

City Charters: An Overview

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The National Civic League: A long history of innovation...

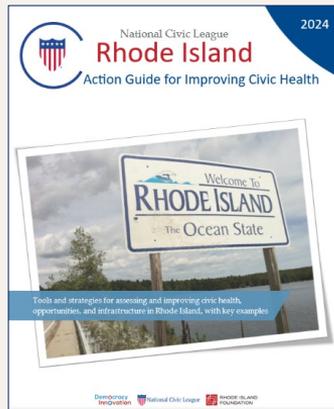
Founded in 1894 by Teddy Roosevelt, Louis Brandeis, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Mary Munford, NCL established the Model City Charter, city manager form of government, and other reforms to fight corruption, end patronage, and advance public health.

The mission of the National Civic League is to advance civic engagement to create equitable, thriving communities through key programs: charter reform, community assistance, celebrate engagement at the All-America City Award, and elevate community work in the National Civic Review.



...now directed toward 21st C needs and goals

The Civic League works with communities to improve public meetings, measure civic engagement, and strengthen civic infrastructure.



Better Public Meetings project

Process and timeline

The project process and timeline is divided into four stages:

- CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE SCAN**
 - Interview community organizations and government staff.
 - Launch a scorecard to rate public meetings.
- COLLABORATE**
 - Share the findings with the community and hold a visioning exercise.
- DISCUSS IDEAS**
 - Work with civic engagement practitioners, city managers, staff and elected officials to discuss prospects for better public meetings.
- INTEGRATE INNOVATIONS**
 - Continue monitoring approaches and tools that uniquely address the community's needs.

National Civic League

OUR WORK ▾ EVENTS & PROGRAMS ▾ RESOURCES ▾ ABOUT ▾ SUPPORT ▾

VIEWING All Categories ▾

Explore All Fifty States (and D.C.) on the Healthy Democracy Ecosystem Map!

It includes groups working on a wide range of priorities, including: service and volunteering, civic learning, voter engagement, civic media, deliberation and participation, electoral reform, organizing, connecting across differences, and civic technology. More states, data, and filter functionality coming soon!

The [U.S. Democracy Hub](#) complements this Map by providing extensive financial data on foundations and nonprofit organizations.

9,912
Groups Mapped

79
Major Networks/Coalitions

57
Healthy Democracy Goals

Add Your Organization

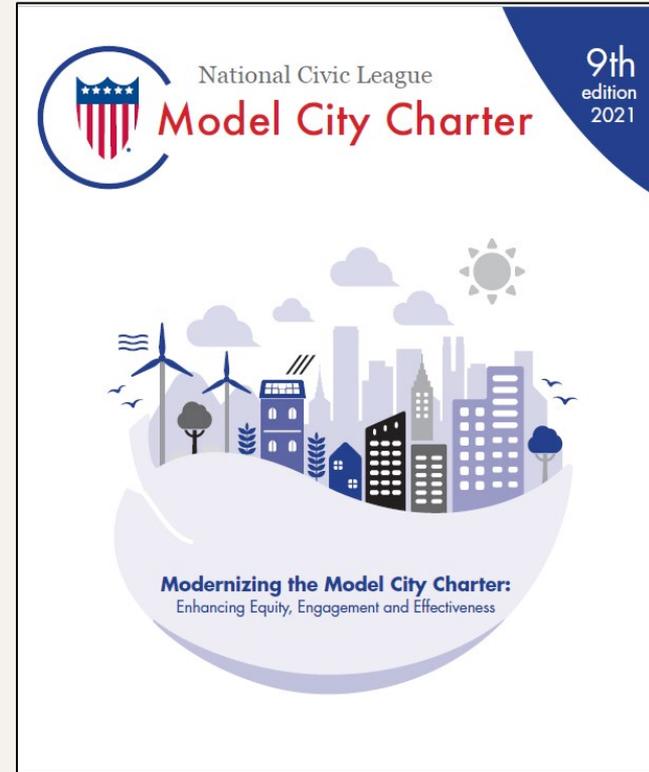
The 9th edition of the Model City Charter

The Charter

- Used for over 120 years – city-manager form
- Emphasis on equity and engagement

Articles of 9th ed:

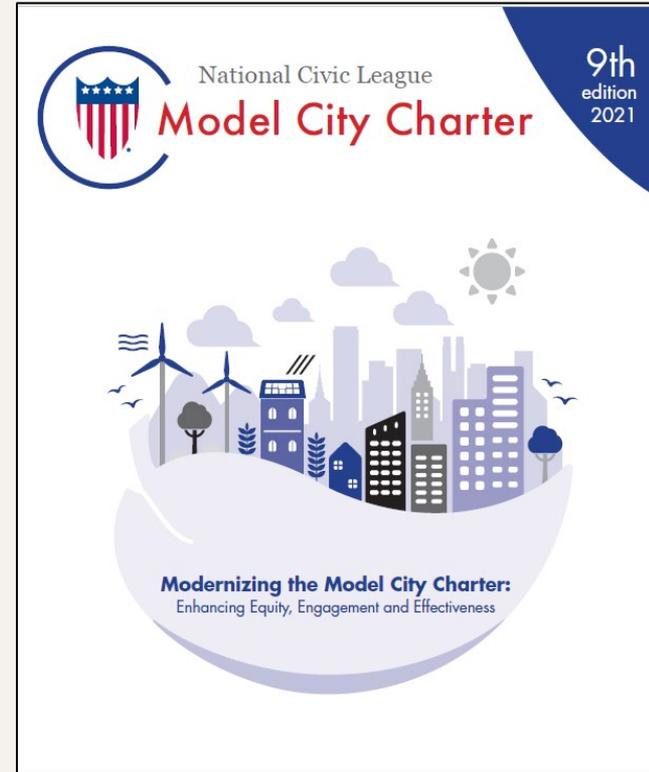
- Preamble, Powers of the City, City Council, City Manager, Departments, Offices, Agencies, Financial Management, Elections, Public Engagement, General Provisions, Charter Amendment, Transition and Severability, Elections and voting, Roles of city departments, Equity, Engagement, Powers of the City



What is a City Charter

- A foundational governing document of a municipality – the local constitution – sets policy principles and values
- The source of municipal **authority** – defines powers
- Government's **structure** - composition
- **Procedures** for elections, legislation, finances, ethics, public engagement etc. – authorization to conduct work

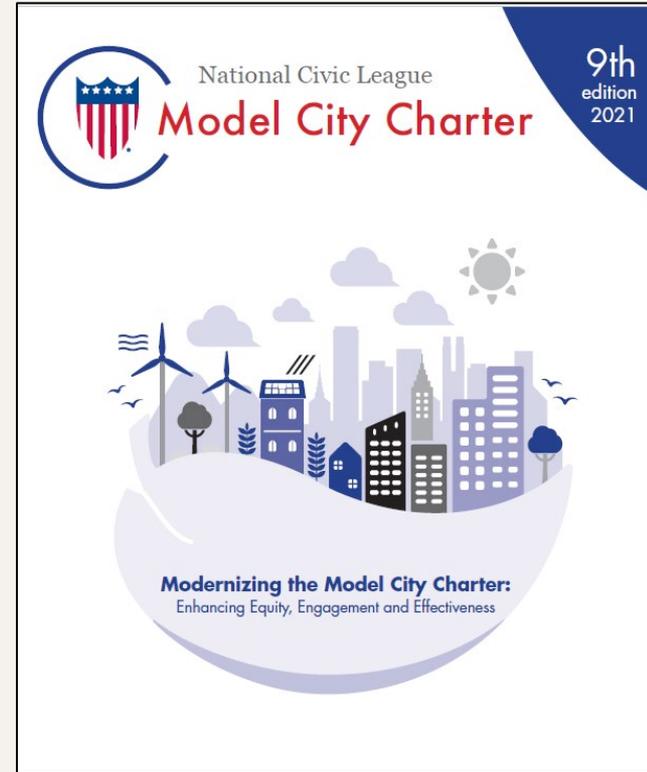
- *****Foundational, durable, structural*****



