

# Democracy in Planning

Enhancing democratic participation in San Diego's Community Planning Groups



A #PlanDiego  
Report

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# Acknowledgements



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# Executive Summary

Public participation is a cornerstone of city planning and a pillar of democracy. Everyone should have a voice in how decisions are made, especially in local government. In the City of San Diego, City-sponsored community planning Groups (CPGs) serve as the primary vehicle to facilitate public participation in the planning process. CPGs provide a space for community members to serve their City, and their input frequently improves development and transportation projects.

Unfortunately, not all voices have equal access to participate in CPGs. The structure of CPGs has allowed certain voices to become amplified, while excluding others. The CPG system in San Diego creates barriers to participation from new residents, and those residents that work, care for family members, or who have other obligations. These barriers undermine the purpose of CPGs to collect diverse and representative public input and to advance democratic participation.

Nationwide, jurisdictions have adopted a variety of mechanisms to form neighborhood-level planning groups to solicit input on planning and transportation choices. The structure of these local groups are as diverse as the jurisdictions themselves. Many also implement policies to ensure that a representative set of voices can access the community planning process.

In the City of San Diego, a City-wide policy sets the framework for how CPGs operate through Council Policy 600-24. Bylaws of individual CPGs must comply with 600-24. Nevertheless, wide discretion is left to individual CPGs for the actual mechanics of their election processes, and how to organize their meetings and agendas. This local control allows CPGs to adopt—or continue—policies that may have the effect of excluding certain voices from the CPG process. If CPGs become too insular and resistant to new voices, they can become weighted in favor of the status quo. CPGs that are not open to all voices cannot fairly advocate for policies that benefit everyone.

When CPGs are closed off to new and diverse voices, there can be real consequences. Neighborhood planning groups that make it difficult for new residents, often renters, from participating tend to oppose new housing construction, which artificially inflates rents. Restricting housing supply short-changes the housing needs of younger generations who don’t currently occupy seats at the table. Similarly, CPGs that oppose new bicycle lanes in favor of preserving parking spaces put the lives of bicycle riders in danger.

This report recommends that the San Diego City Council update Council Policy 600-24 to require that CPGs meet certain minimum thresholds for how elections are structured and how meetings operate. Such changes will allow more diverse participation in San Diego’s land use and planning decisions. With more diverse participation, local input on planning and transportation will be more likely to embrace policies that benefit wider segments of the population. Champions of the status quo deserve a voice in local planning policies, too, but they should not be allowed to exclude the voices of others.

- Prohibitions against policies that restrict the right of community members to vote in and stand for CPG elections.
- Agenda reform to ensure land use and transportation items are heard at the beginning of CPG meetings.
- Changes to term limits and continuing education to ensure new CPG members have an opportunity to serve as informed citizen planners.

Community input is essential to local land use and transportation decisions. CPGs should be structured to ensure that all community members have equitable access to the decisionmaking process. Common sense changes to the rules that govern CPGs can open up the planning process, improve outcomes, and advance our shared goals for democratic participation.



# Introduction

Community Planning Groups (CPGs) are an important feature of the City of San Diego’s land use and transportation decisionmaking processes. The City of San Diego has a General Plan, like every city in California. The City also has more than 50 individual community plans, which are neighborhood-level land use documents. Most neighborhoods have their own CPG,<sup>1</sup> which advises the City on how to implement the General Plan, their community plan, and any other plans within their geographic area.

CPGs are elected by the community’s residents, property owners, and business owners to include a local voice into land use decisionmaking. CPG members often bring a common sense perspective and a familiarity with neighborhood conditions that professional planners or policymakers do not always have. Furthermore, CPGs have been in existence for over 50 years, and they have become established conduits between elected officials and at least some of the civic leaders in the neighborhoods they represent.

***“CPG members often bring a common sense perspective and a familiarity with neighborhood conditions that professional planners or policymakers do not always have.”***

CPGs provide valuable input to City decisionmaking. CPGs are each unique and their support for issues such as dense development projects or bicycle lanes varies from community to community. As San Diego continues efforts to implement the General Plan’s City of Villages Strategy, community plans, and the Climate Action Plan, changes to land uses and transportation choices must occur and adopted plans must be implemented. Some CPGs are considered opponents of change, particularly for new developments and new transportation options. CPGs have been blamed for preventing bus lines from moving fast,<sup>2</sup> bicycle lanes from being built,<sup>3</sup> and affordable homes from being developed.

San Diego needs to construct more market-rate and affordable homes to address our region’s growing housing crisis.<sup>4</sup> Some CPGs have opposed these efforts, complicating the City of San Diego’s ability to achieve its City-wide goals.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, some CPGs vocally support new

housing and transportation infrastructure.<sup>6</sup>

The voting structure and agenda practices of CPGs often perpetuate longtime incumbency—despite the imposition of term limits in 2007—and preclude new and diverse voices from participation. Anecdotal observations from some CPGs find that CPG members are more frequently older, white, and homeowners than the neighborhoods they are tasked to represent. However, there is no requirement for the City to track the relevant demographics of CPG board members, so there is no statistical proof for this common observation.

