

Summary of the Santa Monica City Council Meeting of October 28, 2025

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Core Points

1. Santa Monica City Council Meeting Context and Procedures

- The meeting opened with acknowledgments of the land of the Gabrieleno and Tongva peoples, emphasizing respect and partnership with the indigenous community.
- Council members conducted roll call, addressed agenda modifications, and managed public input sessions, including in-person and phone participation.
- Public comments were structured to allow concerns on agenda and non-agenda items, with limitations on council action regarding off-agenda issues.
- Consent calendar items were reviewed and adopted with some items pulled for discussion, particularly regarding historic property preservation agreements.

2. Public Input Themes and Community Concerns

- Residents expressed frustration about transparency, community engagement, and decision-making related to housing, public safety, and economic vitality.
- Many speakers urged for more effective strategies addressing homelessness, behavioral health facilities, and bridge housing projects, emphasizing the need for clinical support and community input.
- Concerns were raised about perceived inequities in housing facility placement, with wealthier neighborhoods seen as protected and lower-income areas bearing disproportionate burdens.
- Calls for increased police presence, public safety, and economic revitalization were frequent, alongside requests for improvements in city services and infrastructure.
- Several commenters highlighted the importance of historic preservation, cultural programming, and the role of libraries in community vitality.

3. Historic Property Preservation and Mills Act Discussion

- The Mills Act program offers tax incentives to property owners who maintain and restore historic buildings in Santa Monica.
- Staff presented data on the program's financial impact, noting revenue loss to the city and other public entities but emphasizing the cultural and community benefits.
- Council members discussed the need for cost-benefit analyses, potential caps on tax benefits, and fee structures to sustain the program.
- Legal constraints require approval of Mills Act contracts if certain findings are met; however, the council debated the possibility of future program adjustments.
- Questions arose about the balance between public benefit and private gain, the visibility of historic properties, and the accessibility of these properties to the public.

4. Santa Monica Realignment Plan

- The city manager and executive team introduced a comprehensive "realignment plan" addressing public safety, economic revitalization, housing stability, and organizational health.
- Key priorities include increasing police presence downtown, improving clean streets, reopening branch libraries, modernizing permitting processes, and reducing fees for outdoor dining.
- The plan targets reducing structural deficits, enhancing revenue through parking fees, ambulance billing, digital signage, and potential parcel taxes.
- Investments in infrastructure, such as urban forestry, streetscape improvements, and vision zero traffic safety programs, are integral to the plan.
- The plan also involves expanding code enforcement, vacant property and rent registry programs, and pursuing strategic housing development in the downtown core.
- Organizational culture reform is emphasized, with values of humility, integrity, motivation, and care guiding the city workforce.
- The city projects fiscal stability and balanced budgets by fiscal year 2027-28 with continued transparency and public reporting commitments.

5. Public Safety and Policing Enhancements

- The plan includes reopening a police substation downtown and expanding patrol forces, including specialized units for crime impact and traffic enforcement.
- Additional public safety officers will be deployed to parks and popular public spaces to improve order and safety.
- Collaboration with Metro Police aims to improve security on transit platforms.
- Expansion of diversion and alternative treatment programs (e.g., SAMO Bridge, Step Court) is planned to address misdemeanor filings and support vulnerable populations.
- Traffic enforcement efforts have resulted in significant increases in citations and arrests, including for illegal drug use and firearms offenses.

6. Community Engagement and Transparency Challenges

- Public comments and council members acknowledged past deficiencies in community engagement, especially regarding housing and behavioral health projects.
- Recent controversies over bridge housing on Ocean Avenue highlighted the need for earlier and more transparent communication.
- The council directed city management to work with LA County and state agencies to improve coordination, accountability, and community input on housing projects.
- Legal constraints related to fair housing laws and state housing element requirements limit the city's discretion in siting supportive housing, but efforts aim to balance compliance with community concerns.
- Amendments to council motions emphasized protecting vulnerable populations, maintaining confidentiality where required by law, and ensuring transparency on project timelines after termination of controversial projects.

7. Economic Development and Cultural Programming

- Support was expressed for expanding entertainment zones, including the downtown core, pier, and business improvement districts (BIDs).
- Initiatives include large-format activations, monthly programmed events, and a planned large-scale music festival.

- A peer-to-peer ferry service proposal aims to connect Santa Monica to Malibu, Marina del Rey, Long Beach, and San Pedro, enhancing regional transit and emergency evacuation options.
- Discussions about a beach gondola system surfaced but faced skepticism regarding staff resource allocation and visual impact.
- Efforts to support small businesses, particularly in Sunset Park and Ocean Park, include technical assistance to establish BIDs and improve retail vitality.

8. Additional Civic and Community Services

- Plans to reopen all library branches with increased service days were detailed, emphasizing libraries as community hubs for education and economic opportunity.
- Improvements to 311 service were underway, including expanding host teams to better manage complaints and service requests.
- Public works and maintenance staffing will increase to improve cleanliness, groundskeeping, and infrastructure upkeep.
- The city aims to build cash reserves by monetizing select downtown land assets, generating significant revenue to stabilize finances.

9. Council Deliberations and Action

- The council unanimously adopted the realignment plan and related budget adjustments, with a motion to exclude the gondola exploration from staff workload.
- Amendments to housing transparency and accountability motions were adopted to clarify legal compliance and protect vulnerable populations.
- Certain council members recused themselves from housing-related items due to conflicts of interest.
- The meeting concluded with adjournment in memory of notable community members and victims of a recent traffic tragedy, reinforcing a commitment to safer streets.

