functions, though some departments (notably Recreation & Parks and the Port of San Francisco) operate with greater

¹ N. Neditch, A. John-Baptiste, and S. Karlinsky, *Designed to Serve: Resetting the City's Governance Structure to Better Meet the Needs of San Franciscans*, SPUR, August 2024, <https://www.spur.org/publications/spur-report/2024-07-31/designed-serve>; B. Rosenfield, M. Skelly, and N. Neditch, *Charter for Change: Empowering San Francisco's Government Through Charter Reform*, SPUR, November 2025, <https://www.spur.org/publications/policy-brief/2025-11-10/charter-change>.

flexibility due to unique charter provisions that grant them broader independent authority.² For most departments involved in permitting, however, three systemic problems embedded in the charter compound one another.

- 1. Inflexible department structure.** City departments and their responsibilities are written into the charter, making reorganization impossible without a voter-adopted ballot measure. Even when a department's structure is outdated or demonstrably causing problems, the city cannot adjust it through ordinary legislative or administrative action.
- 2. Inflexible practices.** The charter has accumulated a set of overly specific policy and administrative provisions that prescribe procedures and reporting requirements for certain departments. These provisions permanently lock in operational details that belong in an ordinance or departmental policy, not in a constitution-level document.
- 3. Appeals.** The charter creates a near-universal right of appeal for almost every permit and license the city issues. This right is additive: a project requiring multiple permits faces compounded risk of appeal at each stage. Moreover, the appeals process applies uniformly, whether the project is replacing windows in a home or a new rail transit line, with no mechanism to calibrate oversight to the project's scale or impact.

Consider an analogy to federal governance: Imagine the U.S. Constitution prescribed not just the existence of executive departments, but also who reports to whom within each agency, how appeals must be handled, and how long certain procedural steps must take. That is effectively what San Francisco's charter does for much of local government, embedding operational minutiae in a document that requires a citywide vote to change.

Each of these problems exacerbates the others. A rigid, outdated organizational structure makes it harder to foster coordination and collaboration across departments. Cementing the specifics of organizational roles and practices discourages learning and continuous improvement. An overbroad appeals framework layers additional risk and delay on already cumbersome processes. Together, they create a system that is resistant to reform.

The impact extends well beyond permits for private development and small businesses. Public infrastructure agencies such as the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency must also secure permits from city departments for bus lanes, cycling infrastructure, and transit projects. A single appeal can stall infrastructure work for months or years, delaying projects intended to serve hundreds of thousands of residents.

Too often, the city's government obstructs the city's priorities — not because of bad intentions among city officials but because of the structure in which they operate and the rules and procedures they are legally bound to implement.

² Charter Sec. 4.106; https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/san_francisco/latest/sf_charter/0-0-0-241&ved=2ahUKEwjwrt3lloGUAXUYK1kFHVkNJVVoQFnoECBcQAQ&usq=AOvVaw2EvMnfA_tpswe9DF7xclk0.

When *Should* the Charter Grant Its Unique Authority to Departments and Commissions?

The charter assigns the foundational authority to the Board of Supervisors and mayor to adopt laws that govern how the city government is structured, how services are performed, and how departments operate.

In certain instances, however, a given function requires a degree of independence from the board and mayor. To ensure that this independent authority can't be legislatively amended by a majority vote of the board and mayor, these authorities must be established in the charter and can therefore only be amended by the voters through a charter amendment.

Some examples of functions that require this type of charter-authorized authority:

- The **Elections Commission and Department** operate under charter authority to conduct elections free from the risk of political interference.
- The **Ethics Commission and Department** maintain unique independence that includes oversight of campaign and ethics laws that govern all city officials, including the board and the mayor.
- The **Controller** requires independent authority to conduct audits, including of elected officials, and to ensure that the city's finances remain healthy.
- Authority for **certain fiduciary responsibilities**, such as maintaining a balanced budget and conducting audits, including audits of the activities of elected officials, must be independent of legislative amendment. Fiduciary boards and officers that conduct apolitical oversight of trust funds are also established in the charter to ensure their continued independent authority.
- **Certain fundamental processes** are politically insulated by the charter, which requires a higher hurdle for the mayor and board to suspend financial policies, establish or reject certain fees, or conduct other activities. If these higher standards weren't set in the charter, the mayor and a majority vote of the board could amend these processes at any time.

Because most aspects of the current permitting system are prescribed by San Francisco's charter, the system is inherently resistant to experimentation. Most meaningful improvements require a charter amendment, forcing even modest reforms into a high-stakes, citywide ballot measure that, once passed, cannot be adjusted or amended without returning again to the voters.

This dynamic discourages iteration and learning. Every adjustment requires average voters (rather than city policymakers, managers, and workers) to become experts in esoteric city government procedures. It also requires voters to discern fact from fiction on sophisticated governance questions, often amid expensive and politically charged campaigns.

Because the charter prescribes departmental roles and one-off procedural requirements (such as additional approvals from bodies with narrow jurisdiction), friction defines the system without consistently delivering a clear public benefit. City officials are prevented from consolidating overlapping functions, streamlining review processes, or testing new service delivery models without first mounting a campaign and winning at the ballot.

In the current system, San Francisco voters have the final say on each specific question about permitting procedures and departmental organization, while city officials are left with no option but to enforce a flawed system as written or pursue messy, ambiguous workarounds to get the job done.

Fully modernizing the permitting experience in San Francisco will require reforms beyond individual charter amendments. While the charter governs the overall process, dozens of additional gates and requirements (some of which present mutually conflicting standards) exist in city codes, voter-adopted ordinances, agency regulations, and state and federal law beyond the scope of this brief.

How Charter Reform Can Bolster PermitSF

Mayor Lurie's PermitSF initiative aims to simplify San Francisco's complex permitting system through multi-agency collaboration. Launched in January 2025, it attempts to make the permitting process faster, more transparent, and more unified across city departments. New stages of the initiative are announced every 100 days. While PermitSF has led to immediate improvements and streamlined operations, it also highlights the need for charter reform to address deeper structural issues that limit effective governance. Three of SPUR's recent governance reports identify specific charter changes necessary for better management and decision-making, emphasizing the importance of empowering city leaders to enhance overall outcomes for residents.

PermitSF

Mayor Lurie has made permitting reform a centerpiece of his administration, launching PermitSF shortly after taking office.³ The initiative's stated goals are straightforward: make permitting fast, predictable, transparent, and unified across city departments.

The mayor tapped San Francisco Planning Department Director Rich Hillis to lead the effort, working directly with Chief of Housing and Economic Development Ned Segal.⁴ The leadership team also includes the directors of the Department of Building Inspection, Office of Small Business, San Francisco Permit Center, and the Planning Department's Current Planning Division. This cross-departmental structure reflects the core premise of PermitSF: the permitting problems facing residents and businesses are confined to no single department but arise from fragmentation across many.

PermitSF has pursued reform on parallel tracks: changes to city codes and improvements to internal operations, including technology upgrades.

City codes: Early PermitSF actions eliminated permit requirements for sidewalk tables, window signage, and restaurant table candles. Subsequent ordinances streamlined accessory dwelling unit rules to align with state law, cut development fees for large projects, eased restrictions on historic properties that had left buildings vacant, and ended fines for residents parking in their own driveways.

