SANTA FE CHARTER REVIEW COMMISSION

Recommendation — Strategic Planning and Budgeting

Questions C and D

Working recommendation for Commission deliberation

Recommended Approach

Charter the framework; establish the mechanics by ordinance. The Charter should establish a durable connection among community input, City goals and priorities, the annual budget, and accountability for results. Detailed planning and budgeting procedures should remain in ordinance and administrative policy so they can evolve without repeated Charter amendments.

This approach avoids the false choice between putting everything in the Charter and putting nothing there. It also fits the hybrid form of government under consideration: the governing body establishes priorities and controls the budget, while professional administration prepares and implements the budget.

Pros and cons of the charter-plus-ordinance approach

Pros

+ Durable: the goals-to-budget relationship cannot vanish with a change of administration.
+ Flexible: planning and budgeting techniques can evolve by ordinance without another Charter amendment.
+ Proven in-state: mirrors Albuquerque under the same DFA rules, with a small Charter footprint that is hard to attack as micromanagement.

Cons

– Even a thin Charter provision is harder to change than policy — a future body could not drop the goals requirement without a public vote (the point, but also a rigidity).
– Requires drafting discipline to stay “thin”; scope creep could pull mechanics into the Charter.
– A two-instrument approach (Charter plus ordinance) is slightly more complex to enact and explain than a single ordinance.

The Commission Should Recommend Three Core Reforms

1. Establish multi-year City goals and priorities

The governing body should adopt and maintain multi-year goals and priorities, developed with meaningful public input.

Pros

+ Creates continuity — priorities persist across budget years and administrations instead of resetting annually.
+ Developed with public input, it gives residents a durable point of entry into what the City pursues.
+ Anchors everything downstream (the budget, reporting) to an adopted, visible set of priorities.

Cons

– If goals are vague or too numerous, the linkage becomes symbolic rather than real.
– Depends on governing-body capacity: an under-staffed council may be unable to develop and truly own the goals, risking that professional staff set priorities the body only ratifies.
– Adds a front-end goal-setting step that must be scheduled against the DFA budget calendar.

2. Connect the budget to those priorities

The annual budget should be consistent with the adopted goals and priorities, and the budget message should explain how proposed spending advances them.

Pros

+ The single highest-value change — turns the budget from a year-to-year exercise into a goals-driven one, creating continuity and enabling outcome reporting.
+ Well-proven and NM-DFA-compatible (Las Cruces, Albuquerque).
+ An equity safeguard — transparent, adopted priorities are harder to quietly redirect away from underserved areas.

Cons

– A cultural and operational lift — it needs staff capacity and discipline the City is only beginning to build.
– If goals are vague or too numerous, the budget linkage becomes symbolic.
– Front-loads the work: goals must be set before budgeting, compressing the calendar against DFA deadlines.

3. Build accountability into the process

The City should regularly report publicly on progress toward adopted goals, and maintain appropriate performance information (develop a dashboard on the City website).

Pros

+ Transparency and public trust — residents and the governing body can see whether resources are producing progress (every peer city does some version of this).
+ Builds equity in structurally rather than leaving it to goodwill.
+ A public dashboard makes the priorities-to-spending-to-results chain visible.

Cons

– Real cost and staffing — dashboards and performance measurement need money and capacity to sustain, and can go stale.
– Risk of “metrics theater” — measuring what is easy rather than what matters.
– As currently drafted this reform lives entirely in ordinance, so a future body could weaken or drop it — the same durability gap the Charter framework is meant to close.

What Belongs in the Charter

The Charter should contain only durable requirements that define responsibilities and outcomes. It should not prescribe the City’s detailed planning or budgeting methodology.

Illustrative Charter language

Goals and Priorities. The governing body shall adopt and maintain multi-year goals and priorities for the City, developed with meaningful public input.

Budget and Goals. The City shall prepare and adopt an annual balanced budget consistent with the goals and priorities adopted by the governing body. The budget message shall explain how the proposed budget advances those goals and priorities.

Budget Authority and Public Participation. The governing body shall have authority to review, amend, and adopt the budget and shall provide public hearings as required by law.

Financial Accountability. The City shall provide for an annual independent audit in accordance with applicable law.

Process. The procedures for developing, adopting, implementing, and reporting on the City's goals, priorities, and budget shall be established by ordinance, consistent with New Mexico law.

Drafting note: *Final Charter language should be reviewed by the City Attorney for consistency with New Mexico statutes and Department of Finance and Administration requirements. The assignment of budget preparation and transmittal responsibilities should be coordinated with the final form-of-government recommendation.*

What Belongs in Ordinance or Administrative Policy

The Commission should recommend that Council establish the operating framework by ordinance. This preserves flexibility while giving the City a clear, repeatable process.

