

Getting Started as a Budget Advocate

An eight-page guide for new Budget Advocates and team volunteers, 2026-27

thebudgetadvocate.com • Companion to the three-page White Book guide • As of September 28, 2026

Welcome to the work

A city's budget is the clearest statement of what it values. Los Angeles adopted a **\$14.87 billion** budget for 2026-27, and every dollar in it reflects a choice about which services grow, which hold steady, and which get cut. The budget is also dynamic. Beyond where the money goes, it covers projected revenue, the fees the City charges, the timing of spending so it never gets ahead of revenue, adjustments during the year, and long-range planning.

Neighborhood Council Budget Advocates bring neighborhood concerns into that process. We work toward two goals: **better City services** and **a more transparent budget process**. Neighborhood Councils fund our programs through their contributions, so our first loyalty is to them and the stakeholders they serve.

It is also a privilege. Few residents ever get ninety minutes with a general manager and a budget director. As a Budget Advocate, you will, and you will carry your neighborhood's questions into the room.

44

departmental teams, one for each department or bureau we cover

3 or more

teams for every Budget Advocate

7

members at most on any one team

About 6

recommendations per team report, never fewer than three

Your first two weeks

1. **Join at least three departmental teams** on the sign-up form at thebudgetadvocate.com. Rows shaded rose on the teams table need people most.
2. ★ **Team up with your Region.** Work with the two other Budget Advocates in your Region and determine which Neighborhood Councils each of you will cover. Give those councils regular updates, and request time on their agendas to discuss the work of the Budget Advocates.
3. **Watch Intro to the City Budget.** The September 24 recording and slides are posted under Training at thebudgetadvocate.com.
4. **Read the three-page White Book guide**, then open your departments' pages in Volume I or Volume II of the 2026-27 White Book. The guide lists the page for every team.
5. **Read last year's NCBA report** on each of your departments in the most recent White Paper. It names the managers we met and the recommendations we made.
6. **Introduce yourself to each team chair** and ask who is setting up the department meeting. If your team has no chair yet, volunteer or help the team pick one.
7. **Save the meeting pattern.** The full body meets the first Monday of the month at 7:00 p.m. and the third Saturday at 9:30 a.m., both on Zoom. Next up: Monday, October 5, and Saturday, October 17.

Where you fit

Budget Advocates are elected from the City's 12 regions, with three seats per region, for the 2026-2028 term. Every nominee is a Budget Representative appointed by a Neighborhood Council. Co-Chairs Jay Handal and Glenn Bailey lead the full body, and standing and ad hoc committees carry much of the year-round work. Budget Representatives and community volunteers are welcome on departmental teams alongside elected Advocates.

A word from our veterans. Your first effort does not have to be perfect. This guide gives you what you need to be effective in your very first department meeting.

How the City budget gets made

The City's fiscal year runs from July 1 through June 30. Each fall the Mayor issues a budget policy letter that sets objectives for the next year, and the City Administrative Officer (CAO) sends budget instructions to every department. Departments submit their requests to the Mayor (the Charter deadline is January 1, and most are due in November). The Mayor, the CAO, and each general manager then work through those requests, and by March the Mayor's Office has revenue projections from the Office of Finance, the CAO, and the Controller.

The Mayor must present the Proposed Budget to the City Council by **April 20**. The Council's Budget and Finance Committee holds hearings with the Mayor's Office, general managers, the CAO, and the Chief Legislative Analyst, then recommends changes. The full Council must adopt or modify the budget by **June 1**. The Mayor then has five working days to approve or veto the Council's changes, and the Council has five working days to sustain or override any veto by a two-thirds vote. What comes out the other end is the Adopted Budget.

