

A Strategy for Strategy

How Berkeley should decide what earns money, staff capacity, Council attention, and public trust

The goal is not less government. It is government capable of doing important things well.

The problem is not a shortage of ideas

First diagnose the failure. Then introduce the method.

- 1 The problem is not a shortage of ideas.
- 2 It is how we choose among them.
- 3 Berkeley needs a durable, consistent method for making choices.

Without that method, every new idea competes with every existing obligation — and the contest is usually political, not strategic.

Why this matters

The warning signs show up in services residents use and taxes residents are asked to pay.

CORE WORK

Streets, public safety, inspections, recreation, and emergency access are already hard to execute well.

NEW LOAD

New facilities, grants, regional schemes, pilots, and referrals keep adding durable obligations.

NO TRADEOFF

Across-the-board cuts and last-minute agenda items hide rather than disclose what will be displaced.

LOW TRUST

Audits, reports, and campaign promises do not build confidence when outcomes do not improve.

The case for a framework begins with the consequences of not having one.

Warning: core responsibilities are slipping

The remedy is not another slogan. It is an ordering system for essential performance.

STREETS

PCI target 70; repeated plans and audits; no credible route to the metric.

→ *Prioritize funding, sequencing, and leadership stability around the metric.*

FIRE / WILDFIRE

Station closure presented as a tax contingency while hillside risk remains a core vulnerability.

→ *Protect essential safety capacity first; resolve access and evacuation.*

HOPKINS

Approved politically before emergency access and evacuation dependencies were resolved.

→ *Make safety dependencies gates to approval, not reconciliation tasks after.*

POOLS

Schedules can own facilities without organizing service around residents' lives.

→ *Measure resident utility, not facility existence; adjust hours to actual use.*

Tactical wins can become strategic losses

University Avenue shows why project-by-project decisions are not enough.



Each action can be defended as urgent, practical, or opportunistic. The aggregate may be a future nobody deliberately chose.

A principal gateway can lose commercial activity, housing options, tax revenue, neighborhood stability, and alternative public uses — without Council ever voting on that corridor strategy.

The question is not only whether each decision had a reason. **It is whether the accumulated direction has earned a place in Berkeley's strategy.**

Warning: commitments outlive their assumptions

Representation breaks down when Council cannot absorb what it is asked to decide.

AAHRC

Capital construction proceeds while the operating model and recurring costs remain unresolved.

No capital approval without lifecycle cost, operator, staffing, and funding source.

PUBLIC BANK

Designed as a regional undertaking; regional participation collapsed.

When required partners withdraw, reclassify before money is committed.

HOMEKEY+ / MOTELS

Outside funding creates pressure to act before long-lived local impacts are tested.

A grant deadline cannot replace an evidence package and exit conditions.

PREMIER CRU

Staggered forward despite staff-described blockers for its original public-office use.

Known blockers must trigger reassessment, not a zombie lease.

PATHWAYS / STAIR

A pilot was renewed without the evaluation it was supposed to produce.

A pilot expires unless the predeclared evaluation is complete before renewal.

Urgency does not waive the standard

Fast decisions are sometimes necessary. Doing the work well still matters.

Can Berkeley do this well?

Speed is not success. A deadline does not turn an unready proposal into a sound one. Urgency can justify a faster process — not a lower standard for durable obligations.

THE EXCEPTION MUST BE BOUNDED

- ✓ Real deadline or hazard
- ✓ Minimum evidence stated
- ✓ Exposure capped
- ✓ Operating owner named
- ✓ Review date set
- ✓ Retrospective evaluation required

When the standard cannot be met in time, narrowing, delaying, or passing can be the responsible choice.

Warning: attention is being spent without a budget

Referrals, late items, and agenda overload consume the government's capacity to govern.

Referrals look cheap because they do not always arrive with an appropriation. They are not cheap: they consume staff work, legal review, management attention, agenda capacity, and public trust.

No major referral should proceed without a displaced-work statement.
If we do this, what will we delay, reduce, transfer, or stop?

A government that cannot say “not now” eventually says “yes” to more work than it can perform.

The Category 1 / 2 / 3 test

A plain-language way to name what the City is being asked to own.

CATEGORY 1

Must do

Core municipal outcomes:
safety, streets, infrastructure,
inspections, recreation, fiscal
management.

CATEGORY 2

Do with partners

Regional or shared undertakings
where cost, governance, risk,
and benefit are credibly
distributed.

CATEGORY 3

Must not do

Wrong scale, missing expertise,
failed partners, duplicative
structure, or open-ended costs.

Category assignments are not permanent. They move when facts, partners, costs, and performance change.

Start / Stop / Continue

This is how categories move and priorities stay current.

START

Adopt or repair only what earns a place within finite capacity; every start needs a tradeoff.

STOP

End, transfer, consolidate, outsource, sunset, or redesign work that cannot justify its claim.

CONTINUE

Protect what performs, measure it, and fund it at a viable level.

A STOP decision must remain possible even outside a budget crisis. Contracts, leases, and labor agreements should not make necessary exit impossible.

The evidence package

Before approval, Berkeley should know what it is buying and how success will be tested.

Outcome target

Minimum service level

Full lifecycle cost

Operating owner

Performance metric

Dependency gate

Adverse effects

Review or sunset date

Pilots and urgent exceptions need minimum evidence and an evaluation plan before launch. No evaluation means expiration, not automatic continuation.

Financial audits ask whether money was handled properly. **Performance audits** ask whether the program actually worked.

Protect outcomes, not habits

Do not confuse who performs the work with whether residents receive the result they need.

FOOD SAFETY

The City must ensure safe restaurants; it need not operate a tiny inspection unit if county scale performs better.

HEALTH

Evaluate functions one by one: continue local work that performs; transfer scale-dependent work that does not.

PERMITTING

Unlimited plan-review rounds are not “thoroughness” if every review becomes bespoke and unbounded.

SERVICE MODEL

Employees, nonprofits, contractors, counties, and public/private partners should compete on outcomes, not ideology.

The responsibility can be essential while the current delivery model is not.

What would change

The framework changes the order before it changes the budget.

Hopkins

Emergency-access confirmation becomes a gate before approval.

AAHRC

Operating plan and recurring funding resolved before capital commitment.

Public Bank

Loss of regional partners triggers reclassification before taxation.

Pilots

No renewal without the evaluation promised at launch.

University Ave.

Cumulative land-use review before tactical conversions reshape the gateway.

Referrals

New work requires a named displaced priority.

The point is not to guarantee “no.” It is to make “yes” mean the City can deliver.

Adoption is political

The method can begin by rule. It may need a charter amendment to endure.

- 1 Resolution**
Adopt Category 1/2/3, evidence packages, and Start/Stop/Continue as Council policy.
- 2 Rules + budget**
Require displaced-work statements, review dates, and work-in-progress limits.
- 3 Auditor dashboard**
Track outcome metrics and performance audits, not only financial compliance.
- 4 Charter if needed**
Entrench the discipline if ordinary procedures are ignored, repealed, or waived.

A strategy for strategy decides what earns a place before politics fills the agenda.

THE GOVERNING QUESTION

What earns its place in Berkeley's priority portfolio?

Must do? · Do with partners? · Must stop?

What result will be measured, what capacity will it consume, and what will Berkeley decline so the priority can be real?

Priorities are not what Berkeley praises. They are what Berkeley protects, measures, funds, and is willing to choose over something else.