

ETHICS REFORM EFFORT SPOTLIGHTS COUNTY DYSFUNCTION, SHORTENS TEMPERS

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Report and Commentary on Los Angeles City and County Governance Reform

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2026-27 John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation Fellow

Los Angeles County is on course to blow a voter-imposed deadline to get an independent Ethics Commission up and running by the end of the year – unless it asks voters to sign off on county ethics reform yet again, this time in the Nov. 3 election.

An independent Ethics Commission “to increase restrictions on lobbying and investigate misconduct” was an integral part of Measure G, the historic county government overhaul adopted by voters in November 2024 to expand the Board of Supervisors and create an elected county executive. A 13-member [Governance Reform Task Force](#) is advising the board on how best to flesh out and comply with the ballot measure’s requirements. It sent the supervisors an [Ethics Commission proposal](#) late last month.

The process has not been smooth. A number of Task Force members have become increasingly frustrated by the perceived untimeliness of county legal advice and inadequacy of county staff support. Simmering tension reached a boiling point at the panel’s April 8 meeting in Castaic, at which several members suggested that the county establishment may be trying to undermine the reforms already adopted by voters.

“In the process of developing the ethics recommendations, what I saw from various places within the county was a real interest in not advancing any real reform,” Task Force member Sara Sadhwani told her colleagues. “It became clear that having independence for the Ethics Commission, which was mandated in Measure G, was not an interest of other county departments.”

Sadhwani is political scientist and professor of politics at Pomona College. She helped craft a 2024 ballot measure to strengthen the Los Angeles City Ethics Commission. She chairs the Task Force’s ethics subcommittee and helped conduct a months-long process of expert testimony, public hearings, debate and drafting that resulted in a proposal calling for a seven-member Ethics Commission appointed by various authorities, and an executive director, enforcement staff and legal counsel appointed by and reporting solely to the commission.

The Task Force considered these features key to protecting “independence,” as that term is generally understood by other ethics bodies in California.

In March, near the conclusion of the long process, Sadhwani told the Task Force that she had recently been “advised” that those features would violate the county charter. Only the Board of Supervisors can appoint members to commissions. Only the executive officer can appoint department heads. Only the County Counsel’s Office can give or oversee legal advice and representation.

So the independent Ethics Commission “by 2026” that Measure G already promised voters will have to go back to the ballot in November.

The revelation that the county cannot adopt the independent Ethics Commission that Measure G requires came with a particularly exasperating twist: Identifying the source of the advice would violate attorney-client privilege, leaving the Task Force in the awkward and irritating position of voting to alter a proposal based on advice from an anonymous source.

But everyone knew the advice came from the County Counsel’s Office, whose authority over a new Ethics Commission would be erased by the proposal that the Task Force sent to the Board of Supervisors.

The episode spurred the Task Force in March to ask the Board of Supervisors for independent counsel, or at least a lawyer who could provide a second opinion. But by the April meeting the Task Force still had neither its own lawyer nor a timeline for getting one.

At the April 8 Castaic meeting, the board’s executive officer, Edward Yen, briefed members on what he saw as their duties, deadlines and resource needs. It might have been an appropriate presentation for the group’s first or second session.

But the Task Force has been meeting every other week for nearly a year, has created and is following its own work plan and has already completed two of the tasks assigned under Measure G: the budget and ethics recommendations. Yen’s presentation sounded condescending. Some members said they felt insulted.

“It almost feels like we are children being told we have done something wrong and you’ve come in to give us a new plan,” Sadhwani told Yen and Santos Kreimann, a former county department chief who was brought on last month to brief the group on the county’s often mysterious procedures.

Member Derek Steele, executive director of the Social Justice Learning Institute, questioned the county establishment’s commitment to reform and suggested that it might be trying to wrest away authority for Measure G implementation.

“What I don’t want to do is drive all the way out to Castaic,” Steele said, “for [county officials] to be taking control of the process and we’re just kind of here for formalities.”

Yen and Kreimann tried to assure the Task Force that they respected the panel’s work and that their presentation was an effort to meet their own obligation to share their knowledge about how the county works, in order to better inform members as they craft their recommendations. Yen noted, for example, that he planned to present the panel [study of county governance](#) when a contractor delivers it later this month.

Unfortunately, the still-undelivered report underscores the county’s plodding pace and its lack of enthusiasm for self-examination and change. The Board of Supervisors ordered the study in February 2023, beginning a process of bids, evaluation and selection of a contractor to prepare the report. But a year and a half later, none of it had happened. That official foot-dragging helped convince the board majority to give up on internal reform altogether and instead go to the ballot with Measure G.