³ SF.gov, "Mayor Lurie Launches Permit Reform Effort With Focus on Housing and Small Business," February 13, 2025, <https://www.sf.gov/mayor-lurie-launches-permit-reform-effort-with-focus-on-housing-and-small-business>.

⁴ Rich Hillis has since retired. The new director is Sarah Dennis Phillips.

Internal operations: On the operational side, the initiative has expanded “over-the-counter” permit processing, introduced “shot clock” performance targets for each department and permit type, removed the pre-application meeting requirement for large housing projects, and launched a new integrated software to track permitting functions across departments.⁵

Early results have been encouraging. Within a year of launch, more than 600 San Francisco restaurants registered for outdoor dining through a streamlined process. Of those, 160 businesses were entirely new to outdoor dining and had previously been deterred by the complexity of the old system.⁶

The PermitSF Portal and OpenGov

The most ambitious component of PermitSF is a new digital permitting portal designed to replace more than 30 legacy software systems with a single citywide platform. In October 2025, after reviewing proposals from more than 50 vendors, the city selected OpenGov, an enterprise software provider serving more than 2,000 government agencies, as its technology partner.^a The contract aims to consolidate permit application, payment, tracking, and communication into a single online system.

The first phase of the portal launched in February 2026, just four months after the project kicked off. It is initially handling online applications for five permit types, including common home improvement permits (replacing doors, windows, and siding), fire alarm and sprinkler permits, and special event applications. Applicants can submit materials, communicate with staff, make payments, and track their applications online without visiting the Permit Center in person. The city plans to expand the portal in phases, adding residential remodels, business signage, and more complex development projects over the following months and years.

The OpenGov selection drew scrutiny when internal evaluations found that a competing vendor scored higher on technical criteria. Still, the administration has defended the choice and is committed to publishing weekly progress reports on implementation. Regardless of the procurement controversy, the underlying project to unify the city’s fragmented permitting technology acknowledges a real and well-documented problem. Full implementation is expected to take multiple years.

^a *PR Newswire*, “City and County of San Francisco and OpenGov Kick Off Project to Overhaul Permitting,” October 15, 2025, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/city-and-county-of-san-francisco-and-opengov-kick-off-project-to-overhaul-permitting-302584650.html>.

⁵ A “shot clock” target sets a specific number of days within which city staff must review and/or approve a permit. For example, a shot clock could include a guarantee that a resident will hear back from Building Inspection about their permit submittal within 15 days.

⁶ C. Julig, “Could Santa Fe Learn from San Francisco’s Permit Reform Initiative?” *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, April 2, 2026, <https://www.pressreader.com/usa/santa-fe-new-mexico/20260402/281513642702783>.

Charter Reform

PermitSF's legislative and operational reforms can deliver meaningful near-term improvements short of resolving the structural problems embedded in the city's charter. Code changes and better technology can reduce friction, but they cannot reorganize departments whose boundaries are established in the charter, eliminate appeals rights that the charter guarantees, or sunset voter-adopted ordinances that the charter protects from legislative amendment. To address these deeper constraints, charter reform is necessary.

SPUR laid the analytical groundwork for this reform through three reports published in 2024 and 2025. Together, they document how the charter's structure constrains effective governance, and they identify specific changes that would improve outcomes for San Franciscans.

- **Designed to Serve** examined the charter's practical effects on city governance.⁷ The report found that the charter creates an overly complex system characterized by fragmented management, diffused decision-making, and unclear lines of authority, a structure that prioritizes oversight over outcomes and ultimately fails to serve residents effectively. The report established leadership, empowerment, and accountability as foundational design principles for reform.
- **Charter for Change** built on those findings with 10 recommendations to inform the November 2026 ballot.⁸ Its recommendations addressed mayoral authority over department heads, the city administrator's role as chief operating officer, purchasing reform, ballot-measure thresholds, departmental flexibility, budget set-asides, employee bargaining, and the removal of outdated procedural requirements from the charter.
- **Purchasing Power** examined the city's procurement system, documenting how more than 100 code sections and 8,700 references to "contracts" and "procurement" across the municipal code have created a maze-like system that is difficult for businesses to navigate, frustrating for staff to administer, and expensive for the city to operate.⁹ The report estimated that each solicitation costs the city between \$22,000 and \$28,000 and recommended granting the city administrator clearer authority over purchasing rules.

⁷ N. Neditch, A. John-Baptiste, and S. Karlinsky, *Designed to Serve: Resetting the City's Governance Structure to Better Meet the Needs of San Franciscans*, SPUR, August 2024, <https://www.spur.org/publications/spur-report/2024-07-31/designed-serve>.

⁸ B. Rosenfield, M. Skelly, and N. Neditch, *Charter for Change: Empowering San Francisco's Government Through Charter Reform*, SPUR, November 2025, <https://www.spur.org/publications/policy-brief/2025-11-10/charter-change>.

⁹ N. Neditch, *Purchasing Power: Nine Recommendations to Improve San Francisco's Procurement Process and Make It a Core Part of the City's Strategy to Deliver More Equitable Services*, SPUR, April 2025, <https://www.spur.org/publications/spur-report/2025-04-17/purchasing-power>.

The Commission Streamlining Task Force

In *Designed to Serve*, SPUR advocated for developing a process to clarify the purpose of each of San Francisco's boards and commissions and to reduce the number of bodies.^a In November 2024, San Francisco voters approved Proposition E, establishing the Commission Streamlining Task Force. The task force was charged with conducting a comprehensive, evidence-based review of the city's 126 charter-defined commissions, boards, and advisory bodies and recommending which ones should be modified, eliminated, or combined to create a more effective, efficient, and economical city government.

The task force delivered recommendations to the Board of Supervisors in February 2026, including changes to both the charter and the Administrative Code. The board is currently considering these recommendations and potential amendments at its public legislative sessions. Changes to the charter informed by the task force's recommendation may be placed on the November 2026 ballot.

^a N. Neditch, A. John-Baptiste, and S. Karlinsky, *Designed to Serve: Resetting the City's Governance Structure to Better Meet the Needs of San Franciscans*, SPUR, August 2024, <https://www.spur.org/publications/spur-report/2024-07-31/designed-serve>.

Three Areas Ripe for Changes to Improve Permitting

San Francisco's departmental rigidity, voter-adopted ordinances that cannot be amended through the legislative process, and broad appeals authority constrain fair, fast, and predictable permitting.

Department Organization

Housing is among the most urgent challenges facing San Francisco, and the city's housing permitting process illustrates with particular clarity why departmental organization matters. The path from project proposal to construction start in San Francisco is longer, more expensive, and less predictable than in virtually any peer city.¹⁰ The city's policy goals are not unusual, but the organizational structure charged with implementing them is fragmented, rigid, and resistant to coordination.

Nearly every American city has one or more local departments that oversee compliance with planning and building codes for proposed projects that will change the physical environment. Each code entails two major compliance functions: plan checks and inspections. Plan checks (application reviews and permits issuance) are completed before a project or stage begins and serve as permission to proceed with construction or a change of use. Inspections occur on-site during construction, at project completion, and periodically throughout the life of a building to verify compliance with permits.

