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## A Plan for Oakland: A Unitary Strong-Mayor System

The case we've made is this: Oakland's [Federal-style government](#) has failed the City and its 440,000 residents. It strips the mayor of decision-making authority by denying her a policy-making vote. It frustrates council members, whose constituents expect them to oversee the city when, in reality, they have little control over day-to-day operations. It leaves the city attorney conflicted between two clients with different and sometimes opposing interests. And it has resulted in high turnover of the professional city administrator (*six in the last five years!*) which, in turn, negatively impacts the city's budget, workplace culture, and operations.

Most California cities use [council-manager systems](#), which are demonstrably more [transparent](#), [responsive](#), [effective](#), [efficient](#), [fiscally responsible](#), and [less corrupt](#). However, these systems are often criticized for having an "invisible" mayor who is not selected by voters. Also: people in larger American cities typically expect an elected mayor to run city hall – not an appointed city manager.

So, what's the path forward? Are California cities really limited to just two options – "council-manager" or "strong mayor"? **No.** Is there a hybrid model that blends good features of both systems while avoiding their drawbacks? **Yes. Emphatically, yes!**

## An Emerging Trend

Over the last 50 years, several California cities – notably **San Jose, Long Beach, and Riverside** – have recalibrated the balance of power in their council-manager governments by empowering mayors in a system we're calling a **Unitary Strong-Mayor** plan (*see organizational chart on page 4*). Recent charter amendments and voter-approved initiatives in these three cities reflect a common theme: a search for the "*Goldilocks*" solution that gives the mayor sufficient visibility and authority to provide effective citywide leadership while still retaining the professional expertise, long-term stability, and reduced corruption that council-manager systems provide. Consider:

- **San Jose** maintains a council-manager system but, unlike the rotating mayor approach used by many smaller cities, switched to a [direct popular election of the mayor](#) in 1967. The city has also [timed the mayoral election](#) to coincide with higher-turnout presidential elections. **Berkeley** and **Richmond** use a similar approach, with a citywide elected mayor serving as Council President in an otherwise council-manager form of government.
- In **Long Beach**, voters approved charter changes ([1986](#), [2007](#)) creating a citywide elected mayor *and* gave the mayor veto power over ordinances and resolutions – even line-item veto power over the city's budget. The city council can override the mayor's vetoes, but it

requires six of nine votes. In an interesting twist, Long Beach's mayor does not vote on ordinary council items, but presides over meetings and can cast a tie-breaking vote immediately from the dais.

- **Riverside** has also retained its council-manager system and granted veto power to the mayor, similar to the Long Beach model.

## Should Oakland Adopt a Unitary Strong-Mayor Structure?

Let's not forget what's driving the community's revived interest in reforming Oakland's city charter. [75% of Oaklanders think the city is on the wrong track](#). The city has seen profound turnover in its executive ranks, leading to organizational instability and a fiscal crisis. Oakland is staring down annual deficits of up to \$130M that have, over the past year, [raised questions](#) about insolvency risk. The Oakland Police Department has been under the [expensive](#) thumb of Federal oversight for twenty-two years with no end in sight. The recall of Mayor Sheng Thao represented a peak moment of dissatisfaction with Oakland's government; no other mayor in Oakland's 173-year history has ever been recalled from office.

**It's time to try something different.** A Unitary Strong-Mayor structure offers the efficiency, effectiveness, and professionalism of a council-manager system while also empowering the mayor with meaningful authority. A Unitary Strong-Mayor system would allow Oakland's mayor to do what voters expect of her: shape the agenda, reliably deliver core services, and deliver a balanced and responsible budget – in other words, *to lead the city*. Oaklanders, meanwhile, would benefit from the expertise of a dependable and professional city manager who is selected and supervised by the entire city council, thus working for all of the people of Oakland. Indeed and in fact: a Unitary Strong Mayor structure would solve each of the four significant charter problems [we identified in previous InBriefs](#). It would deliver:

- **The strongest Oakland mayor in over a century.**
- **An empowered city council**, led by the Mayor, that selects, sets goals for, supervises, and evaluates the city manager/administrator.
- **A city attorney with just one client:** the municipal organization.
- **A stable chief executive** whose tenure is not tied to mayoral election cycles.

