

COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

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CLERK OF THE BOARD  
OF SUPERVISORS



# COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

## BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

1600 PACIFIC HIGHWAY, ROOM 335, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92101-2470

### AGENDA ITEM

**DATE:** January 12, 2021

**09**

**TO:** Board of Supervisors

#### **SUBJECT**

**FRAMEWORK FOR OUR FUTURE: ENSURING TRANSPARENCY AND OPEN GOVERNMENT IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

#### **OVERVIEW**

The seal in the lobby of the County Administration Center is inscribed with the words, "Good government demands the intelligent interest of every citizen." This ethos should underpin every County decision and action to be transparent, participatory, and collaborative with the public. Transparency provides the public with information about what the County of San Diego is doing. It allows for civic engagement, good governance, and accountability. With transparency, the County can leverage the myriad talents represented by the public and be responsive to the needs of its citizenry. It allows the public to collaborate, provide input, and help shape government policies and programs to serve the needs of our diverse communities.

To further these objectives, this board letter recommends the creation of an Advisory Committee composed of two Board Members and would authorize them to consult county staff, hold meetings, conduct research on best practices, engage the public, and craft recommendations that would allow for greater transparency for San Diego County, including internal procedures as well as public engagement strategies.

#### **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

##### **SUPERVISOR NATHAN FLETCHER AND SUPERVISOR JOEL ANDERSON**

1. Establish an Advisory Committee to review, assess, conduct stakeholder outreach and recommend modifications to enhance transparency, accessibility, and open government within the County of San Diego's operations, public engagement processes, and website offerings, including but not limited to the following:
  - a. Public Records Act portal
  - b. Accessing archived public records

**SUBJECT: FRAMEWORK FOR OUR FUTURE: ENSURING TRANSPARENCY AND OPEN GOVERNMENT IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY**

- c. Email retention policy
  - d. Board and stakeholder engagement, including but not limited to:
    - i. Annual County budget
    - ii. Meetings of the Board of Supervisors, and other public meetings such as County Boards & Commissions
2. Appoint Supervisor Joel Anderson and Supervisor Nora Vargas to the committee.
  3. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to provide staffing to support the committee.
  4. Report back to the Board of Supervisors regularly with progress reports and return with a final report and recommended changes in 180 days.

**FISCAL IMPACT**

There is no fiscal impact associated with these recommendations. There may be future fiscal impacts associated with recommendations proposed by the Advisory Committee. Any such recommendations would need to be approved by the Board.

**BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT**

N/A

**ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT**

N/A

**BACKGROUND**

The seal in the lobby of the County Administration Center is inscribed with the words, “Good government demands the intelligent interest of every citizen.” This ethos should underpin every County decision and action to be transparent, participatory, and collaborative with the public. Transparency provides the public with information about what the County of San Diego is doing. It allows for civic engagement, good governance, and accountability to the public. With transparency, the County can leverage the myriad talents represented by the public and be responsive to the needs of its citizenry. It allows the public to collaborate, provide input, and help shape government policies and programs to serve the needs of our diverse communities.

The County of San Diego has made reforms in the past to facilitate greater transparency. These efforts include developing a website to navigate archived public records, creating an online budget portal, and conducting evening budget hearings.

However, the opportunity presented by changing leadership at the Board of Supervisors provides an opening to revisit and reexamine past decisions around transparency. It is an opportunity to reflect on current policies and recommend changes that allow for greater transparency, including access to public records, documents, and meetings in recognition that public participation and access to information is foundational to our democracy.

This board letter recommends the creation of an Advisory Committee composed of two Board Members and would authorize the Committee to consult county staff, hold meetings, conduct research on best practices, engage the public, and craft recommendations that would allow for

**SUBJECT:       FRAMEWORK FOR OUR FUTURE: ENSURING TRANSPARENCY AND  
OPEN GOVERNMENT IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY**

greater transparency for San Diego County. Meetings of the Advisory Committee will be accessible and open to the public. Meeting times and locations will be made public, and key stakeholder groups and members of the media will be invited to attend and provide input.

We propose that the Advisory Committee begins with investigating the following issue areas, but the scope of the committee is certainly not limited to these issues:

Public Records Act Requests

Under the California Public Records Act, members of the public have the right to access information to pursue the people's business. This fundamental right helps advance transparency, promotes more comprehensive understanding of government decisions, and ensures accountability to the public.