American cities employ many permitting models for entitlements and building codes. Some consolidate planning and building functions under a single agency, while others maintain separate departments but coordinate them through a unified intake and tracking system, or assign permitting to a dedicated office that draws staff from multiple departments (Appendix A).

San Francisco operates distinctly separate charter departments for planning and building, but unlike many other cities that do the same, San Francisco does not allow one submission for both departments, does not provide a single point-of-contact to applicants navigating the maze of permitting, and historically has not had technology that can track changes and progress between departments involved in review. The Planning Department administers zoning and land use entitlements; the Department of Building Inspection handles building permits, plan review, and code compliance inspections (Exhibit 1). Depending on the scope of a project, other city departments, including the SF Public Utilities Commission, Public Works, Environment, and Public Health, may be involved in granting or reviewing permits. The PermitSF initiative coordinates permitting across departments, but the underlying organizational silos remain intact.

¹⁰ San Francisco Planning Department, "Housing Element Update 2022," accessed April 6, 2026, <https://sfplanning.org/project/housing-element-update-2022>.

EXHIBIT 1

San Francisco Operates Distinctly Separate Charter Departments for Planning and Building

The Planning Department oversees variables that affect how a building looks, is used, and fits into the city's fabric. The Department of Building Inspection focuses on variables related to engineering and life safety, viewing an individual building as a machine that must function properly. Depending on project scope, other city departments may be involved in issuing or reviewing permits.

**PLANNING DEPARTMENT**

Planning oversees and enforces the Planning Code, which includes:

Use—What can be built, such as housing, hotel, office, and retail

Intensity—How much can be built, specifying density, height, and physical volume

Design—How what is built looks and whether it complies with design standards and historic preservation

**DEPARTMENT OF BUILDING INSPECTION**

Building Inspection oversees and enforces the Building Code, which includes:

Structure and safety during emergencies—Ensures buildings won't collapse and occupants can be safe*

Essential systems—Water, power, air, elevators, fire sprinklers

Performance—Energy and water efficiency, disability access

Source: SPUR.

*Note: The San Francisco Fire Department conducts its own review, closely coordinating with DBI. DBI forwards the relevant sections of permits to SFFD if they require Fire Code review and inspection. Once SFFD signs off on fire safety, DBI may finalize and issue the permit (and later, the certificate of occupancy).

As a result of this siloed structure, project applicants in San Francisco — whether developers, homeowners, or small business owners — must navigate an unpredictable maze of submissions, approvals, and inspections (Exhibit 2). Without a unified management structure to set performance targets and resolve conflicts swiftly, applicants are bounced from one department to another. The fragmented permitting system leads to problems such as

- **Sequential reviews that lengthen project timelines and increase costs.** San Francisco's current site permit model has historically required sequential review of addenda (technical engineering documents that provide calculations for the foundation, structural, mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems) rather than allowing concurrent review.¹¹ In addition, the San Francisco Fire Department's primary plan check is not performed simultaneously with the Department of Building Inspection's first round, at times leading to late-stage conflicts that require costly redesign.

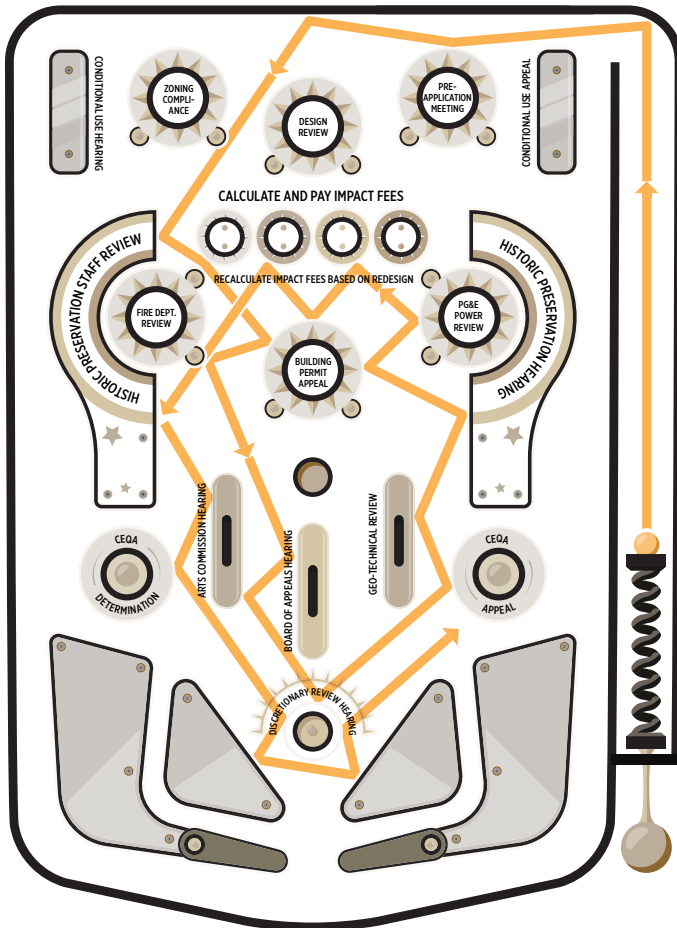
¹¹ Budget and Legislative Analyst's Office, City and County of San Francisco, *Post-Entitlement Permitting in San Francisco*, Policy Analysis Report, March 5, 2026, https://sfbos.org/sites/default/files/BLA_Post_Entitlement_Permitting_030526.pdf.

- **Conflicting requirements with no resolution authority.** The Planning Department, the Department of Building Inspection, the Fire Department, the Public Works Department, and the Municipal Transportation Agency can issue contradictory comments on a given project with no binding process to reconcile conflicts, at times resulting in costly mid-construction changes. The problem is especially acute for projects that span multiple code domains, such as mixed-use developments or buildings on sites with complex utility infrastructure.
- **Imposition of requirements beyond approved plans.** Fire Department and accessibility inspectors can change construction requirements from approved plans during field inspections. They can apply interpretations stricter than the code language, resulting in expensive mid-construction changes that sometimes conflict with requirements imposed by other departments.¹²

EXHIBIT 2
The Path to Obtaining a Permit in San Francisco Can Be Arbitrary and Chaotic

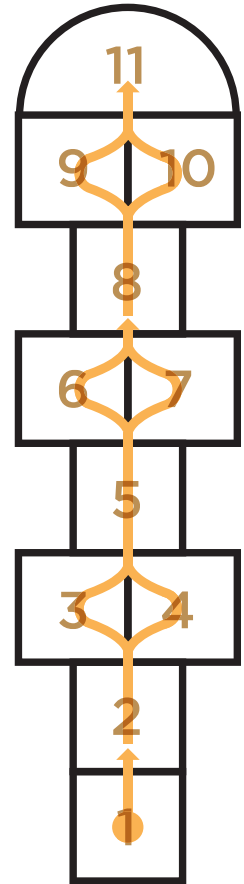
Even with the PermitSF initiative, the city's fragmented permitting system can send permit seekers bouncing from one city department to another, increasing project timelines and costs. Source: SPUR.