This report outlines a variety of City-wide policies that the City of San Diego can adopt to encourage more participation in CPGs. Instead of demanding particular seats for relevant demographics, a current practice of many CPGs, this report recommends the establishment of standards for voting to allow more people to effectively compete in elections to join CPGs. The report also identifies some structural changes like enhanced opportunities for participation, and more efficient meetings, to ensure that community members have an opportunity to be heard on land use and transportation decisions that affect their neighborhood.

These recommendations are calculated to be politically viable because they do not pick winners and losers, but instead promote widely accepted democratic values of participation and fair process. Adopting these reforms may not transform CPGs into entities that always support new development near transit or every new bicycle lane. But they will help neighborhood residents, property owners, and business owners, choose CPG members that are more likely to represent them fairly and effectively.



**Pacific Beach Community Planning  
Group Meeting**

# What are Community Planning Groups?

The City of San Diego organizes CPGs to advise the City on the development and implementation of land use and transportation policies.

CPGs are made up of residents, property owners, and business owners within certain geographic areas. The CPG system is governed by Council Policy 600-24 (“600-24”),<sup>7</sup> a City-wide policy document that sets the framework for how individual planning groups should operate. CPGs are also subject to California’s open meeting law, the Brown Act.<sup>8</sup>

According to the City of San Diego’s website, CPGs have been in existence since the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> In 1966, the San Diego City Council formalized this role of CPGs with the adoption of Council Policy 600-05.<sup>10</sup> The structure of CPGs and their relationship to the City were further refined in 1976 by the City Council’s adoption of 600-24, which was last amended in 2014.<sup>11</sup>

600-24 requires that CPGs must adopt their own bylaws to govern their operations, the qualification of members, and their own elections. 600-24 provides a sample bylaws template, but places relatively few requirements on how CPG bylaws are structured. A major revision to 600-24 was effected in 2007 and all CPG bylaws were updated at that time to comply with the update. Similarly, a significant update to 600-24 in 2014 also required every CPG bylaw to be updated to remain in compliance. CPG bylaws are not considered adopted until approved by the City. Bylaw deviations from 600-24 are allowed, subject to City Council approval.

CPGs are charged with advising the City of San Diego and other governmental agencies on a variety of issues, but the scope of their official capacity is not unlimited. 600-24 specifically tasks CPGs with advising on the adoption and implementation of “the General Plan or a land use plan when a plan relates to each recognized community planning group’s planning area boundaries.” That scope is further expanded to any issues “requested by the City or other governmental agencies.” A final clause in 600-24 allows that CPGs “may be called upon to advise on, or participate in, additional efforts such as CIP infrastructure needs identification discussed in Council Policy 000-32.”

600-24 explains that the core responsibility of CPGs is to advise the City and other government agencies on land use and transportation policy within their geographic areas. That advice can be provided for updates to a neighborhood-level community plan or other long-range planning documents. Oftentimes, individual developments need amendments or variances from land use documents or discretionary permits, and CPGs have a role to advise

the City on whether those amendments or permits should be granted. CPG agendas commonly list requests from the City’s Planning, Public Works, and Development Services Departments for a response to a City or private developer proposal. Transportation agencies like the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) and Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) also present to CPGs and seek input for projects that are planned to run through a particular neighborhood. Although only advisory, recommendations from CPGs can be persuasive for the City Planning staff, the Planning Commission, and potentially to City councilmembers who must weigh in on some land use and transportation decisions. However influential they may be, it is also not unusual for certain CPG recommendations to be declined.<sup>12</sup>

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Despite the limited formal scope provided to CPGs by 600-24, these bodies often weigh in on issues outside of their boundaries, and outside of their land use and planning purview. For controversial projects, CPGs have banded together to oppose development, even for projects outside of their boundaries.<sup>13</sup> Agenda topics commonly include items entirely unrelated to land use, transportation, and infrastructure, like emergency housing expos,<sup>14</sup> support letters for charity runs,<sup>15</sup> and the energy procurement policy for the City of San Diego.<sup>16</sup> Reports from elected officials or their district representatives are also common agenda items at CPGs. CPGs often adopt a broad mandate for themselves, and they can operate as general community forums, not narrowly tailored bodies to weigh in on neighborhood land use issues.

# Community Planning Group Structure Today

CPGs vary in significant ways from community to community reflecting the diverse nature and history of San Diego’s neighborhoods. These differences can impact the ability for a broad and diverse range of community members to become involved. 600-24 details the governance, roles, and responsibilities for CPGs throughout the City. 600-24 includes a shell bylaws document, which each CPG customizes, for their governance and procedures. The ability to customize the bylaws means that each CPG has different rules for important procedures including eligibility to participate in CPG elections, specific seats for board members, and term length.

## Elections

Eligible candidates must be at least 18 years of age and a community member of the group they want to join. 600-24 defines a community member as a property owner, resident, or a local business person working in the community planning area. Candidates must provide documentation to verify their eligibility. Proof usually comes in the form of a government-issued ID, a utility bill, or in the case of business owners and property owners, a copy of a business license or tax bill. Most CPGs require that candidates attend a minimum number of meetings before the election.

