

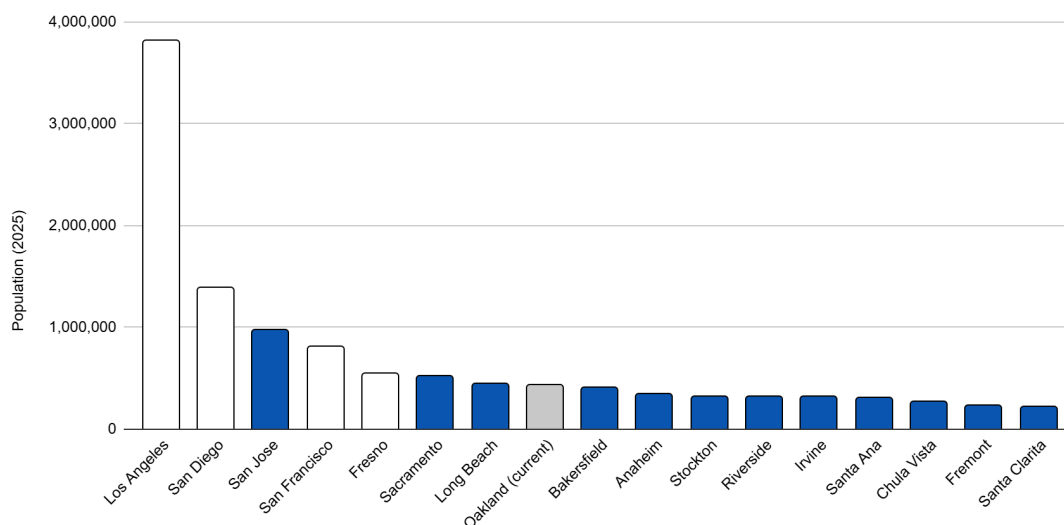
In [our previous InBrief](#), we described Oakland's Federal-style system, with three branches of government that separate the Mayor from the City Council, resulting in a less responsive and less efficient government. Most California cities don't have branches of government but, instead, just government — singular, unitary government.

## Most California Cities Use the Council-Manager System

The unitary council-manager form of government emerged in the early 20th century during the Progressive Era, when reformers sought to eliminate corruption and improve the efficiency of local government services. Designed to resemble a corporate structure (see *organizational chart on page 4*), this system vests all executive, legislative, and judicial authority in the city council—unlike Oakland's current system, which divides power among three separately elected offices. **Under this model, the council sets policy and appoints and supervises a professionally trained city manager who oversees the city's daily operations.** The mayor is typically selected from among the council members, serves as council president, chairs meetings, and holds one vote equal to other members. **The city attorney is also [appointed by the city council](#)** rather than elected, and represents a single client: the municipal government.

This form of government gained popularity among California cities in the early 20th century. Beginning with Inglewood and Glendale in 1914, the unitary council-manager model rapidly spread as cities like San Jose, Long Beach, Sacramento, and Oakland moved away from commissioner or Federal-style systems in favor of a more efficient approach. Today, [97% of all California cities use the council-manager form](#), including twelve of the state's seventeen largest cities.

**California Cities by Population (Mayor-Council in White; Council-Manager in Blue)**



## Case Studies

With long histories, rich demographics, complex challenges, ports and airports, and population numbers close in size to Oakland's, it's fair to say that **San Jose, Long Beach, and Sacramento** are California's relevant comparator cities for Oakland. But, unlike Oakland, those cities all have unitary council-manager rather than Federal-style mayor-council government systems. Why is that? Here are the case studies:

**San Jose** adopted the unitary council-manager form of government in 1916 but has, over the decades, engaged in periodic [debates](#) about whether the city should instead shift to a mayor-council system. Rather than abandoning the council-manager model, however, voters in the 1980s amended the city's charter to grant the mayor [additional powers](#) *within* the council-manager system while keeping day-to-day operations under the appointed city manager. The question last surfaced in 2020 when a "strong mayor" ballot initiative narrowly won council approval but was [withdrawn](#) amid public pushback. As California's third-largest city, San Jose thus continues to maintain its professional council-manager government.

**Long Beach** abandoned its commission system in 1921 following public frustration with corruption and inefficiency. The new charter vested legislative authority in the elected City Council (and a citywide mayor) and appointed a professional city manager as the chief executive. Efforts to adopt a mayor-council ("strong mayor") system have surfaced from time to time (a [2010 charter committee](#) even considered placing a proposal on the ballot) but none have been successful. While there have been recent [local conversations](#) about revisiting the idea, the consensus has been to retain the current structure because it promotes collaboration and accountable governance.