How It Is Now



How It Could Be

11. CLEARED FOR CONSTRUCTION!
10. PULL BUILDING PERMIT
9. PAY FEES
8. REVISE APPLICATION BASED ON COMMENTS FROM STAFF
7. SUBMIT ADDENDA FOR CONCURRENT REVIEW (PG&E, PLUMBING, STRUCTURAL, FIRE)
6. SUBMIT BUILDING PERMIT PLANS AND DRAWINGS FOR INTAKE
5. PLANNING PERMIT APPROVAL
4. ZONING AND DESIGN REVIEW
3. HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW (IF NEEDED)
2. REVISE BASED ON COMMENTS FROM STAFF
1. SUBMIT TO PLANNING



¹² M. O'Neill, G. Gualco-Nelson, and E. Biber, "Developing Policy from the Ground Up: Examining Entitlement in the Bay Area to Inform California's Housing Policy Debates," *Hastings Environmental Law Journal* 25 (1): Winter 2019, https://www.law.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/O'Neill_et-al_Developint_Policy_from_the_Ground_Up.pdf.

Ballot Box Planning

Structural Paralysis

As community needs evolve, elected officials must adapt by maintaining land use laws that support current priorities. Yet on many consequential land use decisions, policymakers face a significant constraint: Policies and procedures adopted by ballot initiative cannot be amended administratively or legislatively but only through another ballot initiative. This lack of flexibility creates a stark imbalance between the decision making of elected representatives and the permanence of ballot measures. Economic, environmental, political, and technological change evolve, yet land use policies adopted at the ballot make permanent choices that become outdated and sometimes even harmful.

As a result, San Francisco has accumulated decades of hyper-specific rules that require voter approval or exceptions before individual projects can be proposed. The resulting process often blocks worthwhile projects from consideration while undermining the policy expertise of the Board of Supervisors, departments, and their commissions.

Key Voter-Adopted Policies to Reconsider

Over the last half-century, San Francisco activists and community organizers have responded to controversies of the moment by proposing permanent citywide policies at the ballot box. Many of these measures were pursued amid waves of anti-urbanist sentiment, including arbitrary citywide caps on office development, voter-approval requirements for certain categories of construction, and conditional-use mandates targeting specific business types (Exhibit 3). While voters often adopted these provisions to address the circumstances of their time, they remain binding long after those circumstances have changed.

The result: worthwhile projects aren't proposed or require staff to divert resources to documenting compliance with the outdated priorities of past generations. In both cases, they hold the city in the past at the expense of advancing the priorities of the present.

Appeals

San Francisco's charter has turned the right to appeal a harmful government action into a tool that can be used to block projects the city desperately needs. The goal is not to eliminate all appeals but to make the process fair, proportionate, and calibrated to risk.

Charter-Protected Appeals Rights

San Francisco's charter creates a broad and unusually permissive right of appeal for nearly all permits and licenses the city grants. With only two narrow charter-defined exceptions, permits and licenses can be appealed to the Board of Appeals, a charter-created body charged with adjudicating them.¹³

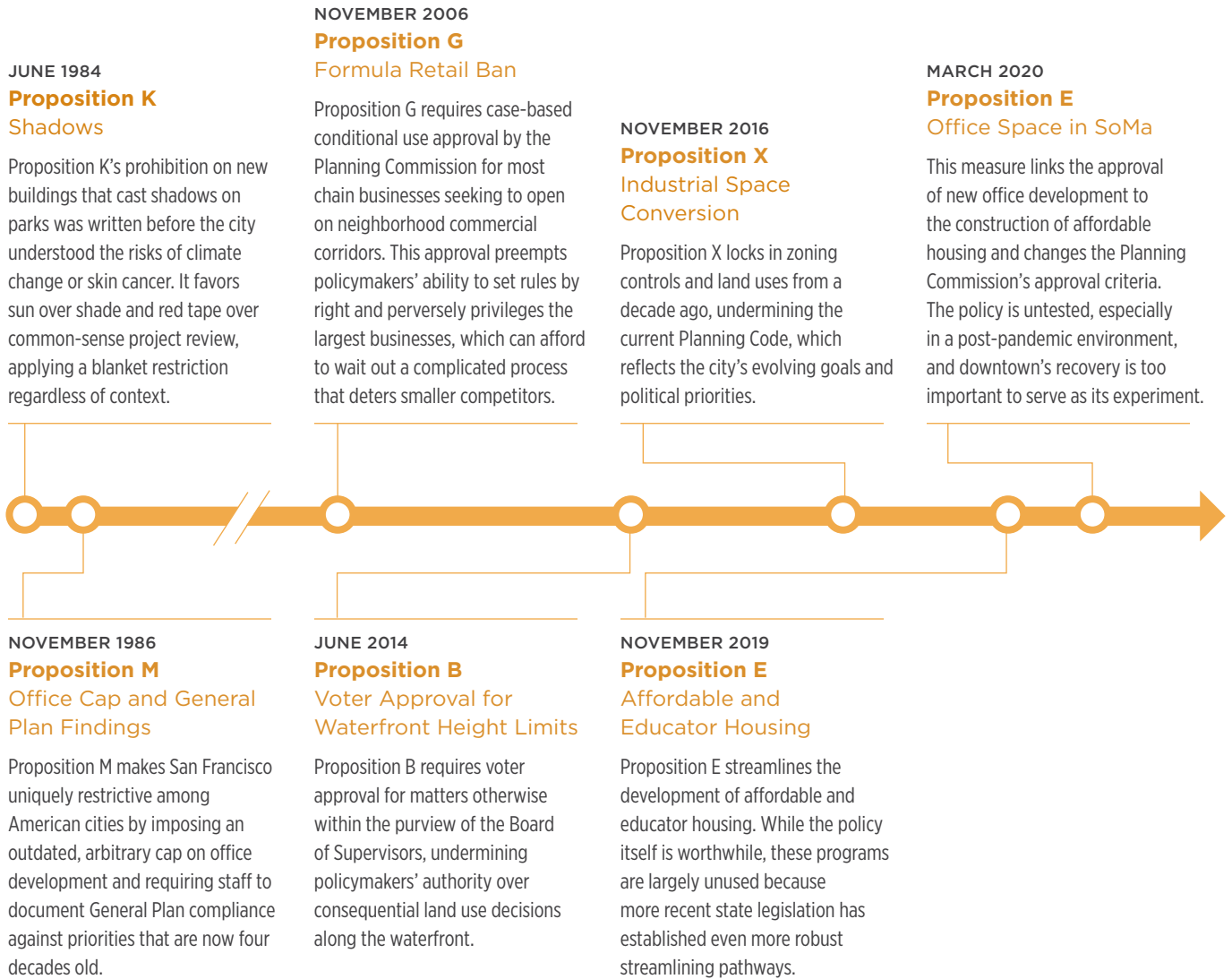
¹³ The San Francisco Charter grants exceptions for permits granted by the Port and the Recreation & Parks department. See San Francisco Charter Sec. 4.106.

EXHIBIT 3

Key Voter-Adopted Land Use Provisions Have Deleterious Effects Today

Seven propositions have shaped permitting in ways that delay or halt beneficial projects.

Source: San Francisco Planning Department analysis.



City decisions subject to appeal include, for example, business licenses, entertainment permits, and street-use permits, as well as building and planning permits.

