



# City of Sunnyvale

**Study Issues Process Discussion  
City Council Study Session**

August 26, 2025

# From Raftelis



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- 40+ years of local government and consulting experience
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# Today's Objectives



Review analysis, preliminary observations and strategies for improvement



Receive City Council feedback

# Agenda

5:40 – 6:05 p.m.

6:05 – 6:15 p.m.

6:15 – 6:25 p.m.

6:25 – 6:35 p.m.

6:35 – 7:00 p.m.

Raftelis Presentation

Council Question #1

Council Question #2

Council Question #3

Public Comment/Discussion

# Project Objectives and Background



# Project Background

Study Issue OCM 24-02:

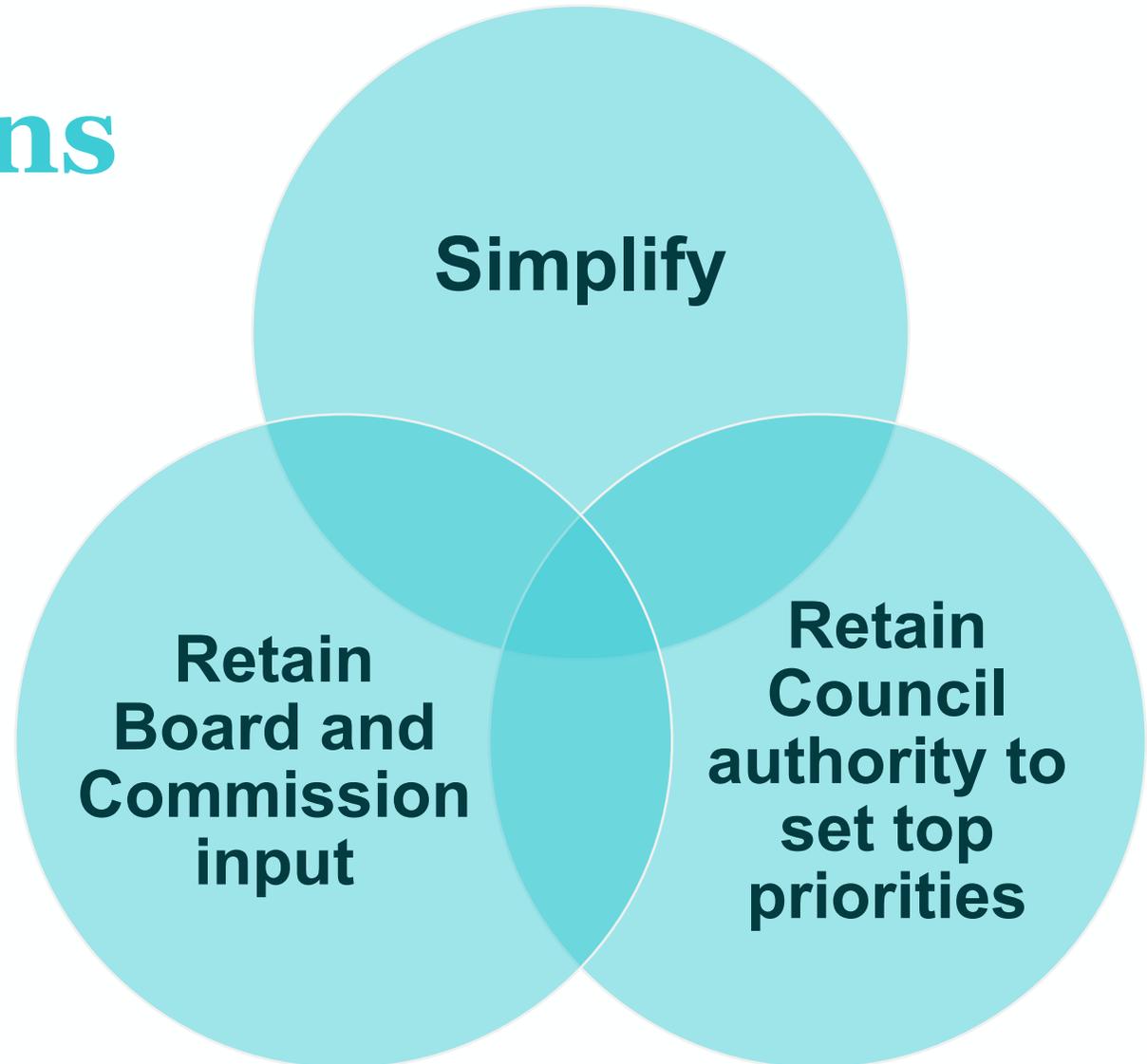
Evaluate the City of Sunnyvale Study Issues Process