Similar to eligibility requirements for candidates, only community members of the community planning area are eligible to vote. Depending on their bylaws, a CPG may require minimum attendance requirements to be able to cast a vote.<sup>17</sup>

Annual CPG elections take place in March.<sup>18</sup> Election procedures are established by the bylaws of each CPG. Some CPGs allow for people to vote at different locations throughout their community and have multiple voting times. However, most CPGs have their elections immediately before their March meeting at only one location.

## Board Members

CPGs are made up of 12 to 20 members. In rare cases, the City Council may allow a CPG to have more than 20 board members if they decide that a higher number of members would make the group more representative of the community.<sup>19</sup>

600-24 encourages CPGs to “the extent possible, be representative of the various geographic sections of the community and diversified community interest.”<sup>20</sup> To this end, some groups specify the number of members that must come from specific neighborhoods within their boundaries. For example, the Encanto CPG has eight at-

large seats plus one seat per neighborhood for a total of 16 board seats. Some groups set aside seats to be occupied by specific groups. In the case of City Heights, seats are reserved for business owners, school representatives, nonprofits, and youth between the ages of 16-18, an exception to the minimum age requirement to join a CPG. In newly developing communities, such as Carmel Valley, the major land developer is given a dedicated seat.<sup>21</sup>

Terms of office for board members vary per CPG and range between two and four years. In the event of a single vacancy, the remaining CPG board members can appoint someone to finish the balance of the term. If two or more concurrent vacancies exist, an election is required to fill the open seats.<sup>22</sup>

CPG members are restricted to serving a maximum of eight consecutive years, or nine years if their terms are for three years. After a year break, a termed-out member is eligible to run again for their CPG. However, there is an exception to the rule. A person may stay on as a CPG board member after serving eight or nine consecutive years if there are not enough eligible and interested candidates to fill the vacating seats, and if that person receives two-thirds of the votes cast. At all times, a CPG must comprise three-quarters of members who have not exceeded eight or nine years.<sup>23</sup>

***“600-24 encourages CPGs to “the extent possible, be representative of the various geographic sections of the community and diversified community interest.”***

Elected community planning group members are required to attend either an in-person or online Community Orientation Workshop (COW). These workshops review the protocols, procedures and regulations that govern a CPG, mostly as mandated by the Brown Act. For CPG members to receive indemnification against any lawsuit for an action taken in their role as a CPG member, they must have completed their COW training. Typically new board members have 90 days from their election date to complete their training. No other formal training or education is required of board members for the duration of their service.

# Community Planning in Other Jurisdictions

San Diego is not the only city in the United States with a system for community planning. Many other jurisdictions employ similar structures, with neighborhood-level groups to advise on land use and transportation decisions.

## County of San Diego

The County of San Diego employs community planning groups for the unincorporated areas of the County. While operating much like the City of San Diego’s CPGs, County groups’ elections are on the November General Election ballot.<sup>24</sup>

## Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C. employs Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANCs). Unlike in the City of San Diego, ANC elections are actually on the November General Election ballot.<sup>25</sup> Similar to San Diego’s CPGs, ANCs have influence over variances and land use decisions, and they have been criticized for being structured to oppose change.<sup>26</sup>

## Denver

Denver operates a system of Resident Neighborhood Organizations (RNOs).<sup>27</sup> To register with the city, RNOs must meet a set of eligibility requirements laid out in the Denver Revised Municipal Code.<sup>28</sup> Like CPGs, RNOs receive notice and are invited to provide input on a variety of neighborhood-level decisions, including zoning amendments, landmark designation applications, planning board and board of adjustment hearings, and liquor and cabaret licenses.

## New York City

New York City operates Community Boards that are similar in function to CPGs.<sup>29</sup> Instead of being elected by neighbors, Community Boards are appointed by Borough Presidents. Half of the appointees to Community Boards must be nominated by the relevant City councilmembers. Community Boards have a broad mandate. They are tasked with reviewing land use and zoning issues, and advising on other issues related to their neighborhoods. There are 59 Community Boards in New York, compared with about 50 in San Diego. That suggests that the individual Community Boards in New York cover much wider territory, and a larger population than the average CPG in San Diego.

While the Community Boards in New York are not selected through neighborhood-level elections like San Diego’s CPGs, they are arguably more democratic. The electorate that selects CPG members in San Diego can number as low as tens of voters, and rarely more than a few hundred. In New York, the selection of Community Board members is made by officials that are elected by millions of voters, ensuring a much broader degree of representative democracy.