In addition to appeals heard by the Board of Appeals, the charter provides opportunities to appeal most Planning Department permits. The Planning Commission is authorized by the charter to grant permits and may delegate approval authority to the Planning Department. Most Planning Department permits can be appealed to the Planning Commission through an official process called Discretionary Review, and certain Planning Commission decisions can in turn be appealed to the Board of Supervisors. The result is a maze of charter-protected appeals rights that apply to nearly

all permits granted by the Planning Department and other city departments, allowing multiple appeals of a single decision to three bodies: the Planning Commission, the Board of Appeals, and the Board of Supervisors (Exhibit 4).

Residents should be able to appeal certain major, irreversible government decisions that affect their lives. But San Francisco’s charter goes much further, granting appeal rights that apply uniformly to nearly all city permits and licenses regardless of their significance.

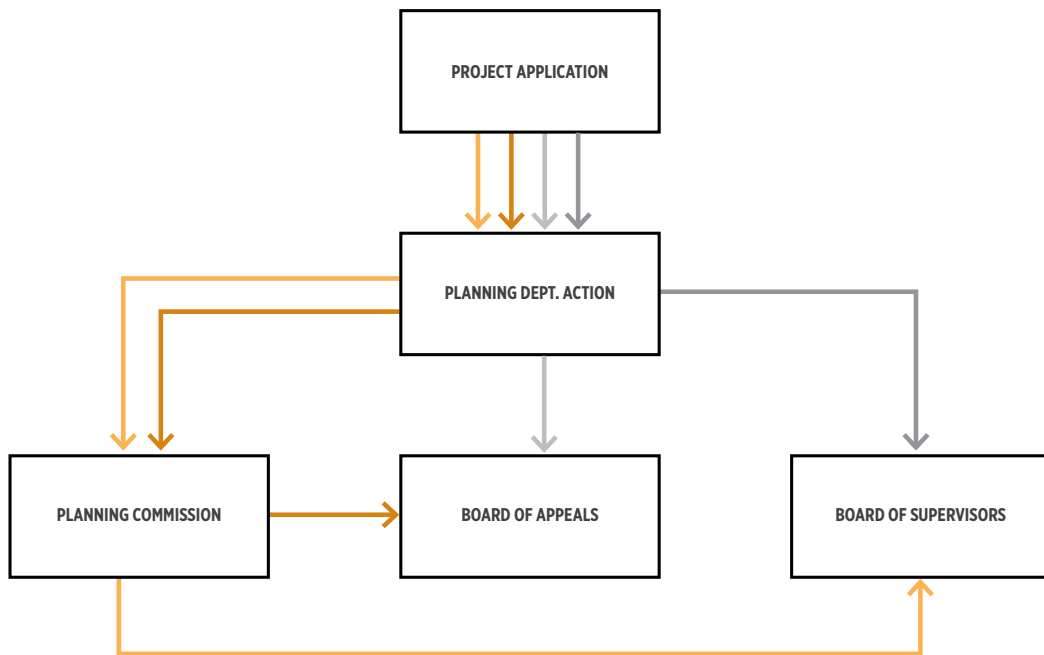
A Culture of Fear

EXHIBIT 4 San Francisco Allows Redundant Project- Appeals Pathways

San Francisco’s charter allows nearly all permits and licenses granted by the city to be appealed to the Board of Appeals, with few exceptions. Most permits from the Planning Department can also be appealed through a process called Discretionary Review, which allows appeals to

the Planning Commission. Additionally, certain Planning Commission decisions can be further appealed to the Board of Supervisors or Board of Appeals, creating multiple layers of oversight.

Source: SPUR.



In granting residents the standing to challenge nearly all permits and licenses issued by the city, the system does not serve as a targeted safeguard for major land use or environmental decisions (Appendix B). It functions as a universal mechanism that applies the same level of procedural scrutiny to every permit the city issues, regardless of the project’s scale, complexity, or potential impact.

The system weakens the city’s own rules by making approved decisions easy to reopen. Additionally, it discourages early engagement among applicants, communities, and staff, when

feedback is most likely to improve outcomes. Today's system rewards objections raised after approvals are granted, at the stage when delays are most expensive and design changes are most disruptive.

The result? A culture of fear and procedural overcaution that undermines the balance of individual rights and community benefits. Over time, this culture entrenches risk aversion and diverts limited staff and commission resources away from projects of real public importance.

Threat of an Appeal Can Discourage New Projects and Add to Costs but Rarely Changes Outcomes

SPUR analyzed appeals filed on projects with the Planning Department in 2023. Our findings highlight the mismatch of risks, costs, and benefits that result from overly broad appeals processes.

- Appeals took an average of four months to resolve. Each appealed project had an average of 1.5 appeals. Projects that are appealed face delays that can add to their costs.
- The median value of appealed projects was \$355,000. Of these appealed projects, 38% were valued at under \$200,000, and 25% were valued at more than \$1 million. Only 2% were valued at more than \$10 million. The smallest projects faced the most appeals.
- Only 17% of appeals were fully or partially granted; the remaining 83% were rejected or withdrawn. Thus, appeals changed a project outcome in only 0.03% of the 16,745 projects subject to potential appeal.
- Only 2% (37) of these projects were appealed. Nevertheless, the threat of appeals is sufficient to discourage developers from pursuing projects with significant community benefits.
- With construction cost inflation nearing 5% annually, a two-year delay of a \$10 million project would increase its cost by nearly \$1 million, jeopardizing its feasibility.^a Facing this potential risk, sponsors of projects still on the drawing board may opt never to break ground.

When the threat of appeals delays or discourages project development, the result is fewer small businesses, unimproved transit infrastructure, and a worsening housing crisis. These costs are borne broadly by residents who may never know what was not built.

^a The City and County of San Francisco capital plan inflation forecast is 4.5% for the coming years. For a \$10 million capital project, this inflation would mean that a two-year delay adds \$920,000 in project costs. See OneSF, "2026 Annual Infrastructure Construction Cost Inflation Estimate," PowerPoint Presentation, December 1, 2025, <https://onesanfrancisco.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/Agenda%20Item%206%20-%202026%20AICCI%20Presentation%20Dec%202025.pdf>.

Recommendations

Taken together, our recommendations represent an opportunity to modernize the city's charter in ways that would make PermitSF and similar initiatives more effective and less dependent on the energy of a single administration. The proposed changes would support such initiatives by creating a governance structure designed for continuous improvement.

Unlock departmental flexibility to enable better ways of organizing permitting.

The charter locks 88% of the city's departments in place, making reorganization impossible without a ballot measure. This rigidity prevents the city from consolidating overlapping permitting functions or testing new service delivery models. Shifting certain departments and commissions to the Administrative Code would enable different ways of organizing permitting operations.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Shift the Building Inspection and Arts departments from the charter to the Administrative Code.

Proposed amendment: Move certain functions from the charter to the Administrative Code.