## Should Oakland's Mayor Have Veto Power?

Presuming Oakland decides to pursue a Unitary Strong-Mayor system, an important question remains. Should Oakland's mayor wield veto power? If so, how expansive should it be?

The **benefits of the veto** are clear: Oakland would have a single elected leader who – because they control the public agenda and can nullify (most) council actions with the swipe of a pen – is responsible for policy. This would improve accountability because citizens would know “who's in charge” and reward or blame the mayor at the ballot box for city performance. Veto power – if used judiciously – could deter hasty or fragmented council decisions and encourage consensus

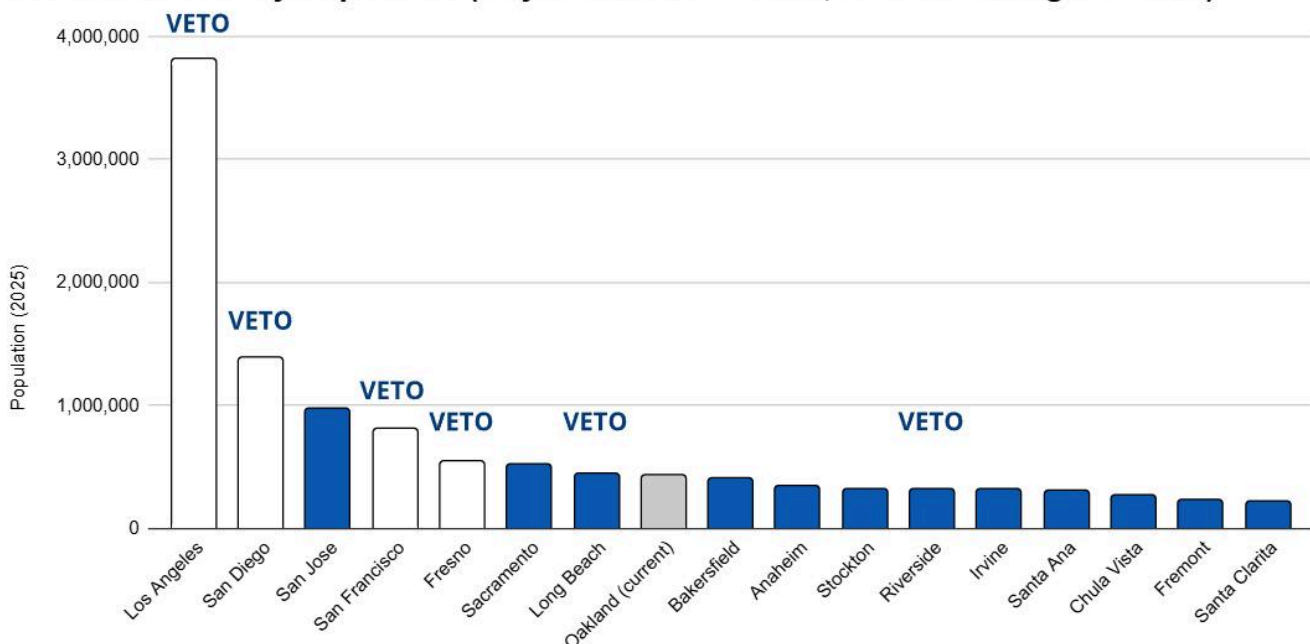
(since council must gather a supermajority to override). This was a primary rationale for adding veto power in Long Beach and Riverside – to require extra deliberation on contested issues.

There are, however, some notable **disadvantages** associated with the mayoral veto. The most common is that a mayoral veto centralizes tremendous civic power in one individual. A mayor with a veto could diminish the city council's role in policy-making and, in so doing, generate resentment among council members and community groups who feel their influence is reduced. A veto could also be abused by the mayor to block popular legislation for personal or political reasons.