## Los Angeles

The City of Los Angeles has a system of Neighborhood Councils, with annual elections.<sup>30</sup> Like CPGs, Neighborhood Councils have wide discretion for how they are structured. They may create dedicated positions for certain stakeholder groups, though they notably prohibit any stakeholder group from being entitled to a majority of such positions.<sup>31</sup> Election locations are required to accommodate disabled voters, and they must have convenient access to public transit.<sup>32</sup>

## Seattle

Seattle provides an interesting example of a community planning group process that was widely regarded as dysfunctional, and which has recently been reformed substantially. Until recently, Seattle sought input on local planning decisions through 13 volunteer Neighborhood District Councils. Those groups operated similarly to CPGs, providing public input to development and other land use decisions. In 2016, former Mayor Ed Murray cut ties and city funding from those groups, replacing them with a new plan to seek community input.<sup>33</sup> The Seattle Neighborhood District Councils would be replaced with a new 16-member Community Involvement Commission, to solicit public input, as well as a second new body, the Seattle Renters’ Commission.<sup>34</sup> The action by Mayor Murray came after years of concern about the makeup and role of the Neighborhood District Councils. In particular, a 2009 report from the Seattle City Auditor found that Neighborhood District Councils were structured in a way that resulted in their membership not adequately representing the residents on whose behalf they were tasked with providing input.<sup>35</sup>

The diversity of structures for neighborhood-level planning groups shows the wide range of options for how local governments can solicit community input for planning and transportation decisions. Different jurisdictions have arrived at different systems, likely in response to different circumstances and political considerations. While San Diego has operated CPGs for a number of decades, there is nothing inherently fixed about their structure, and 600-24 has been amended numerous times. Policymakers also have the option to borrow successful models from other jurisdictions to ensure that CPGs operate as intended, and to facilitate greater democratic representation.



# Why Community Planning Reform Matters

CPGs are an integral part of planning in San Diego. Their opinions bear strong influence on updates to community plans, entitlements for developments, and construction of transportation infrastructure.

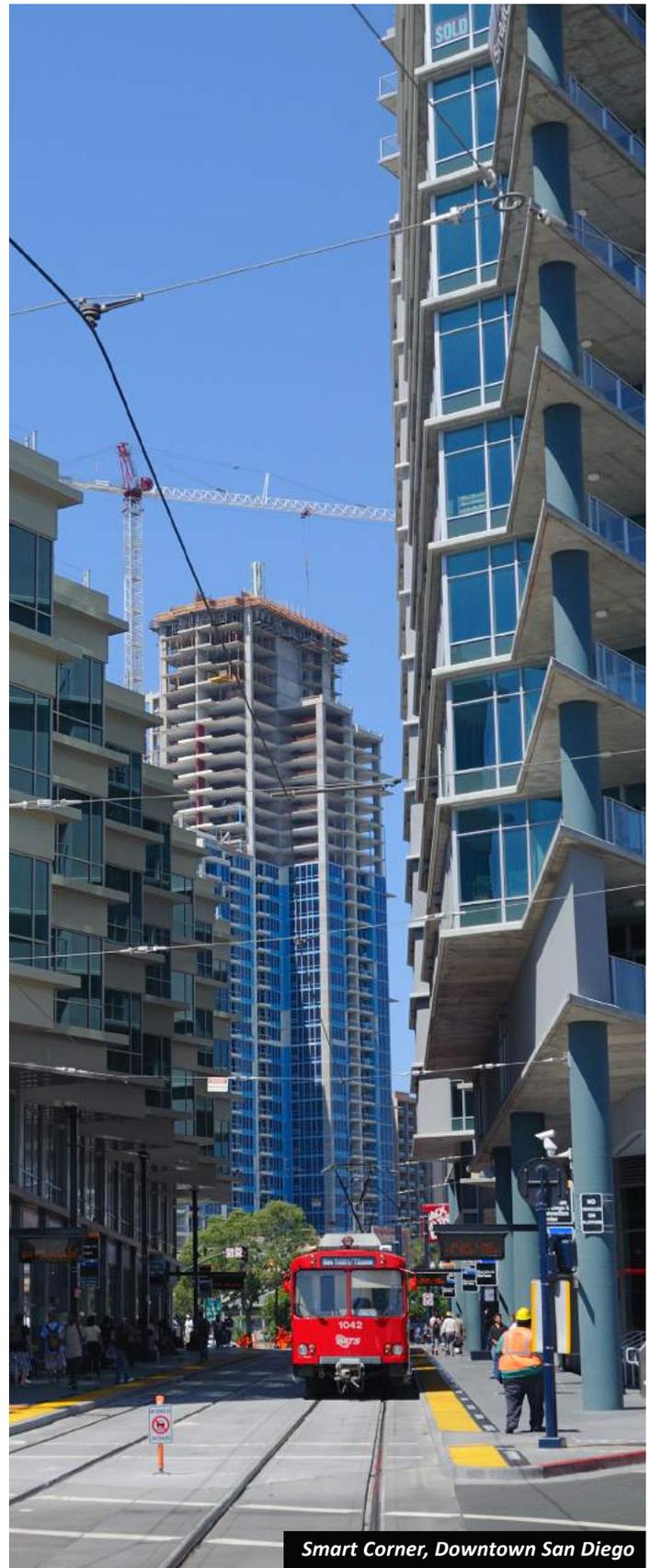
San Diego’s City of Villages Strategy calls for community plans to be updated to allow more development near transit. The Climate Action Plan requires the same. Adding more development capacity near transit is a win-win-win for San Diego, by ensuring more affordability, more economic development, and more greenhouse gas reductions.<sup>36</sup> If individual CPGs act as barriers to these goals, then San Diego cannot achieve its goals City-wide.