Elected leaders should be able to propose better models for delivering permitting services. Moving certain departments from the city's charter to the Administrative Code would give policymakers the authority to organize staff and resources based on current needs and best operational practices. Functions that require independence from the Board of Supervisors to fulfill their missions, such as reviewing ethics complaints and performing financial audits, should remain in the charter. Those that do not should be governed by the Administrative Code, where the mayor and board can adjust them through the normal legislative process. According to this rationale, two departments involved in permitting should move to the Administrative Code:

- **Building Inspection:** Placing the Department of Building Inspection in the charter does not structurally safeguard the quality of its work; it merely makes reform more difficult (see Appendix C).
- **Arts:** As recommended in *Charter for Change*, shifting the arts department (which in San Francisco is named the Arts Commission) to the code would allow a future Board of

Supervisors to determine its appropriate role in reviewing permits at the nexus of public art and public space.

Shifting a department to the Administrative Code does not automatically change the department's scope, importance, or budget. What it does is give a future Board of Supervisors the ability to propose and pass amendments legislatively, unburdened by the delays and rigidity of a mandatory voter approval requirement. In addition, it increases the likelihood that incremental improvements will be pursued, thus expanding accountability for elected officials to seek solutions when a department's structure no longer serves the public. It also ensures that daily operations are not immediately disrupted upon the passage of a charter amendment.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Shift restrictive department roles and procedures from the charter to the Administrative Code.

Proposed amendment: Amend charter sections 4.105 and 4.135.

The city's charter currently specifies detailed job titles, processes, and organizational structures that belong in ordinances, not in a constitution-level document. Moving the planning director's appointment process, the commission secretary's reporting structure, the zoning administrator's role, the city's historic preservation function, and other operational procedures out of the charter would enable elected leaders to incrementally modernize the city's development review functions without requiring a ballot measure every time a change is needed.

Consider historic preservation. San Francisco's preservation function is currently managed by experts on staff inside the Planning Department — a department with its own robust commission that SPUR recommends retaining in the charter. However, the preservation team inside Planning also reports to an *additional* commission that was created by a ballot measure in 2008. The Historic Preservation Commission oversees staff's work in policy, plan, and project review — pursuant to strict, charter-mandated procedures — but does not have a mandate to balance its preservation purview with other important city goals, such as housing affordability, environmental sustainability, and hazard resilience.

Policymakers should have the option to legislate improvements to the city's preservation function, ideally working to strengthen a multi-purpose venue that can comprehensively deliberate competing city values and priorities. SPUR recommends considering two possible approaches:

- 1. Add the Historic Preservation Commission and its procedures to the Administrative Code and remove them from the charter.** This move is consistent with SPUR's position opposing the 2008 charter amendment that established the Historic Preservation Commission.¹⁴

¹⁴ SPUR, "Proposition J - Historic Preservation Commission," *SPUR Voter Guide*, November 1, 2008, <https://www.spur.org/publications/voter-guide/2008-11-01/proposition-j-historic-preservation-commission>.

- 2. Maintain the Historic Preservation Commission in the charter, but move all procedural details and appointment qualifications to the Administrative Code.** This move is consistent with the recommendations of the Commission Streamlining Task Force.¹⁵

RECOMMENDATION 3

Expand the affirmative authority of the mayor and Board of Supervisors to establish and structure departments.

Proposed amendment: Amend Charter Section 4.132.

The charter should expand the authority of the mayor and Board of Supervisors to establish and define city departments responsible for planning, permitting, and other development services. By doing so, the charter would make clear that departments' organizational structures are ultimately the responsibility of policymakers.

The proposed amendment would

- Provide flexibility regarding hierarchies, responsibilities, relationships, and naming of commissions and departments.
- Establish the commissions' appropriate operations and constitution.
- Allow commissioners to serve on multiple commissions and allow commissions to convene jointly.
- Reconcile the budgetary authority of the Building Inspection director with that of the Planning director.

In *Charter for Change*, SPUR recommended that the mayor be granted authority to modify relationships between executive branch departments. Two additional models for proposed charter language are in the charters of San Diego and Los Angeles, both of which grant legislators broad authority to organize development services departments through legislation (Appendix D).

With expanded authority, the mayor and Board of Supervisors can explore restructuring of permitting-related departments. Some ideas worth debating are merging plan-check units within the Planning and Building Inspection departments, shifting project reviews currently heard by the Historic Preservation and Arts commissions to the Planning Commission, implementing truly concurrent permitting in post-entitlement review across all approving departments, and pooling software and resources across departments with integrated functions.

¹⁵ City and County of San Francisco Commission Streamlining Task Force, *Commission Streamlining Task Force Final Report: Recommendations on Appointive Boards and Commissions to Improve the Efficiency and Effectiveness of San Francisco Government*, January 28, 2026, https://media.api.sf.gov/documents/Commission_Streamlining_Task_Force_Final_Report.pdf.

End ballot box planning by restoring the legislative process.

Voter-adopted ordinances that addressed concerns of past decades cannot be amended through legislation, even when they are outdated or counterproductive. Giving the Board of Supervisors the ability to amend these ordinances would allow current codes to reflect current needs.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Resolve land use and permitting issues through leadership and the legislative process rather than at the ballot.

Proposed amendment: Update Charter Section 14.101.

Each election, San Franciscans vote on a longer list of ballot measures than is typical elsewhere in California. This trend is a result of charter shortcuts that are not available in other jurisdictions, such as lower signature and legislative thresholds to place a measure on the ballot. These shortcuts undermine San Francisco's standard legislative process, in which laws are adopted by a board majority, subject to a mayoral veto — a practice that promotes deliberative decision-making and rewards consensus. The standard process also includes public review, analysis of policy outcomes, and discussion of economic and financial impacts, which are missing from the shorter ballot process.

Too often, the result of these unique charter allowances is not a problem-solving process designed to negotiate a solution to an identified problem but instead a political process designed to win a campaign. The results include instances of ballot box planning (as discussed on page 18), often with unintended consequences.

As we recommended in *Designed to Serve* and *Charter for Change*, the charter should be amended to remove the ability of the mayor or a minority of the Board to place a measure directly before the voters, and the signature threshold required to qualify a ballot measure should be amended to bring those requirements in line with other local governments in California.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Recognize that some voter-adopted land use ordinances are outdated and create a clear pathway for policymakers to reconsider them.

Proposed amendment: Add a new charter section.

Voter-adopted land use ordinances should be revisited to allow city legislators to adjust laws as needed, an especially important consideration during times of significant economic, social, and political change. Reforming these ordinances would yield three benefits:

- **Save time and money.** Under current rules, even a minor technical correction to a voter-adopted ordinance requires a ballot measure. Preparing a ballot measure involves months of drafting, legal review, legislative hearings, and public outreach before voters ever see the

question. Ballot measures are also expensive. As *Charter for Change* documented, the cost of a single local campaign can run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars, and the city incurs substantial indirect costs in staff time, legal analysis, and election administration.¹⁶ These resources could be better directed to improving the services that the codes are meant to support.

- **Provide flexibility.** This reform would restore the city's ability to adapt its rules to changing circumstances. Voter ordinances affecting land use span nearly four decades, starting in the 1980s. San Francisco's economy, demographics, housing market, and environmental challenges have changed dramatically over that period. A governance system that cannot update policy without a ballot campaign for each change is ill-equipped to keep pace with the city's evolving needs.
- **Improve services.** Many voter-adopted ordinances create procedural requirements that departments must administer regardless of whether they continue to serve their original purpose. One example is Proposition K, passed in 1984, which requires an analysis of the shadows that proposed projects would cast. The ordinance predates contemporary understanding of climate change and the public health benefits of shade. Departments expend significant staff time and resources administering compliance with these outdated mandates. That time could be spent on the work that matters most to residents.