## Project Objective

Conduct a comprehensive assessment of the City's longstanding study issues process to develop recommendations that lead to the **most efficient and effective approach to identify, prioritize, and analyze policy priorities.**

# Goals of Our Recommendations

**To Save Time for Everyone Involved**



# Project Methodology



# Our Approach



**City Council and Staff Interviews**



**Online Surveys of Board and Commission Members and City Staff**



**Data and Process Analysis**



**Case Study Cities and Best Practices**

# Key Themes from Information and Analysis

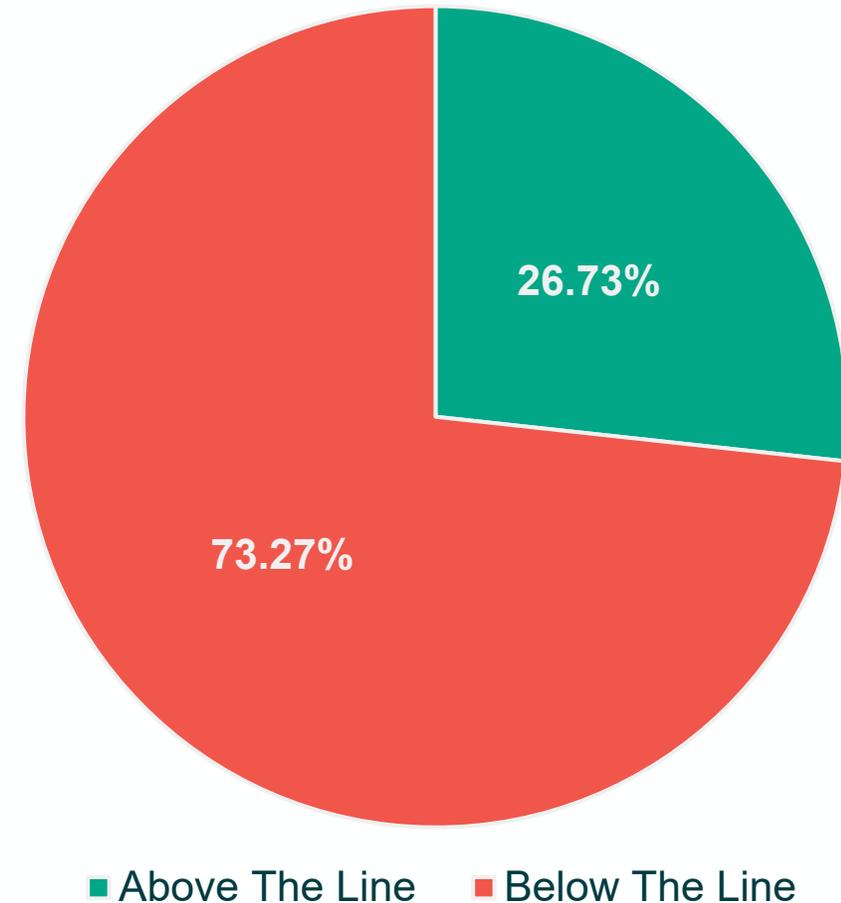
- Main theme from interviews and surveys was, “**Change It But Don’t Eliminate a Way to Prioritize**”
- Councilmembers’ key concern is the **length of time** for the process overall (from sponsorship to study completion)
- Study issues are part of a larger system but **treated as separate**
- Some items now proposed for study issues are within the City Manager’s or City Attorney’s purview to determine action and **may not need routing** through the formal prioritization process
- Case study cities have **disciplined** ways of setting priorities that are less complicated
- Councilmembers like having a way to **prioritize ideas**
- Staff’s key concerns are the amount of **time devoted to the process** and impact on delivery of core services
- Boards and Commissions want to have input, but agree the process is **overly complex**
- Study issues process is **time consuming and expensive**, and detracts from service and project delivery