The 2026-27 Budget Advocate year

When	City of Los Angeles	Budget Advocates
September 2026	CAO publishes the 2026-27 White Book. Mayor's budget policy letter and CAO budget instructions go to departments.	Trainings (Intro to the City Budget, September 24). Sign up for teams; chairs request department meetings.
October - November	Mayor's Office meets with departments on proposals. Departmental budget requests and capital and technology requests go to the Mayor and CAO.	Meet with departments and draft team reports. Begin reading the CAO's quarterly Financial Status Reports (FSRs).
December - January	Mayor and CAO review requests; Charter deadline for department requests is January 1.	Reports are edited and assembled into the White Paper. Share findings with Neighborhood Councils.
February 2027	Budget and Finance Committee hearings with departments, the Mayor's Office, and the CAO.	Present findings and recommendations to the CAO, the Mayor's Office, and the Budget and Finance Committee.
March	Charter deadline for the Controller's revenue estimates to the Mayor.	Review the revenue estimates.
April	Mayor submits the 2027-28 Proposed Budget (the Blue Book) by April 20.	Read the Blue Book pages for your departments.
Late April - May	Budget and Finance Committee public hearings and recommendations; Council deliberates.	Write or speak at hearings; support department requests where our recommendations agree.
June	Council adopts by June 1; Mayor and Council veto and override window. New fiscal year starts July 1.	Budget Day, Saturday, June 26, 2027 , at City Hall with Neighborhood Councils.
July onward	Quarterly Financial Status Reports continue.	Review FSRs and plan the next year.

Timing follows past years. The Co-Chairs set the exact NCBA deadlines for reports and the White Paper.

What you will do this year

Learn

- How City government is organized, and what your departments actually do
- Where to find department budgets, rosters, websites, and our prior reports
- The budget calendar, the key documents, revenues and spending, and the City's financial policies, from the people who build the budget

Meet

- Join your team's meeting with department managers to understand and question the services they provide
- Put the most energy into the larger departments, the 20 percent where 80 percent of the action is
- Look closely at programs where the money is, such as police recruitment, the urban forest, sewer funds, and homelessness

Recommend

- Make recommendations on revenue, spending, and the services the City provides
- Help write your team's report and, through it, the White Paper
- Carry the recommendations to the CAO, the Mayor, and the Budget and Finance Committee

Connect with your Neighborhood Councils

- Stay in regular touch with Budget Representatives and NC boards in your region
- Ask stakeholders what the City should do more of, or less of
- Help your NC draft Community Impact Statements (CISs) on budget items
- Ask NCs that have not given in two years to consider the suggested \$500 contribution
- Bring regional concerns to the full body and to your departmental teams

Beyond the department meetings, there is plenty of room to pitch in: outreach, social media, the website, regional town halls, Budget Day planning, and editing the White Paper. Sign up for standing and ad hoc committees through the committee form linked on the monthly agenda.

Who does what on a team

Role	What it involves
Chair	Requests the meeting with the general manager and budget manager, agrees on the talking points with the team, keeps the meeting moving so every point gets covered, and makes sure the report is drafted on time. Chairs receive their team's contact list from Thomas.
Writer	Drafts the report from everyone's notes. Settle who writes before the meeting, not after.
Every member	Does the homework, takes notes in the meeting, cleans them up that evening, and sends them to the writer. Reviews the draft and the recommendations.
Budget Representatives and volunteers	Welcome at the meeting when the team invites them. Three to five people in the room is a good number.

How we carry ourselves in the room. Budget Advocates act as neutral observers, always civil and polite. We share our neighborhoods' concerns with department managers, we ask how Budget Advocates and Neighborhood Councils can help the department, and we leave personal opinions and pet projects at the door.

Do your homework: where to find what you need

Start as soon as you join a team, and share the links with your teammates. Printing the pages you plan to cite is a good habit; you will want them at your elbow during the meeting.