What is an Ordinance

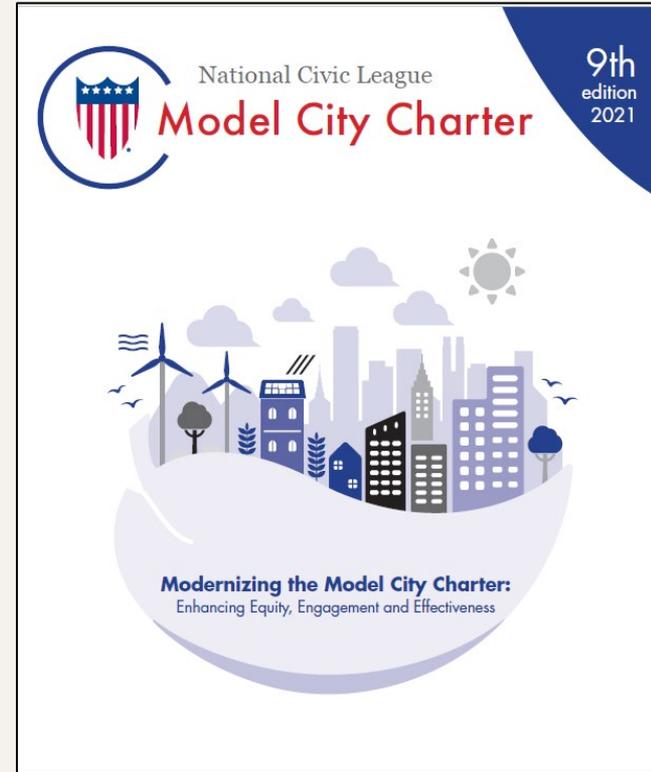
- A local law adopted by the council that is binding, enforceable and regulates policy areas.
- They implement charter-level authority, create enforceable rules for residents, businesses, city operations
- Provide legal mechanisms for taxation, zoning, public safety
- MCC – ordinances: establishing or amending administrative code, creating/abolishing departments, levying taxes, setting penalties, regulating land use, borrowing money, granting franchise, amending/appealing past ordinances

- *****Flexible for revision based on circumstances*****



What is a City Code

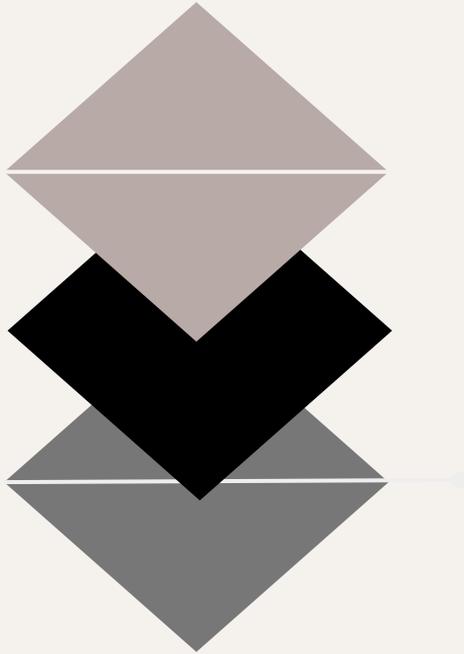
- The organized, codified collection of all ordinances and regulations bound by law.
- Purpose – to make laws accessible and organized, provide a single reference point, to consolidate legislation coherently via chapters
- It compiles laws – the authority comes from ordinances that make up the code and the charter empowers them
- *****If referenced often, in the code.*****



Summary

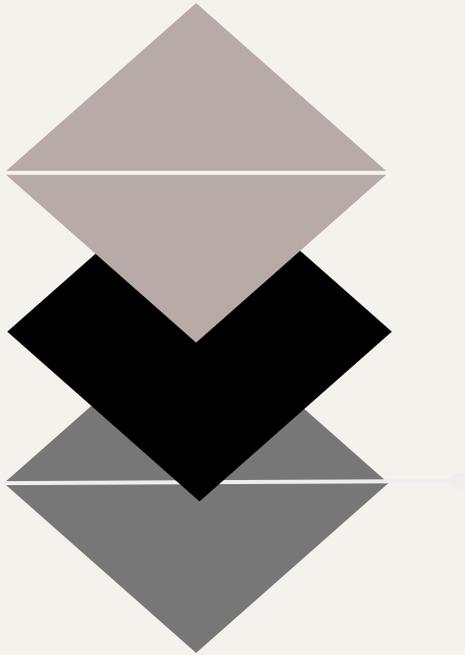
Document	Purpose	Level	How Changed	Examples
Charter	Constitutional framework of city government	Highest	Public vote / charter commission	Government structure, powers, elections
Ordinance	Local law adopted by council	Mid-level	Council legislative process	Zoning, taxes, penalties, departments
City Code	Organized compilation of ordinances and regulations	Reference	Updated as new ordinances are passed	Zoning code, traffic code, building code