The city could contemplate a range of options for reconsidering existing voter-adopted land use ordinances enacted in the Planning Code, the Building Code, and any other section of San Francisco's municipal code (Exhibit 5). The options would not apply to policy set through voter-adopted charter amendments, which continue to require voter approval under California state law. From the greatest level of future flexibility to the least, these options include the following:

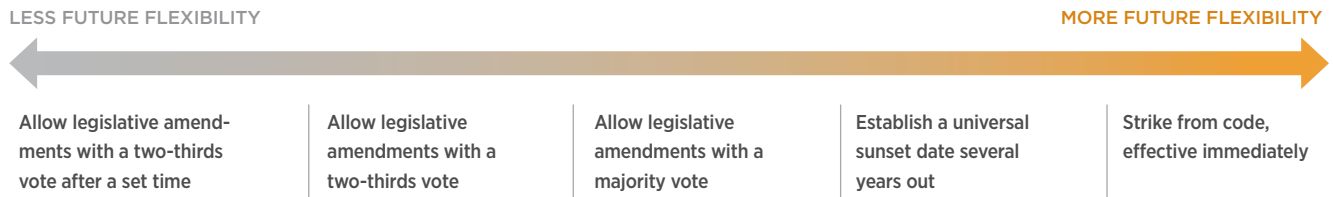
1. **Strike ordinances from the code, effective immediately.** Striking all existing voter-adopted land use ordinances would create a clean slate for policymakers to work from.
2. **Create a universal sunset for all existing ordinances.** Enacting a sunset date for all existing voter-adopted land use ordinances would give time for the parties most interested in a given policy to prepare alternatives before changes are made, while still having a universal reset effect.
3. **Allow amendments with a majority vote at the Board of Supervisors.** Granting policymakers amendment authority would restore the legislative process as the primary venue for policy refinement over time. Enabling the board to update voter-adopted land use ordinances through the legislative process would allow departments to focus their resources on the work that matters most to current and future residents, rather than on compliance with outdated mandates.

¹⁶ B. Rosenfield, M. Skelly, and N. Neditch, *Charter for Change: Empowering San Francisco's Government Through Charter Reform*, SPUR, November 2025. <https://www.spur.org/publications/policy-brief/2025-11-10/charter-change>.

- 4. **Allow amendments with a two-thirds vote at the Board of Supervisors.** Establishing a two-thirds threshold (8 of 11 supervisors) would ensure that voter-adopted laws receive heightened protection relative to ordinary legislation, while allowing the city’s elected representatives to act when there’s a broad consensus that a change is needed. This threshold is consistent with the charter’s existing supermajority requirements for other significant legislative actions.
- 5. **Allow amendments with a two-thirds vote at the Board of Supervisors after a certain number of years since the measure was approved.** Granting amendment authority — but only after a certain number of years has passed — provides a built-in structure for successful voter-adopted ordinances to demonstrate their impact before policymakers may revisit them. The charter contains other provisions that recognize that the will of voters must be renewed over time. Examples include four-year terms for elected officials, two-term limits for elected officials, and 10- to 25-year expiration dates for different budget set-asides.

EXHIBIT 5
Options to Modify Ballot-Box Planning Decisions

Source: SPUR.



Create tailored appeals that balance individual rights and community benefits.

The charter grants a near-universal right of appeal for all permits and licenses the city issues. In 2023, appeals changed the outcome on just 0.03% of projects, according to a SPUR analysis of San Francisco Planning Department data. Yet the threat of delay was sufficient to discourage projects with significant community benefits. Changing charter-required appeals processes to create tailored appeals rights would better balance individual and community benefits.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Move appeals procedures out of the charter and into the Administrative Code.

Proposed amendment: Move language from the charter to the Administrative Code.

The only way policymakers can fine-tune project appeal procedures is to move them to the Administrative Code. Doing so would enable the city to retain meaningful review of projects that have broad potential community impacts while avoiding unnecessary delays for those that do not.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Empower the mayor and Board of Supervisors to legislate tailored, tiered appeal rights, rooted in project type and risk, by removing from the charter the broad default right of appeal for all city-issued permits and licenses.

Proposed amendment: Move language from the charter to the Administrative Code.

The broad, uniform appeals framework currently embedded in the charter fosters a culture of fear that discourages the development of projects with wide-ranging social benefits. It applies the same level of procedural scrutiny to every permit the city grants, regardless of the project's scale, complexity, or potential impact, and it rewards objections raised after approvals are granted — when delays are most expensive and design changes are most disruptive. The goal of the appeals process should be to ensure it's fair, proportionate, and calibrated to risk.

What's Next

San Francisco's permitting system is not broken because of administrators' incompetence or bad intentions. It is broken because the rules governing it are locked in the charter, frozen in voter-adopted ordinances, and layered with appeals processes that apply uniformly regardless of scale or risk. The recommendations in this report would give the city's elected leaders the authority to reorganize permitting departments, update outdated policies, and calibrate appeals to project impact through the normal legislative process. If these recommendations are proposed at the ballot and adopted by voters, the next phase of reform may proceed.

Charter reform is a necessary first step, not a final destination. Charter amendments alone do not reorganize departments, repeal outdated ordinances, or redesign appeals procedures: they create the legal authority for the mayor and Board of Supervisors to attempt to accomplish these tasks. The substantive work of modernizing the city's permitting system — amending the Planning Code and Administrative Code to implement new organizational structures, updated policies, and tailored appeals processes — will require significant action by the Board of Supervisors after passage of any charter measure reflecting this report's recommendations.

The timeline for this work is already taking shape. As the mayor and Board of Supervisors finalize the city's budget, they have an opportunity to align resources with the administration's permitting reform agenda and to ensure that PermitSF has the staffing and technology it needs to continue its work. Concurrently, the board will consider charter amendments for the November 2026 ballot, including those recommended by the mayor, the Commission Streamlining Task Force, and SPUR.

If voters approve SPUR's proposed reforms, the Board of Supervisors should move promptly to exercise its new authority. That means drafting and adopting legislation to define department structures in the Administrative Code, to amend or repeal voter-adopted ordinances that no longer serve the city's goals, and to establish a tiered appeals framework calibrated to project type and risk. Each of these tasks will require public hearings, policy analysis, and engagement with affected communities and other stakeholders — exactly the kind of deliberative legislative process that the current system makes impossible for charter-protected provisions.

San Francisco has an opportunity to build a permitting system that is fast, fair, and responsive to its own needs and the needs of residents and businesses. The recommendations in this report are designed to make such a system possible by restoring the city's capacity to find better answers.

Appendix A

Permitting for Entitlements and Building Codes in Seven Cities

San Francisco’s structure of separating its planning and building departments is not unique, but it is also not universal. SPUR’s review of seven comparable U.S. cities shows that departmental structures for issuing entitlements and construction permits can take multiple organizational forms. Some consolidate planning and building functions under a single agency and management structure, while others maintain separate departments. By granting policymakers authority to restructure departments, San Francisco will be able to assess which best practices it can import from cities that demonstrate efficient, fair, and transparent permitting operations.