Source	What it tells you	Where to find it
Department roster	Who is who, and a quick read on what the department really does.	lacity.gov, City Directory, then the phone icon next to the department
Department website	The department's public face. Is it clear and accessible? Look for an annual report, and click every page to see the scope of the work.	Listed on the roster
2026-27 White Book, Vols. I and II	Program-by-program detail of the adopted budget: positions, metrics, and every numbered change. Published mid-September.	cao.lacity.gov, Budget; both volumes and our three-page reader's guide are linked at thebudgetadvocate.com
Blue Book	The Mayor's proposed changes for the coming year, in the same format. The 2027-28 edition arrives in April.	cao.lacity.gov, Budget, Mayor's Proposed Budget
Budget Summary	The Mayor's short overview booklet; find your department in it.	cao.lacity.gov, Budget
Financial Status Reports (FSRs)	The CAO's quarterly check on spending and revenue during the year.	cao.lacity.gov, Budget
Budget memos	Report-backs to questions the Budget and Finance Committee asked during hearings.	cao.lacity.gov, Budget
NCBA White Papers	What we asked and recommended last year, the date of the meeting, and who attended. Start here.	budgetadvocates.org/white-papers; the 2025 edition is on thebudgetadvocate.com
Mayor's budget letter	The Mayor's priorities and instructions for the next budget.	mayor.lacity.gov, budget resources
Control Panel LA	The Controller's open data on spending, revenue, payroll, purchasing, and special funds.	controllerdata.lacity.org
Controller budgets and audits	Adopted budgets, audits, and reviews.	lacontroller.org/budgets
Council File 26-0600	The official record of the 2026-27 budget, with every related report.	cityclerk.lacity.org, Council File Management System
Your own neighborhood	Concerns raised at Budget Day, by your NCs, by stakeholders who use the service, and in the news.	Your NC board, Budget Representatives, and local press

Key terms

Term	Meaning	Term	Meaning
CAO	City Administrative Officer; prepares and administers the budget and negotiates labor contracts	CLA	Chief Legislative Analyst; the Council's policy and budget staff
B&F	The Council's Budget and Finance Committee	FSR	Financial Status Report, issued quarterly by the CAO
General Fund	Flexible tax dollars the Mayor and Council can direct anywhere	Special funds	Money restricted by law or fee to a set purpose
Regular authority	A permanent position created by ordinance	Resolution authority	A limited-term position; its funding is deleted each year and must be re-justified
White Paper	The NCBA's annual report of department findings and recommendations	CIS	Community Impact Statement, a Neighborhood Council's formal position on a Council File
Budget Representative	A person each Neighborhood Council appoints to work on the budget	Proprietary departments	Airports, Harbor, and Water and Power; they control their own funds

Talking points for your department meeting

These are the questions we hope every team covers. Agree with your team on the final list, give the most weight to budget matters, add current events that may affect the department's budget, and send the list to the department a day or two ahead.

The department

- Mission, goals, and basic services
- Staffing: regular and resolution positions; how many are filled today
- Revenue: what share comes from the General Fund, fees, special funds, contracts, and grants? Could the department find revenue to expand services? Any ideas for the City as a whole?
- Spending by bureau: how much goes to salaries and benefits? To litigation?
- Long-range planning: is there a multi-year plan, and a plan for swings in the economy?

This past year

- Successes, disappointments, and challenges

Our follow-up

- Last year's NCBA recommendations for this department (list them)
- Neighborhood concerns and issues in the news (write out each concern and question)
- Homelessness: spending, share of the budget, statistics, and concerns
- How can Budget Advocates help with what you need in your budget?

The 2026-27 budget

- What was reduced or eliminated from 2025-26?
- What in your 2026-27 request was approved, and what was not?
- How are the changes being carried out? When will new staff be on board, and where will they work?
- Obstacles: hiring, bond issuance, technology?
- Do fees cover the full cost of services, including overhead, benefits, pension, and overtime?
- Do you have the funds to do the job you have been asked to do?
- Where could you be more efficient? Are there duplications? What could be cut and the money used elsewhere?
- How are the Mayor's priorities and your metrics shaping the budget? May we have a copy of your metrics report?

Looking ahead to 2027-28

- Key goals for next year
- Could you do the work with less? What would you do with more? What is not in your budget that you would like to do?
- Succession planning: retirements this past year, and the share of staff eligible to retire
- Technology: sharing data systems with other departments, and cybersecurity
- Planning for the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games

Bring the numbers: six questions the White Book lets you ask

- Council changed your Blue Book request before adoption. What was added or cut, and what did you give up?
- Which one-time items and resolution positions were deleted for 2026-27, and which were continued? What stops if they were not?
- Your largest program grew (or shrank) by X percent. What does that buy, and how will its metrics move by June 2027?
- How many authorized positions are filled today, and how does your vacancy rate compare with the salary savings the budget assumes?
- Your contractual services schedule lists \$Y across Z contracts. Which would you bring in-house if you could, and why?
- What did you ask for that is not in the book, and what would you do with one more million dollars?

