



2024-2025 Final Report

Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury



This ancient oak is next to Jack London's cottage at Jack London State Park in Glen Ellen. It is revered by the Pomo Nation and protected by the State of California. Photographer, Don Roberts

Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Final Report 2024-2025

Table of Contents

Letter from the Presiding Judge	1
Letter from the Foreperson/Introduction	2
Breves Resúmenes de Informes, <i>en español</i>	3
Sonoma County Airport	
<i>Addressing Challenges and Preparing for the Future</i>	5
Permit Sonoma 2025	
<i>Management Review a Beginning, not an End</i>	13
Local Fees, Local Subsidies	
<i>Fees and subsidies cause local pain</i>	36
<i>Animal Services in Sonoma County: Separate and Not Equal</i>	43
Sonoma County Emergency Evacuation Plans	
<i>Are We Ready for the Next Major Evacuation?</i>	60
Who Can Afford to Live in Sonoma County?	
<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>	79
Sonoma County's Surplus Property Disposal	
<i>Housekeeping takes time but pays long term benefits</i>	97
<i>Providing Continuity by Following Through on Previous Investigations:</i>	
Responses to the 2023-2024	
Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Reports	104
Responses to the 2018-2023	
Sonoma County Civil Grand Juries' Reports	116

Para leer los informes del Gran Jurado Civil 2023-2024 en español, visite
<https://sonoma.courts.ca.gov/general-information/grand-jury/grand-jury-reports-responses>

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.

SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA COUNTY OF SONOMA



SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA COUNTY OF SONOMA



Christopher Honigsberg
Presiding Judge
(707) 521-6726

Hall of Justice
600 Administration Drive
Santa Rosa, CA 95403

June 13, 2025

Dear Members of the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury:

I reviewed the Grand Jury Final report for the fiscal year 2024-2025. I find that it complies with Penal Code section 933. You are commended for your thorough investigations, conscientious findings, and recommendations. You fulfilled your duties with hard work and dedication.

The citizens of Sonoma County are indebted to you for your diligent, straightforward efforts. I know that the performance of your duties required a lot of your time and that you sacrificed other personal and professional obligations to serve. As volunteers that serve a vital public role, you took your responsibility seriously and it shows in the investigations of the different issues that affect the citizens of Sonoma County.

I know it was a lot of effort, work, and collaboration to perform the tasks necessary to create your report. On behalf of the Superior Court of Sonoma County, I applaud and thank you for all you have done. I would especially like to thank your foreperson, Karen Rocco, for her practical leadership and dedication to the work of the Grand Jury.

Once again, congratulations to our Civil Grand Jury. You have worked hard and done your job well. Our county is a better place thanks to your work.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Chris Honigsberg", is written over the typed name.

Christopher Honigsberg,
Presiding Judge
Superior Court of California,
County of Sonoma

CH/ml



The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury

PO Box 5109 Santa Rosa, California 95402

(707) 565-6330

gjury@sonomacounty.gov

www.sonomagrandjury.org

To the Citizens of Sonoma County and the Honorable Judge Christopher Honigsberg:

On behalf of the 2024–2025 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury and pursuant to California Penal Code Section 933, it is both my duty and privilege to present our Final and Consolidated Report.

Throughout this term, our jurors dedicated countless hours to conducting thorough investigations, reviewing complex data, and crafting detailed reports. Despite the unexpected reduction in our ranks from 19 to 13 jurors, the remaining members demonstrated exceptional perseverance, integrity, and commitment to the responsibilities entrusted to us by the people of Sonoma County. Their unwavering dedication ensured that our work was completed with rigor and care.

Service on the Civil Grand Jury demands far more than time—it calls for collaboration, critical thinking, respectful dialogue, and a shared sense of civic responsibility. It is a powerful platform for effecting positive change by illuminating areas within local government that warrant reform, increased efficiency, or enhanced accountability.

Over the course of our term, we completed a series of reports addressing critical topics that affect the lives of Sonoma County residents. These include housing affordability and displacement, the state of animal services, airport infrastructure and growth, disaster evacuation planning, building permit processing, surplus property disposal, and local fee structures. Each report offers carefully considered findings and recommendations aimed at improving transparency, equity, and public service delivery.

Now more than ever, in a national climate where transparency is often elusive and public trust is strained, the Civil Grand Jury stands as a beacon of democratic engagement. It is one of the few remaining institutions that offers ordinary citizens a direct, impartial, and constructive voice in local governance. Our efforts this year reaffirm the essential role the Civil Grand Jury plays in safeguarding the public interest and fostering a more responsive, accountable government.

We are proud to present our findings and recommendations, and we invite all residents of Sonoma County to engage with this report as a catalyst for informed dialogue and meaningful action.

Sincerely,

Karen Rocco

Foreperson

Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury 2024–
2025 Term

Página de resúmenes en español

Los informes del Gran Jurado en español estarán disponibles en el sitio web del Gran Jurado a partir del 1 de julio de 2025.

(<https://sonoma.courts.ca.gov/general-information/civil-grand-jury/current-year-reports-and-responses>)

A continuación, se presentan resúmenes de los informes.

Aeropuerto del Condado de Sonoma: Abordando los desafíos y preparándose para el futuro

El Gran Jurado recomienda actualizaciones estratégicas para el Aeropuerto del Condado de Sonoma el Aeropuerto Charles M. Schulz del Condado de Sonoma (STS) ha crecido significativamente en los últimos años, atendiendo a más de 770,000 pasajeros en 2024 y convirtiéndose en un enlace de transporte vital para la región de North Bay. Un nuevo informe del Gran Jurado Civil reconoce este progreso y recomienda actualizaciones estratégicas para ayudar al aeropuerto a mantener el ritmo de su crecimiento. Las sugerencias clave incluyen la contratación de una empresa para crear un plan maestro basado en el número actual y proyectado de pasajeros, y recomienda una estructura de gestión que refleje un aeropuerto de tamaño mediano, no un aeropuerto local de aviación general.

Enajenación de Bienes Excedentes en el Condado de Sonoma: La gestión del hogar requiere tiempo, pero ofrece beneficios a largo plazo

El Gran Jurado Civil del Condado de Sonoma ha publicado sus conclusiones sobre la gestión de los bienes excedentes en el condado, destacando el sólido desempeño de la División de Gestión de Flotas en la enajenación de vehículos y equipos, que genera importantes ingresos anuales gracias a un sistema bien organizado y sostenible. Por el contrario, el Gran Jurado concluyó que el condado carece de un enfoque estratégico para la gestión de terrenos y edificios excedentes —sus activos más valiosos—, citando oportunidades perdidas y una transparencia limitada. El informe recomienda mejor acceso público a los datos territoriales y una estrategia proactiva para aprovechar al máximo el valor de los bienes públicos infrautilizados.

¿Quién puede permitirse vivir en el Condado de Sonoma?: Una historia de dos ciudades

A medida que se intensifica la crisis de vivienda en el Condado de Sonoma, impulsada por un precio medio de la vivienda de \$900,000 y una creciente escasez de opciones asequibles, dos ciudades se destacan como modelos de progreso. Healdsburg y Rohnert Park, a pesar de sus diferentes identidades, han obtenido la Designación Pro-Vivienda de California y están superando los objetivos estatales de vivienda mediante estrategias innovadoras y adaptadas a las necesidades locales. Al agilizar las aprobaciones, aprovechar los terrenos públicos, obtener financiación estatal y local, y fomentar una profunda participación comunitaria, estas ciudades demuestran que, con un liderazgo sólido y una planificación inclusiva, es posible crear soluciones de vivienda que beneficien a todos los residentes.

Servicios para animales en el condado de Sonoma: Separados y desiguales: Los costos y las consecuencias de la descentralización

Un nuevo informe del Gran Jurado Civil del Condado de Sonoma 2024-2025 destaca serias preocupaciones sobre la desigualdad en los servicios para animales en todo el condado, especialmente en las zonas atendidas por los Servicios para Animales de North Bay (NBAS). La investigación reveló que NBAS opera con una supervisión insuficiente, incumple contratos y presenta deficiencias en el cumplimiento de las normas de salud pública, lo que pone en riesgo el bienestar animal y la seguridad de la comunidad. En contraste, agencias como los Servicios para Animales del Condado de Sonoma y el Refugio de Animales de Rohnert Park demuestran un firme apego a las mejores prácticas. El Gran Jurado insta a los gobiernos de los condados y ciudades a redoblar esfuerzos para coordinar y estandarizar los servicios de control de animales y refugios, mejorar la supervisión y garantizar el cumplimiento de las leyes estatales para proteger mejor tanto a los animales como a los residentes.

Tarifas y subsidios locales: Las tarifas y los subsidios causan problemas locales

Un informe reciente del Gran Jurado Civil del Condado de Sonoma concluyó que, si bien Santa Rosa, Petaluma y Rohnert Park siguieron los procedimientos legales para ajustar las tarifas de los permisos, cada ciudad podría mejorar la transparencia y la comunicación, especialmente en lo que respecta a la eliminación de los subsidios que llevaron a aumentos significativos de las tarifas. En Santa Rosa, la tarifa de un permiso de renovación histórica aumentó de \$1,700 a \$17,000 en 2024, lo que generó preocupación en la comunidad y una revisión del proceso de permisos de la ciudad. El Gran Jurado recomendó que los gobiernos locales identifiquen con mayor claridad los cambios en las tarifas y sus impactos para ayudar a los residentes a comprender mejor y prepararse para los ajustes de costos.

Planes de evacuación del Condado de Sonoma: ¿Estamos listos para la próxima evacuación?

Un nuevo informe del Gran Jurado Civil del Condado de Sonoma concluye que el condado no está preparado para evacuaciones a gran escala durante incendios forestales e inundaciones, debido al retraso en el cumplimiento de las leyes estatales de planificación de evacuación y a la inadecuada infraestructura vial. Las rutas de evacuación clave siguen siendo peligrosamente estrechas o propensas a cuellos de botella, mientras que los sistemas de comunicación, especialmente en zonas rurales, carecen de la fiabilidad necesaria para emitir alertas oportunas. Si bien el condado cuenta con un plan de emergencia escrito y un centro de operaciones activo, ha pospuesto el mapeo completo de las rutas de evacuación y la modernización de los semáforos hasta 2030. El informe insta a la inversión inmediata en herramientas de planificación de evacuación, mejoras viales y sistemas de alerta comunitaria más robustos para garantizar la seguridad pública durante futuros desastres.

Permit Sonoma 2025: La Revisión de la Gestión es un Principio, No un Fin

El Gran Jurado Civil del Condado de Sonoma publicó sus conclusiones sobre Permit Sonoma, la agencia de permisos de planificación del uso del suelo y desarrollo del condado, y elogió su progreso sustancial en la modernización de sus operaciones y el cumplimiento de los mandatos legales. El jurado determinó que Permit Sonoma cumple ampliamente con los requisitos del Proyecto de Ley 2234 de la Asamblea de California, que impone plazos estrictos y estándares de transparencia en los procesos de permisos de construcción. También elogió el compromiso de la agencia con la implementación de las 15 recomendaciones de la revisión de gestión de Berry Dunn de 2023, destacando logros clave como la reducción de los tiempos de revisión de permisos, la ampliación de las aprobaciones directas, la mejora de la atención al cliente y el uso de verificadores de planos externos para evitar retrasos. Sin embargo, el Gran Jurado enfatizó la necesidad de una mayor inversión en tecnología y sistemas de flujo de trabajo para realizar un seguimiento completo de las métricas de rendimiento y estandarizar los procedimientos. Si bien el informe confirma la dedicación de Permit Sonoma a la reforma, también insta a los líderes del condado a mantener el impulso y proporcionar recursos adicionales para garantizar el éxito a largo plazo, la confianza pública y el apoyo continuo a los objetivos de vivienda y desarrollo del condado de Sonoma.



Puede ver los informes completo en este sitio de web.

Sonoma County Airport

Addressing Challenges and Preparing for the Future

SUMMARY

Over the past two decades, Charles M. Schultz-Sonoma County Airport has evolved from a small general aviation facility¹ into a thriving mid-sized commercial airport, now serving more than 700,000 passengers annually. Its growth places it on par with regional airports such as those in Green Bay, WI, and Peoria, IL. However, during this rapid expansion, the airport's management structure, planning efforts, and infrastructure have struggled to keep pace—creating challenges that hinder it from reaching its full economic potential.

Key issues limiting operational efficiency include FAA compliance shortcomings, insufficient management resources, inadequate TSA space for screening during peak travel times, and limited parking capacity. These factors strain the airport's ability to grow sustainably. Missed opportunities in parking revenue and commercial leasing continue to limit the airport's ability to generate maximum benefit for both it and the county.

This report highlights these critical concerns and proposes ways to enhance regulatory compliance, improve airport operations, and modernize management practices. The objective is to position Sonoma County Airport for sustainable growth while maximizing its economic contributions to the region.

The Sonoma County 2024-25 Civil Grand Jury extends its gratitude to the many county officials, private stakeholders, and community members who provided valuable insights throughout this review. We are also encouraged by the county's initiative to launch a citizen-led oversight effort, fostering collaboration and innovative thinking to shape the future of the airport and surrounding property.

Sonoma County Airport can continue to grow as a vital economic engine for the region while providing an exceptional experience for passengers and businesses by proactively addressing these challenges.

METHODOLOGY

The Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) pursued multiple avenues of inquiry to ensure accuracy and depth. The investigation included extensive internet searches to gather publicly available information, a thorough review of documents published by local news organizations, and an analysis of records from public meetings of airport commission and local government officials. Additionally, the Grand Jury conducted interviews with key personnel knowledgeable about the airport operations and management practices.

BACKGROUND

Charles M. Schultz-Sonoma County Airport (Airport code STS) is a county-owned, public-use airport. Sonoma County Airport has a rich history that dates to the late 1930s. Sonoma County purchased 339 acres of agricultural land and began constructing a runway in 1939. During World War II, in 1942, the U.S. Army took control of the site, expanded it by adding 826 acres, and

¹ General aviation (GA) - Refers to all civil aviation operations other than scheduled commercial airline flights and military aviation. It's a broad category that includes everything from small private planes and helicopters to business jets and even gliders and balloons

developed additional infrastructure, extending the original runway, building a second runway, taxiways, apron areas, and other facilities. The airport was officially opened for military operations in June 1942 as Santa Rosa Army Airfield. After the war, on July 8, 1946, Sonoma County resumed operation of the airport as a civil facility. Therefore, while initial construction began in 1939, the airport commenced operations in 1942 under military control and transitioned to civilian use in 1946.

STS, like all public airports in the United States, is regulated by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Air traffic control, safety and runway facilities requirements, noise and other environmental impact and security administration must all meet FAA minimum standards. One particular aspect of FAA requirements pertains to [Airport Master Plans](#): Advisory Circular (AC) 150/5070-6B outlines the recommended practices and requirements for developing airport master plans, which serve as long-term planning tools to guide the sustainable development of airport facilities. The FAA emphasizes that the master planning process should be tailored to the specific needs of each airport, whether it's a small general aviation facility or a large commercial service airport. This comprehensive document lists the many things that an airport is required to consider when establishing and executing its operational plans and budgets, including:

1. **Inventory of Existing Conditions:** A comprehensive assessment of current airport facilities, infrastructure, airspace, and environmental considerations.
2. **Aviation Activity Forecasts:** Projections of future aviation demand, including passenger enplanements, aircraft operations, and cargo volumes.
3. **Facility Requirements:** Identification of the necessary facilities and infrastructure to meet projected demand, ensuring compliance with safety and design standards.
4. **Alternatives Analysis:** Evaluation of various development options to meet facility requirements, considering factors such as cost, environmental impact, and operational efficiency.
5. **Airport Layout Plan (ALP):** A detailed, scaled drawing depicting existing and proposed airport facilities, which must be approved by the FAA for federally obligated airports.
6. **Implementation Plan:** A phased approach to development, including cost estimates, funding sources, and project timelines.
7. **Environmental Considerations:** Assessment of potential environmental impacts associated with proposed developments, in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant regulations.
8. **Public Involvement:** Engagement with stakeholders, including the community, airport users, and governmental agencies, to gather input and foster transparency throughout the planning process.

While initially serving general aviation, private, and charter flights, the airport currently hosts commercial carriers such as Alaska Airlines, Avelo, and American Airlines.

The airport's rapid expansion, particularly in the years following the post-COVID economic recovery, has made it into one of Sonoma County's greatest success stories. It is the nearest airport to Sonoma county's renowned wine-growing region and the greater North Bay area, with a service area encompassing more than 800,000 residents. The closest other major airports—Sacramento, Oakland, and San Francisco International—are significantly farther, making Sonoma County Airport a crucial gateway for both business and leisure travelers. Sonoma County Airport directly and indirectly supports approximately 1,700 jobs and has a significant multiplier effect on the local economy.

Recognizing the airport's increasing importance, the Grand Jury initiated an investigation to assess how effectively the airport is planning, adapting, and responding to its rapid growth. This inquiry was not driven by complaints or concerns of misconduct but rather by a commitment to ensuring that the airport continues to serve the county efficiently and sustainably. Given STS' position as a major economic engine and essential public asset, it is critical to evaluate its development strategy, operational readiness, and long-term vision.

DISCUSSION

Airport Management and Operations

Sonoma County Airport is owned and operated by Sonoma County. The airport's 22 staff members are county employees; the Airport Manager reports to the Director of the Sonoma County Public Infrastructure Department, who reports to the Sonoma County Executive, who reports directly to the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors. In fiscal year 2025, the Board approved the addition of two Airport Operations Specialist positions to enhance operational efficiency and safety. STS's annual operating budget is \$25.4 Million.

Terminal Modernization and Expansion:

In November 2022, the airport unveiled a modernized terminal following a comprehensive \$40 million renovation project. The expansion added over 27,000 square feet, bringing the terminal's total size to approximately 56,000 square feet. Key enhancements included a renovated ticketing lobby, improved security lanes, additional boarding gates, expanded concessions, a new baggage claim area with dual carousels, and outdoor seating options. The project aimed to elevate the passenger experience and accommodate growing air travel demand.

Passenger Volume Trends:

Passenger traffic at STS has demonstrated a consistent upward trajectory in recent years:

- **2015:** 263,142 passengers
- **2019:** 488,179 passengers
- **2020:** 195,303 passengers (a decline attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic)
- **2021:** 435,427 passengers
- **2022:** 614,481 passengers
- **2023:** 641,178 passengers
- **2024:** 772,758 passengers

In 2024, Sonoma County Airport experienced record-breaking passenger traffic, with a total of 772,758 travelers, marking a 20.5% increase from the 641,178 passengers in 2023.

When evaluating STS's performance relative to similar regional airports of similar size and usage, several factors are noteworthy:

- **Passenger Growth:** STS has experienced a robust recovery and growth trajectory post-pandemic, with 2023 passenger numbers surpassing pre-pandemic levels and 2024 volume establishing a new traffic record.
- **Terminal Enhancements:** The \$40 million terminal modernization completed in 2024 was intended to position STS competitively, offering amenities and capacities comparable to other medium sized airports, thereby enhancing its appeal to both leisure and business travelers.