CPGs that oppose new market-rate and affordable homes exacerbate the current housing crisis and shortchange the next generation who do not already have a seat at the table. When CPGs vote to oppose new bicycle lanes to preserve on-street parking, they place the convenience of car storage above the value of human lives. CPGs must be accessible to the entire community if their advice is to benefit the entire community.

Much of the concerns expressed about CPGs are anecdotal. Developers complain about delays or denials for their projects. Transportation advocates cite CPG objections to individual projects like bike lanes or bus facilities. It is tempting to chock these up as outliers, or as grouching from anyone who has not succeeded when trying to accomplish some policy objective, especially since CPGs are only advisory and have no legal authority. It must also be said that CPGs themselves argue that developers and the City ignore their input.

While it is difficult to quantify the aggregate impact of CPGs on policy outcomes, national data does exist on the impact local planning processes can have on overall outcomes, especially for housing. A recent study showed that jurisdictions that require more reviews for project entitlement, which are often neighborhood-level processes, tend to experience more income segregation.<sup>37</sup> The California Legislative Analyst’s Office also credits policies to shift land use away from local decisionmaking to state-level entities for higher housing construction and better affordability outcomes.<sup>38</sup>

These studies should not be read to suggest that CPGs be removed from advising on local decisionmaking. But they should help establish the reality that the CPG process can act as a barrier to achieving some of the City of San Diego’s housing and transportation goals. The CPG process must be reformed to help CPGs become a part of the solution to advancing City-wide goals, instead of being frequent opponents to progress and change.



Smart Corner, Downtown San Diego

# Recommendations for Community Planning Group Reform

The City of San Diego looks to CPGs to represent their communities and to advise decisionmakers. As the only official neighborhood-level advisory groups to the City, it is vital that CPGs represent the unique diversity of each community.

CPGs perform a public service to their community. While CPGs must be representative of their community, they must also make informed recommendations to the City. Without informed recommendations on the issues, the City is often left without the ability to incorporate the community’s input. The advisory role of CPGs requires that their input be based on accurate information as well as a strong understanding of the process and evaluation criteria that the City uses when making decisions.

What follows are a variety of specific policy recommendations for how to reform CPGs City-wide to expand the opportunity for more representative and informed advisory groups. These reforms can lead to more democratic citizen involvement in planning the future of San Diego.

## [Election Format and Requirements for Participation](#)

CPG members are elected to their position by community members.<sup>39</sup> Aspects of elections vary from community to community, including how voters and candidates become eligible and the format of the election itself. There is also no general location on the City of San Diego’s website to find election information for a community member who is interested in voting or running for a seat. Instead, interested community members must research the bylaws available online or find a meeting agenda for the prior month, which will likely, but is not required to, include election details.

600-24 allows for each CPG to determine for itself the number of meetings that a candidate is required to attend to become eligible to participate, ranging from one to three meetings in the 12 months before the election. 600-24 does not include a section on voter eligibility, resulting in some communities requiring previous attendance even to be eligible to vote.

For an election, 600-24 states that “at a minimum, ballots shall be available for a specified period at the noticed community planning group meeting at which the election will be held.”<sup>40</sup> While ballots must be available at the CPG meeting for a period of time, 600-24 allows opportunities for expanded election participation. Specifically, 600-24

allows for a CPG to establish multiple voting times or days, multiple voting locations, and mail-in ballots. Some CPGs provide extensive opportunities for residents to vote while others only provide a limited hour-long voting period in a single location.

### *Recommendations for reform*

600-24 does not mandate broadly accessible elections for all residents, property owners, and business owners. The following recommendations will increase democratic involvement in CPGs.

**Recommendation: Community members should not be required to have attended previous CPG meetings to be eligible to vote.**

Voting is at the root of any democratic process. There should be no eligibility requirements beyond the basic geographic requirements to be a community stakeholder, just as there are no requirements for previous participation to be eligible to vote in City-wide elections. Many people interested in CPGs vote for a candidate to represent them because they may not have time to attend meetings regularly. Any requirement to have attended even one previous meeting takes away from a resident, property owner, and business owner’s ability to participate in the democratic community planning process.

**Recommendation: Candidates should not be required to have attended more than one meeting in the past 12 months to be eligible to join a CPG board.**

Candidates should understand the commitment of joining a CPG board and that can be achieved by attending one meeting in the 12 months prior to the election. Allowing for CPGs to require candidates to have attended more than one is arbitrary and it creates an anti-democratic barrier to wider participation. If more extensive attendance to CPG meetings is an important quality for a candidate, that can be weighed by the voters who will be given more candidates to choose from when less rigid eligibility requirements are put in place.

