

# Pacific Grove City Charter Amendment

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## Reforming the Approval Process for City Council Pay & Benefits

[www.transparentpg.org/initiative](http://www.transparentpg.org/initiative)

### 130% Pay Raise, New Benefits, and Less Work

- In May 2025, Mayor Smith and the Council [approved](#) an **immediate** 130% pay raise for themselves just weeks after announcing major fiscal challenges.
- At that same meeting, the Council rejected a motion to submit the increase to the voters and approved a motion to consider adding **medical benefits** for the Mayor and Council at a later date.
- In December 2024, the Mayor and Council voted to cancel 17% of their regular meetings held each year. They want **more pay, new benefits, and less work**.

### The Referendum

- Residents immediately responded with a [referendum](#) seeking a public vote.
- Over **1,800 signatures** were collected in less than 30 days.
- In August 2025, the County certified the referendum with a 91% signature validity rate.
- The ordinance was suspended, marking the **first qualified referendum** in Pacific Grove since 1981.

### Repeal of Pay Raise and Special Election

- In September 2025, the Council [repealed](#) their pay raise instead of submitting it to voters at the next regular municipal election in November 2026 — the first course of action under state law.
- The Council then returned in February 2026 with an **even higher** 135% pay raise and placed it on the June 2, 2026, primary ballot — a special election for the City.
- The City Council chose a June **special election** costing **\$63,000** for a **single measure** to raise the pay for **seven elected officials** (see page 4).

## Election Turnout and Cost

- From 2018 to 2024, Pacific Grove’s November general municipal elections averaged 81% turnout, while primary election turnout averaged only 55% — a 26% difference. During that same period, the November elections cost between \$53,583 and \$63,595 and included **all candidates** for Mayor and Council as well as **all local ballot measures**. See [Initiative](#) Finding 8 & 9.
- The charter amendment requires measures approving pay or benefits to appear at high-turnout general municipal elections that are already scheduled and consolidated. Adding a measure to that ballot is a **“negligible”** (see page 4).
- The last time Pacific Grove placed a single measure on a primary ballot was in June 2008, when voters were asked to approve a 1% sales tax increase.
- Only 51% of voters participated, and the election cost taxpayers **\$46,252** to vote on a **single measure**.

## Structural Loopholes

- California’s referendum process only applies to ordinances and only bars the Council from enacting a similar ordinance for **one year**. It is not permanent.
- A procedural loophole allows the Council to **bypass** the one-year restriction by placing a similar ordinance on the ballot and asking voters to enact it instead.
- Benefits for elected officials, including costly medical benefits, can be approved by **simple resolution** — without voter approval and without the possibility of a referendum.
- Resolutions cannot be challenged by referendum.

## Charter Amendment Solution

- A referendum does not remove the City Council’s authority to approve their own pay and benefits, nor does it prevent them from exploiting procedural loopholes in state law.
- As long as that authority remains in the [Charter](#), future Councils can continue to approve their own pay and benefits.
- This Charter amendment **moves that approval authority** from the Council and into the hands of the voters.
- It requires voter approval of pay and benefits at general municipal elections, when **participation is highest** and **costs are “negligible.”**

## What About the City Council’s June Measure?

- [Measure C](#) is the **replacement** pay ordinance the City Council placed on the June primary ballot after repealing the ordinance that voters had challenged through referendum.
- This Charter amendment provides a **permanent** reform of the approval process for City Council pay and benefits.
- It does not rescind or invalidate any prior vote authorizing pay.
- Regardless of the outcome in June, this Charter amendment ensures that future **pay and benefit** decisions must be approved by **the voters**.

## “Talking Points”

In May 2025, Mayor Smith and the Council voted themselves a 130% pay increase and opened the door to medical benefits — **without asking voters**.

Residents responded with a referendum. Over 1,800 signatures were collected in less than 30 days, and the ordinance was suspended — the first qualified referendum in Pacific Grove since 1981.

