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Oakland Public Ethics Commission Proposes Reforms to Strengthen Government Accountability

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The proposed City Charter amendments would strengthen the Public Ethics Commission's (PEC's) ability to provide independent oversight of Oakland's anti-corruption and government transparency laws and promote a more inclusive and accountable democracy in Oakland.

Oakland, CA - April 11, 2024 – In a move towards bolstering public trust in city government, last night the PEC announced proposed amendments to the City Charter and Oakland Municipal Code (OMC) designed to strengthen the Commission's effectiveness as a watchdog agency and as the administrator of Oakland's landmark Democracy Dollars public financing system. These amendments, developed by the Commission's Charter Review Subcommittee, were unanimously approved by the Commission at its April 10, 2024, meeting.

The Public Ethics Commission is responsible for enforcing Oakland's anti-corruption, campaign finance, transparency, and lobbying laws, as well as administering the City's public financing program, which provides public funds to eligible candidates running for City office that meet certain conditions. The Ethics Commission was originally created by Oakland voters in 1996. In 2014, Oaklanders passed Measure CC, which provided minimum staffing for the Commission and significantly increased the Commission's independence, to ensure its effectiveness as a watchdog agency. However, in the ten years since Measure CC's passage, the Commission's staffing level has not kept pace with its caseload and the Commission's organizational structure falls short of modern best practices for ethics agencies.

"Ensuring high standards of ethics and integrity in local government is critical to building public trust and confidence among our residents," said Commission Chair Ryan Micik. "These amendments will empower the Commission to more effectively fulfill its mandate of promoting ethical conduct and accountability among public officials, lobbyists, and other regulated parties in Oakland."

The proposed amendments adopted by the Commission include:

- Empowering the Commission to select its own Executive Director.
- Strengthening the requirements for who may serve on the Commission to reduce the potential of actual or perceived conflicts between a Commissioner's personal interests and the Commission's mandate.
- Adding two enforcement staff to assist with the Commission's investigations of violations of campaign finance, ethics, and lobbying laws.
- Requiring that any budget reductions to the City's public financing program be proportional to overall reductions taken in the City.
- Prohibiting lobbyist gifts to City elected officials.

"This proposal represents an important step forward in strengthening the Commission's ability to enforce Oakland's ethics and government accountability laws," said Commissioner Karun Tilak. "More than half of the Commission's cases are presently on hold due to severe lack of resources; these reforms will ensure the Commission remains an effective and independent watchdog agency."

In 2022, Oakland voters overwhelmingly passed Measure W, establishing a transformative new campaign public financing program, called the [Democracy Dollars Program](#), administered by the Commission. Under the Program, which is modeled off a similar program in Seattle, every Oakland registered voter will receive campaign vouchers which they may assign to the candidate of their choice. The Program, which will launch in 2026, aims to reduce barriers to participation in the City’s political process and reduce the risk of corruption or its appearance.

“Oakland voters have charged the Commission with a unique and important role to foster a more participatory democracy in Oakland that is powered by the people and not wealthy special interests,” said Commissioner Charlotte Hill. “These amendments will help make sure the Commission can deliver on this important voter mandate.”

The Commission is recommending that the City Council place these proposals before Oakland voters for possible adoption on the November 2024 ballot. Read the full set of proposed amendments [here](#).

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About the Public Ethics Commission

The Public Ethics Commission is an independent agency of the City of Oakland overseen by a seven-member board of Oakland residents. The Commission ensures compliance with the City of Oakland’s government ethics, campaign finance, transparency, and lobbyist registration laws to ensure fairness, openness, honesty, and integrity in city government. The Commission also administers the City’s public financing programs, which aim to promote more representative, inclusive, and accountable local democracy.

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