**Recommendation: In-person voting should be available for at least two hours and should run for at least the two hours after the start time of a CPGs regularly scheduled meeting.**

Lowering thresholds for voter and candidate eligibility will not increase participation from diverse community members if the ability to vote is highly restricted. Elections should be at least two hours in length, and they should

be open at least for the two hours after the start time of regularly scheduled meetings. Individual CPGs could still choose to begin the voting early, and extend it later, but the two hours after the ordinary meeting start time should be required. A standard voting rule of at least two hours, starting at the time of the regularly scheduled meeting, will help create consistency and common practice by CPGs. It will allow City-wide education of ballot processes for potential CPG members.

Expanded voting time requirements may mean that more volunteer hours are necessary to run an election. Some CPGs may also find that a two-hour mandatory voting period is more than is required to receive all of the votes that are ultimately cast. One could also imagine CPGs deciding to dedicate their entire March meeting to administration of their election, instead of carrying on regular business while ballots are open. While these administrative inconveniences may be real, they would be a worthwhile cost for making the City’s advisory groups more democratic and representative of the community. In Los Angeles, polls for their CPG-equivalent elections are open for at least four hours, while polls in San Diego County and Washington, D.C. are open all day because voting is on the general election ballot.<sup>41</sup>

The City of San Diego should also explore options to facilitate online and telephone voting. The technological challenges of such voting processes can be overcome. For example, online and telephone voting is allowed for 21 days before Neighborhood Council elections in Los Angeles.<sup>42</sup>

**Recommendation: Councilmembers should appoint new board members when a CPG vacancy occurs in their council district.**

Vacancies occur throughout the year and it is difficult to advertise the appointment process to the general public. Requiring that the CPG’s councilmember appoint any vacancies gives the elected official the opportunity to bring in outside or underrepresented voices based on their understanding of the needs of the community and district.

Under this recommendation, an appointee must still be eligible to be a board member based on the CPG’s bylaws requirements, including not being a termed-out board member. The only difference from current practice is that it is an appointment from the councilmember, who represents all CPG members in the District and received thousands of votes, instead of by sitting CPG board members who have received a fraction of the votes of their councilmember. This is similar to the practice of establishing new CPGs, where original CPG board members are appointed by the councilmember.

This policy would remove the incentive for some current CPG board members to not widely advertise regular

elections, with the hopes that they can have control over who gets appointed in the case of a vacancy. Instead, board members will be encouraged to fill seats through elections, or else see councilmembers filling those vacancies for them.

**Recommendation: Gather relevant demographic data of CPG board members in an audit immediately and require new CPG board members complete a demographic survey at every election or time of appointment.**

There is currently no demographic data available on the make-up of CPG board members. While it is expressly a goal of CPGs to represent the community,<sup>43</sup> there is no data on CPG demographics and no periodic review of demographics to see how representative CPGs are of their community. Demographic data sought in a survey should include questions on the following: neighborhood, gender, race, ethnicity, age, status as a homeowner or renter, whether they are a business owner or property owner, and professional background. This report does not recommend a policy that would automatically require different membership based on demographic figures. However, collecting demographic information is an important accountability mechanism to track CPG’s representation of their community.

## Board Meetings

Board meetings are the core function of CPGs. CPGs should be run efficiently for the benefit of all in attendance. CPG meetings have a reputation for being long and sometimes inefficient. For community members who are interested in participating in CPGs, the length, structure, and format of the meetings can be a deterrent.

The purpose of CPGs is to advise the City of San Diego and other public agencies. Yet a significant amount of time at many CPG meetings is spent receiving updates by representatives of elected officials or large industries in the community. While these updates inform the community, it can take more than an hour to go through these updates and other non-agenda public comments even though they are not consistent with the purview of CPGs as described in 600-24. In addition, these updates are usually heard at the beginning of the meeting, leaving the agenda items that fulfill the purpose of advising the City to the end of the meeting.

### *Recommendations for reform*

The Brown Act and 600-24 dictate certain aspects of CPG meetings. Within these constraints, meeting efficiency is largely controlled by the Chair’s decisions on what items are heard at meetings and the ability to keep the meeting focused. Amendments to 600-24 can require prioritizing the agenda items that accomplish the core function of CPGs.

**Recommendation: Prioritize action items that inform City decisionmaking in the order of the agenda.**

In a CPG meeting, action items are heard and discussed at the end of the agenda, yet those are the items that inform the City in their decisionmaking. Advising governments on land use and transportation decisions is the primary function of CPGs and therefore should be prioritized in the meetings. Like the San Diego City Council,<sup>44</sup> non-agenda public comment should be time-limited in order to ensure that the CPG has time to consider all agenda items. Public comment and actions items unrelated to 600-24’s grant of authority should be required to occur at the end of the agenda. This recommendation will allow for more time and energy to be focused on the important matters at hand instead of rushed at the end of the meeting when CPG and community members may want to go home. It will also create a more predictable system for community members to know that the items that affect them will be heard soon after the meeting begins.