- **Airline Partnerships:** The presence of carriers such as Alaska, American, and Avelo Airlines, offering direct services to 8 U.S. destinations, underscores STS's strategic importance and connectivity. Airport management continues to try to attract additional carriers and flights.

These developments align STS with national trends observed in regional airports that have invested in infrastructure and service enhancements to meet evolving passenger expectations and stimulate further growth.

Challenges and Opportunities

Sonoma County Airport has faced several operational and infrastructure challenges in the past year. These issues, while documented extensively in local media, highlight the growing pains associated with increased activity at the airport, as well as the complexities of maintaining aging infrastructure and complying with FAA regulations. The following are among the most pressing issues currently affecting STS:

Runway Structural Integrity and Maintenance Deficiencies

In mid-2024, Sonoma County Airport experienced significant runway issues, including the discovery of multiple sinkholes. In May 2024, a hole measuring between 12 and 18 inches in depth was identified on the main runway, leading to a temporary closure for emergency repairs. Subsequent inspections revealed additional pavement failures, which were linked to the deteriorating condition of a culvert beneath the runway. These structural deficiencies necessitated emergency repairs, and the airport has embarked on plans for further maintenance to ensure the continued safety and operational integrity of its main runway. The FAA recently notified the airport that the pace of runway repairs is unacceptable. This situation underscores the challenge of maintaining aging infrastructure at an airport that has seen increased traffic in recent years.

Noise Abatement Issues

Sonoma County Airport noise complaints from residents increased by more than 200% in 2024. Complaints are largely attributed to the growing presence of larger, louder jet aircraft and new FAA-mandated traffic patterns. As the airport experiences heightened passenger traffic, community members have voiced concerns over the disruption to their quality of life. These complaints have become a point of tension with residents pushing for changes, including potential adjustments to flight paths or operational hours, to mitigate noise levels.

Emergency Planning

The FAA requires every airport providing commercial passenger service to have a [complete and comprehensive Emergency plan](#). The FAA has notified STS that the current Emergency Plan does not meet FAA standards, and that Sonoma County Airport is required to develop a compliant emergency plan. It has also found repeated violations of regulations for emergency services response time requirements, failure to update pilot communications regarding airfield communications, and a variety of other violations that collectively suggest inadequate airport management resources and non-compliance with mandated safety and operational regulations.

Master Plan and Strategic Planning

The airport's current Master Plan was completed in 2007, with an update in 2011. The plan has not been regularly revised to meet the growing demands and challenges of an airport whose traffic has increased by more than 50% in the past six years and tripled in the past decade. The master plan, rather than being a proactive guide for future development, largely serves as a reactive update to the 2007 plan. The [Sonoma County Airport Master Plan Update](#) primarily revises projections rather than

offering a comprehensive, forward-thinking framework as recommended by FAA Master Plan guidelines.

The need for, and absence of, a fully updated long-term strategic plan is a significant concern and may partially explain why the airport has an ongoing history of operational and infrastructure issues. Following FAA planning guidelines would have included:

- comprehensive assessment of facilities infrastructure (which should have noticed failing runways)
- implementation planning (such as proactive design to reduce TSA screening delays); and
- public involvement regarding environmental concerns (which should have exposed the problems with revised traffic routes producing added air traffic noise)

The Grand Jury recommends that the airport prioritize the development of a comprehensive, updated master plan that considers both immediate needs and long-term projections for the airport's growth. A forward-looking plan will better position the airport to manage future demands and ensure compliance with evolving FAA regulations.

FAA Compliance requires more Resources and more proactive STS Airport Management

While the airport is generally in compliance with FAA regulations, inadequate management resources have led to a lack of continuity and a reactive approach to issues rather than a proactive, anticipatory stance. The airport's inability to handle aircraft noise complaints is one notable example of this issue.

The FAA sets takeoff and landing protocols for commercial airlines without input from the local airport or the surrounding community. Airport management was unaware of new FAA flight protocols until noise complaints began to surface. While the FAA is not required to consult with the airport in advance of such changes, more proactive airport management would have communicated the changes to the public before complaints arose and taken early steps to address community concerns. Airport management is now taking a reactive approach by engaging with the FAA to advocate for adjustments in future flight traffic patterns.

Another example of an FAA compliance issue: the airport's property portfolio includes two county-owned properties that are not related to airport operations and are not generating rental income. These properties—one an equipment yard for the Sonoma County Public Infrastructure Department and the other the North County Detention Facility operated by the Sonoma County Sheriff—do not comply with FAA regulations, which require all airport usage to contribute to the airport's revenue. While negotiations are ongoing to transfer some of this land back to the airport for public parking and to secure rental payments for the remaining property, these discussions have progressed slowly and remain unresolved at the time of this report.

More robust management structure is needed to improve the airport's responsiveness to emerging issues. Proactive engagement with community concerns and FAA partners, especially regarding noise mitigation and operational changes, will help build stronger stakeholder relationships.

Organization structure concerns

Sonoma County Airport is a department within the Public Infrastructure Division of County government, a common organizational placement for small airports in rural counties. STS's growth, however, has turned it into a regional airport with most of the requirements and challenges of a very public-facing agency: it needs long term investment plans, marketing and communication capability,

management succession plans, and staff capable of addressing a host of operational management challenges that are atypical for a local government agency.

The current organization structure has one manager, an assistant manager, four administrative assistants/aides, one IT specialist, a real estate project specialist, a marketing specialist, and an administrative services (budgeting & contracts) officer. Its 2025 budget is approximately 9% of the Public Infrastructure Division total budget, and it gets minimal Infrastructure Division senior leadership attention unless there are significant problems or opportunities.

The Civil Grand Jury notes that the Airport division of Sonoma County Public Infrastructure has essentially the same staffing today that it had in 2019 - while serving almost 300,000 more passengers and twice as many commercial flights. The only staffing additions during this 5-year period are an IT specialist and (2) operations staffers. Management resources and qualifications are unchanged, in an undeniably more challenging environment. In effect, county leadership is treating the airport as if the significant traffic growth and larger facilities under management don't require more resources, or more capable staffing, than were needed to handle a *much* smaller business six years ago.

Sonoma County Airport significantly impacts multiple aspects of Sonoma county business development, interacts with (and answers to) both Federal and State of California authorities, and needs senior leadership that is able and empowered to navigate these challenges. The Civil Grand Jury notes that the Airport Division's current organizational placement as an entity within a much larger Sonoma County department with other priorities may not result in the resources and leadership attention required for long-term success.

Facility Constraints and Parking Issues

The recently completed terminal expansion, while providing some relief, has left the airport with limited room for further expansion. The TSA checkpoint at Sonoma County Airport continues to be a bottleneck during periods of heavy traffic, with little room for dedicated "Pre-check" lines to expedite passengers with pre-cleared security profiles. The recently completed expansion has left the airport with limited room for further expansion to accommodate the projected growth in passenger traffic.

As passenger traffic has increased, Sonoma County Airport has been unable to meet the rising demand for parking. A notable instance of this occurred in October 2024 when the airport saw a surge of approximately 200 more vehicles than available parking spaces could accommodate. This increase coincided with the introduction of Avelo Airlines' service to Ontario, California. The airport's parking facilities are being stretched to their limits as passenger numbers continue to grow, raising concerns about the need for further investment in parking to meet demand.

Parking and passenger pick-up space limitations also led airport management to adopt a counter-intuitive policy that precludes scheduled passenger pick-up by Uber and Lyft, the (2) major ride-share providers. Passenger inability to pre-arrange pickup, especially for early morning and late evening arrivals, means fewer passengers will choose to use third party transportation and thereby decrease parking demand.

Avelo Airlines closed its base at Sonoma County Airport on May 1, 2025, due to low demand and underperformance. While some routes will be discontinued, others like Burbank and Las Vegas will remain. The closure is expected to have only a minor financial impact on the airport—less than \$200,000 in lost revenue. Passenger traffic and parking demand will likely decrease slightly, potentially easing parking demand. Airport officials believe operations will remain stable despite the

changes and are hoping to attract additional airlines and route service to enable continued traffic growth.

CONCLUSIONS

Sonoma County Airport is a critical economic and transportation asset for Sonoma County. It has grown rapidly from a sleepy general aviation airport to serve more than 700,000 passengers a year. However, its current management structure and planning approach are not consistent with this growth, and are on a slow track to react. Current staffing and funding resources do not align with STS's rapid growth and evolving role in Sonoma County. STS faces significant challenges in strategic planning, management continuity and capability, and facility capacity.

Sonoma County Airport *must* address structural runway construction deficiencies. Community concerns over air traffic noise, and inadequate parking capacity are hurdles that the airport must navigate as it continues to expand. Addressing these operational and infrastructure challenges will be critical in maintaining the airport's role as a vital gateway to Northern California, while also ensuring it remains a good neighbor to the surrounding community.

The airport must also address all FAA compliance issues and further enhance the physical infrastructure to fully capitalize on its potential as a regional economic driver. During the past 5 years, Sonoma County Airport has demonstrated resilience and growth, and these efforts position the airport favorably among its national peers and contribute significantly to the region's economic vitality and connectivity, but the lack of a comprehensive forward-looking master plan is a significant concern that will likely constrain future development.

Looking ahead, STS aims to continue its growth trajectory by attracting additional airline services and expanding its destination offerings. Ongoing investments in infrastructure and community engagement are central to the airport's strategy to strengthen its role as a key transportation gateway in Northern California. However, airport management must also recognize and proactively plan for increased airline activity and expanded flight schedules if it hopes to sustain growth while maintaining satisfactory customer service.

FINDINGS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury determined that:

- F1. Charles M. Schultz - Sonoma County Airport's failure to update and execute its Master Plan in compliance with FAA recommendations is a root cause of airport maintenance and development problems.
- F2. STS's current management resources are more appropriate for a general aviation or small commercial airport than for the medium sized passenger airport that Sonoma County Airport has become.
- F3. Sonoma County Airport's management is reactive rather than proactive due to inadequate resources and staffing.
- F4. Sonoma County Airport projects compete with road repair, traffic management, purchasing and other projects for senior Public Infrastructure Department leadership attention.
- F5. Parking is the largest airport revenue source, but the absence of adequate parking on site is a material barrier to continued growth.

F6. Sonoma County use of airport land for non-airport purposes without paying rent could expose the County to significant FAA penalties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. By November 1, 2025, Sonoma County Public Infrastructure will determine how to resolve all FAA non-airport land use issues and submit this plan for Board of Supervisors' review.
- R2. By December 1, 2025, the Sonoma County Executive Officer will evaluate whether Sonoma County Airport should continue to be a department within Public Infrastructure or become a stand-alone agency and will forward an appropriate recommendation to the Board of Supervisors.
- R3. By December 1, 2025, the County Executive Officer will evaluate the need for engaging a qualified Airport Master Plan consultant as suggested in FAA Advisory Circular (AC) 150/5070-6B to facilitate a comprehensive review of the Charles M. Schultz-Sonoma County Airport Master Plan.
- R4. By June 1, 2026, Sonoma County Airport shall complete and publish a full update of the Airport Master Plan using the most current version of FAA Advisory Circular (AC) 150/5070-6B to guide requirements for completing the updated plan.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code §§ 933 and 933.05, the civil grand jury requires responses as follows:

- Sonoma County Infrastructure Department to respond to F1, F1, F3, F4, F5; R1, R4
- Sonoma County Executive Officer to respond to R2 and R3

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

- US Department of Transportation - FAA, "Airport Master Report", December 9, 2024.
- Press Democrat, "Sonoma Jet Center sues Sonoma County Airport, raising concerns over fuel tank project as feud breaks out between tenants." June 22, 2024.
- October 17, 2024, Sonoma County Airport Commission meeting notes.
- County of Sonoma, "Charles M. Schulz – Sonoma County Airport report to Board of Supervisors shows continued growth in passengers, revenue." October 16, 2024.
- Sonoma County Airport, "Master Plan" 2007.
- FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018, Section 163 Grant Assurance #25.

Permit Sonoma 2025

Management Review is a Beginning, not an End

SUMMARY

In August of 2024, the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury set out to answer two simple questions: how many residential construction permits are issued in the unincorporated area of Sonoma County each year, and how long does it take to get a permit? Finding answers was harder than expected, and the inquiry became a more comprehensive investigation of Permit Sonoma.

Permits are required to construct (or modify construction of) any structure of public interest – meaning all residences and buildings that might be habitable or otherwise occupied by people. A permit is required to add or replace anything that might affect public or personal safety in a building: a water heater, solar panels, or even a new deck railing. Permits are a prerequisite to any work that must comply with legal requirements for environmental standards, zoning and property line encroachment, or any construction in a County [“special area”](#) with specific building style, placement or reflectivity constraints. A common perception of the permit process is that it will take forever to get a permit, cost way too much, and require more expertise and patience than the average person could possibly have. The Civil Grand Jury decided to assess this perception to see whether it is true for Permit Sonoma.

Delays in permit processing have the practical effect of hindering housing construction in many locales and can be an effective tactical tool to delay or prevent housing construction. Permitting delays lead to construction delays, which lead to housing shortages. Therefore, in 2022 the California State Legislature took action to reduce roadblocks by passing a law ([Assembly Bill 2234](#)) requiring *all* county and city permitting agencies to review and issue construction permits on a timely basis. Coincidentally, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors concluded that the county would benefit from an independent review of construction permitting in Sonoma County and engaged Berry Dunn (a management and workflow consulting firm) to conduct a formal assessment of Permit Sonoma’s performance. The [consultants’ final report](#) was presented to the Board of Supervisors in January of 2023.

Equipped with this information, the Civil Grand Jury amended its inquiry and initiated a formal investigation of Permit Sonoma with the intent of answering these two questions:

1. Is Permit Sonoma meeting the requirements for permit review and issuance established by AB 2234?
2. Has Permit Sonoma made significant progress toward adopting and implementing the [specific recommendations included in the Berry Dunn report](#)?

The conclusion: Permit Sonoma is essentially meeting requirements for AB2234 and fulfilling the Berry Dunn Report recommendations. This report will tell you how Permit Sonoma’s performance compares with internal goals set in 2024 in response to the Berry Dunn report recommendations. The Civil Grand Jury also learned that Permit Sonoma’s workflow isn’t as efficient as it could be: there are loose ends to tie down and systemic impediments to overcome, and we will suggest how Permit Sonoma could make permit application better, faster, and cheaper in the future.

METHODOLOGY

The 2024-2025 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (Civil Grand Jury)

- Conducted more than 20 interviews with Permit Sonoma staff & leadership, third party contractors and service providers
- Reviewed and analyzed more than 500,000 data records related to construction permit applications
- Researched permit activity for other California counties and cities' timely performance, self-certification and over-the-counter permitting processes and workflow systems deployments
- Reviewed Sonoma County ordinances regarding Permit Sonoma (and its predecessor Permit and Resource Management Department) authority and Sonoma County building and safety codes

BACKGROUND

What is Permit Sonoma and What Does It Do?

[Permit Sonoma](#) (PS), formerly known and formally ordained as the Permit and Resource Management Department (PRMD), is a Sonoma County government agency established by Sonoma County [Ordinance 4906](#) in 1995. It is responsible for regulating construction projects to ensure that new buildings, structures, or renovations meet local, state and federal standards for structural safety, health, environmental efficiency, and (in the case of [‘area-specific plans’](#)) community expectations constraining land use, housing density, and construction appearance. Permit Sonoma is also charged with developing and organizing [county-wide plans for new housing construction](#) and critical review of proposed housing developments in the unincorporated areas of Sonoma County. In the words of Permit Sonoma senior leadership, “our mission is ... to support our entire community, through excellent customer service, to balance environmental protection with sustainable development.”

Oversight of these processes means Permit Sonoma has enormous influence on construction efficiency in Sonoma County, from initial design to finished build—and if Permit Sonoma does its job well, County residents should see lower construction cost, faster project completion, and ultimately more and better housing at all price points. Conversely, inefficiencies in Permit Sonoma operations can slow down construction progress, delay project completion, and make housing more expensive at all price points.

Why Does Permit Sonoma Do What It Does, and Who Put Them in Charge?

Permit agencies play a crucial role in safeguarding public welfare and ensuring orderly development in communities. Their work addresses several key objectives:

- **Public safety:** Ensuring buildings are safe for occupants and the surrounding community, and preventing accidents or disasters, such as building collapses, fire hazards, or electrical failures.
- **Planning:** Assisting local governments with planning for sustainable development and helping balance growth with environmental considerations and infrastructure needs.
- **Reasonable use of and demand for public infrastructure:** Ensuring new developments do not overload existing infrastructure (e.g., roads, water systems, waste disposal) by adhering to guidelines that balance growth with available resources.

- **Compliance with local, state, and federal requirements:** Ensuring that construction projects comply with a broad range of legal requirements, from local zoning laws to state fire codes and federal accessibility standards.

In California, a permit agency's authority comes from both state and local governments. The State of California *grants overarching authority to local permit agencies* through state laws and regulations, particularly through the [California Building Standards Code](#). California law allows local permit agencies to amend the state building code, in line with their own specific zoning laws and development guidelines. Specifically, localities may *add* specific requirements but *may not prescribe lesser standards* than are required by the state code. You can find an abridged version of [Sonoma County's local building code on the PS website](#) and a [complete copy of County ordinances](#) is also available online; chapters 7, 11 and 13 are particularly relevant.

The California Building Standards Code is updated every 3 years (most recently in 2022) and is largely based on the International Building Code (IBC). These updates are part of an ongoing effort to incorporate new knowledge, technology, and best practices for builders; improve building safety, sustainability, and energy efficiency; respond to emerging threats such as climate change; and incorporate advances in construction materials.

How Does a Permit Agency Ensure That Buildings Comply with the Building Code?

Permit agencies ensure that buildings comply with the building code through a two-fold process: **plan checks** and **inspections**.

Plan checks: Before construction begins, developers or homeowners submit their building plans to the permit agency. A trained plan checker reviews the plans to ensure they meet all relevant building codes, zoning laws, and safety standards. This step is crucial for preventing non-compliance before work even begins.

Inspections: Once construction starts, permit agencies conduct periodic inspections to ensure work is done according to the approved plans and building codes. Inspectors visit the site at various stages of construction, including foundation, framing, electrical installation, and final completion, to ensure everything is up to standard. If non-compliance is found during inspections, the construction project may be halted, and corrections will be required before the project can move forward.

Plan checkers and **building inspectors** typically have backgrounds in construction, architecture, or engineering. They are required to have specialized training and certifications to ensure they understand and can apply building codes effectively. The following qualifications are typical:

A quick history of California Building Codes

California's first official statewide building code was established in **1927**, with the adoption of the [California Building Standards Code](#). The code has evolved since then, incorporating updates based on changes in technology, building materials, and safety knowledge.

What Major Laws lead to the California Building Code?

Over the years, several major laws have amended the California Building Code to address safety concerns, technological advancements, and changes in community needs. Here are some significant changes:

Title 24: Title 24, known as the California Code of Regulations, is a comprehensive set of regulations that includes the California Building Standards Code. This code governs all aspects of construction in California and was first established in the 1970s. Title 24 is regularly updated to reflect changes in building safety, energy efficiency, and accessibility standards.