Tip. Worksheet 1 (Know Your Department) on thebudgetadvocate.com walks you through this research, and Worksheet 2 (Meeting Setup and Prep) turns it into your final talking points.

Setting up the meeting

Start now. General managers' calendars fill weeks, even months, ahead, and the best time to meet is before the department finalizes its budget request. Aim for October or early November.

1. **Check your team's availability first**, then call the department so you leave the call with a confirmed date.
2. **Call the executive assistant** listed on the department roster. Ask to meet with the general manager and the budget manager for at least 90 minutes. Some larger departments will offer deputies instead; that works too.
3. **Mention last year's meeting**: the date and the managers who met with us, from the department's report in the most recent White Paper.
4. **Follow up by email**, as most departments will ask you to. Attach or summarize your talking points and note that you will also bring questions from your Neighborhood Councils.
5. **No reply in three days? Call again** for the time, date, location, and parking. Ask your chair, the Vice Chair of Development, or the Co-Chairs for help if you get stuck.
6. **Confirm with your team and the department**, then log the date through the Worksheet 2 form at thebudgetadvocate.com (or email LABudgetAdvocates@gmail.com) so we can track every team.

Sample request email

Dear Ms. [Name],

Neighborhood Council Budget Advocates would like to meet with the leadership of [Department]. Thank you for meeting with us on [date of last meeting], when [names of department staff] attended.

We hope to cover:

- Changes the department made in 2026-27, including new, expanded, and reduced programs
- Staffing: vacancies, retirements, and hiring to fill essential positions
- Your 2027-28 budget request: key items, top priorities, and where the funds would come from
- Long-range planning, including technology, cybersecurity, and the 2028 Olympics
- Policy changes or new revenue that would help the department meet its needs

We will also bring questions from our Neighborhood Councils and stakeholders. We would like to meet during October. Please let me know what works for your team. You can reach me at [phone] or by email.

Thank you in advance.

[Your name]

Neighborhood Council Budget Advocate, [Department] team

Prepare as a team

- Review the department's website, roster, budget pages, and our prior reports so you understand its services and its budget.
- Gather concerns from Budget Day, your Neighborhood Councils, and the news, and turn them into questions. Keep the broad picture in view.
- Agree on the final talking points, who will lead the meeting, and who will write the first draft. Everyone takes notes.
- Plan to meet briefly both before and after the department meeting.

The meeting, start to finish

Two days before

- Reconfirm the date and time. If in person, confirm the location and parking.
- Send the department the names of everyone attending and your final talking points.
- Expect anywhere from two to eight managers. Three to five of us is a good match; invite Budget Representatives or well-informed community members as it fits.
- Meeting on Zoom? Set up a separate team Zoom for right after, so you can regroup even if the meeting runs long.

Introductions

- Ask permission to record, for accuracy in your report. Some departments agree and some do not; take thorough notes either way.
- Go around the table. In person, trade business cards and hand out the talking points.
- Say what you and your teammates already know about the department.

Leading the meeting

- Walk through the talking points, and let the managers know your team has reviewed their website, roster, and budget pages.
- Keep it moving and keep it focused. Topics will come up in any order, so track what is covered; a bright marker on your list helps.
- Near the end, ask how Budget Advocates can help the department.
- Ask whom to contact with follow-up questions and for anything left uncovered.

The day of

- If in person, dress professionally and arrive at least 15 minutes early to go over the plan together. Be on time.
- Bring note pads, extra copies of the talking points, and copies of anything you plan to cite: budget pages, prior reports, news articles.
- Managers are prompt and may leave right on schedule. Many see the meeting as outreach and will want to show you the breadth of their work, so plan to steer.