Key Conclusions

1. A New Strategic Direction for Santa Monica

- The realignment plan represents a unified, strategic effort to restore Santa Monica's safety, economic vitality, and organizational health after years of fiscal, social, and operational challenges.
- The plan's success depends on ongoing transparency, accountability, and measurable outcomes to rebuild trust with residents, businesses, and stakeholders.

2. Public Safety as a Foundational Priority

- Enhanced policing, outreach, and enforcement programs are critical to reversing perceptions of disorder and improving safety downtown and across the city.
- Collaboration between city agencies and regional partners like Metro Police is vital to address complex public safety concerns.

3. Community Engagement Must Be Meaningful and Timely

- Past failures in community consultation, particularly around housing and behavioral health projects, have eroded trust.
- The city commits to improving coordination with county and state partners, enhancing outreach efforts, and ensuring transparency consistent with legal frameworks.

4. Balancing Legal Compliance with Community Needs

- The city must navigate state laws requiring fair housing compliance while addressing local concerns about siting and impact of supportive housing projects.
- Policies and frameworks must reflect this balance, providing protections for vulnerable populations and respecting neighborhood contexts.

5. Economic and Cultural Revitalization as Key to Recovery

- Investments in cultural programming, business districts, and innovative transit options like the peer-to-peer ferry align with goals to attract visitors, support local businesses, and enrich community life.
- Infrastructure improvements and regulatory reforms aim to create a more welcoming, functional urban environment.

6. Organizational Renewal Underpins Citywide Success

- Strengthening internal culture, clarifying roles, and fostering collaboration among city staff and leadership are essential for effective implementation.

- The city must maintain focus and discipline to avoid overpromising and underdelivering.
7. Historic Preservation Remains an Important but Complex Issue
- The Mills Act program helps preserve Santa Monica's historic character but requires careful balancing of tax incentives, public benefits, and financial sustainability.
 - Future program adjustments and fee structures will be explored to enhance accountability.
8. Fiscal Stability is Achievable but Requires Vigilance
- The realignment plan projects a balanced operating budget within a few years, supported by new revenues, expenditure controls, and asset monetization.
 - Continued monitoring and community communication will be essential to maintain financial health.

Important Details

1. Mills Act Program Specifics

- The city currently has 104 properties under Mills Act contracts.
- Tax revenue loss since 2000 attributable to Mills Act is approximately \$4.5 million.
- Proposed future measures include application and monitoring fees, contract limits, and renewal work plans.
- Some council members requested cost-benefit analyses and possible caps on benefits to align with public interest.

2. Realignment Plan Financial Projections

- Downtown parking fee increases expected to generate approximately \$9 million annually starting January 2026.
- Ambulance operator program projected to generate \$7 million annually.
- Digital signage fees could produce \$4.5 million annually by 2027.
- Additional revenues from user fees, credit card fees, and investments total about \$3.5 million.
- Potential parcel tax estimated to raise \$12 million annually pending voter approval.
- Expenditure controls and bond refinancing expected to add \$7.5 million in savings.

3. Public Safety Staffing and Programs

- Police substation to be established at Santa Monica Place Mall.
- Patrol force downtown to double from 4 to 8-10 officers daily.
- Additional 8 public safety officers to be deployed across public spaces.
- Crime impact team to grow from 5 to 7 members.
- Motor and traffic enforcement unit to expand.
- 10 police overhires planned to address impending retirements.
- Increased misdemeanor filings expected as enforcement intensifies.

4. Library Service Enhancements

- Fairview and Ocean Park branches to reopen three days per week starting January 2026.
- Plan to expand to four days per week at all branches by July 2026.
- Libraries viewed as critical community and economic hubs.

5. Vacant Property and Rent Registry Programs

- About 170 vacant properties identified; 30-40 in poor condition.
- Registration fees tiered based on property condition to fund enforcement.
- Rent registry to cover approximately 15,000 non-rent-controlled units.
- Expanded code enforcement staff will provide seven-day coverage.

6. Economic and Cultural Initiatives

- Creation of monthly activation events on the promenade.
- Support for large-scale music festivals and enhanced programming.
- Peer-to-peer ferry service planned to connect coastal communities, with private funding and partnerships.
- Beach gondola concept under preliminary review, but not prioritized due to cost and visual concerns.
- Efforts underway to support smaller business districts and new BIDs.

7. Community Input and Legal Constraints on Housing Projects

- Council motions require city attorney review to ensure compliance with fair housing laws and housing element requirements.

- Confidentiality provisions included to protect sensitive populations until appropriate public engagement can occur.
- Transparency on project timelines to be enhanced following termination of controversial projects.
- Emphasis on collaborative frameworks with county and state agencies to improve project coordination and community trust.

8. Organizational Culture and Values

- The “One Samo” plan emphasizes humility, integrity, motivation, and care among city staff.
- Leadership retreat revealed commitment to teamwork and shared purpose.
- Wellness benefits and improved employee morale programs included in budget.

9. Memorial Adjournments

- The meeting closed with tributes to June Lockhart, a beloved actress and community supporter.
- Also honored were Brad Lipshi and Mora Cohen, victims of a tragic traffic accident, underscoring the urgency of street safety initiatives.

10. Next Steps and Ongoing Accountability

- The realignment plan is a starting point with many elements requiring further vetting, community engagement, and phased implementation.
- Council committed to transparent progress monitoring, public dashboards, and responsiveness to community input.
- Future meetings planned for boards and commissions review and continued discussion of housing and economic development initiatives.

This summary captures the detailed discussions, community perspectives, council deliberations, and strategic directions outlined in the October 28th Santa Monica City Council meeting transcript.

Please note that this transcript/summary was generated by an AI and may contain errors or omissions. For complete and accurate information, please consult the original audio or video recording of the meeting.