The California Energy Code (Title 24, Part 6): One key amendment to Title 24 came in the form of more stringent energy efficiency standards. The state has continually updated these standards, aiming to reduce the environmental impact of construction and improve building sustainability.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA): In response to the ADA, California made significant amendments to building codes to ensure accessibility for people with disabilities, mandating features such as ramps, wider doorways, and elevators in larger buildings.

Seismic Safety Laws: After devastating earthquakes in the 20th century, California's building codes were significantly amended to address seismic safety, especially in areas such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, and other earthquake-prone regions.

Education: A bachelor’s degree or equivalent experience in civil engineering, architecture, or construction management.

Certifications: Many plan checkers and inspectors hold certifications from organizations like the International Code Council or California Building Officials. These certifications indicate a professional’s knowledge of building codes and construction practices.

Experience: Several years of practical experience in construction or a related field are often required before becoming a plan checker or building inspector.

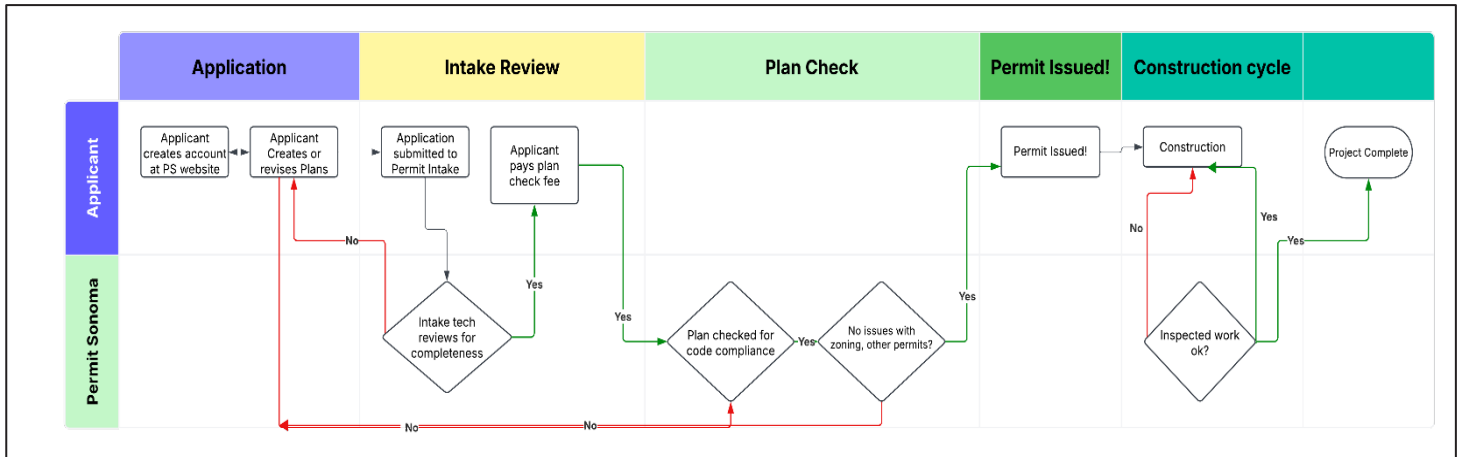
How Many Permits Does Permit Sonoma Process? The chart below was obtained from Permit Sonoma web site data:

Permit Sonoma Annual Activity Report				
Division	Permit Type	2022	2023	2024
BLD	Building	8,696	8,100	8,003
BLD	Building - Demolition	798	603	515
BLD	Building - Field Review	19	3	9
BLD	Safety Assessment	NA	67	115
	Subtotal, Building Division	9,513	8,773	8,642
ENG	Encroachment	532	518	389
ENG	Engineering Project	24	20	30
ENG	Grading	274	242	217
ENG	Surveys & Improvement Plan	368	13	28
ENG	Low Impact Development	16	3	11
ENG	Roiling	2	6	3
ENG	Sewer Construction & Fees	275	204	175
ENG	Storm Water	1	3	10
ENG	Transportation	858	682	685
	Subtotal, Engineering Division	2,350	1,691	1,548
W&S	Gray Water Systems	7	3	1
W&S	Septic Design	22	20	23
W&S	Septic	562	421	364
W&S	Well & Septic Field Review	890	597	391
W&S	Well & Well Study	558	431	464
	Subtotal, Well & Septic Div	2,039	1,472	1,243
PLAN	Admin Design Review	110	86	83
PLAN	Minor Subdivision	8	16	18
PLAN	Planning Project	34	27	28
PLAN	Use Permit	74	52	103
PLAN	Vacation Rental License	NA	266	1,334
PLAN	Water Resource Monitoring	223	14	46
PLAN	Zoning Permit	241	182	215
	Subtotal, Planning Division	690	643	1,827
	Total, Permit Sonoma	14,592	12,579	13,260
	<i>Total, Ex Vacation Rental Licenses</i>	14,592	12,313	11,926

This is an incomplete list, as there is at least a dozen more types of permits, including “design review”, environmental impact assessment and “building envelope modification”¹ applications. There is a noticeable decline in the number of permit applications since the peak (Covid) year of 2022. The data was developed from Permit Sonoma’s web site.

How does Permit Sonoma Do What It Does?

Applying for a permit is a fairly straightforward process, even though many (especially amateur/homeowner) applicants find the process daunting. Based on documents on the PS website describing permit application flow, here is a standard workflow diagram that encapsulates the process:



This diagram understates the complexity of the permitting process when the application is for more than simple permits (such as water heater replacement or electric panel upgrades): over and above construction code compliance, applications may need to be checked for conformance with local zoning, availability of septic capacity, and potentially dozens of related conditions. Regardless, Permit Sonoma’s basic workflow is the same: determine the list of applicable requirements; check the plans to see if they’re compliant; inform the applicant of any identified issues and request resubmission of conforming plans; or issue the permit when everything looks good. And, of course, collect permit application fees.

Prior to 2017, Permit Sonoma did everything on paper: record keeping was done manually, and permit applicants usually had no idea how far along the plan check path the permit had progressed, or even which engineer had been assigned to review plans. Permits, when issued, were on paper and paper copies of the permit were required to be attached to an official set of plans (maintained on site, along with a paper copy of inspection(s) records).

In 2017 (a few months before the Tubbs fire), Permit Sonoma contracted for a “Workflow Management” software package from a company, Accela, to keep track of “who’s done what, where, and when” with application paperwork. As the system was deployed across all PS departments, applicants began to benefit too: they could see online when an application had been accepted for plan check and get rudimentary information about the processing status of their permit application(s).

¹ “Building envelope” is the area of a zoned plot designated as the allowable building location. Plans to construct a building outside the recorded building envelope require an additional application and fee.

Then Covid hit in 2020 and shut down Permit Sonoma’s physical interaction with permit applicants. PS switched almost immediately to electronic submission of (formerly paper) plans. PS plan checkers switched to electronic review of plan documents, which required running changes to the Accela workflow management system. It also exposed shortcomings in the workflow: communications previously handled by permit employees walking to an adjacent cubicle had to be done electronically. Accela modifications were the only practical solution, so during the next 2 years Permit Sonoma adapted by adopting and developing a series of changes to Accela-based workflow in conjunction with functional reorganization of “who does what”.

Today, every aspect of PS’s interaction with permit plans and applicants is (supposed to be) noticed and tracked in Accela so that staff, management *and applicants* can see their application status at any moment, including who has signed off, who still needs to sign off, and what changes (if any) are needed to get a permit issued. For the most part, the system works well enough. At any given time, PS has a thousand or more permits in some stage of completion, is working on 500-1,000 new applications every month, and the current state of each application can be seen on the PS web site.

Processing Permit Applications Faster: California Assembly Bill AB2234 (2022)

The Covid emergency elevated public awareness of California’s housing shortfall and multiple legislative efforts resulted: [Project Homekey \(AB 83, 2020\)](#) provided funding to convert hotels and motels into short term housing for homeless people; the [California Home Act \(Senate SB9, 2021\)](#) required localities to permit lot splits and accessory dwellings in many more places than had been previously allowed; and the Assembly passed [AB 2011 in 2022](#), allowing residential housing on commercially zoned lots in locations that many cities and towns had forbidden.

In 2022, the state legislature concluded that one reason for the statewide housing shortage is that it simply takes too long to get permission to build. Many localities (generally *not* Sonoma County) use permit processing slowdowns as a first line of defense against housing development, and permitting delays were a significant contributor to the state’s housing construction issues. [Assembly Bill AB2234](#) establishes a simple requirement: permit agencies are required to review a permit application for completeness within 15 (business days and completed applications must then be assessed for code and ordinance compliance within 30 business days. Failure to meet these deadlines carries a significant penalty: by law, *if a permitting agency doesn’t do its job consistent with the requirements of AB2234, the application will be considered accepted.*

Permit Sonoma is the Sonoma County agency that is required to meet these targets. Each “*Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ)*” in the County’s nine cities are also required to comply with AB2234. *NB: this report is limited to discussion and review of the County agency, **not** the city AHJ’s.* The statute includes definitions and legal caveats that add specific requirements and exceptions to this simple statement, but both the language and the requirements are straightforward and understandable. [A more comprehensive summary of the law is included in Appendix 1].

Improving Permit Sonoma Performance: The Berry Dunn Report

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors (BoS) is ultimately responsible for the performance of all County agencies. In February of 2022, the BoS decided it would like an independent assessment of Permit Sonoma’s operations and engaged third party experts to conduct the analysis. In January of 2023, the [list of calendar items on the County Board of Supervisors’ agenda included this notice:](#)

“The Sonoma County Administrator’s Office (CAO) periodically conducts department reviews to evaluate County departmental programs, operational, and organizational effectiveness. Permit Sonoma was selected for review.”

... “The consultant, Berry Dunn McNeil & Parker LLC (Berry Dunn) delivered the results from their management review of Permit Sonoma to the Board of Supervisors on January 31, 2023. Permit Sonoma is actively working to implement changes identified in the review, make our permitting more efficient, and improve our customer service.”

The Berry Dunn Report (BD Report) includes many observations regarding PS workflow and behavior, and concludes with 15 specific recommendations in three general categories:

1. Change the way Permit Sonoma works, in ways that benefit the customer.
2. Establish explicit permit processing performance targets and make sure that hard data exists to measure throughput.
3. Ask your customers to tell you how PS can do a better job and then do what they tell you.

Permit Sonoma leadership reviewed these recommendations with the Board of Supervisors in February of 2023, *and accepted all of Berry Dunn’s recommendations.*

How well is PS doing towards these goals? According to a management update delivered to the Board of Supervisors in February 2024, Permit Sonoma has done a great job of achieving all of its objectives:

“In aggregate, the result is a 67% reduction in processing times across the department’s most common permit types without compromising critical compliance reviews that keep our community safe.”

Permit Type	Average Days to Review		Reduction
	June 2023	Dec 2024	
Building Permit	71	23	68%
Encroachment Permit	49	22	55%
Grading Permit	82	41	50%
Septic Permit	98	21	79%
Well Permit	123	18	85%
Average			67%

Permit Sonoma’s update to the Board of Supervisors concludes as follows:

“...the service that is being delivered to the residents of Sonoma County has been continually strengthened over the last 18 months. In addition to the average 67% reduction in permit response times the department has strong customer service scores from our permit center surveys with a positive response of 95.41% out of 1,592 survey respondents... has also resulted in stronger working relationships between the department’s six divisions and has laid the groundwork for improving employee recruitment, onboarding, and retention.”

DISCUSSION

Is Permit Sonoma Compliant with AB2234 Requirements?

Assembly Bill 2234 has two distinct timely review requirements: first, that submitted applications be reviewed for documentary completeness within 15 business days and either accepted or returned to the applicant with specific notice of any insufficiency; and second, an accepted application must be reviewed for compliance with construction codes, zoning and planning ordinances within 30 business days of acceptance.

Requirement 1: 15 Days to Review an Application for Completeness

The Permit Intake department is the PS gateway for all new permit applications and is also the department tasked with explaining document review requirements to prospective permit applicants. We reviewed thousands of 2024 initial permit applications and are pleased to report that *Permit Intake only failed to review applications for completeness and acceptability within the 15-day limit a handful of times – out of more than 7,000 permit applications*. That being said, the way that Permit Intake interacts with Accela makes it VERY difficult to prove the truth of this statement: AB2234 makes it clear that if an applicant is informed that documentation is incomplete or inadequate, the 15-day clock resets. However, Permit Sonoma’s Accela system doesn’t reflect the reset so PS Permit Intake’s Accela data can’t be used “as is” to report permit acceptance performance versus AB2234 requirements.

One of the senior managers within Permit Sonoma has developed a ‘work around’ for this Accela system shortcoming: Permit Intake records are extracted from Accela and inserted into a homebuilt Microsoft Access database, wherein a series of scripts and queries converts the inconsistent Accela data into a form that allows for Intake and Acceptance date calculations. The results of this data manipulation are used to inform PS management about its general performance (and identify problematic applications nearing the 15-day limit) but is not the permanent and auditable solution that would exist if Accela were modified to integrate this functionality.

Requirement 2: 30 days post-acceptance to Review and Comment on Plan Issuance

After a plan is accepted by Permit Intake technicians, applicants are required (in most cases) to pay for the time it will take Permit Sonoma to review the details of the proposed work for compliance with building codes, zoning requirements, stormwater and erosion control, and myriad other rules governing permit issuance. Payment of this plan check fee triggers a second clock under AB2234: review the plans and issue the permit within 30 business days or tell the applicant why it isn’t acceptable. These “Plan Check Comments” are required to be specific and comprehensive, such that an applicant knows exactly what changes need to be made to application documents for successful plan resubmission.

AB2234 requirements presented new but (mostly) manageable processing timelines for Permit Sonoma. The most challenging problem still hasn’t been solved: while each of the plan check department managers have their own way to keep track of plan check engineers’ progress, PS’s Accela system implementation doesn’t include management reporting that reliably tracks the amount of time between the “Plan Check Fee Paid” date and the date when comprehensive Plan Check Comments are sent. When multiple departments are required to review the plans, Accela records the date when each department does its work, but there is no systemic recognition of the requirement for *all* departments to complete their work within 30 business days—and if any one department hasn’t finished its work, they can all be deemed to have failed to meet the statutory requirement.

The Civil Grand Jury knows this is a problem because it tried (on multiple occasions over many, many hours) and failed to identify a programmatic method for confirming the actual amount of time PS was taking to get from plan check start to first comments sent. Interactive review with PS staff and management confirmed that the problem is real: the Accela database can be queried to retrieve sets of records that are representative of the work being done, but there is no way to *reliably and consistently* calculate how much time has elapsed since the clock started ticking—and it will take PS and Accela a significant amount of work to fix this problem. The Civil Grand Jury shared this experience, with multiple members of Permit Sonoma staff and management, and confirmed that this is a known problem within PS. The recognized "solution" is the ad hoc Microsoft Access system

referenced above — with the same caveats: the integrity of PS’s Access-based tool is neither audited nor auditable, and its maintenance depends on a single individual. If that person leaves the department, critical knowledge may be lost.

Caveats and concerns aside, the Civil Grand Jury can report that a time-consuming manual review of more than 5,000 permit review task status records for the months of February and October, 2024 found that fewer than 20 of ~1,100 permit applications requiring plan check failed to meet the AB2234 requirements. All of the failures were permits that required review by multiple departments; *and we saw meaningful reductions in overall processing time between February and October of 2024.*

Has Permit Sonoma Fully Implemented the Berry Dunn Report Recommendations?

California Civil Grand Juries are chartered to conduct independent inquiries and investigations into local government operations, so in the words of the old Russian adage that Ronald Reagan repeated to Mikhail Gorbachev: “Trust but verify”. Here’s what we learned about Permit Sonoma’s progress toward implementing the Berry Dunn recommendations:

1. Berry Dunn categorical recommendation: *change how PS works in ways that benefit the customer*

In Permit Sonoma’s traditional workflow, plan check was a serial process and each person in the queue waited to be notified that the person before them had completed their task. Berry Dunn suggested an alternate approach: work in parallel and use the Accela system’s workflow management capabilities to keep track of “who’s done what” using systems-based tools to trigger additional review as needed. Implementing this approach required several significant changes to Permit Sonoma operational process:

- Establish Standard Operating Procedure: Everyone in the workflow chain needs to use a known and standardized set of operating procedures (SOP).
- Integrate the Procedural Steps into the Accela Workflow: These procedural steps need to be incorporated in the Accela system so when significant progress is made, everyone who needs to know (including the customer) is informed—and conversely, when issues arise, people who can fix the problem are invited to do so.
- Permit Sonoma had to find ways to deal with seasonal loads that increase the volume of plan checks in excess of PS capacity.
- Permit Sonoma should have the ability to outsource plan check and certification of field work to third parties whenever practical, especially in cases where this would produce customer cost savings. One major point of emphasis was review of permit types to see how many additional types of permits could be issued “over the counter” to reduce the number of simple applications flowing through a system designed to handle complex permits.

BD Recommendation: Establish Standard Operating Procedures

Similarly skilled personnel in different departments all work in similar ways, but the absence of globally standard operating procedures (SOPs) for Accela nomenclature, combined with inadequate staff training regarding Accela system changes and updates means that SOPs aren’t actually standardized across departments. For example, almost everyone in Permit Intake and the six plan check departments uses a personal checklist to review application documents, but there is no universal checklist that is used department-wide in any PS department—let alone standardized across all of Permit Sonoma.

PS has undertaken an agency-wide effort to develop SOPs for each PS department but only one department ([Code Enforcement](#)) has actually published a document that could reasonably be described as a formal SOP framework; most other departments have made an effort to initiate SOP development but have considerable work to do to complete this task. After the individual departments are done establishing their own SOP's, the entire agency needs to finish the task by establishing and implementing standardized cross-department procedures—a task that hasn't been started, let alone completed.

Failure to implement efficient and *standard* operating procedures is costing Permit Sonoma money and time and is an opportunity for future improvement.

BD Recommendation: Integrate Procedural Steps into the Accela Workflow

The good news is that PS customers have *much* more visibility into the status of their permit application than they had even one year ago. One HUGE improvement: customers can see the names and phone numbers/email addresses of the individuals assigned to process their permit applications so they know who to contact when questions arise or when the review process is stalled. Additionally, inconsistencies in task names and status have been reduced (although there are still instances where departments use different names for the same task).

The bad news? As currently implemented by Permit Sonoma, Accela only handles process tracking, not workflow management. There's more work to be done on the Accela implementation and no plan to do it. While the data for each individual permit application is reliable, highly likely to be accurate, and shared with the applicant, *two permits for exactly the same type of work, processed by different Permit Sonoma employees, may be described differently in the Accela system* and/or recorded more or less accurately. Consequently, the Accela system as implemented by PS doesn't produce reliable reports on individual and aggregate employee performance. Given the fact that reports generated externally via Microsoft Access are not integrated into Accela, their results are impossible to verify independently.

BD Recommendation: Develop Systemic Awareness of Interdepartmental Collaboration Requirements

Complex permits for major remodels and new construction usually require action by multiple PS departments with overlapping requirements. For example, a building permit might require a well and septic permit that calls for additional leach field capacity—which requires agreement by Engineering that the site can be graded—before issuing a permit involving additional bedrooms. Permits can't be issued until all conditions are met, and when they involve multiple PS departments, each department needs to be systematically aware of outstanding tasks that must be completed before other departments can finish their work.

