

CITY OF SANTA BARBARA

Commissions, Committees, and Boards

SUMMARY

The 2015-2016 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) was asked to investigate potential conflicts of interest among the City of Santa Barbara's (City) appointed commissions, committees, and boards and the influence of their members on the City's policies. The City has functioning advisory groups to the City Council, Charter Boards, and Commissions required by Article VIII of the City Charter. The City also makes appointments to four groups created by California State law. The Jury looked into the very large number of these advisory groups, their responsibilities and their influence. The Jury considered the following questions: Do conflicts of interest exist; have some of these entities outlived their usefulness; do some of them have overlapping mandates? The Jury concluded that the answer to these questions is sometimes yes.

BACKGROUND

The Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) received a complaint questioning an advisory committee member's influence on the City of Santa Barbara's (City) Council decisions. The complainant was concerned that these positions may attract volunteers with potentially prejudicial motives or with conflicts of interest, real or perceived. The complainant questioned whether the objective decision making process of the City Council has been influenced unduly, resulting in disregard of the public good.

The City of Santa Barbara has at least 38 commissions, committees, and boards that all provide advice to the Santa Barbara City Council (Council). The Jury noted that the numbers of groups do not always agree in various parts of the City's websites. There are 11 committees that were part of the original Santa Barbara City Charter. These City Charter Committees often have decision making mandates. A clear distinction should be made between these decision making bodies and those which are purely advisory.

METHODOLOGY

The Jury interviewed a present committee member, senior City employees, former City employees, City engineers, a City planner, a City zoning ordinance officer, and an ex-council member. The Jury reviewed requested documents from the City, the City's web pages, and the website of the Fair Political Practices Commission.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

Engaged citizens volunteer to serve on those advisory groups in which they have interest and knowledge. Some boards require detailed knowledge of the field such as the Board of Architectural Review. Some boards denote an interest in the subject, such as Art in Public Places. All of the advisory groups require a moderate to great amount of personal time and commitment. In several of the advisory groups, participation has historically been a stepping stone to running for public office. The Jury noted that some groups have outlived their mandate, such as the 2006 Measure P Committee (marijuana enforcement priority). Others appear to have overlapping mandates.

No process is evident that calls for periodic review of the effectiveness and/or continued need for these committees. Additionally, there is no “sunset” rule in place whereby the committee’s mandate would be revoked automatically unless it is extended intentionally.

Number of Vacancies

How many vacancies are there? According to the City’s website, there are currently 43 open positions on its various advisory committees. Currently, for example, 15 committees have no vacancies, and one has six. Among the four State mandated appointments, two have current vacancies; the Housing Authority Commission has three vacancies, the Central Coast Commission for Senior Citizens has one. Table 1 shows which committees currently have unfilled positions.

CITY OF SANTA BARBARA

Table 1 - City Committees, Boards, and Commissions

Committee Title	Committee Size	Vacancies*	Required By
Access Advisory Committee	7	0	Optional
Airport Commission	7	0	City Charter
Airport Public Art Advisory Comm.	7	0	Optional
Architectural Board of Review	7	0	City Charter
Arts Advisory Committee	7	0	Optional
Building & Fire Code Board of Appeals	8	1	Optional
Central Coast Commission for Senior Citizens	12, of which Santa Barbara is 1	1	State Mandate
Civil Service Commission	5	0	City Charter
Community Development & Human Services Committee	13	3	Optional
Community Events & Festivals Comm.	7	0	Optional
Creeks Advisory Committee	7	2	Optional
Downtown Parking Committee	7	1	Optional
Fire & Police Commission	5	0	Optional
Fire & Police Pension Commission	5	2	Optional
Front Country Trails Task Force	6-All City/County Empl	No Data	Optional
Golf Advisory Committee	7	Outdated Data	Optional
Harbor Commission	7	2	City Charter
Historic Landmarks Commission	9	0	City Charter
Housing Authority Commission	7	3	State Mandate
Integrated Pest Management Advisory Committee	5	No data	Optional
Library Advisory Committee - County	18, Santa Barbara provides 1	2, one from Santa Barbara	Optional
Library Board	5	2	City Charter
Living Wage Advisory Committee	7	2	Optional
Measure P Committee	7	4	Optional
Metropolitan Transit District Board	7, Santa Barbara provides 2	0	State Mandate
Mosquito & Vector Management Dist.	1	0	State Mandate
Neighborhood Advisory Council	13	4	Optional
Noise Abatement Committee	No data	No data	Optional
Oversight board	7	0	Optional
Parks & Recreation Commission	7	2	City Charter
Planning Commission	7	0	City Charter
Rental Housing Mediation Board	10	3	Optional
SB Arts & Crafts Show Advisory Comm.	5	2	Optional
Santa Barbara Youth Council	15	6	Optional
Sign Committee	6	0	Optional
Single Family Design Board	7	1	Optional
Sister Cities Board	3	0	Optional
Staff Hearing Officer	1	0	Optional
Street Tree Advisory Committee	5	0	Optional
Sustainability Committee	7 City Employees	0	Optional
Transportation & Circulation Committee	7	0	Optional
Water Commissioners Board of	5	0	City Charter

*As of the date of this report.