Preventing Charter Bloat: Do's



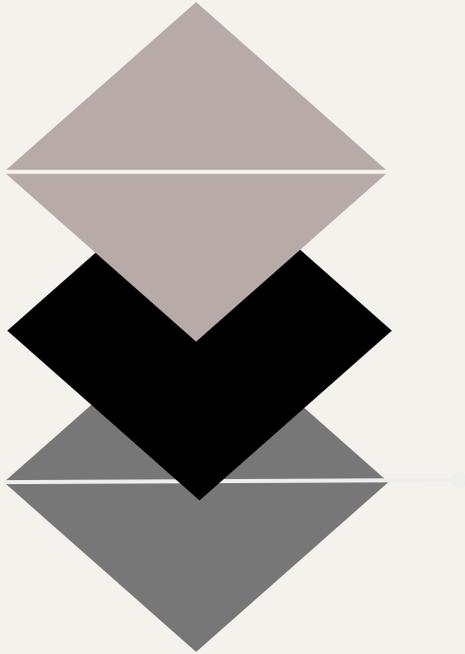
- Use plain language and concise, broad articles – avoid language that can be interpreted too restrictively or risks omission
- Provide guarantees of public values, limits on governmental overreach
- Channel detail into ordinances or admin codes
- Include review mechanisms (periodic) – retain structural clarity and democratic safeguards
- Build in flexibility through enabling language rather than enumerating every possible legislative function