The Accela system currently tracks task status within each department but has no facilities (other than engineers posting "Read Me" comments) for communicating interdepartmental dependencies. A true systematic workflow would recognize these dependencies and ensure that every permit's interdepartmental status and sequence is understood across all of PS. This shortcoming results in systemic delays and is also the reason that sometimes permits get "lost" while each department waits for another department to act.

Commercial entities often use "program management" systems and personnel to ensure that complex processes proceed in an orderly fashion. Currently, no individual or department within Permit Sonoma is tasked with ensuring that all necessary inter-department work proceeds on a timely basis. Complex permit processing—especially for projects that involve both Planning and

Engineering review and require public notice—would benefit from PS adoption of standard program management methods.

The remaining Accela work recommended by Berry Dunn should be completed, even though it will require currently unbudgeted work and additional management attention, for 3 reasons:

- 1) Management, staff and applicants should know at every point along the permit issuance path how much time has been taken to get to issuance, and how much more time is left before the permit can legally be presumed to have been issued. This requirement is implicit in AB2234's statutory requirement.
- 2) Interdepartmental communications regarding “Who’s doing what, and are they done yet?” is the single biggest challenge that PS has toward achieving significantly improved permit throughput for complex applications. Fixing systemic issues preventing the simple calculation and reporting of elapsed time will also reduce time wasted by one department not realizing that another department had finished its work. While this problem doesn’t happen as often as it used to, it shouldn’t happen at all.
- 3) Permit Sonoma senior management, the County Executive, and the Board of Supervisors cannot know how well the Permit Sonoma staff is doing its job until this problem is fixed.

As currently implemented, the workflow system is far from perfect. It could certainly be easier to use (for both applicants and staff), more comprehensive in its record-keeping capabilities, and provide much more “exception reporting” to facilitate management and customer insight and intervention. If Permit Sonoma workflow is improved, permit processing could be much faster for everyone—and cheaper, too. So, regarding this group of Berry Dunn recommendations, “there are still a few bugs in the system” and Permit Sonoma has more work to do. PS’s Board of Supervisors update is generally accurate, *but tasks recommended by Berry Dunn are not as complete as has been reported.*

2. BD Categorical Recommendation: *Use Third Party Plan Check and Self-Certification to Cut Permitting Times*

The Berry Dunn report made five specific recommendations to help applicants get permits more quickly at lower cost. By adopting the BD recommendations, Permit Sonoma committed to the following:

- Over the Counter Permitting: Expanding the range and scope of permits that could be issued “over the counter”.
- Express Permit Review: Implementing an Express Permit review process that would engage all reviewing departments concurrently (instead of each department waiting until precedent reviewers had completed their work).
- Third Party Plan Check: Employing (licensed and certified) 3rd party engineering firms to augment the Permit Sonoma plan check staff both for cost-saving and load management purposes.

The Civil Grand Jury reviewed permit application data to see whether the impact of each of these initiatives could be verified. Permit Sonoma staff and management were interviewed to gather their collective opinion on the success of (and enthusiasm for) changing workflow in these ways. Here is a brief summary of learnings:

BD Recommendation: Over the Counter Permitting (OTC):

One might think that a search for “over the counter” on Permit Sonoma’s website would lead to a description of all the work that can be permitted this way... perhaps even a specific form or forms that would make a simple permit application fairly painless. One would be wrong.

The search returns just 10 documents, and here is *all* the text in those 10 documents that actually refers to “over the counter” building permits:

“Building permits for minor work, such as a re-roof, new water heater, electric upgrade or other work that does not involve any structural modification, can be issued over the counter.” and (regarding installation of new electric service to residential or commercial construction) “Residential Service...400 amp or less: No plans required. Can be issued over the counter with no plan check.”

That’s all. No form and certainly not a complete list of work that can be permitted over the counter. Here is a more complete list of work that may be permitted “over the counter” without plan check required (obtained by reviewing actual permits issued over a 6-month period):

- Water heater replacement
- New electric service and meter replacement
- Replacement of heating and cooling systems
- Replacement of roofing shingles not requiring structural modifications
- Siding replacement
- Some (but not all) residential solar panel installations
- Sidewalk and driveway repair
- Minor interior remodels with no structural changes
- Minor demolitions such as septic tank destructs
- Covered parking waivers, legal nonconforming determinations
- Temp campaign signage
- Designating structures as Accessory Dwelling Units
- Residential setback reduction with neighbor approvals
- Telecom tower modification

Permit engineers were asked to suggest other items that could or should qualify. For example, if an electric service is upgraded, could the load panel design be self-certified by a licensed master electrician? How about installing a Level 2 EV charger in a garage? Or even replacing an air conditioner and forced air heating system with a heat pump? Virtually everyone we spoke to had ideas for work that could be permitted OTC, but *no one in authority has plans to actually add OTC permit types* to the list. Nor is there a formal process to submit additional types of OTC permit recommendations.

BD Recommendation: Express Permit Review

The idea for “express permitting” came from within Permit Sonoma staff, and it’s simple and exciting: put someone from every department responsible for reviewing routine building permit applications in the same room, (virtually) pass the plans around the room to see whether any department has material concerns, and (finding none) approve the permit on the spot! The goal is to eliminate the typical delays that happen during serial application review and ensure that every department that needs to review an application does so on a timely and rapid basis. And... it works!

The process was tried for the first time in the fall of 2024, with excellent results: half a dozen permit applications were reviewed and issued in an afternoon, saving weeks of time for applicants with no additional work on Permit Sonoma’s part. Since then, the Express Permit team (an ad hoc group with one engineer from each plan check department in Permit Sonoma) has been meeting (almost) every week and the Express Permit team self-reports that the process works well, is effective, and saves

both applicants and Permit Sonoma time and money. Permit Sonoma staff says they plan to continue, and possibly even expand, collaborative application review in the future beyond the 8-10 typically processed during the current pilot.

Why not make Express Permit review the default SOP? Reportedly, expanding the scope and scale of the Express Permit program would require changes to organization structure and ‘additional resources’ (meaning more staff) so significant expansion of this innovation is unlikely.

The Civil Grand Jury disagrees with PS management on this point: knowledgeable members of staff believe a much higher percentage of permits could be processed using the Express approach without additional resources, and observations suggest that the staff is correct. The “express permit” process doesn’t work well for complex projects with significant engineering challenges, but these applications are a small fraction of Permit Sonoma’s residential construction volume.

BD Recommendation: Self-certification of construction plans and installation methods

This is a concept that every quality builder has wondered about since permits were first required in ancient times. The BD Report recommended that licensed (and insured and certificated) professionals including architects, structural and civil engineers, master electricians and plumbers and other specialty engineering trades should be allowed to check their plans for code compliance and certify that their work has been done conformant to both plan and code, rather than have to call a County inspector to come to the jobsite and check it for them.

This isn’t a new idea, nor is it original to Sonoma County: the city of Bellflower has had a [plans self-certification program](#) for some years; Riverside County allows [self-certification of a variety of construction work](#) and Los Angeles is [considering a new ordinance](#) allowing self-certification in the wake of the devastating Eaton and Palisades fires, in hopes of expediting fire rebuild construction. Sonoma County has also experimented with self-certification. Permit Sonoma allows over-the-counter permitting for roofing material replacement, with self-certification of the work after it’s done, and a majority of roofing replacement is already being done this way. Permit Sonoma is also considering (but has not yet committed to) allowing some earthwork and grading to be self-certified in the future.

Permit Sonoma staff are not optimistic about significant expansion of this program, however. A quick look at [this February 2025 Permit Sonoma activity report](#) will demonstrate that the majority of Permit Sonoma building permit applications (289 of 525) require no plan check – but still charge a plan check processing fee – and 25-50% of the remaining applications are for solar panel and battery installations which are largely routine designs.

Examples of allowable “Building Permit No Plan Check” applications include (in addition to roofing) hot water heater replacement, window replacement, electrical panel replacement, deck board and home siding replacement, plumbing fixture replacement, sidewalk repair, and driveway repair. All seem to be good candidates for self-certified inspection by master tradespeople.

It should also be noted that, in other locations where self-inspection of trade work is allowed, the Authority Having Jurisdiction (i.e. Permit Sonoma in our case) retains the *right* to inspect. In most other AHJ’s, inspections are conducted randomly *with loss of self-certification privileges resulting from failed inspections*.

BD Recommendation: Third Party Plan Check

The analysis done to produce the Berry Dunn report occurred at a time when Permit Sonoma had a big backlog of permit applications. Covid workflow hadn’t yet been fully implemented and many

people decided to use their new-found at-home time to launch renovation and rebuilding projects. The result was a significant increase in the time it took to issue a permit. In response, Berry Dunn recommended 3 things:

1. Pay third party resources—i.e. commercial engineering firms with qualified and certificated plan reviewers on staff—to bring down the backlog.
2. Expand applicants’ access to (and awareness of) the availability of third party plan check resources in lieu of Permit Sonoma application review; and
3. Implement checklist-based initial review and resubmittal procedures to ensure that plan checks would be conducted consistently, regardless of which Permit Sonoma or third-party person did the review.

Permit Sonoma did fulfill both of the first two recommendations. It contracted with three private engineering firms and, by year-end 2024, had reduced the backlog to levels that Permit Sonoma management can handle using on-staff reviewers. It also published [a list of nine third parties](#) that applicants can pay to review plans on an expedited basis. The cost of third party review is incremental to (somewhat reduced) plan check fees charged by Permit Sonoma.

Item 3, however—a task that is reportedly “complete” on Permit Sonoma’s Board of Supervisors update—is still a work in progress. While almost all Permit Sonoma plan checkers have a checklist they use to conduct their reviews, *they all use different checklists and none of those checklists are public*—which reduces both the presumed benefit and cost savings that were the basis of the Berry Dunn recommendation.

3. BD Categorical Recommendations: *Establish Explicit Performance Targets and Systems Improvements to Improve Throughput and Reduce Cost*

This group of recommendations are the most essential changes proposed by the BD management review. Berry Dunn observed that while Permit Sonoma staff works hard, it could work smarter. To that end, BD recommended five changes that collectively could increase Permit Sonoma management *and applicant* visibility into plan check productivity.

The first task was for Permit Sonoma to clearly identify how long it should take to review permit applications. Conveniently, AB2234 established statutory requirements for turnaround time so that task was complete.

The four remaining tasks—still works in progress—were to modify the Accela workflow system to keep track of how much time is being spent on each individual permit review, and then use experiential data to establish plan review timetable expectations.

A rudimentary implementation of this time tracking capability was added to Accela, and some (but not all) plan checkers include their estimate of the ‘time on task’ in their Accela data. However, there is no systematic management review of the data, nor is there any systemic requirement that this data be recorded for every permit so the task (while “complete “in PS task tracking reports”) hasn’t actually been done.

Has PS made progress toward establishing explicit performance targets and implementing systems improvements?

Metrics, metrics, metrics: Management consultants implore organizations and their leaders to define clear goals and then measure performance toward them. Berry Dunn made a good effort to advance the appreciation of metrics by PS management, but it appears to have fallen on deaf ears.

PS has very few Accela system-generated performance analysis reports and the principal reports telling senior management (and the public) how Permit Sonoma is performing are created by a single skillful but self-taught senior manager who creates data queries using Microsoft Access (an application that isn't supported by Sonoma County Information Systems and is definitely not intended by Microsoft to be enterprise software). There are no other Access developers on the staff at Permit Sonoma. Accordingly, if and when that singular senior manager retires or chooses another path, the entire corpus of Permit Sonoma management metrics will need to be refactored.

What metrics are missing? The place to start is “time on task”, both individually and collectively. Permit Sonoma should know, specifically, how much time is being spent on primary tasks like plan review, site visits, staff education, and preparation and attendance at public meetings. Objective data would result in clear appreciation of both individual and collective performance. Less obviously, capturing time spent on secondary tasks, such as composing and responding to customer communication, interacting with applicants in an advisory context, or even addressing BoS constituent inquiries, would help management decide where to invest in training, tools, and resource allocation.

The other major benefit of improved performance metrics: quantifying the volume of work being done is essential to calculation of appropriate fees. Conversely, not knowing how much time it takes to do a type of work makes it impossible to know whether agency fees are charged correctly. Multiple staff members raised this concern, with consensus that both PS and its customers would benefit from understanding the true costs associated with permit application review and approval.

Government agency performance is mandated (and often limited) by a myriad of statutes, codes and ordinances; and budget constraints are a fact. But every enterprise, private or public, can benefit from setting clear performance goals and measuring progress towards them. Permit Sonoma has chosen not to prioritize the benefits that would result from rigorous metric assessment of its own performance and is unlikely to achieve optimal performance until it does.

Other Categorical Berry Dunn Report Recommendations

The Berry Dunn recommendations were grounded in the presumption that Permit Sonoma *should* want to deliver more, better, and faster customer response. While the foregoing topics were the principal mechanisms for achieving these goals, there were also 3 recommendations for expanding customer focus, improving customer interaction, and more and better communication.

The goal of Berry Dunn's customer relationship management recommendations was to reflect a commitment to customer-centric behavior in PS workflows: some combination of more, better, faster, cheaper service for builders and their customers. Permit Sonoma's SHOVEL initiative summarizes the message that Permit Sonoma has chosen to encapsulate its customer service program, and this graphic is pretty much the entire program:

"You can't manage what you don't measure" Peter Drucker

"Measure what is measurable and make measurable what is not so"
Galileo Galilei

"If you don't know where you're going, you'll end up someplace else" Yogi Berra

"The things that get measured are the things that get done." Tom Peters

"If you can't measure it, you can't improve it" Peter Drucker

"Measure twice, cut once"
Mike Brady

When it comes to service we dig deep!

Permit Sonoma Customer Service Values:

- S - Solution-Oriented: Provide customer-focused, realistic solutions.
- H - Helpful: Be attentive and friendly.
- O - Ownership: Be accountable, proactive, and follow through.
- V - Versatile: Adapt to diverse needs and backgrounds of customers.
- E - Efficient: Maximize resources and strive for timeliness and accuracy.
- L - Listens: Engage and empathize to resolve customer concerns.

If Permit Sonoma succeeds at improving internal processes and making the workflow system better, then getting permits approved or rejected as quickly as possible will follow naturally.

Berry Dunn Report Review Conclusions

The authors of Permit Sonoma’s Berry Dunn management review presented a clear prescription for Permit Sonoma’s workflow systems issues, but PS still hasn’t been able to do what Berry Dunn said it should do. There is inconsistent systematic recognition of simple permits and expedited plan check, no systematized task checklists for intake or plan check, no integral recognition of due dates, time on task, or even which permits are overdue, and very limited ability to generate reliable management and performance metrics. Permit Sonoma has made an excellent beginning toward implementing all of the other recommendations included in the Berry Dunn report.

Other Observations about Permit Sonoma

Any report that purports to be comprehensive will have limits and exclusions, and sometimes the exclusions are more significant than the included material. This report is like that: the list of what wasn’t learned may be more important than what is covered.

What Questions About Permit Sonoma Weren’t Answered?

- How long does it actually take to do a plan check? Anecdotal statements in interviews and data recorded by some plan checkers suggests that a typical residential construction plan check takes 4-8 hours of staff time, but the Accela system doesn’t capture (or require staff to record) real processing times.

Why does this matter? According to both state law and Sonoma County ordinances, fees charged should only cover actual costs incurred and the cost of a plan check should clearly correlate with the amount of time it takes—but since PS doesn’t record how much time is spent on each plan review, plan check fees are averaged based on an opaque estimate of amalgamated staff and overhead expense that literally no one thinks is representative of the actual work being done. Bad actors who require multiple reviews or excessive amounts of plan rework (or submit design changes in the middle of the review) are often charged the same amount as applicants who submit a fully compliant, properly annotated set of plans that can be reviewed in a few hours.

- This study did not review how Permit Sonoma conducts inspections or code enforcement. In hindsight, it was a significant omission. Inspections are a time-consuming and expensive element of construction permitting and Permit Sonoma's inspections department is reported to do an excellent job of being both responsive and comprehensive. As self-certification programs evolve, the inspections department must lead the way towards determining the correct balance between improving operational efficiency and ensuring public safety. Similarly, the code enforcement process (which happens when builders and property owners fail to secure permits or build structures that don't meet code, zoning and planning permit requirements) is an opaque intersection of authority meeting the reality of personal and public interest and safety. It isn't clear that Permit Sonoma code enforcement is worthy of the applause that most other PS divisions deserve.
- Why do permits cost as much as they do and how much should they cost? Permit Sonoma's current fee schedules are based on a "[fee study published by a contracted consultant in 2021](#)" using methods that meet state requirements for fee analyses. The consultant applied a legal, but not particularly thoughtful, formula which basically divided total department costs by total hours worked. The resultant fees aren't based on actual time spent on permit processing. Permit Sonoma, like many other County agencies, does a great deal of work on the public's behalf that has little to do with the cost of processing permit applications. The fees collected from home builders and developers cover many costs that are loosely (or not at all) related to the direct cost of the services that PS provides to builders, and this fact was of concern to many of the Permit Sonoma staffers that were interviewed.
- How much, and why, is so much unpermitted work being done? We suspect that complex permit application processes and excessive permit fees are why there is so much unpermitted work.
- Why does it take as long as it does to process permit applications? If a permit plan check takes 4-8-12 hours, why does it take 4-8-12 weeks to work its way through the system? Could most permits be issued in days or weeks instead of months if PS were a bit more ambitious?

The Future of Permit Sonoma

During the course of this investigation, the Civil Grand Jury inquired about the behavior of other Authorities Having Jurisdiction in California. One learning from this research is that permitting agencies play an important role in the state of housing development in California and the statewide housing shortage can't be overcome without improvement in permitting agency performance.

It is highly likely that technology solutions are imminent and much of the work needed to review plans for code and ordinance conformity will be automated in the next 5 years. This should free the many knowledgeable and experienced people at Permit Sonoma to do work that can't be automated: coaching builders and their customers on construction best practices, compliance with legal mandates, fire-sensible construction alternatives, and alternate approaches to environmentally sensible construction. In other words, improving public safety in meaningful ways.

CONCLUSIONS

Permit Sonoma plays a significant role in Sonoma County public safety and, in answer to the two questions that the Civil Grand Jury set out to answer, Permit Sonoma is doing what it's supposed to do: processing thousands of permit applications on a reasonably efficient basis and complying with state mandates for timely review. Although the Civil Grand Jury can't be absolutely certain that

Permit Sonoma is meeting its legal obligation to process permits as quickly as AB2234 requires, our research suggests that PS is compliant. We wish we could prove it.

The fact that the case can't be proven is a problem that must be corrected. PS's workflow systems need work and don't support PS management or (more importantly) permit applicants' need for better and more automated access to individual and overall performance metrics.

This absence of meaningful plan check performance data precluded inclusion of permit cost analysis in this Civil Grand Jury study. Permit Sonoma doesn't know whether the fees it charges fairly reflect the work it does because the workflow systems don't capture time-on-task data in ways that are necessary to complete the analysis. Capturing this data programmatically would be more efficient, and fair, than repeatedly hiring fee study consultants who imagine creative legal methods to justify fee schedules.