Specifically, action items outside of the scope of 600-24 as well as the bulk of non-agenda public comment should occur at the end of meetings. 15 minutes should be allowed for non-agenda public comment at the beginning of the meeting, with any remaining non-agenda public comment and reports from elected officials heard at the end of the CPG meeting after all other agenda items. Each CPG may decide if the 15 minutes is occupied by one to three minute time limits per speaker, so long as non-agenda public comment does not exceed 15 minutes and the order of speakers is determined on a first-come, first-served basis.

CPGs can serve a valuable function as a town hall forum where updates from elected officials or discussions of other community issues not directly related to land use and transportation can be heard. However, that should not come at the cost of fully discussing CPG business and making informed recommendations to the City.

**Recommendation: Require that CPGs determine a maximum duration for meetings.**

Determining a hard stop time for CPG meetings has multiple benefits. Time limits give both board and community members in attendance the assurance that the meetings will last a certain amount of time and they will not be staying later than anticipated. That duration can be determined by each CPG based on their unique needs. A safety valve provision could allow for meetings to be extended if two-thirds of board members agree. A hard stop requires that meetings be facilitated efficiently in order to finish the business on the agenda. Lastly, time limits would help combat the notion that CPG meetings are long and inefficient, encouraging more broad community participation.

**Recommendation: Require timely production of meeting minutes.**

600-24 should require timely production of meeting minutes. Many CPGs struggle with producing draft minutes, falling several months behind. The City currently takes a laissez faire attitude on meeting minutes, which limits the public’s understanding and participation.

**Board Members**

CPG board members have the responsibility to make informed recommendations to local governments on behalf of the broader community. For a variety of reasons, many community members do not participate in their CPG. Elected board members have won their positions at elections where a small subset of the community participates. Even the CPG elections with high turnout attract only a few hundred voters. While community planning areas range in size, voter turnout for CPG elections is typically less than 1%.

This lack of widespread participation leads to many CPGs with board members who have served for multiple terms, even beyond the current two to four-term limits. This is because they can take a one year break from the CPG after they have reached their eight or nine year term limit and then run for a board position again or even continue to serve without a break if no one else runs for the position.

Regardless of which community members are on a CPG, it is imperative that board members be fully informed of both the process and the plans that they must operate within. While CPG members must attend a one-time Community Orientation Workshop (COW) soon after their election, the City does not require nor provide continuing education for board members on the myriad processes and plans the City adopts. For example, little or no education is provided on the development process or the Climate Action Plan, both of which shape the City of San Diego’s decisionmaking. While many advocacy organizations try to fill that gap, the City should offer broader objective education.

*Recommendations for reform*

Increasing community representation and understanding of the planning process is beneficial for the City, communities, and CPG board members. Education will lead to more informed recommendations by CPGs that can constructively influence decisionmaking at the City.

**Recommendation: Consider incorporating appointed positions to CPGs by councilmembers to provide balance with the elected board members.**

Providing councilmembers with the opportunity to appoint a minority of CPG positions would allow for the ability to ensure that various perspectives are represented on

CPGs. There is also a democratic value to this proposal. Councilmembers are elected by much larger numbers of voters than current CPG board members. Allowing councilmembers to appoint a limited number of CPG members will improve the number of voters who see their choices impact CPG makeup. The councilmember would have the discretion to appoint someone from an underrepresented geographic area, professional background, or other field. It would also provide a mechanism to ensure turnover of CPG board members by bringing new people to the table.

**Recommendation: Provide required ongoing education for decisionmaking processes and planning.**

Professionals in a wide variety of fields are required to participate in ongoing education. Yet volunteer representatives of the community who may have no background in public policy or city planning do not have the opportunity to develop their understanding of the complex decisionmaking that takes place at the City beyond the COW. The COW handbook, which includes useful information on the community planning process, is updated annually and is available online.<sup>45</sup> Yet this document is passive, not interactive, and not widely promoted to sitting board members as a resource for them, let alone required reading as a part of any continuing education.

This lack of training results in CPGs missing their opportunity to provide input in a timely and appropriate fashion. For example, while the City has adopted the Climate Action Plan, the City has not provided CPG board members with information on how their community must adapt to meet the mode share and density goals in the plan. In addition, 600-24 states that a formal CPG recommendation on a development proposal should be submitted during the project review process and no later than the end of the public review period for the environmental document. Yet, there is frequent debate during CPG meetings as to when the appropriate time is to weigh in on a development project.

CPG board members should be provided with regular opportunities to further develop their understanding of their role within the City’s multiple decisionmaking processes. Ongoing education topics could include the development process, the scope of CPG purview, the role of CEQA and environmental review, and briefings on long-range plans already in place. While the City does offer annual training for CPG chairs, more needs to be provided on the mechanics of running meetings. In-depth training on the Brown Act and Robert’s Rules should be provided on an annual basis, whether through in-person or online trainings. Ongoing education such as the above recommended trainings should be required for both board members and chairs, and their indemnification should depend on participating in annual ongoing education, not

just the one-time COW.

**Recommendation: Require a termed-out board member to wait two years until they can run for their CPG again, without exceptions.**

600-24 should be amended to require that a termed-out board member wait two years before they serve again, without exceptions. Longtime CPG board members do have valuable experience and knowledge. While CPG board members may look forward to a termed-out board member returning after a one-year break, this dependence on longstanding board members can diminish the incentive to recruit new people. Expanding the number of years where a veteran CPG member must refrain from serving on a CPG board will open more opportunities for new people to serve.