However, the current system of submitting and receiving County Public Records Act requests is outdated and in need of review. There is no central clearinghouse to submit requests and no portal to view public records that are responsive to prior requests – meaning that there are drains on staff time to produce the responsive records and potentially process the same request multiple times.

Other government agencies have a central clearinghouse and a simple process to follow for requesters. The Advisory Committee should research alternatives to the current County system and propose solutions like a user-friendly web portal.

Archived Public Records

Since 1996, the Clerk of the Board of Supervisors has provided online access to official records from Board of Supervisors meetings. In 2010, the Clerk of the Board digitized the County's microfilm records of official Board actions dating back to 1877 and made them available via online record search. Last spring, the Clerk of the Board released an update to the online records search that made all online records full text searchable. However, because records have been categorized in a variety of formats over the years, the search portal does not function as it should and often does not return responsive documents.

The Clerk of the Board is actively working with the County's technology contractor to address issues with the online search system. As the Clerk of the Board continues to pursue improvements, it would be helpful to have the Advisory Committee participate in a review of the usability, other technology improvements, and provide feedback from the public's perspective.

Email Retention Policy

The County of San Diego has an email auto-delete policy. After 60 days, emails are auto-deleted unless they are archived or otherwise saved. Most other governments in San Diego County have a substantially longer email retention period. The auto-delete policy can remove public records that are important to the functioning and transparency of democracy. The Advisory Committee should review the current email retention policy and propose any necessary changes.

**SUBJECT: FRAMEWORK FOR OUR FUTURE: ENSURING TRANSPARENCY AND OPEN GOVERNMENT IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY**

**Board and Stakeholder Engagement**

The Advisory Committee is also tasked with providing recommendations on ways to enhance Board and stakeholder engagement on important subjects, including the County’s budget process and Board meetings.

Over the past two years, there have been changes proposed annually to ensure that the budget process is transparent and accessible to the public. Evening budget hearings are scheduled annually with high levels of participation and feedback. The Advisory Committee should make recommendations to revise the budget process to achieve more robust stakeholder participation in the entire County budgeting process and generally enhance stakeholders’ views of County government; improve credibility and trust through increased budget transparency; and develop and implement a comprehensive communication strategy.

The County of San Diego currently allows for public participation at Board of Supervisors meetings and other County of San Diego boards and commissions. It is our intent that this Advisory Committee will investigate additional options to engage the public, solicit feedback, and develop opportunities for diversity in engagement with these governing agencies. Where appropriate, information technology can be used to meet these outcomes, such as the recent use of call-in opportunities for the public at Board meetings, available since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We urge your support for the actions before you to create an Advisory Committee made up of two Supervisors to identify recommendations enhance transparency, accessibility, and open government, direct the CAO to assign staff to support the committees work and report back to the Board with regular progress reports and a final report in 180 days.

**LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN**

The requested action supports the County’s 2021-2026 Strategic Plan objectives of Operational Excellence and Thriving Communities, by promoting residents to engage in community life and civic activities

Respectfully submitted,



**NATHAN FLETCHER**  
Supervisor, Fourth District



**JOEL ANDERSON**  
Supervisor, Second District

**ATTACHMENT(S)**

**SUBJECT:** FRAMEWORK FOR OUR FUTURE: ENSURING TRANSPARENCY AND  
OPEN GOVERNMENT IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

N/A

**SUBJECT:** FRAMEWORK FOR OUR FUTURE: ENSURING TRANSPARENCY AND OPEN GOVERNMENT IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

**AGENDA ITEM INFORMATION SHEET**

**REQUIRES FOUR VOTES:**       Yes     No

**WRITTEN DISCLOSURE PER COUNTY CHARTER SECTION 1000.1 REQUIRED**

Yes     No

**PREVIOUS RELEVANT BOARD ACTIONS:**

N/A

**BOARD POLICIES APPLICABLE:**

N/A

**BOARD POLICY STATEMENTS:**

N/A

**MANDATORY COMPLIANCE:**

N/A

**ORACLE AWARD NUMBER(S) AND CONTRACT AND/OR REQUISITION NUMBER(S):**

N/A

**ORIGINATING DEPARTMENT:** Districts 4 and 2, Board of Supervisors

**OTHER CONCURRENCE(S):**    N/A

**CONTACT PERSON(S):**

Emily Wier

Name

619-531-5544

Phone

Emily.Wier@sdcounty.ca.gov

E-mail

Scott Barnett

Name

619-531-5522

Phone

Scott.Barnett@sdcounty.ca.gov

E-mail