PS has done a fine job of accepting and interpreting the Berry Dunn report recommendations and made an excellent *plan* to achieve these recommendations. Victory was declared prematurely, however: there is still meaningful work to be done *and it would be a shame to stop short of full implementation*. Permit Sonoma has completed the initial phase of its management review. Now, staff must focus on continued process improvement with particular emphasis on improving customer service and empowering additional express permitting teamwork. Factors such as lower permit volumes and smarter fulfillment of regulations will require Permit Sonoma to operate with greater efficiency and embrace new technology to do better work, faster, at lower cost in the future. Permit Sonoma management's report to the Board of Supervisors, while generally accurate, glosses over work that still needs to be done *and funded*.

The Civil Grand Jury concludes that PS is doing a good job of accepting and reviewing permit applications on a timely basis and has both opportunity and organizational capability to be more ambitious. A moderate additional investment in the workflow platform – and staff with the skills to improve it as needed – will produce significant gains in Permit Sonoma efficiency and an excellent return on investment for Sonoma County builders and taxpayers.

FINDINGS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury determined that:

- F1. Permit Sonoma meets California Assembly Bill 2234 (2022) requirements for initial acceptance of permit applications on a timely basis.
- F2. Permit Sonoma generally meets AB2234 (2022) requirements regarding review of permit applications within 30 business days.
- F3. The Civil Grand Jury was unable to conclusively verify AB2234 (2022) compliance because Permit Sonoma workflow systems do not *reliably and consistently* capture elapsed time for permit reviews.
- F4. Permit Sonoma is not able to factually report permit review and approval throughput because its workflow tracking systems are not capturing data on a consistent and reportable basis.
- F5. Permit Sonoma has made excellent *plans* to implement all of the Berry Dunn management review recommendations, but its reports overstate the actual progress observed by the Civil Grand Jury.
- F6. Full implementation of Berry Dunn management review recommendations will take additional application development resources that are not currently in place within Permit Sonoma.

- F7. Other than compliance with California Assembly Bill 2234 (2022), Permit Sonoma senior management has not established objective expectations for staff performance regarding plan review or timely permit issuance.
- F8. Permit Sonoma does not provide information to the public about over the counter and express permit review requirements and opportunities in a manner that is easily accessible and comprehensive.
- F9. Permit Sonoma permit intake and plan check staff need additional workflow systems training to ensure accurate data entry and consistent use of status reporting conventions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. By October 17, 2025, Permit Sonoma shall require that all employees record, within the workflow systems, time spent on task for permit intake and plan check, site visitation, field inspection and code enforcement review.
- R2. By December 19, 2025, Permit Sonoma shall develop a plan to implement all workflow system changes required to capture and report, in a reliable and sustainable manner, individual employee and collective permit throughput; and agency compliance with California Assembly Bill 2234 (2022) timely performance requirements.
- R3. By December 19, 2025, Permit Sonoma will establish and publish objective performance and throughput goals regarding permit review and approval.
- R4. By December 19, 2025, Permit Sonoma shall review and make available on its website and other publicly accessible documents all over the counter permit processes and requirements.
- R5. By December 19, 2025, Permit Sonoma shall review and publish its requirements and expectations for express permit review and approval, third party plan check, permit and inspection self-certification, and use of program management techniques to fulfill all Berry Dunn Report recommendations.
- R6. By December 19, 2025, Permit Sonoma shall review and publish an accurate update to its January 2025 Board of Supervisors report on progress toward fulfillment of the Berry Dunn report recommendations.
- R7. By March 27, 2026, Permit Sonoma shall determine whether additional resources are required to fully implement the workflow system upgrades needed to fulfill all Berry Dunn Report recommendations and communicate such incremental budget requirements to the County Executive Officer and the Board of Supervisors.
- R8. By March 27, 2026, Permit Sonoma will review, publish (and require consistent staff usage of) requirements checklists for issuance of all permit types.
- R9. By March 27, 2026, Permit Sonoma shall review and update its workflow system training materials and protocols for all Permit Intake, Plan Check, and Planning personnel.
- R10. By March 27, 2026, Permit Sonoma shall establish and publish, in a consistent format, standard operating procedures for all Planning, Building, Engineering, Well & Septic, and Code Enforcement permit issuance/compliance review processes.

- R11. By May 1st, 2026, the County Executive shall review Permit Sonoma’s resource requirement noted in Recommendation 7 for inclusion in the Board of Supervisors’ 2026-27 budget review.
- R12. By July 10, 2026, and annually thereafter, Permit Sonoma shall publicly post an accurate annual report of each department’s permit processing performance and compliance with timeliness requirements of 2022 California Assembly Bill 2234.
- R13. By July 13, 2026, or as soon thereafter as allowed by budget authority, Permit Sonoma shall implement workflow system upgrades sufficient to ensure that individual and collective throughput performance is captured and reported in a reliable and consistent manner.

RESPONSES REQUIRED

Findings F1-F9: Permit Sonoma

Recommendations R1-R10, R12-13: Permit Sonoma

Recommendation R11: County Executive and Board of Supervisors

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Civil Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.

APPENDIX 1. SUMMARY OF CALIFORNIA ASSEMBLY BILL AB 2234 (2022)

Title: AB 2234 – Post entitlement Phase Permits

Authors: Assemblymembers Robert Rivas and Tim Grayson

Signed Into Law: September 28, 2022

Effective Date: January 1, 2023

AB2234 includes provisions that address what happens if local jurisdictions fail to meet the specified deadlines for processing housing permit applications. If a local agency does not adhere to the 30- or 60-business day limit for reviewing applications, the application is deemed approved under certain conditions. This serves as a form of penalty by automatically moving the project forward if the local agency does not act in time.

The focus is on ensuring that housing projects are not unduly delayed by bureaucratic processes. This system of deemed approval encourages local governments to prioritize and expedite their review processes, indirectly penalizing them by removing their ability to deny or request further changes to applications that they do not review within the mandated time frames.

Purpose and Background

AB 2234 was introduced to streamline and bring greater transparency and efficiency to the post entitlement permit approval process for housing developments in California. The bill is a response to significant delays and inconsistencies in the approval of post entitlement phase permits (such as grading, demolition, and building permits) at the local level, which have historically hindered housing production.

This legislation builds upon previous housing reform efforts, including SB 330 (2019), which aimed to expedite the housing approval process by limiting local governments' ability to delay projects.

Key Provisions of AB 2234

1. Standardized Timelines for Permit Approvals

- Local agencies must review and decide on post entitlement housing permits within specific timeframes:

- 30 days for projects with ≤ 25 housing units
- 60 days for projects with > 25 housing units
- If the local agency finds that an application is incomplete, they must notify the applicant within 15 business days with a detailed list of missing information.

2. *Online Permit Tracking and Transparency*

- Local governments are required to maintain an online system where applicants can:
 - Submit applications electronically
 - Track the status of their permits in real-time
 - Receive notifications of any required modifications
- This provision is aimed at improving government accountability and reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies.

3. *Restrictions on Permit Denials*

- Agencies cannot reject a post entitlement phase permit unless they provide:
 - A written explanation detailing the reasons for denial
 - References to specific laws, ordinances, or codes that justify the rejection
- If a permit is denied, the applicant has the right to appeal, ensuring due process.

3. *Standardized Checklists:*

- Cities must develop and publish objective checklists detailing permit application requirements, ensuring clarity for developers.

4. *Scope and Applicability*

- Applies to all local jurisdictions in California.
- Covers post entitlement permits for residential developments that have already been approved through zoning and land-use approvals.
- Does not override the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) or other state/local regulatory requirements but ensures that the final approval process is not unnecessarily prolonged.

Expected Impact

- Accelerates housing production by preventing unnecessary delays.
- Enhances transparency in the local permitting process.
- Supports affordable housing initiatives by reducing regulatory barriers.
- Reduces construction costs by providing a more predictable and efficient permitting process.

Conclusion

AB 2234 is part of California's broader housing reform efforts aimed at addressing the state's severe housing crisis. By ensuring that post entitlement permits are processed within reasonable timeframes, the bill helps remove bureaucratic roadblocks that often delay much-needed housing developments. It represents a significant step toward streamlining housing construction, making the process more efficient, transparent, and predictable for developers and home

APPENDIX 2. COUNTY MUNICIPAL CODE

Ordaining Permit Sonoma (formerly Permit & Resource Management Division) as the Authority Having Jurisdiction in unincorporated Sonoma County.

[See Municipal Code, Section 7 for a more comprehensive list of Permit Sonoma authorities.](#)

Sec. 7-5. - Building permit required.

- a) No person, firm or corporation shall erect, construct, enlarge, alter, repair, move, improve, convert or demolish any building or structure in the unincorporated area of this county, or cause the same to be done, without first obtaining a separate building permit for each such building or structure as required by this chapter. Permits shall be issued and fees shall be collected by the permit and resource management department. The building standards for the work authorized by the new permit shall be governed by the codes in force at the time of the new permit application as described in Chapter 1, Division I, of the California Building Code as to the erection and construction of dwellings and appurtenant structures for which construction was lawfully commenced, commenced to legalize a violation, or approved prior to the effective date of this ordinance.
- b) Permits shall not be issued by the permit and resource management department for work which includes any of the following, unless and until written approval has been received:
 1. The construction, alteration or modification of: (i) Any on-site disposal system (approval required from the well and septic section of permit and resource management department), (ii) Any water supply system which under state law or county ordinance is required to have a permit to operate (approval required from the health officer or the state health services department), (iii) Any establishment selling or preparing food or food products, any public or semi-public swimming pool as defined in the 2013 California Administrative Code (approval required from the health officer);
 2. The construction, alteration or modification of any structure which will result in the structure being connected to an on-site wastewater disposal system or water system; (approval required from the well and septic section of permit and resource management department),
 3. The alteration or modification of any existing structure which is connected to an on-site wastewater disposal system or water system requiring a permit, where the alteration or modification may impose additional burdens upon the existing system, such as, but not limited to, the addition of rooms or the modification of floor plans for potential additional occupancy. This section shall not apply to repairs, such as replacement of roofing or siding. Where the permit is for modification or alteration of an existing structure, no permit will be issued where, in the determination of the chief building official, such modification is likely to result in exceeding the capacity of the system;
 4. The construction, alteration or modification of any structure which may result in the property being improved in excess of its capacity to absorb sewage effluent. This section is intended to cover any change in the property which might adversely affect sewage disposal such as, but not limited to, grading or the construction of a barn or swimming pool which might infringe on the leach field (approval required from the well and septic section of permit and resource management department);
- c) For the purposes of this section, approval by the well and septic section of permit and resource management department shall mean either an office clearance, field clearance, or issued well and septic permit for on-site wastewater disposal system.
- d) Whenever approval of the on-site wastewater disposal system is required, it shall be based upon the requirements imposed by this chapter and any other state or local law or regulation which may be

applicable, including basin plans and other standards promulgated by the North Coast Water Quality Control Board and the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board.

- e) Building permits must be cleared as to zoning considerations in [Chapters 26](#) or 26C, grading and drainage requirements in [Chapter 11](#), and stormwater requirements in [Chapter 11A](#) of this Code. Building permits for projects regulated by the California Fire Code and Sonoma County fire safe standards may be subject to review and approval by appropriate fire service agencies. Where county road encroachment is necessary, a permit for same shall be first secured. A water and/or sewer clearance is first required in areas serviced by special districts and cities before building permits can be issued.
- f) Notwithstanding any other provision of this chapter or the codes adopted hereby, emergency maintenance work or repair of buildings and structures requiring a permit hereunder may be commenced before obtaining a permit without violating this chapter provided the permit and resource management department or the public health officer, in the appropriate case, is notified prior to noon of the next following business day and the permit required is obtained within twenty-four (24) hours thereafter, and provided further that no work shall be covered before it has been duly inspected and approved. Compliance with the State Subdivision Map Act, the Sonoma County subdivision regulations, and the Sonoma County zoning regulations, including compliance with conditional permits issued thereunder, and compliance with all laws, is a condition precedent to the issuance of any permit required by this chapter for work to be done on any particular parcel of real property in the unincorporated area of this county.
- g) As a condition precedent to the issuance of a building permit required by this section for which an application was made on or after November, 1989, the applicant shall pay to the county development fee as specified in [Section 26-98-660](#) of this Code. The permit required for Section 105 of Appendix 1 of the California Building Code for structures subject to the requirements of this subsection shall not be issued unless and until the development fee has been paid.
- h) Within flood-prone urban areas as defined in [Section 7-13\(a\)\(10\)](#), a building permit authorizing excavation for foundations shall not be issued until a disposal location for excavated material has been designated. Acquisition of a building permit does not relieve the permittee of the responsibility for acquiring any other state and local permits required for the activity.
- i) In any unincorporated portion of Sonoma County where stormwater discharges are subject to the requirements of one or more NPDES permits, as referenced in [Chapter 11](#), any construction site for which building permits are approved pursuant to [Chapter 7](#) must be developed and used pursuant to any applicable requirements of said NPDES permit(s). Failure to adhere to applicable NPDES permit requirements at any time will be deemed to be a violation of this section and may subject the permittee to the penalties established by this chapter. Permittees may meet this requirement by filing with the Regional Water Quality Control Board the appropriate notice of intent to comply with the state general construction activity stormwater permit or by obtaining approval of an individual NPDES permit from the Regional Water Quality Control Board.

Local Fees, Local Subsidies

Fees and subsidies cause local pain

SUMMARY

Nobody likes paying government fees, especially regulatory ones like permits for home renovations. But frustration can turn to anger when these fees suddenly increase dramatically without warning or alternatives.

That's exactly what happened in the summer of 2024 when a fee for reviewing home modifications in Santa Rosa's historic districts jumped from \$1,700 to \$17,000. The fee was meant to cover the cost of reviewing major renovation projects in historic areas. Although the City of Santa Rosa followed the legal process for increasing fees, the Cultural Heritage Board (CHB) which had been responsible for reviewing projects wasn't informed of the public hearings until after the fees had already been approved. While such notification was not required by law, CHB members considered the increase excessive and likely to discourage major renovations in historic districts. Several resigned in protest.

To its credit, the Santa Rosa City Council acknowledged that the historic district fee increase was not what it intended. The increase was buried in a broader fee study undertaken to adjust hundreds of fees that hadn't changed since 2014. There was nothing to signal the unusual size of the increase or the fact that the fee had been subsidized in the past. The resulting uproar led to an eight-month review process that streamlined service delivery and simplified regulations. Despite these improvements, it left many Santa Rosa residents angry and wondering how such an outrageous increase was ever proposed.

This incident prompted the Grand Jury to investigate how fees are set and controlled in Santa Rosa and other cities. By state law, a fee is a charge for a service or product provided directly to those who pay it. Unlike a tax, a fee may not exceed the actual cost of providing a specific service. The Grand Jury examined fee-setting practices in Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park, and Petaluma—the three largest cities in Sonoma County. The study reviewed the legal requirements for raising fees and explored ways local governments could prevent excessive increases from being approved without proper consideration and oversight.

BACKGROUND

Over the past 50 years, California voters dramatically changed how local governments are funded. A brief recap of these changes may be instructive to understanding local government finance.

- Proposition 13 (1978). This state-wide proposition limited property taxes to 1% of the assessed value of real property set at the last sale price. It allowed property assessment values to increase no more than 2% per year until a property was sold again. At sale, the property's assessed value would be changed to the sale price or market value. The law further required that any property tax increase would need to be approved by a 2/3 vote of the electorate.
- Proposition 218 (1996). This proposition was called the [Right to Vote on Taxes Act](#). In the uncodified Section 2 it stated:

Findings and Declarations. The people of the State of California hereby find and declare that Proposition 13 was intended to provide effective tax relief and to require voter approval of tax increases. However, local governments have subjected taxpayers to excessive tax, assessment,

fee and charge increases that not only frustrate the purposes of voter approval of tax increases, but also threaten the economic security of all Californians and the California economy itself. This measure protects taxpayers by limiting the methods by which local governments exact revenue from taxpayers without their consent.

- Proposition 26 (2010). Proposition 26 amended State Constitution Article XIII to add new definitions of state and local “taxes,” defining all revenue measures imposed by the government as “taxes” unless within one of seven express exemptions for local government or five express exemptions for state government.

The takeaway from all these actions is that local governments are under strict mandates to ensure that their revenue raising activities follow requirements imposed by the voters of California. To not be a tax, fees must comply with an exemption process. Specifically, [Proposition 26](#) stated:

e. As used in this Article "tax" means any levy, charge, or exaction of any kind imposed by a local government, except the following:

- 2. A charge imposed for a specific government service or product provided directly to the payor that is not provided to those not charged, and which does not exceed the reasonable costs to the local government of providing the service or product.*

Another six exemptions are discussed in Proposition 26 but are not relevant to this investigation. The main point of Proposition 26 is that fees may not exceed the cost of providing the service or product.

Cities often outsource cost-of-service fee studies and rely on these assessments to set fees that cover, but don't exceed, the actual cost of providing each service.

Sometimes, governing bodies decide it's in the public interest to charge less than the full cost for certain services. For example, local governments often use General Fund subsidies to reduce fees for youth recreational programs to encourage more participation. In contrast, adult recreational programs are usually expected to cover their full costs. Similarly, building permit fees may be reduced for projects that benefit the public, such as daycare centers. These policy decisions are up to the governing body.

A challenge with fee subsidies is that if the governing body or staff doesn't closely monitor changes, a previously subsidized fee can shift to a full-cost fee, causing steep increases. In the Santa Rosa example, a fee increased tenfold without being flagged when presented to the governing body. The increase was approved without council members recognizing the magnitude of the increase. This led to public outrage. While the increase was legal, it caused significant disruption and led to heartfelt apologies by City Council Members.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury performed Internet searches of public information, reviewed documents posted by the cities under investigation, reviewed video recordings of public meetings and interviewed personnel familiar with the fee setting and approval process.

DISCUSSION

The Grand Jury limited its investigation to the three largest cities in Sonoma County: Santa Rosa, Petaluma, and Rohnert Park. The Grand Jury expected to find the following in each city's fee-setting process:

1. A study justifying the fees.
2. A staff report discussing the fees.
3. When appropriate, a discussion of which fees would be subsidized or no longer subsidized.
4. A discussion about how much the proposed fees would change from current fees.
5. A public hearing when adopting the fees.

Santa Rosa

The City of Santa Rosa presented proposed Planning and Building Department fees at a study session on January 30, 2024. The fees had not been updated since 2014. The fee study was conducted by MNG Consultants. In March 2024, the Council approved the new fee structure, which took effect on July 1, 2024.

While the Council discussed subsidizing certain fees, it did not review which fees were losing previously approved subsidies. Ultimately, the Council approved the staff's recommendations, including one fee increase of more than \$15,000.

After the new fees were approved, a member of the Cultural Heritage Board (CHB) discovered that certain fees affecting historic districts had jumped from \$1,700 to \$17,000. Outraged by the drastic increase, CHB members resigned in protest.

Following the resignations, the City of Santa Rosa re-evaluated its permit requirements and determined that many projects subject to the increased fees did not require full CHB review. Instead, they could be handled through a director-level review, eliminating the need for costly permit fees.

