

REPORT OF THE CHIEF LEGISLATIVE ANALYST

DATE: September 28, 2026

TO: Honorable Members of the City Council

FROM: Sharon M. Tso 
Chief Legislative Analyst

Council File No.: 25-0125
Assignment No.: 25-03-0203

Other Jurisdiction Streetlight Policy Comparative Analysis

SUMMARY

On March 4, 2025, the Council adopted Motion (Rodriguez – Padilla), Attachment 1, which instructed the Bureau of Street Lighting to report on its existing processes to repair damaged lighting infrastructure and instructed this Office to report on the streetlighting policies in other major cities and best practices that could be adopted locally. The Bureau of Street Lighting has issued its report detailing its repair operations, which is attached to the Council File.

This report reviews the ownership models, tax and fee policies, and repair request processes in the City and compares these to the street lighting ownership models and policies in Los Angeles County, San Francisco, San Jose, San Diego, New York City, and Chicago. Based on this analysis, this report finds that issues of increasing streetlight repair times are not due to the failure of the City to adopt best practices in its streetlight management, but are primarily the result of increased incidents of copper wire theft and the long-term effects of funding and staffing shortfalls as the City's streetlight assessment fees have not been adjusted in nearly three decades.

The Council recently ordered a review of all of the City's street lighting costs in order to bring the Bureau of Street Lighting's various fees into full cost recovery and identify areas of the City supportive of increased assessments (C.F. 26-0955). Additionally, as part of the Council's consideration of reforms to the City Charter, the City will place a measure on the November 2026 ballot that would greatly expand the Director of Public Works authority over the bureaus and enable the Council to make further alterations to the Department of Public Works' (DPW) governance and structure (C.F. 26-1100-S11). Any changes to the ownership structure of the City's streetlight system could disrupt the Council-ordered process of bringing the City's street lighting-related fees into full cost recovery and identification and development of maintenance districts supportive of increased assessments. This report is provided for informational purposes only.

RECOMMENDATION

Note and file this report inasmuch as it is provided for informational purposes only.

DISCUSSION

City Streetlight Ownership and Management

City Charter Section 580 dictates that DPW shall have responsibility over "public rights-of-way lighting facilities owned by the City." Within DPW, the Bureau of Street Lighting is the City agency tasked with management of the City's streetlight network, which the City directly owns and manages. The network is comprised of over 223,000 streetlights.

The process by which the City funds maintenance and repair of the bulk of the City's streetlights is through the administration of Street Lighting Maintenance Districts which allow the City to levy assessments on property owners within a district for the operational, maintenance, and repair costs of streetlights. Streetlights that provide a general benefit to the City, such as streetlights located on bridges or tunnels, are not funded by assessments and are supported by the General Fund or other funding sources (Special Funds or grants).

The City has not adjusted its street lighting assessment rates since 1996. Street lighting assessments are subject to the voter approval requirements of Proposition 218. Property owners must be balloted when the City declares an intention to create new districts or an intention to raise district assessments rates. Per California state law, assessment rates may not exceed amounts needed to achieve full cost recovery.

Other Jurisdiction Ownership and Management

This report reviewed the general streetlight policies of six jurisdictions: Los Angeles County, San Francisco, New York City, Chicago, San Diego, and San Jose. Attachment 2 of this report provides an overview of the size, ownership model, and funding sources of these jurisdictions' respective streetlight systems.

Streetlight Ownership

Los Angeles County and San Francisco are the only two jurisdictions reviewed with a significant proportion of privately-owned streetlights. All other jurisdictions, like the City, own their streetlight systems publicly. In the case of the County, approximately 30,500 streetlights are publicly-owned and managed by the County's Department of Public Works and 33,500 are owned and operated by Southern California Edison. In San Francisco, approximately 26,000 streetlights are owned and managed by the County through the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and approximately 18,000 are privately owned and managed by the Pacific Gas and Electric Company.

System Management

In review of the six jurisdictions considered in this report, only the County includes oversight of streetlights under the responsibility of a public works department. New York City, Chicago, San Diego, and San Jose all house oversight of their streetlight systems within their respective transportation departments. San Francisco's Public Utilities Commission owns and manages the publicly-owned streetlights in its jurisdiction.

While New York City, Chicago, San Diego, and San Jose manage streetlights out of their transportation departments, these departments operate as de facto public works departments. New York City, Chicago, and San Diego do not have official public works departments and the design, construction, maintenance, and management of much of the public right-of-way infrastructure is managed by these cities' transportation departments. While San Jose does have a separate public works department, its public works department is solely focused on capital projects and public permitting, performing a similar role as the City's Bureau of Engineering.