Asking good questions

- Frame each question around what you need for the report, with the budget front and center.
- Ask open-ended questions. Avoid long, multi-part questions that invite a yes or no.
- Refer to budget documents, prior reports, and the news, and keep copies handy.
- Think citywide, and use specifics as examples.
- Keep personal opinions and pet projects out of it.

Right after

- Huddle as a team right away, in the hallway, the parking structure, or your follow-up Zoom. Sketch possible recommendations while it is fresh.
- That evening, every member reviews and fills in their notes so they make sense to the writer, then sends them along as soon as possible.
- Send the department a thank-you email.
- Follow up on unanswered questions, and ask for any documents the department offered.

Recommendations are ours to make. Share the draft report with the department to check the facts, but remember that our recommendations may or may not line up with the department's budget requests. A report that simply repeats the department's wish list does not do the job.

Writing the report

A good report runs two to five pages and uses four headings, in this order. Start wherever it feels easiest; many writers begin with the department name, date, and attendees, then work through the topics from everyone's notes.

Heading	What goes there
ATTENDEES	Department managers with titles, then the Budget Advocates and Budget Representatives who attended.
RECOMMENDATIONS	About six, never fewer than three. Begin each with an active verb (fund, expand, require, establish, evaluate, prioritize, and so on) and keep each one short. If you have more than six, split them under two headings, for example Budget Recommendations and Recommendations on Homelessness. The Mayor, Council members, and CAO analysts read these, and CAO analysts report back to us on them.
DISCUSSION	A few sentences on what the department does; the budget picture (revenue, staffing, challenges, efficiencies, metrics); and the core of the meeting, including last year's recommendations and NC concerns. Use subheadings so readers can find the reasoning behind each recommendation. Short paragraphs, active voice.
CONCLUSION	Two or three sentences that sum up the meeting. Introduce nothing new. Add an addendum only when a chart or document is truly needed.

What strong recommendations look like (from the 2024 White Paper)

- *City Administrative Officer*: Add liabilities to department budgets so departments see what the City pays out on their behalf.
- *Information Technology Agency*: Post department metrics on the department's website to increase transparency.
- *Bureau of Street Services*: Fund positions that work on grants.
- *Recreation and Parks*: Fund more programming at senior centers in response to the growing number of older Angelenos.

Format and review

- Calibri 12 point, single-spaced. Department name in 14 point, centered; meeting date centered below it.
- Margins: 1.25 inches left and right, 1 inch top and bottom. Submit as a Word document, not a PDF.
- Your team reviews the draft first, then turns it in quickly for discussion at the next full meeting. Expect edits.
- The editing group will ask questions; approve its changes or clarify. Consider asking a department manager to check the facts.

After the report: budget hearings

- After the Mayor releases the Proposed Budget in April, each department writes to the Budget and Finance Committee to press for more. Ask for a copy or find it on the CAO's website, and consider how we might support it.
- Make sure the Committee has your team's report before the department appears. Then, as fits, write a letter or speak, ideally first thing the morning of the department's hearing. Identify yourself as a Budget Advocate "for identification purposes only," since you speak as an individual, and bring eight copies of any report you cite.
- Watch for the department's report-backs to the Committee on the CAO's website, and appear before the full Council when it makes sense.
- Throughout the year, keep tabs on your departments' issues, read the quarterly FSRs, and support department requests that match our recommendations.

Questions? Start with your team chair. Thomas holds office hours on Zoom on Tuesdays, 1:30 to 3:00 p.m., through early November; email LABudgetAdvocates@gmail.com for the link. The Co-Chairs, Jay Handal and Glenn Bailey, can help too. Recorded trainings, including the September 2025 "Meet with City Departments" coaching session, are at budgetadvocates.org/trainings.

Sources. Ringuette, B. (2024). *Education & coaching* [Training handbook]. Neighborhood Council Budget Advocates. • City of Los Angeles, Office of the City Administrative Officer. (2026). *2026-27 adopted budget: Detail of department programs* (Vols. I-II). • Neighborhood Council Budget Advocates. (2026, September 19). *Meeting #6 agenda*.