Santa Rosa also simplified its design review process by merging the CHB with the existing Design Review Board, creating a single Design Review and Preservation Board. However, the city did not adjust the new fees to reflect the streamlined process. Instead, it approved a 92% subsidy that substantially reduced permit costs for homeowners. Commercial and non-profit property owners in historic districts will not receive the subsidy but will benefit from the streamlined process and reduced review requirements.

At the adoption meeting for the revised process on February 4, 2025, several homeowners testified that the fee hikes had been excessive. Many were frustrated that it had taken eight months to address the issue. Ten individuals spoke about the historic district fees during a 25-minute public comment period. Some of the comments included:

- *"I've always had a problem paying these crazy permit fees. I didn't know what the fees were before, but to remodel my backyard, the fee went from \$409 to \$8,300 — and you voted for it."*
- *"I'm thrilled that the city is dropping fees by 92%."*
- *"It was insane to discover fees increasing by over \$1,000. Tonight, we're undoing what was done — it feels like smoke and mirrors."*
- *"We weren't told about the permit fee increases — it's ridiculous."*

- *“I am glad Santa Rosa is streamlining its approval process.”*
- *“I did \$60,000 of work on my home. If I’d had to pay another \$10,000 in permit fees, I couldn’t have afforded it.”*
- *“The fees would have been comical if they hadn’t had real impacts on people. They only look reasonable compared to the enacted fees. If fees must exist, they should be as low as possible.”*

Council members acknowledged their responsibility to approve reasonable fees and expressed regret for allowing the previous increases. The Grand Jury noted that if Santa Rosa’s process had clearly flagged the substantial fee increases nearly a year earlier, the public outcry and subsequent Council remorse might have been avoided.

Petaluma

The City of Petaluma hired the Willdan consulting firm to prepare a cost-of-service fee study. The report on city fees was presented to the City Council on April 8, 2024, and adopted on May 6, 2024. It justified the full cost of fees and outlined the changes from current fees. However, this information was among numerous line items in a lengthy report printed in small type.

Smaller Fee Increases More Frequently vs Large Fee Increases Infrequently

In our review, Petaluma decided to revise fees annually by the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Such a practice allows for smaller fee increases instead of larger fee increases when a fee study is conducted after multiple years. It also increases revenue as costs increase, resulting in higher net revenue. Consider the example below in which City A has a CPI increase each year and City B only increased fees after 7 years. Table I, Hypothetical City Fees, shows the annual change in the fee and revenue generated per fee paid.

Table I
Hypothetical City Fees

Year	CPI	City A		City B	
		Fee	Fees paid, one per year	Fee	Fees paid, one per year
2025		1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000
2026	3%	1,030	1,030	1,000	1,000
2027	4%	1,071	1,071	1,000	1,000
2028	2%	1,093	1,093	1,000	1,000
2029	5%	1,147	1,147	1,000	1,000
2030	3%	1,182	1,182	1,000	1,000
2031	3%	1,217	1,217	1,000	1,000
2032	3%	1,254	1,254	1,254	1,254
		Total	8,994	Total	8,254
		Inc. over B	9%		

The last comprehensive fee review took place in the 2015–2016 fiscal year, eight years earlier. Since then, the city had adjusted fees annually based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI).

Although not legally required, the report did not identify which previously subsidized fees were no longer recommended for subsidy. The Council approved the staff recommendations. The largest increase for existing fees was under \$1,000.

One reason Petaluma’s fee increases were smaller than those in other cities may be its practice of adjusting designated fees annually based on the San Francisco-Oakland-San Jose CPI. While not perfect, this method tends to prevent large, sudden fee hikes. It also provides increased revenue as costs increase with inflation.

Rohnert Park

As part of its municipal code, Rohnert Park has certain requirements that go beyond California State Law. One municipal requirement found in [Chapter 3.32](#) asks for an annual report which shows:

1. The services for which cost recovery fees are charged;
2. The amount of the cost recovery fee charged for each service;
3. The percentage of actual costs recovered by each cost recovery fee;
4. Whether or not the fee includes an annual escalator;
5. The year in which the fee was last comprehensively reviewed; and
6. Recommendations for modifications to the services for which cost recovery fees are charged, the amounts of cost recovery fees or the percentage of costs recovered in order to assure that the cost recovery fees continue to recover the reasonable and proportional share of costs from applicants requesting services.

Upon review of Rohnert Park Council actions, the Grand Jury found no record of the required report. When asked about compliance with the municipal code, the city admitted it was not currently compliant.

The Grand Jury did find that some departments, such as the Police and Parks & Recreation Departments, had presented fee resolutions to the City Council and held public hearings. However, these reports lacked the detail required by the municipal code. Additionally, Police Department fees had not been adjusted since 2004. Instead, the department compared its fees to those of other agencies to determine appropriate rates. This comparison of fees among local governments tends to keep fees from increasing dramatically but may not meet the legal requirement of showing how a local governments fees are not greater than the cost to provide the service or product.

Even if the city had followed its municipal code, the Grand Jury would still have concerns about the lack of clarity regarding previously subsidized fees. Without this information, it is difficult to assess changes in subsidies and their impact on residents.

Fee Comparisons to other Local Governments

Rohnert Park’s fee comparison to other local governments has the benefit helping a local governing body avoid approving a fee at great odds to what is being done in the local area. Its main defect may be that the fee is not supported by some methodology showing that the fee is not more than the cost to produce the service or product, as required by State Law.

Here is an example of a fee comparison from Rohnert Park.

I n c l u d e d	O m i t t e d	Title	Description	Proposed	C P D	H P D	P P D	S C S O	S P D	S R P D
	X	Firearm Storage	When individuals prohibited from possessing firearms choose to turn their guns in to RPDPS for temporary storage instead of to a firearms dealer, a flat fee plus time-based fee (not prorated) should be collected.	\$140 ea + \$125 / mo	\$192 / 5 + \$192 / mo	\$216 ea	\$85 ea	\$144 ea	\$63 / 5 + \$5 / day	

CONCLUSION

California state law requires certain procedures to ensure that fees do not exceed the cost of providing a service. However, the law does not specify how often a fee study must be conducted or require escalation clauses for gradual increases. The two cities that conducted studies had last done so 8 and 10 years earlier.

The law also does not require local governments to clearly state previous fees when proposing new ones. When fee increases are large and abrupt — such as when a previously subsidized fee is no longer subsidized, as happened in Santa Rosa — residents may see the new fees as excessive and punitive.

By reviewing all fees with significant increases, governing bodies can better assess what level of fee increases are justified.

FINDINGS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury determined that:

- F1. Long intervals between fee studies can result in large fee increases that are unacceptable to the public.
- F2. Without some mechanism for fee increases to keep pace with inflation, governments are unable to recover increased costs and the public is confronted, periodically, with large increases.
- F3. Because the fee studies examined did not routinely discuss prior subsidies, Santa Rosa City Council Members were disadvantaged in recognizing excessively large changes.
- F4. Staff's failure to complete an annual fee report was noncompliant with the requirements of the Rohnert Park Municipal Code and resulted in Council Members lacking information needed to evaluate and adjust the fee schedule to cover, without exceeding, actual costs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. By December 31, 2025, the City Councils of Petaluma, Rohnert Park, and Santa Rosa direct staff to include a section in all future fee proposals that identifies any fee changes that will exceed a council-specified threshold and any fees with past or proposed subsidies.
- R2. By December 31, 2025, the City Councils of Rohnert Park and Santa Rosa will adopt a policy to avoid abrupt fee increases.
- R3. By December 31, 2025, the City of Rohnert Park will either direct staff to submit a fee report in the 2025–2026 fiscal year that complies with Rohnert Park Municipal Code Chapter 3.32 or revise that code section to align with state law.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code §§ 933 and 933.05, the Grand Jury requires responses as follows:

- The City Council of Petaluma to respond to R1 and F1 by September 30, 2025.
- The City Council of Santa Rosa to respond to R1, R2 and F1-F3 by September 30, 2025.
- The City Council of Rohnert Park to respond to R1- R3 and F1-F4 by September 30, 2025.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [League of California Cities, “Proposition 26 and 218, An Implementation Guide”, May 2017.](#)
- Press Democrat, “Santa Rosa board quits over hiked development fees for historic properties.” August 28, 2024.
- February 4, 2025, Santa Rosa City Council Minutes; also, YouTube Video, “City of Santa Rosa Meeting February 4, 2025”, Time: 04:55:00.
- Press Democrat, “Santa Rosa Overhauls Permits, Fees.” February 7, 2025.
- City Council Meeting of Santa Rosa, March 13, 2024, Item 16.1, Exhibit A, Santa Rosa Fee Study.
- City Council Meeting of Petaluma, May 6, 2024, Item 11, Exhibit B- Comprehensive User Fee Study Report.
- [Rohnert Park Municipal, Chapter 3.32.](#)
- City Council Meeting of Rohnert Park, April 23, 2024, Item 9D, Public Safety Fee Increase Proposal.

Animal Services in Sonoma County

Separate and Not Equal

The Costs and Consequences of Decentralization

SUMMARY

In addition to approximately 480,000 residents, Sonoma County households include an estimated 113,000 dogs and 100,000 cats. Feral cats and other domestic and wild species add to the animal population. State law mandates that county and city governments provide humane care for animals and operate animal control programs to protect public health and safety. Because the entire state of California is a declared *Rabies Area*, every dog owner is required to maintain current rabies vaccination and licensing of their pet. Every county and city government must implement a Rabies Control Plan that includes ensuring availability of low-cost rabies vaccination, quarantine of dangerous animals, enforcement of licensing, and submission of dog licensing data to the state. Spay/neuter programs for population control are strongly recommended.

A citizen complaint prompted the 2024-2025 Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) to investigate the Petaluma-based North Bay Animal Services (NBAS). This led to a broader study of county-wide animal services. The work was guided, in part, by a 2012 study of animal services and subsequent updates undertaken for the Board of Supervisors by the Department of Health Services (DHS). The initial report mapped existing services, identified best practices, and explored alternative governance models to provide consistent, cost-effective animal services. It called for a task force to establish shared standards and resources and explore alternative governance models to provide consistent, cost-effective animal services. The task force members failed to agree on recommendations for a governance model, oversight, shared resources, or standards. One respondent told the Jurors that after two years of sporadic work, the only agreement was on a logo. While the task force was ultimately disbanded, the Grand Jury found a high level of voluntary compliance with industry standards during visits to the Humane Society of Sonoma County (HSSC) and the Rohnert Park Animal Shelter (RPAS). Report updates have documented the continuous improvement of Sonoma County Animal Services (SCAS). This public agency serves the 66% of county residents who reside in the unincorporated areas, the City of Healdsburg, and the City of Santa Rosa.

A discussion of animal services in the remaining third of the county is largely absent from recent county DHS reports. Mapping and evaluating agencies serving this area became a focus of the Grand Jury investigation. Jurors learned that Rohnert Park's municipal shelter also serves Cotati in cooperation with the cities' police departments. The City of Sonoma Police Department manages that city's dog licensing and sends animals to SCAS or Pets Lifeline when needed. NBAS is responsible for providing animal services to more than 20% of the county through contracts with the Cities of Cloverdale, Windsor, Sebastopol, and Petaluma.

Evidence collected by the Jurors confirmed the complainant's allegation that a lack of city oversight is allowing NBAS to operate in violation of applicable laws and other terms of its contracts. The Grand Jury also confirmed the absence of oversight by the organization's board of directors. Its dog licensing rates are approximately half of the national average of 23% and are far below those reported by SCAS. It is placing animals in foster-to-adopt homes without prior, or timely scheduling of sterilization. It fails consistently to report dog bites to the county health officer. It lacks an established role in the county's *Animals in Disaster Response Plan*. Shelter maintenance and operation fall short of industry standards specified in its contracts. Staff are over-burdened and

under-qualified. Given the extensive reach of NBAS, these shortcomings are a matter of concern for public health and safety and are a source of potential liability for the cities it serves. The governments contracting with NBAS have failed to exercise their right and responsibility to ensure that NBAS is providing the services it has contracted to perform and that animals are getting services that are legally required.

More than a decade has passed since Sonoma County convened public and private partners in an animal services task force to identify a governance model conducive to uniform and cost-efficient provision of animal control and shelter. Shortcomings and inefficiencies in the current system include the inability to ensure county-wide compliance with state laws or to mount a fully coordinated emergency animal evacuation. Uneven license rates undermine rabies control and fail to secure funds needed for animal services.

Based on these findings, the Grand Jury strongly recommends that county and city governments and their non-governmental partners renew efforts to coordinate and standardize animal services throughout Sonoma County and adopt an effective system of oversight.

GLOSSARY

- ***Animal Control*** includes field calls by certified Animal Control Officers (ACO) and implementation of programs to comply with state law and local ordinances that require rabies vaccination, licensing of dogs, and provision of spay/neuter programs.
- ***Animal Control Officer/Animal Regulation Officer (ACO)*** certification requires completion of the 40-hour PC 832 Arrest and Firearms Course and three months of field training.
- ***Shelter Care*** includes the housing, feeding, tracking and care of animals, provision of veterinary care, and management of adoption programs.
- ***Foster-to-Adopt Programs*** enlist volunteers to care for and socialize animals to prepare them for adoption.
- ***Fear Free Shelter Certification*** is a program designed to minimize stress and optimize the safe handling of shelter animals. <https://fearfreepets.com/fear-free-certification-overview/>
- ***Community/feral cats*** are cats with no acknowledged owner. Government agencies are responsible for managing the cat population through accessible, free spay/neuter programs.
- ***TNR*** is the acronym for *Trap/Neuter/Return*, a program in which cats in feral cat communities are trapped, sterilized and vaccinated, and then returned to the community.
- ***Rabies Area*** means any area determined by the California Public Health and Safety Director where the existence of rabies constitutes a public health hazard. As a rabies area, Sonoma County and its city governments must comply with California's Health and Safety Code.
- ***NGO*** is the acronym for a non-government organization.
- ***Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)*** is a legal agreement that specifies responsibilities, obligations, and privileges between entities.
- ***A Joint Powers Agreement (JPA)*** is a legal contract between two or more public agencies, like cities or counties, that allows them to cooperate on shared services or powers. These agreements enable agencies to combine resources and expertise to achieve goals that might be difficult or impossible for a single agency to accomplish alone.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury visited the shelters, reviewed animal data, budgets, websites, service contracts, city council minutes and memoranda and coverage provided by print and social media. The Grand Jury researched industry standards for animal care and shelter design and interviewed the complainant, other NBAS clients, and representatives from the following organizations:

- Sonoma County Animal Services (SCAS)
- Humane Society of Sonoma County (HSSC)
- North Bay Animal Services (NBAS)
- Rohnert Park Animal Shelter (RPAS)
- The Cities of Cloverdale, Windsor, Healdsburg, Rohnert Park, Sonoma, Sebastopol, Petaluma, and Santa Rosa
- The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

BACKGROUND

A citizen complaint regarding North Bay Animal Shelter (NBAS) prompted this investigation by the 2024-2025 Civil Grand Jury. Among the alleged shortcomings were unacceptable shelter conditions and failure to comply with state laws that mandate humane care, vaccination and licensing of dogs, quarantine and tracking of dangerous animals, and spay/neuter surgery of animals prior to placement in foster or adoptive homes. NBAS provides animal control and shelter services to four of Sonoma County's nine cities comprising more than 20% of its residents. Its contracts with three cities require that it comply with all relevant laws and that the Petaluma shelter shall be maintained in compliance with *U.C. Davis Standards of Care for Shelter Animals*. The current industry guidelines for standards of care (now used by U.C. Davis) are published by the [Association of Shelter Veterinarians](#).¹ The fourth city requires that it perform at the *highest industry standards*. The complaint alleged multiple violations of these terms and an absence of city oversight to ensure compliance.

The Grand Jury broadened its focus to explore how Sonoma County and its nine city governments provide legally mandated animal control and care. Its approach was guided, in part, by a [2012 study of animal services](#) and subsequent updates undertaken for the Board of Supervisors by the Department of Health Services (DHS).² These studies map existing services, identify best practices, and explore alternative governance models to provide consistent, cost-effective animal services. In exploring alternative forms of governance, the 2012 study suggested either a joint powers agreement (JPA) or a county-wide public/private partnership. It noted that without a mechanism for oversight, there would be risks of inconsistent service. The current situation with NBAS is evidence that this was a valid concern.

[Subsequent reports](#) have documented the continuous improvement of SCAS, the public agency that serves the 66% of county residents who reside in the unincorporated areas, the City of Healdsburg, and the City of Santa Rosa.³ Conspicuously absent from these reports was a discussion of what happens in the remaining third of the county. This omission became the focus of extensive research by the Grand Jury.

¹ <https://jsmcah.org/index.php/jasv/issue/view/2>

² <https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5646253&GUID=DF621026-2216-4648-87CE-0C61C0A20014&Options=&Search=>

³ <https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5646253&GUID=DF621026-2216-4648-87CE-0C61C0A20014&Options=&Search=>

The Grand Jury also revisited recommendations that were made by the 2017-2018 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury in its report titled: [The Evacuation and Sheltering of Animals During the Firestorm of October 2017](#).⁴ Through interviews and public documents, the Grand Jury determined that the recommended actions have been largely accomplished. The Director of Animal Services now serves as the animal liaison for emergency operations planning. An *Animals in Disaster Response Plan* has been annexed to the [Sonoma County Emergency Operations Plan](#).⁵ Several MOUs have been adopted, and others are pending with NGOs to specify their roles as emergency responders. Work is underway to establish a regional partnership encompassing Sonoma, Marin, Napa, Lake, and Mendocino Counties. Agreements are in place with [Code 3 Associates](#)⁶ and the American Association of Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Regrettably, not all cities have developed municipal emergency response plans and NBAS has no defined role as the agency responsible for animal control for four of the County's nine cities.

Provision of animal care and compliance with state and local animal regulations is a large and growing challenge for city and county governments. A [Forbes report of pet ownership](#) found that some 66% of U.S. households now include a pet. About a third of U.S. households have more than one pet.⁷ Based on the [Pet Ownership Calculator](#) provided by the California Department of Food and Agriculture, Sonoma County is home to approximately 113,000 dogs and 100,000 pet cats.⁸ Feral cats and other domestic and wild animals add to this population.

A study by [Pew Research](#) found that 51% of respondents consider their companion animals to be members of the family, but along with the benefits of companionship and comfort come responsibilities both for owners and for county and city governments. These responsibilities are codified in state, county, and municipal codes that require humane treatment of animals and address risks that dogs pose for public health and safety (See Appendix A). County and city governments are responsible for enforcement of these laws through their designated Animal Control Officers.

Since 1987, detection of endemic rabies among bats and small mammals has caused every California county to be declared a [Rabies Area](#). In 2024, the virus was detected in Sonoma County bat and fox populations. In a *Rabies Area*, dog owners and county and city governments are required to comply with legal obligations set forth in the Food and Agricultural section of California Government Codes, the Penal Code, Civil Code, the Corporations Code, and Health and Safety Code.

Laws Governing Animal Services

[Penal Code §597](#) requires each county and city government to ensure that all animals in its jurisdiction are treated in a humane manner.