# Data and Process Analysis

# Study Issues Proposals Process

On average, over the past 10 years, only **26.73%** of study issues brought to the February Workshop are approved for implementation (“Above The Line”), an average of 8 or less per year

Conversely, **73.27%** of time is spent on proposals that are not approved. **Staff time could be better spent on implementation.**



# Other Key Findings

- The vast majority of study issues brought to workshop (72.1%) are assigned to Public Works and Community Development
- Over the past five years, four boards and commissions (PRC, SC, BPAC, and PC) sponsored the majority of study issues (57.9%), but most are not ranked highly by Council
- **Of proposed study issues that are ranked Above the Line, 78.9% also require a budget supplement/request (41 of 52)**

# Proposal Process is Expensive in Time and Money

- **The study issues proposal process uses substantial City resources**
- Based upon Raftelis' review of seven study issues, proposals process takes an average of 20 months
- The City is estimated to be spending over **2,500 hours per year, or 64 weeks of staff time**, on the study issues proposal process from sponsorship to funding
  - › This is staff time that could be spent on implementation
  - › Equivalent to 1.2 FTEs of time
- The City is estimated to be spending **over \$347,000 annually in staff time** on the study issues proposal process (prior to approval)

# Study Issues Implementation Timeline Observations

## Timelines vary widely for implementation depending upon nature of each study issue

- Proposal process drivers:
  - Time on deferral list
- Implementation process drivers:
  - Consultant procurement (4-6 months)
  - External entities (e.g., Caltrans)
  - Public outreach processes
  - Staff vacancies

## Study issues timeline starts and is titled by year of first workshop and not from actual approval

- Leads to false narratives on how long the process takes
- Leads to expectations for people who think proposed study issues will happen—but they are not on staff's work plan

# City Staff's Implementation Timeline Data

- Office of City Manager began tracking start/completion data in 2020
- Based upon 44 study issues tracked, **average days from funding to completion is 762.79, or just over two years**

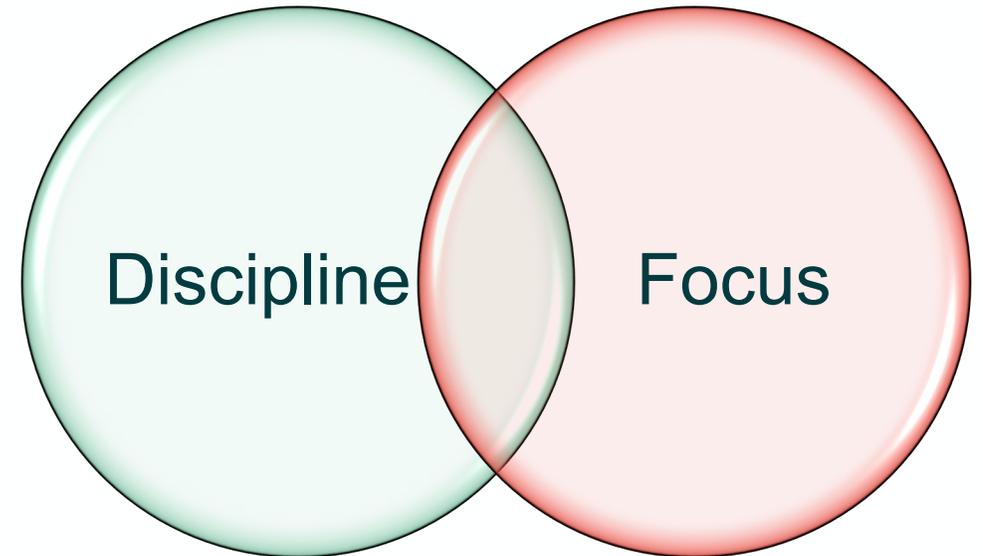
Dept.	No. of Study Issues	Average Days Funded to Completion
CDD	12	983.55
DPS	1	484.00
DPW	11	1005.55
ESD	4	690.25
FIN	2	377.50
HRD	1	1086.00
ITD	1	1027.00
LRS	5	475.20
OCM	7	347.29
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>762.79</b>