New York City is unique in that it contracts for maintenance and repair of its streetlight system. Under its online webpage for reporting street lighting issues, it states that its contractors have four

hours to respond to emergency conditions and 10 days for other issues, though it allows additional time for major outages. In the New York Mayor's Management Report released for September 2026, it is reported that the first action to repair streetlights was completed in an average of 8.5 days. It is unclear what the full repair timeline is for street lights beyond "first action."

Funding

Los Angeles County, like the City, relies on streetlight districts and assessments to fund streetlight system costs for its publicly-owned streetlights. Street lights owned and operated by Southern California Edison in the County are funded via charges to streetlight customers. Similarly, San Francisco's public utility manages its streetlight system and its program is primarily supported by the power system's enterprise fund via charges to street lighting customers. All other jurisdictions reviewed rely primarily on their general funds to support their respective streetlight systems. While both San Jose and San Diego utilize assessment districts, in both instances these assessments support additional costs for decorative lighting elements. Should the City shift away from its assessment model, which currently averages \$81 annually per parcel, this would create a significant burden on the City's General Fund, which has already been supplementing streetlight costs to address copper wire and power theft impacts and overall cost increases.

Service Requests

All of the jurisdictions reviewed have a similar repair request process to the City, which uses the MyLA311 platform for the reporting of streetlight outages and issues. While Chicago has plans to implement a centralized system with real-time monitoring capabilities to track the status of streetlights, currently the majority of jurisdictions reviewed rely on service requests to be notified of outages. The City has deployed smart nodes on some streetlights which allow for remote monitoring, but these have not been deployed across the entire network and the City relies, primarily, on service requests for outage reporting.

Energy Efficiency / Innovations

Additionally, this report finds that the City has been ahead of other jurisdictions in innovative and energy efficiency policies. Whereas most of the jurisdictions analyzed in this report are either in the midst of converting their streetlights to LEDs or have only recently completed this conversion, many of the City's LED streetlights are now at the end of their life cycle and starting to come due for bulb replacement. The City is also leading in deployment of solar-powered streetlight technology, which reduces energy costs and enhances streetlight resiliency against copper wire and power theft incidents.

Conclusions

This Office was instructed to recommend best practices for local adoption based on the reviewed jurisdictions' streetlight policies. However, this report finds that none of the reviewed streetlight ownership and governance models, outage reporting policies, or funding models are likely to reduce streetlight repair times for the City without the provision of additional funding to support repair and maintenance of the City's streetlight system.

Readily accessible streetlight response time reporting from the jurisdictions reviewed are either scarce or anecdotal and insufficient to draw substantive conclusions that alternate ownership and governance models will necessarily address the long repair timelines seen within the City. Most

jurisdictions reviewed have policies stating that streetlight service requests will be addressed within a period ranging from one to two weeks, but caveat that more complex repairs will take longer, without specifying what that length of time would be. In the case of San Diego, the sole jurisdiction reviewed that has clearly published its repair timelines, streetlights are repaired within 480 days. The Bureau of Street Lighting's report attached to the file states that the City's official repair time is one year.

This report finds that the City's lag in repair response times is not specifically tied to the City's structural policies governing management of its streetlight system, but rather the long-term effects of funding and staffing shortfalls as the assessment fees for streetlight districts have not been adjusted since 1996. During that time, maintenance and repair costs have steadily risen. These effects have been significantly compounded by the rise in incidents of copper wire theft, which require more intensive repair work compared to the costs of replacing bulbs or conducting more routine repairs and maintenance. The rise in copper wire theft has been a national phenomenon leading to varied increases in repair times for streetlights in all the jurisdictions reviewed. The possible exception is New York City where incidents of copper wire theft appear to have been targeted more on its public transit system, rather than its streetlight system.

The Bureau of Street Lighting's report under this Council File has also found that its extended repair times are a result of reduced funding and staffing, which have been compounded by the rise in copper wire theft and vandalism. As the assessment fees collected and the costs of repairs and maintenance have further diverged in the nearly 30 years since streetlight maintenance assessments were adjusted, the City has relied on its General Fund to supplement streetlight costs. While shifting funding of streetlight maintenance and repair away from assessment revenues and onto the General Fund has resulted in nominal support of the streetlight system, this has also created an unsustainable burden on the General Fund.

The City is also unique among the analyzed jurisdictions in having a distinct bureau/agency solely dedicated to streetlight management, whereas the jurisdictions reviewed in this report each functionally have a combined Public Works and Transportation Department that manages street lighting (with the exception of San Francisco).

In the case of San Francisco where streetlights are managed by the public utility, there has been past debate whether its streetlight program should be moved into its Public Works Department in order to allow for more direct control and management by San Francisco's Mayor and Board of Supervisors.