[Health and Safety §121690 \(a\)](#) requires pet owners to maintain current rabies vaccinations for dogs over three months of age and license dogs over the age of four months. Licensing is the mechanism to ensure timely rabies vaccination. Animal control agencies enforce this law. The county health officer is required to collect county-wide data and submit reports to the state to document the level of county-wide licensing compliance. A [Sonoma County Ordinance](#) also requires vaccination of cats although licensing is optional except for the City of Rohnert Park.

⁴ <https://sonoma.courts.ca.gov/system/files/grandjuryanimalservicesreport5-30-18.pdf>

⁵ <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/administrative-support-and-fiscal-services/emergency-management/plans>

⁶ <https://code3associates.org/>

⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/pet-insurance/pet-ownership-statistics>

⁸ https://www.cdffa.ca.gov/AHFSS/Animal_Health/eprs/docs/pet_ownership_calculator.pdf

[Health and Safety §121690 \(f\) \(1\)](#) requires each county or city government to provide dog vaccination clinics or arrange for dog vaccination at clinics operated by veterinary groups or associations for a charge not to exceed the actual cost.

[California Code of Regulation §2606.4](#) sets forth vaccination and licensing procedures and reporting requirements for any city or county government in a declared rabies area.

[Food and Ag §30503](#) mandates that no public animal control agency or shelter, Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals shelter, humane society shelter, or rescue group shall sell or give away to a new owner any dog or cat that has not been spayed or neutered. (A veterinarian may approve a temporary delay when required by the dog's health.)

While not required by the state mandated rabies control plan, Sonoma County recognizes the role of spay/neuter programs to reduce the population of unowned and stray animals that are less likely to be vaccinated and more likely to roam, fight or bite, potentially spreading rabies. The [county mandates](#) sterilization of pit bull breeds and of dogs running at large.⁹ SCAS supports spay/neuter for low-income pet owners and partners with Forgotten Felines to spay/neuter Community Cats through its [Trap/Neuter/Return program](#).¹⁰

A table is provided in Appendix A that summarizes animal-related regulations referenced in this report.

Industry Standards for Shelter Facilities and Care of Shelter Animals

The Association of Shelter Veterinarians publishes *Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters* which are widely accepted as industry standards. Best Practices cited in the Sonoma County 2012 Animal Services Report are based on the first edition of this document which was produced with input from U.C. Davis shelter veterinarians.

In making assessments of animal care and shelter management and maintenance during shelter visits, Jurors referenced the [2022 Second Edition of the guidelines](#)¹¹ and a [2023 Checklist of Key Statements](#).¹² Each of the 553 actionable statements made in this 64-page document is presented as *unacceptable*, *must*, *should*, or *ideal*. The statements are presented in 13 sections covering all aspects of shelter care. The Grand Jury focused on statements where compliance could be assessed based on physical inspection, interviews, or document review.

An over-arching admonition made throughout the shelter standards is that "...Operating beyond an organization's capacity for care is *unacceptable*." Certain other statements, paraphrased below, are included in multiple sections of the guidelines:

Animal Care

- A formal relationship with a veterinarian *must* be in place to ensure oversight of medical and surgical care in the shelter.

⁹https://library.municode.com/ca/sonoma_county/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=CH5SOCOANREOR_ARTXIVMASPNEALDORULAALPIBU_S5-170MASPNEALDOLA#:~:text=Article%20XIV.%20%2D%20Mandatory%20Spay%20and%20Neutering,Running%20At%20Large%20and%20All%20Pit%20Bulls.

¹⁰ <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/health-and-human-services/health-services/divisions/public-health/animal-services/spay-and-neuter>

¹¹ <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/health-and-human-services/health-services/divisions/public-health/animal-services/spay-and-neuter/www.aspcapro.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/asvguidelinessecondedition-2022.pdf>

¹² <https://www.sheltervet.org/assets/docs/2022-ASV-GL-Checklist.pdf>

- Veterinarians *should* be integrally involved with development of the shelter's development and updates to written policies and protocols for animal care.
- Each animal *must* receive at least a cursory health assessment by trained personnel at intake to check for signs of infectious disease or problems that require emergency care.
- Medical, surgical, and behavioral services for foster animals *must* be provided in a manner that promotes animal welfare and minimizes length of stay (at the shelter).
- Shelters *must* have comprehensive protocols in place for recognizing and mitigating stress and associated negative emotions including fear, anxiety, and frustration.
- Foster care providers *should* be given clear instructions about how and when to access emergency and after-hours care.
- Shelters *should* sterilize all animals before adoption or ensure that they will be sterilized after their outcome. [NOTE: In California this is mandated by [Food and Ag §30503.](#)]

Shelter Staffing

- Shelters *must* have adequate, qualified personnel.
- Shelters *must* provide training for each shelter task and continuing education *must* be provided for all personnel to improve skills and maintain credentials.
- Continuing education *must* be provided for all personnel to improve skills and maintain credentials.

Shelter Maintenance

- Written protocols for animal care and shelter sanitation *must* be developed and documented in sufficient detail to achieve and maintain accepted industry standards.
- Ventilation *must* be maintained at a high enough rate to ensure adequate air quality in all areas of the shelter including in the primary enclosure.
- Noise *must* be minimized in animal housing areas.
- All food *must* be protected from wildlife, rodents and insects.
- Shelters responding to disasters as part of a coordinated response *should* draft memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with their governmental and nongovernmental response partners.

DISCUSSION

Decentralization and Fragmentation of Animal Services

As dictated by California state law, Sonoma County, and each of its nine cities determines how it will meet California's animal-related regulations. The county and each city government is responsible for implementing its own Rabies Control Plan. Central to rabies control is legally mandated vaccination and licensing. The ten governments have set different license and service fees and fee concessions for animals within their jurisdictions. These fees are presented in Appendix B. The resulting patchwork of fees and concessions is confusing to the public. It complicates efficient, cost-effective license enforcement and collection of license fees. It's confusing to pay one fee when a friend in a nearby city pays another. Agreement among the county and city governments on a common fee schedule and online license management vendor would resolve these issues.

SCAS provides animal control and animal shelter services to 66% of Sonoma County's population. NBAS serves 21%. The remaining 13% receive animal control services through local police departments and shelter care through the Rohnert Park Animal Shelter, the Humane Society of Sonoma County and numerous private and non-profit organizations that provide shelter, adoption, and spay/neuter programs for Sonoma County pets. Among these, the privately funded Pets Lifeline, Dogwood, and Forgotten Felines stand out for their adoption programs and Trap/Neuter/Return (TNR) work to reduce community/feral cat populations.

- Sonoma County Animal Services (SCAS) operates within DHS to provide animal control to the 66% of county residents who reside in the unincorporated areas, and the Cities of Healdsburg and Santa Rosa. It also shelters pets from the City of Sonoma and is responsible for the full range of domestic and wild animals. It has overall responsibility for implementing the rabies control plan and emergency animal evacuations.
- North Bay Animal Services (NBAS) contracts with the Cities of Cloverdale, Windsor, Sebastopol, and Petaluma to provide animal control field services and shelter to more than 20% of Sonoma County.
- Rohnert Park Animal Shelter (RPAS) is owned and managed by the City of Rohnert Park. The shelter serves both Rohnert Park and Cotati in cooperation with the cities' police departments. Municipal funding is augmented by a non-profit foundation.
- The Humane Society of Sonoma County (HSSC) cares for animals from Healdsburg, citizen surrendered animals from throughout the county, and transfers from other shelters. It operates a veterinary hospital that provides pet care for low-income owners, including low-cost spay/neuter surgery and routine vaccinations (but not rabies vaccinations). HSSC currently outsources animal control for Healdsburg to SCAS. It is primarily funded by private contributions and grants and is overseen by its board of directors. An MOU with the county for emergency response is pending.
- The City of Sonoma Police Department provides residents with animal control, including licensing. Shelter care is provided as needed by SCAS and Pets Lifeline.

Common Challenges to Animal Service Providers

This investigation and a review of Civil Grand Jury reports from nearby counties revealed animal services to be a costly, labor and facilities intensive endeavor. Several issues were mentioned repeatedly and were observed, to a greater or lesser degree, in Sonoma County facilities. Collaboration among the county and cities could ameliorate many of these challenges, which include:

- **Underfunding:** Animal services compete with other compelling needs for public tax dollars. Limited county and city funds are augmented by license and service fees and fines. Collection of these fees can be difficult and time consuming for staff.
- **License Enforcement:** License compliance is important, both for rabies control, and because it generates needed income, but agencies struggle to achieve high rates of compliance. [A study conducted by the on-line license management vendor, DocuPet](#), found an average nationwide compliance rate of only 23%. The highest rate found by the Grand Jury was 50%. In Sonoma County, 2024 rates range from 12% to 31% as shown in Appendix C. Among the obstacles to improved licensing compliance that were identified by DocuPet was a lack of public outreach to explain: 1) the importance of vaccination and licensing for rabies control; 2) the legal

requirement for owners to license their dogs; and 3) the benefit of returning a lost pet regardless of where it has wandered.

- **Ageing Facilities:** Constant maintenance and costly upgrades are required to ensure that ageing facilities meet the health and safety needs of animals, staff, and visitors. Operating in ageing, outgrown facilities makes daily operations more difficult.
- **Insufficient Veterinary Services:** A nationwide veterinarian shortage limits access to needed professional care, including affordable rabies vaccination and spay/neuter clinics that are mandated for public safety and population control. Demand has driven up costs and reduced availability of pro bono services.
- **Insufficient Staffing and Personnel Turnover:** Shelter staff are stretched to accomplish a wide range of duties, ranging from animal care to data entry, website management, license management, and interaction with the public. Understaffing and turnover of experienced staff and volunteers requires effective recruitment, supervision, and training and professional development programs that can exceed organizational capacity.
- **Public Demands for “No Kill” Outcomes:** Public sentiment can fail to recognize differences between private agencies that can limit acceptance to adoptable animals and public shelters that are obligated to accept animals regardless of medical or behavioral issues that may preclude live outcomes. The resulting negative impact on public perception can undermine needed support.
- **A Lack of Centralized Communication and Data Sharing:** Without the means to communicate and coordinate activities, agencies are hampered in meeting regularly occurring needs such as rehoming lost pets, coordinating responses to calls for animal control, and sharing knowledge and resources. It impairs the ability to prepare accurate state-mandated licensing reports, track dangerous animals, or mount a fully coordinated, county-wide disaster response.

Tax-Supported Agencies Providing Animal Control and/or Shelter

Sonoma County Animal Services (SCAS) operates within the Department of Health Services to provide animal services to the 66% of county residents who reside in the unincorporated areas and the Cities of Santa Rosa and Healdsburg. It also has an MOU to shelter companion animals from the City of Sonoma.

Scope of Service: In addition to companion animals, SCAS is responsible for farm animals, livestock and wild animals. As a government agency it is required to accept and manage animals regardless of their physical condition or adoptability. It enforces local, state, and federal laws that pertain to animal care and public safety. SCAS administers the state-mandated rabies control program which includes facilitating rabies vaccinations and managing bite reports and quarantine of dangerous animals. It engages legal services to handle cases involving animal bites and incidents of neglect and abuse cases. It collects and compiles license compliance data from all jurisdictions and submits county-wide reports to the state. SCAS is also the lead agency for animal emergency evacuation planning and coordination of emergency response.

Facilities: Demand for pet sheltering sometimes exceeds capacity of the 100-kennel shelter that was built in the late 1980s and was last renovated in 2001. It must also provide housing for a full range of domestic and wild animals. On October 6, 2015, the BOS approved funds for an assessment of the facility and design of needed improvements. After being interrupted by Covid, the design process is funded and underway. Projects will be done in phases starting with

ventilation improvement and noise reduction in the kennels and upgrades to the entry area to enhance interactions with the public.

Staffing: Thirty-two full-time positions include certified veterinary technicians, ten licensed animal control officers, other specialists, and public service and operations staff. It has a contract veterinarian six hours/day, five days a week and hires extra veterinary services at times. It also has a network of veterinarians who volunteer in emergencies. Volunteers provide essential support for animal and shelter care. Volunteers, shelter staff and animal control officers have access to extensive training and continuing education.

Veterinarians, assisted by vet techs conduct intake examinations, care for sheltered and fostered animals and perform spay/neuter surgery. Animals are vaccinated at intake and are sterilized prior to placement in foster or adoptive homes. Low cost spay/neuter services are provided to community members though limited resources create long lead times for surgeries.

Revenue and Cost of Service: Seventy-five to eighty percent of the SCAS \$6.7 million budget comes from Sonoma County, Santa Rosa, and Healdsburg taxes. This is supplemented by collection of license and service fees and tax-deductible donations. Collection rates for service fees are low. Follow up is staff intensive. The SCAS Director estimated an outstanding balance of as much as \$2 million in service fees and penalties. As a county agency, SCAS is required to pay county salaries and benefits.

SCAS is nearing the end of a three-year contract with DocuPet for online license management. A \$25,000 annual payment covers collection of license fees and fines and all correspondence, including sending timely renewal notices. The SCAS Director reported that service has been so efficient that it allowed a reduction to license fees while achieving the highest licensing rates in the county.

The SCAS budget of \$6.7 million dollars provides an extensive range of animal control and shelter services for approximately 305,000 residents of Santa Rosa, Healdsburg, and unincorporated Sonoma County. Santa Rosa's \$3,346,000 contract accounts for about 40% of animal control and shelter budget, or about \$191,000 per 10,000 residents.

Rohnert Park Animal Shelter is owned and managed by the City of Rohnert Park through its Community Services Department.

Scope of Service: RPAS provides shelter care for companion animals for both Rohnert Park and Cotati. The two cities' Police Departments provide animal control. RPAS has recently assumed licensing responsibility from the Rohnert Park Finance Department. It outsources license management to DocuPet and shares data with SCAS. DocuPet retains a small fee for each license. It maintains records and sends renewal reminders. Rohnert Park is the only city that requires cat licensing. Cotati offers a one-time voluntary cat license.

Facilities: Like other shelters, RPAS was built in the 1990s, but it underwent a major renovation in 2005 and has had many smaller upgrades. It is immaculately maintained with 35 dog runs, "flexible capacity" for cats, rabbits, and other small mammals. Designated areas for surgeries, food preparation, and laundry are clean and well-organized.

RPAS has earned certification as a Fear Free Shelter by implementing facility improvements and animal management practices that minimize stress and optimize safety for pets and humans. These include using sound baffles for noise control and minimizing unnecessary disruption that can lead to loud outbursts. Potential adopters view videos of available pets and meet those they wish to interview in a pleasant, private space away from other animals. Positive animal behaviors

are reinforced with small treats. Instead of the frantic barking Jurors experienced in other shelters, they were met with calm, friendly, and noticeably more “adoptable” animals.

Staffing: Staffing includes the supervisor, who holds animal control, vet tech, and euthanasia certifications; a second vet tech; and a community service assistant. A contract veterinarian visits twice a week to provide animal care and perform surgeries. Every animal of required age or size is spayed/neutered and fully vaccinated prior to placement in a foster or adoptive home. Microchipping is free for Rohnert Park and Cotati residents. While the shelter offers low-cost spay/neuter services to its community members, the wait time for an appointment can be long.

Fifteen to 20 of the 100 volunteers schedule regular shifts to assist staff with animal care and shelter maintenance. Many more assist with special projects and activities such as adoption events.

Revenue and Cost of Services: The RPAS budget of \$565,000 provides a high standard of shelter care to a population of 44,000 at a cost of \$128,409 per 10,000. In addition to its municipal funding, the shelter benefits from an independent foundation that raises funds for shelter improvements and to support a variety of programs that support the community of pet owners. These include pet collars and leashes for newly adopted pets and Silver Paws funding to offset the cost of pet ownership for low-income seniors.

The Humane Society of Sonoma County (HSSC) is included in this list of key agencies because of the limited tax revenue it receives through a contract with the City of Healdsburg to oversee animal control and shelter care. HSSC provides the shelter care and sub-contracts animal control. A \$104,000 animal control sub-contract with NBAS, that was near expiration, was terminated and a new \$114,000 contract with SCAS took effect on March 1, 2025.

Scope of Service: HSSC cares for animals from Healdsburg, citizen surrendered pets, and transfers from other shelters. Because it is not a government agency HSSC can be selective in its admission and focuses on adoptable animals.

Facilities: HSSC operates in an immaculate, well-maintained facility purposely built to a high standard of shelter design with donated funds. An adjacent building houses a veterinary hospital that provides pet care for low-income owners and offers low-cost spay/neuter surgery and routine vaccinations. It does not offer rabies clinics and does not manage licensing.

Staffing: HSSC staff includes veterinary professionals and development and communication professionals who manage its fundraising, community relations, and a website that provides a wealth of information on animal care and services throughout the county. Other staff provide maintenance, cleaning, and sanitation. Multiple well-trained volunteers are on site at any given time, interacting as team members with animals and staff. Training and continuing education are provided at all levels.

Funding: HSSC is primarily funded by private contributions and grants and is overseen by its board of directors. The Grand Jury did not pursue detailed budget information because of its focus on the county and municipal agencies.

The City of Sonoma Police Department provides residents with animal control, including licensing which is done on an in-person, walk-in basis. The licensing rate in 2024 was ~15%. Shelter care is provided as needed by SCAS and Pets Lifeline.

North Bay Animal Services (NBAS) was incorporated as a 501-(c)-3 organization in 2018 to operate the city-owned Petaluma shelter and provide the city with animal control services. It succeeded Petaluma Animal Services in this role.

Scope of Service: NBAS currently provides animal control and shelter services to more than 20% of the county’s residents through contracts with the Cities of Cloverdale, Windsor, Sebastopol, and Petaluma. It also contracts with Calistoga and operates the Clearlake shelter. Responsibilities include responding to field calls for domestic and wild animals, providing shelter and veterinary care for companion and small farm animals in compliance with industry standards, managing pet licensing and reporting data to the county, and complying with all animal-related laws on behalf of the cities it serves.

Facilities: NBAS rents the city-owned Petaluma shelter for \$1/year. The facility is aging and suffering from deferred maintenance. Shelter capacity was described as 40-50 dogs and up to 100 cats. The NBAS contract with Petaluma requires the non-profit to provide routine maintenance. The city is responsible for major repairs and improvements. In recent years, these have included roof work.

Staffing: The Director and eight staff serve the four Sonoma County cities from the Petaluma shelter and a storefront in Windsor. One Animal Control Officer is assigned to Windsor and Cloverdale. A second ACO works from Petaluma. The Executive Director is also an ACO who reported that calls are monitored 24/7. Shelter staff also include shelter technicians for cleaning and basic animal care, customer service, a social media position, one “coordinator” each for dogs and cats. No specific qualifications for shelter care of animals were listed either on the staff list provided to the Grand Jury, or on the bios that appear on the agency website.

Revenue and Cost of Service: Annual contract revenue totals \$1,233,000 from the four Sonoma County cities, with a combined population of 100,000. At only \$123,300 per 10,000, this is even less than the RPAS budget that does not include the cost of animal control field operations.