Seattle, Washington	Seattle consolidates permitting, building inspections, land use and zoning administration, code compliance, and tenant protections under one department: the Seattle Department of Construction & Inspections. Long-range planning and code amendments are handled separately by the Office of Planning and Community Development.
Chicago, Illinois	Chicago splits development review between the Department of Buildings, which grants building permits, conducts inspections, and enforces the building code, and the Department of Planning and Development, which administers the zoning ordinance. DPD’s Bureau of Zoning reviews building permit applications for zoning compliance and oversees rezonings, planned developments, and other discretionary land use actions.
San Diego, California	San Diego’s Development Services Department serves as the primary permitting agency, handling building permits, zoning administration, land use entitlements, inspections, and code enforcement. The City Planning Department operates separately and focuses on long-range planning, community plan updates, the General Plan, environmental review, and housing policy.
Los Angeles, California	The Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety handles building permits, structural and safety plan checks, inspections, and code enforcement, while City Planning administers the zoning code, processes discretionary entitlements, and conducts environmental review. City Planning’s Development Services Bureau conducts zoning plan checks for building permits, consolidating all zoning functions under Planning, while building code review remains with the Department of Building and Safety.
Austin, Texas	Austin’s Development Services Department handles building plan review, permitting, inspections, code compliance, and the processing of individual zoning cases and land use applications. Austin Planning is a separate department responsible for long-range planning, the comprehensive plan, land development code policy, historic preservation, and community planning.
Portland, Oregon	Portland Permitting & Development manages building permits, land use reviews, inspections, code enforcement, and public works permits, while the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability handles long-range planning, zoning code development, and climate action. Both report through the Community & Economic Development service area to a deputy city administrator under the city administrator.
New Orleans, Louisiana	The New Orleans Department of Safety & Permits handles building permits, inspections, and zoning administration. The City Planning Commission, a nine-member citizen board with its own professional staff, operates independently and provides recommendations on land use, zoning changes, and the city’s master plan.

Appendix B

Two Cities Offer Potential Models for Charter Language Establishing New Departments

San Francisco's charter outlines the structural and operational framework that governs city planning functions. By examining similar provisions in the charters of San Diego and Los Angeles, San Francisco can identify language to enhance flexibility and responsiveness in its planning processes.

San Diego City Charter, Article V, Section 26:

The Council shall by ordinance, by majority vote, adopt an administrative code providing for the detailed powers and duties of the administrative offices and departments of the City Government, based upon the provisions of this Charter. Thereafter, except as established by the provisions of this Charter, the Council may change, abolish, combine, and rearrange the departments, divisions and boards of the City Government provided for in said administrative code, but such ordinance creating, combining, abolishing or decreasing the powers of any department, division or board shall require a vote of two-thirds of the members elected to the Council. The Council may by ordinance, if authorized so to do by the general law of the State, provide that any function of the City may be performed by the County or that any function of the County may be performed by the City, provided the respective legislative bodies authorize and approve such transfer and assumption of function. There may also be established a combined City and County district for the performance of any function.

Los Angeles City Charter, Sec. 514:

Charter-created powers and duties. The Mayor may propose the transfer of any of the powers, duties and functions of the departments, offices and boards of the City set forth in the Charter to another department, office or board created by the Charter or by ordinance. The transfer shall be effective if approved by ordinance adopted by a two-thirds vote of the Council, or if the Council fails to disapprove the matter within 45 days after submittal by the Mayor of all documents necessary to accomplish the transfer, including the proposed ordinance transferring powers, duties or functions, and any related ordinances or resolutions concerning personnel or funds affected by the transfer. The Council, on its own initiative, may, by ordinance, adopted by a two-thirds vote of the Council, subject to the veto of the Mayor or by a three-fourths vote of the Council over the veto of the Mayor, make any such transfer.

Ordinance-created powers and duties. Powers, duties and functions established by ordinance may be transferred or eliminated by an ordinance proposed by the Mayor or Council. If the Mayor proposes a transfer or elimination, the action shall be effective if approved by ordinance adopted by a majority vote of the Council, or if the Council fails to disapprove the matter within 45 days after submittal by the Mayor of all documents necessary to accomplish the transfer or elimination, including the proposed ordinance transferring powers, duties or functions, and any related ordinances or resolutions concerning personnel or funds affected by the transfer or elimination.

Appendix C

Positive Impacts of a 2022 Charter Amendment on the Department of Building Inspection

In June 2022, San Francisco voters approved Proposition B, a charter amendment that made structural changes to the Building Inspection Commission (BIC) and the Department of Building Inspection (DBI). This measure was placed on the ballot by a unanimous vote of the Board of Supervisors. It passed with 62% of the popular vote.

Prop. B made several structural changes to both the BIC and DBI to increase oversight and flexibility:

- **BIC composition and appointments.** Previously, appointments to the commission were split between the mayor (four seats) and the president of the Board of Supervisors (three seats), with all seats required to include specific groups, such as a structural engineer, a residential builder, or a residential tenant. Prop. B changed these appointments so that only three of the seven commissioners must represent specific groups, and all appointments now require confirmation by the Board of Supervisors.
- **DBI director hiring process.** Previously, the BIC hired and fired the department's director. Under Prop. B, the mayor appoints the director but must choose from at least three qualified candidates nominated by the commission.
- **Civil service changes.** The superintendent and assistant superintendent, who were previously exempt from civil service provisions, were returned to civil service status.

Prop. B simplified and standardized parts of the charter related to DBI, removing many of its exceptional charter authorities and allowing the department's powers to be conferred by code.

Appendix D

Blanket Application of the California Environmental Quality Act Adds to Threat of Project Appeals

Layered atop San Francisco's permissive appeals process is the indiscriminate application of state environmental review procedures on nearly all city-issued permits and licenses. A longstanding state law, the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), requires extensive analysis and provides opportunities for appeal whenever public officials rely on subjective judgment in decision-making, regardless of project scale or impact.

San Francisco is the only California city whose charter declares all permitting decisions appealable. By extension, every city-issued permit is subject to CEQA because of the subjective nature of appeals hearings.

In recent years, the State Legislature has proposed laws that designate certain projects as ministerial and therefore unappealable under CEQA. However, the only projects that benefit from these policies are those approved by majority vote in the State Senate and State Assembly and signed by the California governor. Unsurprisingly, this level of agreement in Sacramento applies only in very specific instances and does not cleanly track with the will of San Franciscans or the scope of projects proposed in California's densest, most urban city.

For example, state law grants ministerial planning approvals for multifamily housing developments on certain urban infill sites that include on-site affordable housing and that pay union-level wages to construction workers (examples include Senate Bill 423 and Assembly Bill 2011). However, this narrow carveout does not apply to market-rate housing projects that meet San Francisco's affordable housing mandates by dedicating nearby land to affordable housing or to commercial projects (office, hotel, retail). San Francisco is not authorized to expand this policy locally without going to the voters.

Together, these barriers mean that even straightforward projects must navigate a system designed for maximum caution rather than calibrated risk, where delay is the default outcome rather than the exception. Meanwhile, the city must administer structurally separate processes for subtly different projects, depending on whether the California State Legislature (not the mayor or the Board of Supervisors) deems it worthy of streamlining.



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