## Which California Mayors Have Veto Power?

Mayors in six of California's top seventeen cities have veto power.

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



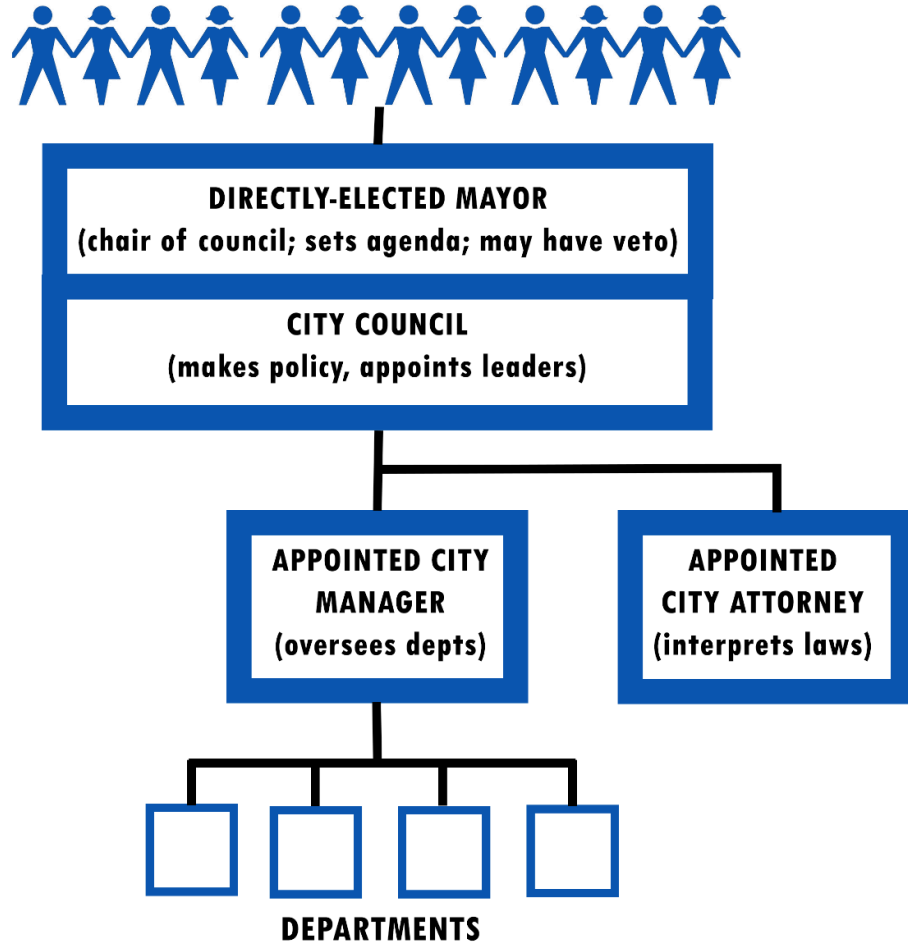
## What's Next for Charter Reform?

Ideally, a charter reform measure would appear on the ballot next June, thus settling the issue before the November 2026 mayoral election. While that may seem far off, it's not – especially given the many steps required to qualify a measure for the ballot. Fortunately, Mayor Barbara Lee has called out charter reform as one of her top ten priorities. We're collaborating with her, along with Councilmembers Jenkins and Ramachandran, to establish a special task force that will study the issue and make final recommendations to the mayor and city council regarding the efficacy of a charter reform ballot measure. The goal is to place that measure before voters for consideration next June.

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# UNITARY STRONG-MAYOR

Many cities have, since the 1990's, adopted a form that strengthens the mayor's office within the unitary model.



The **Unitary Strong-Mayor** model seeks to deliver the efficiency and professionalism of the classic Council-Manager system while addressing the public's interest in electing a powerful and visible mayor who can be held accountable. Long Beach, Riverside, El Paso, and Charlotte are examples of Unitary Strong-Mayor cities. It is a **service delivery system** designed to empower the mayor and councilmembers while delivering transparent, responsive, and effective government.