# Case Study Cities

# Best Practices

# Case Study Cities

- Elk Grove
- Fremont
- Gilroy
- Pleasanton
- Redwood City
- Rohnert Park
- San Mateo
- Victorville



# Themes from Case Study Cities

**Disciplined, streamlined process** that is adhered to – multi-year basis – but ideas are not formally deferred or carried over to next prioritization cycle

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**No involvement of boards and commissions** in Council priority setting

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**Alignment** with a strategic plan or adopted goals and priorities

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**Set priorities with respect for ongoing work** of departments; understand that day-to-day operations must be well managed – and that takes time

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**Process for issues to be raised at Council meetings, but used sparingly**, with discussions with City Manager about impact on workload

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**Majority Council vote** to add items

# Key *Differences* Between Case Study Cities and Sunnyvale

Case study cities have methods for Council to set priorities—but **not as time-consuming or complex as Sunnyvale's**

**None of the cities invite Boards and Commissions** to propose projects for staff

# Best Practices Regarding Roles

## Council

- Set policy
- Adopt budget
- Appoint City Manager and City Attorney
- Stay connected with community concerns

## City Manager

- Manage operations
- Appoint and supervise staff
- Recommend policy
- Recommend budget

## Boards and Commissions

- Carry out designated assignments
- Policy advice to City Council in specific areas – mechanism to identify is in annual B/C Work Plans that Council approves

# For Success – Case Study Cities Minimize Adding New Projects During the Year and Follow These Steps

## Focus

- Do not take staff time away from established priorities and work plans that support those priorities

## Full Council Support

- Once decisions are made, support them and the implementation involved

## Choices

- What drops off or is delayed if something is added?

