

Big changes may be coming to how San Diego gathers neighborhood input

Vicki Granowitz, former leader of the North Park Community Planning Group, is lobbying for changes to how such groups operate (San Diego Union-Tribune)

More than 30 policy changes recommended for community planning groups

By [DAVID GARRICK](#)

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SAN DIEGO —

San Diego's four dozen community planning groups, which provide crucial input to the City Council before key votes, would be governed by more than 30 new rules and policies if recent recommendations by city officials are approved.

Supporters say that input from neighborhood leaders on housing projects and new city policies would become more robust, organized and demographically diverse under the series of recommendations.

The proposed changes were sparked by complaints from the city auditor and the county grand jury that the planning groups are unprofessional, unpredictable and not adequately transparent.

The groups also have been criticized for seeking to block housing projects too aggressively and for having stagnant membership that doesn't accurately reflect the neighborhoods they represent.

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The rule changes aim to include more women, minorities and renters on the groups. The city would begin conducting demographic studies.

The city also would require each board to have at least one renter under the changes, and there would be stronger term limits for the groups.

“The diverse makeup of the city should be reflected at all levels of our government,” said Maya Rosas of nonprofit Circulate San Diego, which proposed many of the changes.

The changes also aim to accelerate approval of housing projects by making the practices of the groups more standardized and more professional.



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For example, groups would be required to make all environmental comments about a proposed housing project by the same deadline as the public, and land-use proposals would be handled early in meetings instead of forcing developers and opponents to wait several hours.

Those proposed changes are prompted by developers lobbying for a more transparent process, said Rammy Cortez, a local developer who served on a task force that helped craft the recommendations for the neighborhood planning groups.

“None of them are consistent across the board in how they treat projects, when those projects are heard, or how they’re reported,” Cortez said.

Lori Pfeiler, leader of a housing advocacy group called Housing You Matters, said slow approvals from planning groups can increase housing costs and discourage construction.

“The cost of housing relates directly to how long it takes to get through the process,” she said.

The City Council’s Land Use and Housing Committee last week endorsed 31 changes to planning group policies recommended by the task force but voted against a proposal to require that the groups’ meetings be recorded on audio or video.

Councilman Scott Sherman, who helped spearhead the proposals, said he thought recordings would help clear up any confusion about a group’s sentiments.

But other members of the committee said that requirement would be too aggressive.

“I do think it’s onerous,” Councilwoman Dr. Jennifer Campbell said. “Reading the minutes generally gives you the idea of what was going on at the meeting.”

The recommendations would also create penalties for groups that violate the state’s open meetings law, require a city audit of the groups every five years and require groups to publicize their elections and have stronger term-limit policies.

Vicki Granowitz, a member of the San Diego Planning Commission who led the North Park Community Planning Group for many years, said it’s crucial to have penalties for violating the open meetings law, the Ralph M. Brown Act.

“Right now, nothing happens,” she said. “We have to make sure everybody follows the rules so it doesn’t taint the entire community planning group system.”

The Community Planners Committee, an umbrella panel for the city’s planning groups, endorsed many of the proposed changes. But the group’s chairman, Wally Wulfeck, warned city leaders to be careful.

“Every group has different concerns about their local community,” he said. “A one-size-fits-all approach to regulating all of these is just not going to work.”

The recommendations will be forwarded to the full City Council, which could direct City Attorney Mara Elliott to craft them into a new policy proposal.