Application Process

An application to fill a vacancy on a committee, commission, or board is submitted to the Council. The application form is available on this website: (<http://www.santabarbaraca.gov/gov/brdcomm/app.asp>). The applicant must provide personal information and agree to provide financial information if requested. The Council reviews the applications, interviews applicants, and makes appointments twice yearly. Applicants are interviewed at City Council meetings open to the public. Appointments are later made, by a majority vote, also at City Council meetings open to the public¹. In most instances, an applicant must be a City of Santa Barbara resident. Exceptions exist in cases where the committee advises an entity whose jurisdiction covers areas outside of the City limits. (Examples are Metropolitan Transit District, Library Advisory Committee, Central Coast Commission for Senior Citizens, and Santa Barbara Youth Council.)

Conflict of Interest

How do conflict of interest laws affect the various City committees? The answer to this question varies, depending on which committee is being discussed. They generally fall into one of three categories:

1. Twenty groups for which ethics and conflict of interest training is mandated by California State law (Assembly Bill 1234, enacted in 2005); and City Resolution 14-068.
2. Fourteen groups which are exempt from AB 1234 but are still required by the City to conform to ethics requirements by City Resolution 13-006.
3. Remaining groups who are exempt from the AB 1234 law but are required by the City's Code of Conduct to follow all State conflict of interest laws.

The Jury was told that appointment to the advisory boards and committees is inherently a political process and having committee members representing "special interests" is not uncommon, and not necessarily undesirable. The Jury was also told that a separate analysis might be required to determine if a conflict of interest exists in a given situation. The selection process can result in politically motivated appointments. A volunteer's employment in a field closely related to their advisory role may well enhance their livelihood and could also be a benefit to the citizens of the City. A "personal financial effects" rule requires a volunteer to abstain from discussion and voting in select situations.

Although, the decision making authority of the various committees, commissions, and boards is varied, the level of concern for conflicts of interest should not vary.

¹ Guidelines for the City of Santa Barbara Advisory Groups, pages 10 and 11, February 12, 2013
<https://www.santabarbaraca.gov/civicax/filebank/blobdload.aspx?BlobID=11620>

Volunteer groups are often advisors to the City Council. The burden of objective and impartial decision making is on the City Council, whose members answer to the public. The City Council members have had mandatory ethics training and make open-meeting public decisions that the voting public can scrutinize. The Council should consider whether the same conflict of interest and ethics training required of Council members should be added as a requirement to the remaining advisory groups, as well.

The City of Santa Barbara's advisory groups are subject to the Brown Act. They conduct announced meetings with an agenda and are all open to the public. Meeting minutes are recorded by a City employee and posted on the City's web site. Each advisory group has a City employee as a liaison along with support staff, who are also City employees. The City bears the cost of each advisory group and their support staff.

Is there a “sunset” provision in place?

The Jury determined that no provision exists for eliminating advisory groups that may have outlived their usefulness. As a result, bureaucratic inertia may set in and the committees just continue in existence, accomplishing nothing other than expending the time of support staff and tax payer money. The Jury recommends City Council review the functioning of the committees and their mandates every five years.

Are all of these committees necessary? Do their mandates overlap?

The Jury’s answer to the first question is, probably not, but this decision is up to the City Council. The community may not need, for example, separate advisory committees for Airport Public Art oversight, Arts Advisory (except the airport), and oversight of the Arts and Crafts show. The purpose of the website is to provide data to prospective volunteer committee members to help them decide whether to apply. On the other hand the Water Commission site is well done and contains much useful information.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1

The City of Santa Barbara has at least 38 commissions, committees, and boards, some of which may have outlived their purpose. No review process exists concerning their relevance.

Recommendation 1 (Sunset Rule)

That the City of Santa Barbara City Council review at least every five years the functioning, productivity, and relevance, of all advisory groups and continue, merge, or delete their mandates.

Finding 2

The City of Santa Barbara’s website does not make a clear distinction between decision making and advisory bodies.

Recommendation 2

That the City of Santa Barbara City Council makes a clear distinction which Committees and Boards have decision-making mandates and those that are advisory only to the City of Santa Barbara City Council.

Finding 3

The City of Santa Barbara's website does not contain current information about committees, boards, and commissions.

Recommendation 3

That the City of Santa Barbara City Council update the section of the website dealing with committees, boards, and commissions.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

Pursuant to *California Penal Code Section 933 and 933.05*, the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury requests the Santa Barbara City Council to respond to the enumerated findings and recommendations within the 90 day statutory time limit:

City of Santa Barbara City Council – 90 days

Findings: 1, 2, and 3

Recommendations: 1, 2, and 3