Instead of allowing voters to decide at a general election, the Council repealed the ordinance and placed an **even higher** 135% pay increase on the June primary ballot — accelerating the vote onto a costly lower-turnout **special election** ballot.

**Reforming** the approval process for City Council **pay and benefits** requires a City Charter amendment — it cannot be done through referendum.

The problem is structural:

- Pay increases require an ordinance, which is subject to referendum.
- Benefit packages only require a resolution, which is not subject to referendum.
- The referendum process is difficult, temporary, and subject to manipulation.

This Charter [amendment](#) places approval of **pay and benefits** directly in the hands of voters. It establishes limits and safeguards tied to state law and ensures accountability and transparency through voter oversight at general municipal elections when **participation is highest** and **costs are “negligible.”**

In short, it places the final decision where it belongs: with the voters — **permanently** and with **no loopholes**.

❖ To learn how direct democracy works in a charter city, see our guide [here](#) ❖

## JUNE ELECTION COSTS \$63,000 — NOVEMBER COST IS “NEGLIGIBLE”

The [Pine Cone](#) asked [Monterey County Registrar of Voters](#) Gina Martinez for the total cost of placing the measure on the June ballot.

"The rough estimate for June's election for the city of Pacific Grove is \$63,000," Martinez said. But it's a different story in November.

"The cost of Pacific Grove adding a measure to the November election, in which they have candidate contests, is negligible," the registrar said.

March 20, 2026

The Carmel Pine Cone

13A

### It's an election year, but really?

By KELLY NIX

GROUPS ADVOCATING for and against a ballot measure that will ask Pacific Grove voters in June to increase the pay for members of the city council are sharing wildly different figures on the cost of the special election. What's true? The Pine Cone asked the county's registrar of voters.

The P.G. City Council in February voted unanimously to hold an election June 2 to allow residents to decide whether to hike their monthly stipends from \$420 to \$897 for council members and from \$700 to \$1,645 for the mayor. If Measure C passes, the council will get its first pay raise since 1998.

The raise has divided residents. So has

the decision to put Measure C on the June ballot — where it will be the lone city measure in a statewide primary — versus placing it on the Nov. 3 ballot, which will include races for the city's mayor and several council members, not to mention the U.S. House of Representatives, the governor of California and numerous state offices.

#### 'Same price'

A group calling itself P.G. Citizens for Sensible Government, started by former Mayor Bill Kampe to "promote facts, fairness and functional solutions," offers a "get the facts" page on its website. It contains

information on why it backs the council raise, along with numerous questions and answers intended to support its position, including this one:

"Will the June election cost more than the November election?" P.G. Citizens for Sensible Government asks.

"No," the group claims.

"The city received estimates from the county elections department showing that the cost of placing a measure on the June ballot is very similar to the cost of a November ballot measure. There is no meaningful financial reason for the delay."

But Transparent Pacific Grove, a group former councilman Luke Coletti started to promote transparency in government, claimed in an email to members last week that P.G. Citizens for

Sensible Government's cost claims are false.

"The truth is that the June special election will cost \$50,000 for a single measure to raise the pay for seven elected officials," Coletti said, adding that in 2008, when the city last had a single measure on a June primary ballot, it cost taxpayers \$46,252.

Coletti also maintained that since the November regular election will already include municipal offices, adding a ballot measure represents only the incremental cost of including it on a ballot already being printed and administered.

#### \$63K

There are several factors that go into the cost of an election, including the number of pages in the voting guide and the number of jurisdictions sharing the costs.

See **ELECTION** page 30A

### Disparate cost projections for P.G. ballot measure

## ELECTION

*From page 13A*

Notwithstanding other benefits and drawbacks of Measure C, The Pine Cone asked Monterey County Registrar of Voters Gina Martinez for the total cost of placing the measure on the June ballot.

"The rough estimate for June's election for the city of Pacific Grove is \$63,000," Martinez said. But it's a different story in November.

"The cost of Pacific Grove adding a measure to the November election, in which they have candidate contests, is negligible," the registrar said.