Preventing Charter Bloat: Don'ts

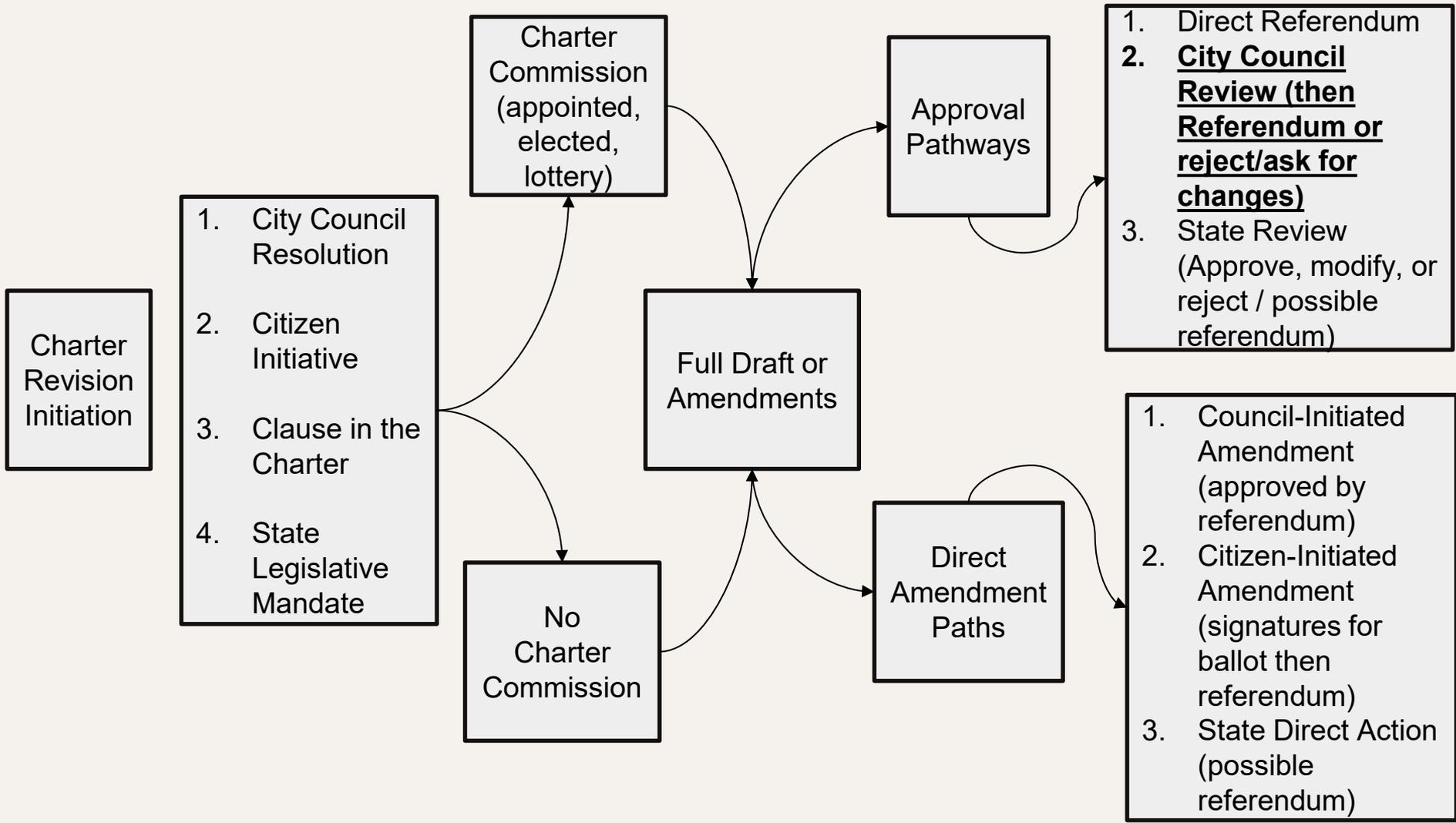


- Use the charter for short-term policy fixes
- Freeze the city in time
- Leave important values unspecified or under-protected
- Make it hard to revise procedures without a charter amendment
- Use the charter where ordinances or the admin code should be used
- Implement partisan applications

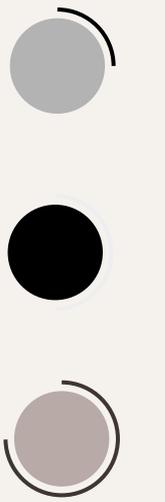
Determining What Goes Where



- Is it structural? Who has power, how elections work, and the form of government, provide details of how these look for the sake of the operation of government and stability? (charter)
- Is it a core value or safeguard, something that can be specified to set direction but broad enough to adapt? (charter)
- Is it about how a department carries out work, tasks, processes, and day-to-day operations? (ordinance)
- Can change be done through policy, and regularly? (ordinance)



Embedding Equity and Participation in the Charter Revision Process - **BEFORE**

- Start with community input before drafting
 - Leverage in-person and digital opportunities
 - Run a community survey
 - Host (a) community listening session(s)
 - Innovate the commissioner selection process (i.e. hybrid civic lottery and appointment, or full civic lottery) – include youth and the underserved
- 

Embedding Equity and Participation in the Charter Revision Process - **DURING**



- Gauge the community as the process is happening, and iterate proposed changes



- Beyond a public hearing – reformat traditional public town halls to have deliberation



- Host targeted sessions with local groups, led by local groups



- Use online digital crowdsourcing – like pol.is, a survey, email etc.
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Embedding Equity and Participation in the Charter Revision Process - **AFTER**



- Evaluate the process – offer a civic scorecard at public meetings (bit.ly/NCLscorecard)



- Work on community outreach with local partners (libraries etc.) leading to a possible referendum

Engagement

Commissions and provisions on how they can have meaningful input/influence, requirements for public input on budgets and other items—including potentially an annual citizens assembly for the budget, system of registered neighborhood associations and official input, provisions for public input on strategic plans, etc.

Ex: NY Civic Engagement Commission, Brookings, or Detroit Community Advisory Councils

Equity

Statement of charter principles that includes equity, gender-neutral language in the charter and beyond, requirement that budget proposals from departments address equity, provisions for outreach to underrepresented populations, departmental requirements to consider equity in planning and services, requirement that cabinets and other leaders reflect the diversity of the population.

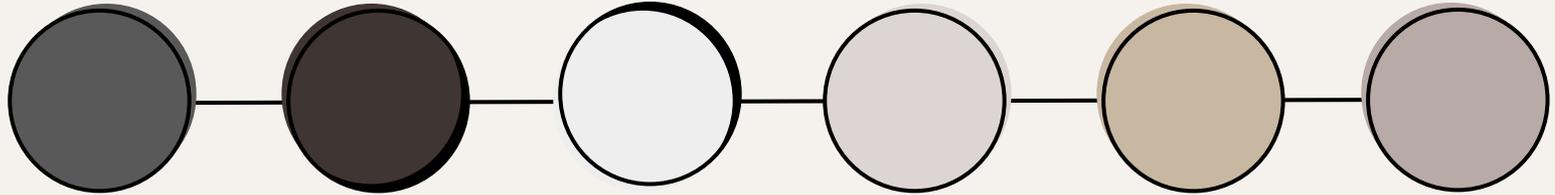
Ex. Cleveland Community Police Commission

Inserting Engagement and Equity in the Charter

Institutionalizing Democratic
Innovation (PB, CAs,
community engagement)

Citizen-involved
monitoring and equity
oversight

Recurring charter
review with resident
participation



Charter
mandated Race
and Equity
(dept/office)

Independent
redistricting

Renovating
existing civic
infrastructure