

## San Diego OKs new policies to accelerate infrastructure projects but reduce City Council scrutiny

By David Garrick

SAN DIEGO — San Diego approved comprehensive policy changes Tuesday that will allow infrastructure projects to be built several months faster but reduce City Council scrutiny and oversight powers.

City Council members voted 7-1 to approve the changes, which sharply limit their own power and increase the mayor's. Council approvals are required for only the most expensive projects under the new policies, and far fewer cost increases now need council approval.

The changes, which city officials predict will shave four to six months off the time needed to complete typical projects, also allow consultants to work on more projects and accumulate more fees without approval from the council.

Supporters say giving the mayor wider authority makes sense at a time when the city's infrastructure spending is sharply rising and is expected to keep rising.

They also stress that it has been more than 10 years since San Diego has updated for inflation the limits on the mayor's authority to pursue projects without council approval.

Critics say city officials are exaggerating how much the changes will accelerate projects. They also say council oversight would shrink too much.

More spending is expected because the city faces a \$4 billion backlog of crucial infrastructure projects, partly because many projects built during a city growth spurt in the 1950s and 1960s are reaching the end of their expected lifespans.

And the city is expecting a large influx of federal money under the \$1 trillion infrastructure law President Biden spearheaded last year.

San Diego's annual spending on infrastructure has risen from \$363 million in fiscal year 2012 to \$542.5 million in fiscal year 2022, which ended June 30.

Partly because of construction of the city's Pure Water sewage purification system, infrastructure spending over the next five years is expected to be \$4.12 billion. And Mayor Todd Gloria's staff said annual spending could surpass \$1 billion with more federal dollars.

"Infrastructure is one of the key things we are trying to catch up on and there are limited dollars," said Councilmember Joe LaCava.

LaCava also stressed that because of inflation, the mayor won't have any more authority than the city's mayor had when the amounts were last updated in 2012.

"We're not talking about expanding mayoral authority, we're just actually right-sizing it," he said, contending that project delays waiting for council approval are a big problem. "That is wasted time and wasted money that doesn't accrue to anybody's benefit."

Councilmember Marni von Wilpert, who helped oversee negotiations of the changes as chair of the council's infrastructure committee, said the policy changes adopted Tuesday should be viewed as a hard-fought compromise.

"The contract thresholds they asked for were much higher," said von Wilpert, referring to the staff of Mayor Todd Gloria.

Councilmember Monica Montgomery Steppe, who cast the lone "no" vote, said council approval is only one small component of the bureaucracy that slows down infrastructure projects.

"To take council and what we approve out of this large picture of what it takes to deliver a capital improvement project is not in our best interests at this time," she said.

Council President Sean Elo-Rivera said he shared some of her concerns, especially if a more unscrupulous mayor than Gloria is elected in the future.

"The decisions we make can't just be made with the thought of who is in positions now, but who might be in positions in the future," he said. "It's not about whether we believe in the relationship between this council and this mayor, but about the dynamics that will exist between any council and any mayor."

But Elo-Rivera voted to approve the changes.

The proposal raises the threshold for council approval of a consulting contract from \$1 million to \$3 million. City staff says that increase makes sense, because the average cost of a consulting contract has risen from \$650,000 in 2015 to \$2.5 million today.

Other changes include raising the cumulative limit on fees a consultant can receive in a particular year, without council approval, from \$1 million to \$5 million.