# Best Practice Criteria for Adding Projects Mid-Year

**Emergency**  
(natural disaster, pandemic, civil unrest)

**New outside funding**  
opportunity that is time sensitive

**New multi-agency opportunity** that cannot be delayed

**Community safety** issue that must be addressed in near term

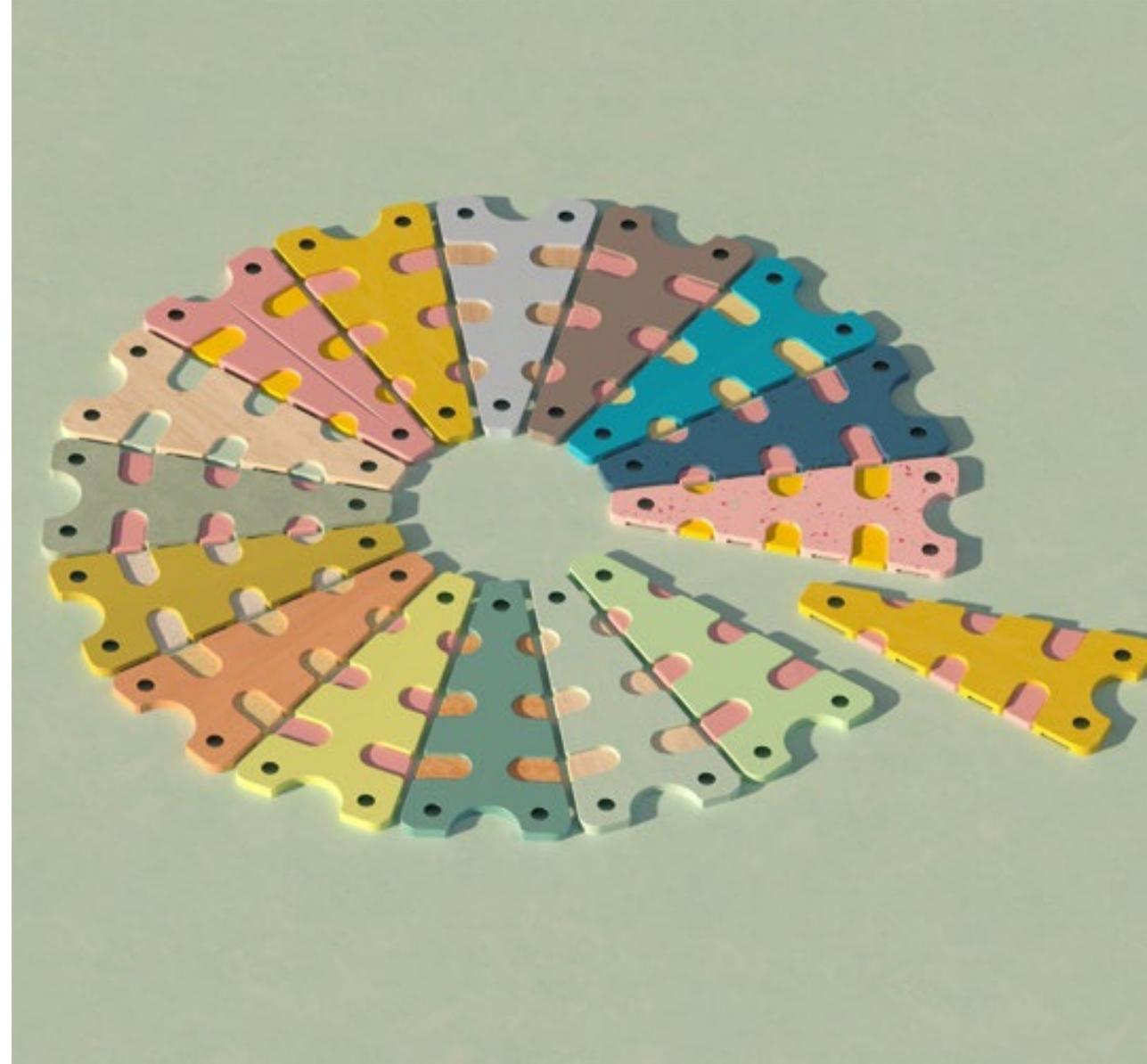
Changes in **laws or mandates**

# Preliminary Strategies for Improvement



# Context

Study Issues  
are Part of the  
Larger System  
*but Treated as  
Separate*



# Observations

- 1) Cost of study issue proposal process is high—time spent could be used implementing priorities
- 2) Significant time is spent by staff in meetings and report writing on proposals that do not get approved
- 3) Board and Commission process is unique and time-consuming— atypical role
- 4) Study issues are part of larger context but treated separately
- 5) Expectations raised that proposals will ultimately be implemented—not necessarily so
- 6) Terminology is confusing (are issues just being “studied”?)
- 7) Tracking and visibility could be easier and better
- 8) No need for two forms
- 9) Some proposed items can be handled by the City Manager or City Attorney
- 10) Strategic Priorities should be reviewed every two years
- 11) Major pieces are in place for a comprehensive Strategic Plan



# 14 Strategies for Improvement

## Three Categories

- A. Study Issues Proposal Process
- B. Process to Complete Study Issues
- C. Related Prioritization and Resourcing Processes