- The strategic-planning cycle and timing, including the frequency for reviewing and updating goals.
- Annual objectives and department-level work plans that implement adopted goals.
- Performance measures and regular outcome reporting to the governing body and community.
- A public performance dashboard or comparable reporting mechanism.
- The methods and timing for community engagement, including meaningful district-level and bilingual engagement where appropriate.
- A plain-language equity analysis or comparable equity review as part of the budget process.
- Multi-year financial forecasting and, where appropriate, capital improvement planning aligned with adopted goals and priorities.
- Detailed budget procedures, formats, calendars, and administrative responsibilities, consistent with New Mexico law.

Recommended Governance Sequence

The reform should establish a simple sequence: community input → governing-body goals and priorities → annual objectives → budget → implementation → public reporting on results.

This is the central policy change. The budget should not be developed independently of the City's adopted priorities. At the same time, the Charter should leave the budgeting method to professional administration rather than locking a particular methodology into the Charter.

Relationship to the Proposed Hybrid Form of Government

Under the recommended hybrid model, the governing body owns the City's goals, priorities, and budget authority; the mayor provides political leadership and performs the transmittal function established by the Charter; and the city manager provides professional budget development, analysis, and implementation. If the Commission ultimately recommends a full council-manager structure, the same Charter framework can operate with the manager preparing and recommending the budget directly to the governing body.

Why This Approach

- **Durability:** the basic goals-to-budget relationship cannot simply disappear with a change in administration.
- **Flexibility:** planning and budgeting techniques can change through ordinance or administrative policy without another Charter amendment.

- **Accountability:** residents and the governing body can evaluate whether resources are producing progress toward adopted priorities.
- **Transparency:** the budget message and regular reporting make the connection between priorities and spending visible.
- **Equity:** incorporating public engagement and an equity review into the process makes distributional impacts more transparent without constitutionalizing a specific methodology.
- **Model-based:** the approach reflects the Model City Charter's emphasis on linking governing-body priorities, professional administration, budgeting, and performance.
- **New Mexico applicability:** Albuquerque provides an in-state example of a Charter-level goals/budget framework while leaving detailed procedures to code.

Alternative Considered: Ordinance-Only Framework

The Commission should recognize that an ordinance-only approach is defensible. It provides maximum flexibility, keeps the Charter shorter, and treats strategic planning and budgeting primarily as operational matters. Its principal weakness is durability: a future governing body could eliminate or substantially weaken the framework without voter approval. The Commission therefore recommends the Charter-plus-ordinance approach because it provides a better balance of durability and flexibility.

Pros

+ Maximum flexibility and the simplest path — one instrument, no ballot measure, easy to update.
+ Keeps the Charter shorter; consistent with the sound caution against detailed charters.
+ Honors the view that budgeting and planning are operational, not constitutional.

Cons

– No durability — a future governing body can weaken or eliminate the framework without voter approval (what happened before 2026).
– Loses the signal value of a community-ratified commitment.
– Foregoes the Albuquerque-proven middle path that keeps most of the flexibility while locking in the framework.

Peer and Model-City Context

The recommendation is consistent with the range of approaches identified in the Commission's review. Las Cruces, Fort Collins, and Flagstaff rely primarily on policy or administrative approaches, while Albuquerque provides an example of placing the basic goals/budget relationship in its Charter and the mechanics in code. The proposed Santa Fe approach adopts the durable element of the Albuquerque model without importing its detailed structure.

Commission Recommendation

The Charter Review Commission should recommend that the City of Santa Fe:

1. Establish in the Charter a durable requirement that the governing body adopt and maintain multi-year goals and priorities developed with meaningful public input.
2. Require the annual budget to be consistent with those adopted goals and priorities and require the budget message to explain that relationship.

3. Preserve governing-body authority over adoption and amendment of the budget, public participation, and financial oversight.
4. Require an annual independent audit.
5. Direct that detailed strategic-planning, performance-management, public-engagement, equity-review, multi-year financial-planning, and budget procedures be established by ordinance or administrative policy rather than embedded in the Charter.
6. Draft the provisions so they operate under either the proposed hybrid or a full council-manager form of government, with final budget-preparation and transmittal language coordinated with the form-of-government recommendation.

Bottom line: Santa Fe should not constitutionalize a particular strategic-planning or budgeting methodology. It should constitutionalize the expectation that the City has durable priorities, that public resources are aligned with those priorities, and that residents can see whether the City is delivering results.