While the City could consider piloting the use of contractors to respond to service requests and basic repairs in set regions with mandated response times, mirroring New York City's model, this would require additional funding to support. It should also be noted that New York City's standard of 10 days for repairs is only the "first action" taken to repair streetlights. It is unclear what the full repair timeline is for complex repairs.

The City recently initiated proceedings to implement a Citywide Streetlight Maintenance Assessment District in accordance with Proposition 218 to increase streetlight assessment fees (C.F. 26-0331); however, the ballot proceedings failed to secure approval from property owners

within existing districts. Subsequently, the Council initiated a review of all of the Bureau's fees and a review of the Proposition 218 ballot results in order to identify areas of the City that supported increased assessment fees (C.F. 26-0955). Additionally, as part of the Council's considerations of amendments to the Charter, the City will be placing a measure on the November 2026 ballot that would greatly expand the Director of Public Works' authority over the Department of Public Works and its bureaus and further enable the Council to alter the governance and structure of the Board of Public Works (C.F. 26-1100-S11).

Given Council's recent actions to review and update the City's street lighting-related fees and potential changes to the governance and structure of the Department of Public Works, this report is not recommending significant shifts in streetlight ownership and management policies, which could be disruptive to the process of bringing to the Bureau of Street Lighting up to full cost recovery.



Matthew Shade
Analyst

Attachments: 1. Motion
2. Overview of Jurisdiction Streetlight Ownership and Funding Models

SMT:MF:RP:MAJS

Government Efficiency

MOTION

Bureau of Street Lighting (BSL) designs, constructs, and maintains approximately 220,000 streetlights that illuminate two-thirds of the City. The system has over 400 different styles of lights, ranging from modern to historic and ornate, with some assets in the City nearly a century old. Streetlights are supported by a vast underground network of approximately 9,000 miles of conduit filled with 27,000 miles of copper wire that connects to 12,000 DWP service points.

While the issue of thefts and vandalism in electrical systems have always been present, the City first saw a sharp uptick in thefts damaging the lighting system between Fiscal Year (FY) 06/07 (9 incidents) to FY07/08 (443 incidents) – well over a 40-fold increase. Levels remained fairly consistent with an average of 500 incidents per year until FY17/18. Within two years the number of incidents grew 4-fold and has consistently been above 2,500 incidents since FY19/20. To date, there are over 2,800 theft and vandalism incidents putting FY24/25 on a course to be the all-time high.

Lighting is an important aspect of public safety and ensuring our infrastructure is in working order and maintained is a core function of City government. It is critical for Council to understand the process that BSL goes through in responding to outages and damaged streetlights and the timeline it takes to repair street and pedestrian lighting.

I THEREFORE MOVE that the Bureau of Street Lighting BE DIRECTED to report to the Government Efficiency, Innovation, and Audits on the existing process for repairing damaged street and pedestrian lighting infrastructure and the current timeline for repairs, as well as on potential bottlenecks or inefficiencies in the existing repair process.

I FURTHER MOVE that the Chief Legislative Analyst, with the assistance of the Bureau of Street Lighting, report to Government Efficiency, Innovation, and Audits with a comparative analysis of the street lighting repair process in other major cities, and how best practices in other cities can be adopted for the process in the City of Los Angeles.

PRESENTED BY:



MONICA RODRIGUEZ
Councilwoman, 7th District

SECONDED BY:



ORIGINAL



Attachment 2 – Overview of Streetlight Ownership and Funding Models

<u>Jurisdiction</u>	<u>No. of Streetlights</u>	<u>Ownership Model</u>	<u>Maintenance/Repair Funding</u>
Los Angeles	~ 223,000	- City-owned - Department of Public Works	- Street Lighting Maintenance District Assessments - General Fund
Los Angeles County (unincorporated regions)	~ 64,000	- County-owned ~ 30,500 streetlights - Private Utility Ownership ~ 33,500 streetlights	- County-Owned - Street Lighting District Assessments - Private Utility-Owned - Costs billed to customers - Public Utility Enterprise Fund
San Francisco	~ 44,000	- Public Utility Ownership ~ 26,000 streetlights - Private Utility Ownership ~ 18,000 streetlights	- General Fund - Community Facility Districts (decorative lighting elements) - Maintenance Districts
San Jose	~ 65,600	- City-owned - Department of Transportation	- General Fund - Lighting Assessment Districts (additional/decorative lighting elements)
San Diego	~ 55,000	- City-owned - Department of Transportation	- General Fund - Lighting Assessment Districts (additional/decorative lighting elements)
New York City	~ 400,000	- City-owned - Department of Transportation	General Fund
Chicago	~ 300,000	- City-owned - Department of Transportation	General Fund