

ASU empowers LA residents to join landmark charter-reform efforts

Professor of Practice Joe Mathews led the historic revision of the city's charter, a process that hasn't happened in decades

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
March 26, 2026

An Arizona State University professor of practice is helping the city of Los Angeles with a historic and complicated process — revising its outdated charter for the first time in decades.

This month, a civic assembly of regular Los Angeles residents convened at the ASU California Center Broadway in downtown LA, where they took a deep dive into some thorny municipal issues and made recommendations that may go before the voters on the November ballot.

The community members in the 2026 Los Angeles City Charter Civic Assembly came up with nine proposals that would change the city government and enshrine reforms for the future — including establishing a permanent civic assembly to meet twice a year.

The effort has been led by Joe Mathews with ASU's School of Politics and Global Studies.

Mathews is also a longtime journalist who's a columnist and editor for [Zócalo Public Square](#), part of [ASU Media Enterprise](#), as well as a founder of [Rewrite LA](#), a coalition of several nonprofits and individuals working on charter reform. He has spent his career reporting on grassroots democracy efforts around the world and has worked to bring global best practices to his hometown of Los Angeles.

"LA had a really rough year last year, between raids and fires and corruption and homelessness. And it also finally convened a commission to look at its charter for the first time since 1999, and only the second time since our charter was written in 1924," he said.

When Mathews, the founder and publisher of [Democracy Local](#), began reporting on the LA charter revision effort, several people involved asked him to draw on his international experience and bring regular residents into the process.

“The fact that it happened is the big thing. In other countries, the government pays for it, and here, we had to raise \$265,000,” said Mathews, who was instrumental in the fundraising.

In February and March, the assembly of 37 residents, chosen by lottery, worked over two weekends to hash out the issue of whether to increase the number of people on the Los Angeles City Council, which is now 15. That means each council member represents about 265,000 people, one of the highest ratios in any American city.

At the end of the second weekend, the civic assembly voted to recommend increasing the number of council members to 25. The Charter Revision Commission approved that recommendation and in April will forward its full slate of proposals to the city council, which will decide in July whether to put the ideas before voters in November.

The civic assembly also made seven other reform recommendations, including automatically increasing the size of the council as the population increases and removing appointment powers for the Ethics Commission from the council and the mayor and giving it to an independent inspector general.

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Joe Mathews

ASU professor of practice

During the two weekends, the assembly heard from experts and people on all sides of the issue. Some of the speakers acknowledged the pessimism around civic reform.

Charter Revision Commission Chairman Raymond Meza told the residents: “What I know about Angelenos is that most people love LA.

“When it comes to government, it’s heartbreak after heartbreak, corrupt officials, potholes that never get filled, streetlights that never get repaired and issues with health and safety in their communities.

“How do we begin to bridge the gap to make people who love the city begin to love their government?”

Mathews agreed that Angelenos have low expectations of their government as previous reform efforts have failed.

“People see it as a place of dreams, of great weather, a beautiful place to live with great opportunities. But if you live here and you’re interested in civic life, you’re sort of always bound to be disappointed.

“But sometimes you make real advances through failure and through the attempt. And I think that because this is new and because the stakes are really high for the city, this can be quite a productive failure.”

Mathews said that ASU’s support was instrumental in launching a democratic process he hopes will endure.

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This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



The ASU California Center Broadway, located in downtown Los Angeles. ASU photo

Text image(s)



Joe Mathews