# Strategies for Improvement: Study Issues Proposal Process

## A. Study Issues Proposals Process

1	Eliminate most study issue papers pertaining to the study issues proposal process
2	Review the board and commission input process
3	Eliminate the January public hearing on potential Council study issues and budget proposals
4	Expand the focus of the February Council workshop to incorporate a review of key projects
5	Modify terminology for clarity
6	Eliminate any deferral of study issues
7	Create one consolidated, brief form for study issues and budget proposals to be submitted in January
8	Prepare a clear description of the new Council Priority Projects that are recommended in the budget, for review and approval by the City Council

# Strategies for Improvement: Process to Complete Study Issues

## B. Process to Complete Study Issues

9

Establish a transparent and informative reporting dashboard

10

Provide targeted project update discussions with the Council on an as-needed basis

11

Identify key tasks or phases that would be value-added for tracking staff time

# Strategies for Improvement: Related Prioritization and Resourcing Processes

## C. Related Prioritization and Resourcing Processes

- |    |   |
|----|---|
| 12 | Conduct a biennial review of the Council's Strategic Priorities   |
| 13 | Create a comprehensive Strategic Plan                             |
| 14 | Apply an agreed-upon set of criteria for adding projects mid-year |

# Suggested Terminology Changes

## *For Clarity*

### Current

### New

- Study Issue → Council Priority Projects
- Strategic Priorities → Strategic Goals
- Above the line/below the line → Delete – *replace with City Manager's recommendation for items to be included in the budget*

# Reframe the February Workshop

**Review the Strategic Priorities only every two years to see if conditions have changed**

1

Review existing major projects

2

City Manager to provide financial update and guidance on capacity for Council and staff to take on new projects

3

Review the new proposals for Council Priority Project (formerly study issues) to be considered

4

Staff would prepare reports on subset

5

City Manager utilizes that information for his recommendations for the budget (returns to May workshop)

# Board and Commission Input Option #1

## Individual Ideas are Shared by Board and Commission Members to City Council

- No form filled out by Board and Commission members
- Board and Commission members, as well as members of the public, could suggest ideas individually to Councilmembers to put forward in February, consistent with other cities' practices
- No discussion or ranking at advisory body meetings
- Councilmembers would determine whether to create proposals from the suggestions
- **Each Councilmember would be able to submit up to three (3) proposals individually each year in advance of the February Workshop**
  - A maximum total of 21 proposals for review at the February Workshop

Under either option, no ranking of proposals by boards and commissions

# Board and Commission Input Option #2

## Each Board or Commission Makes One Submittal Per Year

- By end of December, the advisory body would determine (by majority vote) if it would like to suggest ***one issue to move forward*** to the February Workshop
- Staff would write a one to two paragraph description of the proposal for Council discussion at the February Workshop
- Up to a total of 10 proposals could be submitted each year from Boards and Commissions
- **The number of proposals submitted by each Councilmember would be limited to two each year**
  - A maximum total of 24 proposals to review at the February Workshop

Under either option, no ranking of proposals by Boards and Commissions

# Summary of Proposed Revised Process

1. **One form** (combined “Council Priority Project” proposal/budget proposal) submitted by Council members for 2-3 study issues in January
2. Submitted form would be **reviewed by the City Manager** to determine whether the desired project could be incorporated into City operations in some other way (“just do it”)  
*January public hearing eliminated*
3. **February Workshop retained**
4. Staff would prepare **reports on the agreed-upon subset of study issues** (“Council Priority Projects”) with majority Council support after the February Workshop
5. City Manager’s **recommendations** on what is able to be added to the budget and workplan retained and presented at **Budget Workshop in May**
6. Final determination of “**Council Priority Projects**” made with budget adoption in June; **nothing is deferred**
7. City Manager’s Office responsible for **tracking progress and providing status updates** to Council

# Summary of Proposed Revised Process



# Questions for City Council

- What did you hear from the case study cities that can be applied here?
- Does Option 1 or Option 2 strike the best balance between obtaining Board and Commission input and simplifying the process?
- What strategies for improvement do you think will work well? What do you have concerns about?

# Next Steps

- Prepare report, incorporating Council input
- Present to City Council on October 21

# Thank you!

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