**Sacramento**, after experimenting with commission government, also switched to the council-manager form in 1921. In the century since, the city has periodically revisited the idea of shifting to a mayor-council system, but such proposals have [always been turned down](#). Most recently, Mayors Kevin Johnson and Darrell Steinberg pushed charter amendments (Measure L in 2014 and Measure A in 2020) that would create a mayor-council system, but both were defeated by roughly [57%-43%](#) margins. Sacramento has thus maintained its unitary council-manager form of government because residents feel the existing model's collaborative governance and professional management have served the city well, leaving no compelling reason to overhaul a system that works.

## Addressing the “Invisible Mayor” Critique

One oft-heard criticism of council-manager cities is that they lack a visible, elected executive leader. In challenging times, voters often look to their mayor for leadership but, in most council-manager cities, the mayor has just one vote on the council and little visibility and authority. To address this, since the 1990s, several California cities have moved to strengthen the mayor’s role by instituting direct mayoral elections and expanding the mayor’s powers while still retaining a professional city manager. **Long Beach** was an early example. In 1986, voters [approved](#) a charter change creating a full-time, citywide elected mayor with veto power. The city’s charter was [further amended](#) in 2007 to give the mayor a *line-item* veto over the city budget and greater control over appointments. Likewise, in 1994, **Riverside’s** voters approved a charter amendment that granted the mayor veto power over city council actions. Other cities including **San Jose**, **Sacramento** and **Anaheim** have elevated the mayor’s profile and accountability through direct elections and by granting them new powers over budgets, appointments, and agenda-setting. The result: a more visible mayor who leads with stronger powers (e.g. wielding veto or budgetary influence), balanced by a professional manager who reports to the entire city council and handles administrative operations.

## Where Are We on the Question of a Stronger Mayor?

Since beginning this work in December 2024, we have conducted several focus groups, attended public and private meetings, and spoken with more than 200 Oaklanders about how to improve the City’s charter. Many people we’ve listened to think Oakland would benefit from a stronger mayor. We’ve heard that message and, after studying best practices from other higher-performing cities, are developing a proposal that combines the **efficiency and professionalism of the council-manager system** with a **stronger mayoral role** in policy-making, budget oversight, and public leadership. We’ll introduce that model in our next [InBrief](#).

## Last Time InBrief

**Mid-May:** [Oakland’s Federal-Style Charter Doesn’t Work. Here’s Why.](#)

## Coming up InBrief

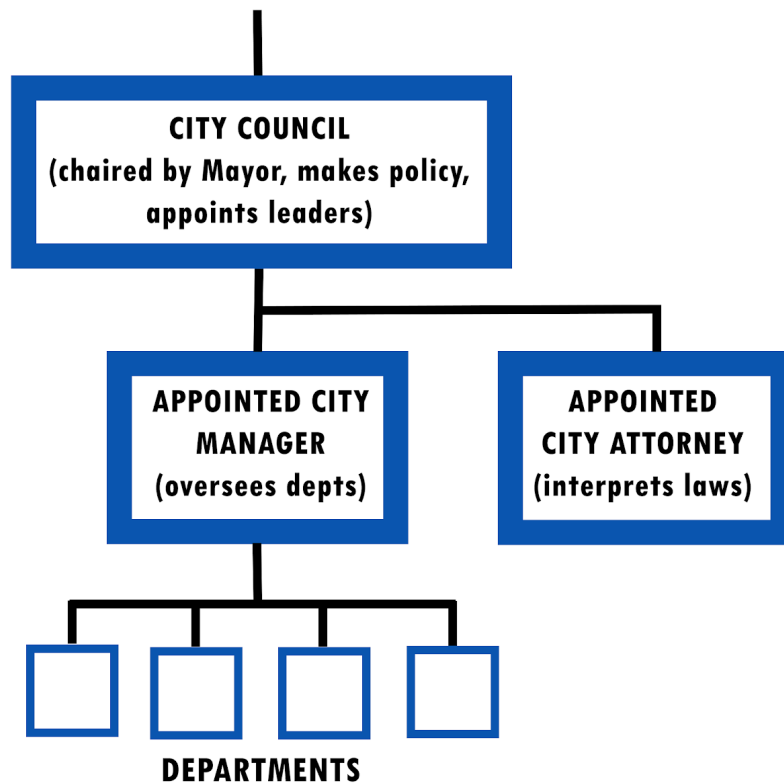
**Early June:** *Our Proposal for a More Transparent, Responsive, Effective, and Efficient Oakland*

**Thanks for reading—and please share this message widely!**

Add your name to our contact list [here](#) and we’ll keep you in the loop.

# UNITARY MODEL

In most California cities (97%), voters elect councilmembers to serve as a unitary board of directors that oversees all aspects of the municipal corporation.



The **Unitary, or Council-Manager, Model** aims to reduce corruption and increase efficiency in municipal administration by hiring a professional manager to run operations similar to a CEO. The City Council, chaired by the Mayor, holds the manager accountable for performance and can hire or fire them based on results. It is a **service delivery** system designed to produce transparent, responsible, effective, and efficient government, but (often) lacks a visible elected head-of-government.