600-24 currently provides an exception to term limits, if the number of eligible candidates is less than the number of vacant seats. These exceptions create a moral hazard for existing CPG members to not advertise elections, or to deter others from running. A clear and inviolable term limit rule will ensure that new voices have an opportunity to serve on CPGs.

## Governance

Every community in San Diego is unique, but that does not mean that every CPG should be unique in its governance and structure. Currently, a bylaw shell exists in Council Policy 600-24, allowing for each CPG to personalize important sections to what the CPG board believes is best. This leads to variation between CPGs and confusion for interested but unfamiliar community members.

While clarity on each CPG can be found by researching its bylaws, this is not a welcoming and open process for people who want to get involved. In addition, some CPGs have social media accounts or their own website while others do not.

### *Recommendations for reform*

**Recommendation: The City Auditor should conduct a review of CPGs.**

While this report provides an overview of CPGs and includes recommendations, a full internal review from the City Auditor is an appropriate next step in the process of improving CPGs. This is an appropriate role for the City Auditor, who regularly reviews the City’s practices and recommends ways to improve the City’s operations.

**Recommendation: Revise the bylaws shell in 600-24.**

600-24 requires CPGs to meet certain minimum standards, though CPGs are provided latitude on many decisions about their structure and elections. 600-24 also provides a sample bylaws shell. CPGs use those bylaws as a baseline, to amend and adjust to suit their community’s needs.

If the recommendations in this report are adopted to require more consistency for elections and CPG structure, a revised bylaws shell should also be created to guide updates to individual CPG bylaws. The updated bylaw shell would make consistency easier to achieve by providing ready language for CPGs to adopt, keeping them in compliance with the requirements of an updated 600-24.

**Recommendation: City staff should attend every CPG meeting.**

City staff should be required to attend each CPG meeting, as they are a valuable resource for CPGs. Staff should be trained to guide CPG activity toward areas that are within their legitimate scope while continuing to act as a resource for the CPG during the meetings. City staff presence should not usurp CPG authority. Instead, keeping CPGs on track with appropriate CPG business and answering CPG questions will ensure that community members who engage with CPGs are able to use their time valuably. Staff support will help CPGs to weigh in on the issues directly affecting their neighborhoods in an informed manner.

**Recommendation: Make explicit that CPGs are allowed to use social media.**

600-24 was written well ahead of the invention of social media and today it still does not discuss the role of the internet in the community planning process. While some CPGs have stand-alone websites and a social media presence, others do not. This results in wide differences between how interested community members are able to get information and become involved.

Interested community members should be able to easily find information on their CPG in order to learn about voting, running for a CPG board position, and where and when to vote. CPGs should be encouraged to create an online presence that is broadly available to community members. While addressing social media must be balanced against the limitations of the Brown Act, the City should make clear what CPGs can and should do to provide access to CPG information through social media.

## Conclusion

CPGs serve an important role to ensure community representation and involvement in planning and transportation. However, like any democratic institution, CPGs are composed of those that show up and are elected. It is necessary for the City of San Diego to encourage its advisory groups to reflect the best of our democratic values, and to fairly represent their communities.

Nationwide, a variety of options have been pioneered in other jurisdictions to promote public participation. The City of San Diego does not have to fly blind, or to reinvent the wheel. It can adopt best practices that advance the values of representative democracy in public planning decisions.

More inclusive planning processes will ensure that decisions benefit everyone. Community planning should not be an exercise in excluding new homes, or preventing new transportation improvements. Instead, public participation should help policy to benefit everyone, not just those who have longstanding influence.

There are a number of ways that CPGs can better meet the needs of the public and the challenges of moving San Diego forward. Amendments to Council Policy 600-24 can ensure that CPG elections are open and fair. Agenda reform can ensure that interested community members can participate in decisions that impact their lives, without having to sit through endless meetings and reports. Changes to term limits and continuing education requirements can ensure that new CPG members have an opportunity to serve as informed citizen planners.

The recommendations in this report include revisions to Council Policy 600-24 that the City Council and the Mayor should support. Promoting democratic participation is a value that transcends party or circumstance. With leadership from City officials, these changes will create opportunities for more community members to be involved in the local planning process. Wider and more diverse participation will ensure that our land use and transportation planning reflect the needs of the entire community.

# Endnotes

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15. Uptown Planners Committee, Minutes from March 1, 2016, available at [http://www.uptownplanners.org/yahoo\\_site\\_admin/assets/docs/160301\\_UP\\_reg\\_mtg\\_APPROVED\\_minutes.17493251.pdf](http://www.uptownplanners.org/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/160301_UP_reg_mtg_APPROVED_minutes.17493251.pdf). Note that City Special Events requires event sponsors to demonstrate support from the community for proposed street closures and traffic detour plans. The City itself shares some responsibility for the mission creep of CPG agendas.
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