Grand Jury Observations about NBAS Performance

NBAS’s city contracts require it to comply with all applicable laws for animal shelters, including quarantine and tracking of dangerous animals, sterilization of animals placed in foster or adoptive homes, and enforcement of licensing/vaccination for rabies control. The Grand Jury identified significant failures to comply with these laws and other terms of its city contracts:

- Multiple professionals and private citizens stated that NBAS places unaltered animals in foster and “foster-to-adopt” homes and that appointments for legally mandated spay/neuter surgery can be delayed for many months. The Grand Jury obtained an email which confirmed that NBAS was aware of multiple similar complaints about delays in sterilization and vaccination.
- NBAS doesn’t facilitate rabies vaccination. State law assigns responsibility for vaccination and licensing both to dog owners and every government jurisdiction. Cities are responsible for enforcing these laws through their designated Animal Control Officers, which is NBAS in the case of Petaluma, Cloverdale, Windsor and Sebastopol.
- Jurors were told that NBAS received 350 to 370 bite calls a year, but the Jurors were unable to secure evidence that legally mandated bite reports had been filed or that potentially dangerous animals were being quarantined as required by state law. This is a matter of concern for public safety and poses the potential for city liability resulting from dog bites.

- NBAS does a poor job of facilitating dog licensure and license renewal. NBAS licensing data for 2024 showed only 12% compliance across NBAS cities compared with 23% in Santa Rosa and 31% in unincorporated Sonoma County. (See Appendix C for licensing rates as estimated based on a state methodology.)
- NBAS advised the Grand Jury that animals are taken to one of several veterinarians when in need of emergency or routine care, so there is no supervising veterinarian in charge of animal medicine. The shelter has no single veterinarian contracted to consult on written protocols for physical, conditions, sanitation, or general animal care at the shelter.
- No NBAS staff member is identified as having had the training and oversight by a veterinarian that is required to conduct physical and behavioral assessment of incoming animals.
- Employees serving in the key positions of Dog Coordinator and Cat Coordinator were described as “experienced,” but without any specific veterinary certifications included in their bios on the NBAS website.
- There is no documentation of training or continuing education of staff or volunteers.
- The workspace for food preparation observed by the Grand Jury is cramped and cluttered; open bags of pet food, some stacked on the floor, are accessible to rodents and other pests, in violation of shelter standards.
- During visits to the shelter, the Grand Jury experienced an overpowering foul odor that suggests that the ventilation system is unlikely to be providing air quality consistent with the health and safety of both animals and humans.
- NBAS does not have a written plan for emergency response. Nor does it have an MOU with the county to specify its role as an emergency responder.

NBAS is contractually required to maintain its facility either “in compliance with industry standards,” or U.C. Davis Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters. The list above demonstrates that it fails to comply with industry standards for animal care, shelter management, and maintenance.

The NBAS Executive Director has an extraordinary—and unrealistic—range of responsibilities. The Director manages staff at the Sonoma County locations, the City of Calistoga, and a second shelter in Clearlake. Although NBAS reports 24/7 call monitoring, multiple sources noted that reaching the shelter and securing a response to messages is extremely difficult.

The Director manages the organization’s operations, its finances and shelter data. The Director is responsible for negotiating and fulfilling the city contracts, which include complying with all applicable laws and maintaining the shelter in compliance with industry standards.

The Director also maintains the agency website where essential information, including online pet licensing, is absent, out-of-date, or inaccessible due to broken links. License renewal notices are not currently being sent, reportedly because of the cost and staff time. Data provided to the Grand Jury showed that the number of license renewals fell from 1,816 in 2023 to 733 in 2024 resulting in a loss of revenue and undermining rabies vaccination enforcement. (See Appendix C for License Compliance data.)

Two or three of an estimated 40-60 volunteers assist staff during each of the morning and afternoon shifts. Unlike other shelters, the number of volunteers has reportedly not recovered since it dropped during COVID.

In short, the Grand Jury concluded that NBAS is extended beyond its financial and organizational capacity to comply with either its contracts or applicable laws, a circumstance which, according to shelter standards, is *unacceptable*. It is surviving despite a perfect storm of underfunding, an aging facility, insufficient use of veterinary services, and a staff that is too small, lacking in continuing education and relevant certification, and wearing too many hats.

City Oversight of Animal Services is Inadequate

Each of the four cities that contract with NBAS have failed to adequately monitor or evaluate the quality of service being provided by NBAS. None of these four cities can be sure they are fulfilling their legal responsibility to facilitate vaccinations, report dog bites to the State of California, ensure that dogs are licensed, or require that sheltered animals be spayed or neutered prior to release for adoption.

Since NBAS has been the animal services contractor, only one city official reported ever visiting the Petaluma shelter, and that was just once. Without periodic inspections, how can these cities be sure they are getting the service they are contracted to receive?

None of the city contracts require NBAS to submit reports that contain quantifiable performance criteria in order to evaluate compliance. How are the cities evaluating contract compliance without any reporting? Only Petaluma requires reporting (annually) to the City Council, and in the 7 years that NBAS has been the animal services contractor, only 3 reports have been submitted—the last one was filed in 2022. Some contracts specify an acceptable response time for calls for animal control, but NBAS does not track response time, and the cities are not requiring it.

Jurors questioned how contracts were awarded. It became clear that NBAS proposals offered a full range of services for prices below those of competitors. Most of the multi-year contracts, including one for 10 years, are for flat annual payments without escalation clauses to accommodate increased costs.

It is unsurprising that the cities did not question whether NBAS bids were sufficient to provide contract services. The low cost would be desirable *if* the terms of the contracts were being fulfilled. However, they are not. What the Jurors did not anticipate was the uniform lack of oversight and outright denial about NBAS shortcomings that was revealed in every city interview.

Each city official interviewed by the Grand Jury stated that they weren't aware of significant issues with NBAS. Based on multiple interviews, the Grand Jury confirmed the original complaint, that NBAS is operating with insufficient oversight by its board of directors or the cities with which it contracts.

CONCLUSIONS

- Most Sonoma County residents are receiving animal services that approach, achieve, or even exceed industry standards. However, this is not the case for the over 20% affected by city contracts with NBAS.
- The existing decentralization of animal control and shelter services and the lack of oversight by the county, the four Sonoma County cities with NBAS contracts, or by the agency's board of directors, has allowed unacceptable performance by NBAS to persist without intervention.
- The NBAS proposals on which its contracts are based promise an extensive range of services for a cost that is far below the budgeted costs of either SCAS or RPAS. The result is that NBAS is inadequately funded to fulfill its responsibilities.

- In recent years, as an underfunded and underperforming non-profit agency, NBAS has failed to provide animal services which are compliant with state mandates and contract provisions. The 2012 DHS report cautioned that insufficient oversight could lead to this situation.
- The existing fragmentation of services is inefficient and confusing for members of the public. It makes it difficult to know where to call in an emergency, or how to access needed services. Fees for licensing and services vary, as does the range and quality of information available on websites and the ability to contact a shelter or animal control officer.
- The lack of shared data and communication channels poses unique challenges for animal control agencies, the County Department of Health Services, and the Office of Emergency Management. It hampers compliance with legally mandated management and reporting of licensing data and the quarantine and tracking of potentially dangerous animals. It makes it more difficult for owners to locate lost pets. It can delay or disrupt response to emergency situations.
- Following a series of disastrous fires and floods, the County appointed the SCAS Director as animal liaison to participate in development of the Sonoma County Emergency Operations Plan. In 2018, it added an animal disaster response plan with defined procedures and established MOUs to define roles for key NGOs. NBAS is not among these partners and not all cities have developed such plans.
- Funding constraints and a lack of coordination among agencies leaves most municipal and non-profit shelters struggling to accomplish support functions that are essential to all such as timely license renewals and invoicing for fees, staff and volunteer training, and maintenance of websites to provide effective public outreach. Thoughtful centralization of some or all these functions could lead to improved, cost-efficient solutions, and increased revenue collection.
- Rabies control efforts are undermined by failure to achieve high levels of pet licensing and implement spay/neuter programs for population control. Failure to collect license and shelter service fees results in the loss of revenue to support animal services.

COMMENDATIONS

The Grand Jury recognized the steady progress achieved by SCAS to comply with best practices, and other recommendations contained in the 2012 DHS report. This progress is acknowledged in subsequent reports to the Board of Supervisors and is, in part, due to the Board's on-going oversight and support of improved animal services.

The exceptional volunteer and financial support provided to the Rohnert Park Animal Shelter by its community is testimony to the value of well-run, conveniently located facilities. At the Humane Society of Sonoma County, we experienced an independent non-profit shelter with minimal public funding whose public engagement and service on behalf of animals extends across city and county boundaries.

While our investigation did not extend to the dozens of private and non-profit programs caring for Sonoma County animals, we would be remiss not to call out the outstanding shelter and adoption services provided by Pets Lifeline and Dogwood and the exemplary work of Forgotten Felines to control populations of pet and feral cats. These non-profit organizations depend on the generosity and volunteer support of the community. Our hats are off to all those who care for the county's companion animals.

FINDINGS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury determined that:

- F1. Failure by the county and its nine cities to adopt recommendations in the 2012 DHS Animal Services Report has left Sonoma County animal service agencies operating without shared standards, communication channels, data sharing or oversight.
- F2. Services provided to the four Sonoma County cities by North Bay Animal Services are non-compliant either with state laws or industry standards for the care of shelter animals as specified in its contracts.
- F3. A lack of coordination between SCAS and NBAS is an obstacle to a fully coordinated implementation of the county-wide disaster response plan for animal evacuations.
- F4. Insufficient funding and staffing make it difficult for some agencies to provide effective training for staff and volunteers.
- F5. Insufficient funding and staffing make it difficult for agencies to maintain websites and social media content required for effective public relations.
- F6. Having multiple different fee structures for animal licenses and services is confusing to the public and complicates billing and collection of license fees and fines.
- F7. Failure to achieve high levels of licensing in all government jurisdictions and provide access to shared information undermines mandated rabies control, makes it more difficult to return lost pets, and results in a loss of revenue.
- F8. Based on SCAS data, uniform adoption of online licensing management through DocuPet (or a comparable vendor) would increase county-wide licensing rates and enhance compliance with state law.
- F9. Failure to promote the benefits and legal requirement to license dogs, and failing consistently to send license renewal reminders, contribute to low license compliance and loss of revenue.
- F10. Making centralized training resources available could enhance performance of animal services employees and volunteers.
- F11. Insufficient oversight either by the cities or by the organization's board of directors has allowed NBAS to be non-compliant with state law and the terms of its contracts by: failing to effectively manage licensing and renewals; failing to offer legally mandated rabies vaccination clinics; failing to perform legally mandated spay/neuter of animals prior to placement; failing to consistently submit bite reports to the county health officer (through SCAS); failing to maintain the Petaluma animal shelter in compliance with industry standards; and failing to collect accurate data and provide reports that demonstrate compliance with contract terms.
- F12. A lack of responsiveness to phone calls has eroded public confidence in the ability of NBAS to respond in a timely manner to calls for service or follow-up.
- F13. While NBAS is responsible for general maintenance of the shelter, the City of Petaluma is not exercising due diligence with regard to facilities maintenance and repair, which may include an adequate ventilation system based upon the Grand Jury's observations during its visits.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. By November 1, 2025, the Board of Supervisors will direct DHS to establish an Animal Services Task Force comprising county, city, and shelter representatives to revisit the 2012 DHS Animal Services Report and recommend a governance structure for animal services that will: 1) provide county-wide oversight to ensure compliance with State Law; 2) standardize fees and engage a common licensing vendor to enhance public health and safety, licensing rates and revenue, and; 3) achieve economic efficiencies through shared resources. (F1, F3, F4-F6 and F9-F10)
- R2. By January 1, 2026, each of Sonoma County's 9 cities will delegate one or more representatives to participate in the county-wide Animal Services Task Force convened by DHS. (F1)
- R3. By January 1, 2026, the director or supervisor of SCAS, HSSC, RPAS, and NBAS will commit to participating in the county-wide Animal Services Task Force. (F1)
- R4. By May 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors will direct DHS to launch a county-wide public information campaign in cooperation with the cities to explain the legal imperative and benefits of licensing pets. The campaign will commence no later than July 1, 2026. (F7-F9)
- R5. By November 1, 2025, each city contracting with North Bay Animal Services will inspect and evaluate the shelter condition, and evaluate the shelter operation and animal control services, to determine whether NBAS is complying with legal mandates and other terms of its contract. (F2, F11-F12)
- R6. By September 30, 2025, each of the cities that contracts with NBAS will require quarterly reports that include data and performance criteria sufficient to evaluate compliance with its contract and all relevant laws. (F2, F11)
- R7. By November 1, 2025, the Petaluma City Council will direct staff to implement a facilities assessment of the city-owned shelter and submit a report of findings related to the adequacy of the HVAC system and any improvements that may be required for the health and safety of animals and humans. (F13)
- R8. By June 1, 2026, the City of Petaluma will correct any identified ventilation and/or other defects that put animal and/or human health and safety at risk. (F13)

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code §§ 933 and 933.05, the grand jury requires responses as follows:

- Sonoma County Board of Supervisors (R1, R4, and F1, F3-F10)
- Department of Health Services Director (R1, R4, and F1, F3-F10)
- The Cloverdale City Council (R1-R2, R4-6, F1-F3, F6-F11)
- The Cotati City Council (R1-R2, R4-R5, and F1 and F3-F10)
- The Healdsburg City Council (R1-R2, R4-7, F1-F3, F6-F11)
- The Petaluma City Council (R1-R2, R4-8, F1-F3, F6-F13)
- The Rohnert Park City Council (R1-R2, R4-R5, F1, F3-F10)

- The Santa Rosa City Council (R1-R2, R4-R5, F1, F3-F10)
- The Sebastopol City Council (R1-R2, R4-6, F1-F3, F6-F11)
- The Sonoma City Council (R1-R2, R4-R5, F1, F3-F10)
- The Windsor City Council (R1-R2, R4-6, F1-F3, F6-F11)

INVITED RESPONSES

The Grand Jury invites the following to respond:

- Sonoma County Animal Services Director (R1, R4, R5, F1, F3-F10)
- The Petaluma City Manager (R1-R2, R4-8, F1-F3, F6-F13)
- Humane Society of Sonoma County (R1, R3-5, F1, F3-12)
- North Bay Animal Shelter Executive Director (R1, R4-R8, F1-F13)
- Rohnert Park Animal Shelter Supervisor (R1, R3-5, and F1, F3-12)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- The Association of Shelter Veterinarians, *Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters*. Second Edition, December 2022.
<https://www.aspcapro.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/asvguidelinessecondedition-2022.pdf>
- The Association of Shelter Veterinarians, *Sanitation in Animal Shelters*. September 1, 2023.
https://www.sheltervet.org/assets/docs/5_Sanitation_Final_06AUG2024.pdf
- County of Sonoma—Department of Health Services, Sonoma County Animal Care and Control Governance Model Review and Best Practices, August 2012.
https://sonoma-county.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=243&meta_id=94249
- *Animal Services Facility Needs Assessment Report* to the Board of Supervisors, September 12, 2023
<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/gateway.aspx?m=l&id=/matter.aspx?key=12398>
- County of Sonoma – Animal Services, *Sonoma County Animals in Disaster Response Plan*, December 2018
<https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/Main%20County%20Site/Administrative%20Support%20%26%20Fiscal%20Services/Emergency%20Management/Documents/Archive/Administration/Services/2147553654/SCASAnimalAnnex%20FINAL%202018%20DEC.pdf>
- State of California Department of Finance, *Population and Housing Estimates for Cities, Counties, and the State—January 1, 2023, and 2024*, May 2024.
<https://dof.ca.gov/forecasting/demographics/estimates-e1/>
- California Department of Food and Agriculture, *Pet Ownership Calculator*
https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/AHFSS/Animal_Health/eprs/docs/pet_ownership_calculator.pdf
- 2017-2018 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury, *The Evacuation and Sheltering of Animals During the Firestorm of October 2017*.
<https://sonoma.courts.ca.gov/system/files/grand-jury/gj-2017-2018-finalreport.pdf>

Sonoma County Emergency Evacuation Plans Are We Ready for the Next Major Evacuation?

Sonoma County has endured four major wildfires and several severe floods in eight years. Each incident exposed the same weaknesses: narrow highways with inadequate capacity, sparse alternate routes, patchy communications capability, and limited shelter planning. The County still lacks detailed, scenario-based evacuation plans and has not met new state mandates that require them.

California’s Emergency Services Act makes local governments responsible for disaster planning, evacuation planning, and emergency plan execution. Three recent statutes enhance the requirements: Assembly Bill AB 747 (2019) mandates evaluation of evacuation route capacity, safety, and viability; SB 99 (2019) requires counties to map every neighborhood with only one way in or out and propose remedies; and AB 1409 (2021) requires advance designation of evacuation shelters and refuge areas.

Sonoma County has not yet fully complied with these mandates. Updates to evacuation route definition, traffic capacity analysis and simulation, and shelter planning are not expected until 2030, far later than comparable jurisdictions. Other meaningful findings:

- Infrastructure is the biggest vulnerability. Many roads and bridges cannot carry simultaneous outbound traffic and inbound emergency vehicles; choke points repeat fire after fire.
- Planning is “ad hoc.” Unlike the City of Santa Rosa, which pre-assigns traffic control resources and shelter sites, the County relies on on-the-fly decisions during an incident.
- Technology gaps hinder readiness: Sonoma County lacks modern evacuation modeling tools used by peer counties. Zone-specific evacuation planning isn’t possible without better tools.
- Cell outages are common, especially during power failures, and alert systems SoCoAlert, WEA, and Nixle won’t work in rural areas without cell service. Radio repeaters that would improve public communication during widespread emergencies haven’t been completed. Community radio networks need stronger integration with the County’s Emergency Operations Center.

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury makes the following suggestions to Sonoma County leadership: *accelerate compliance* with state mandates by completing evacuation route assessments and other safety plan updates *well before 2030*; *invest* in modern simulation and planning tools to inform real-time evacuation decisions; *upgrade key evacuation routes* to support contraflow strategies and emergency traffic signal control systems; *expand GMRs repeater coverage* and integrate neighborhood nets into the EOC to ensure alerts reach remote areas reliably; and *publish zone-specific plans* with route options, evacuation destinations, and communication protocols that residents can follow during a disaster.

Sonoma County has foundational emergency planning infrastructure and a motivated volunteer community, but the County could be better prepared for a fast-moving disaster. Without accelerated investment in planning, communications, and road improvements—and full compliance with California’s legal standards—the risk of chaotic, life-threatening evacuations remains high.

METHODOLOGY

- Reviewed Sonoma County’s existing emergency plans, hazard analyses, and organizational charts.
- Interviewed county emergency managers, police and fire chiefs, and public works officials about evacuation procedures and capabilities.
- Examined reports of past incidents affecting Sonoma County and nearby areas.
- Compared Sonoma County’s plans and resources against state/federal emergency management guidelines (NIMS, FEMA best practices) and lessons learned from other communities.
- Consulted scholarly studies and after-action reviews on evacuation logistics, communication systems, and community preparedness.

GLOSSARY

- **Emergency Operations Plan (EOP):** A written plan that describes how local officials prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies.
- **Emergency Operations Center (EOC):** A central coordination hub activated during major incidents; it supports on-scene responders and manages multiagency efforts.
- **Incident Command System (ICS):** A standard framework for organizing on-scene response. It defines roles and a chain of command so police, fire, EMS, and other responders can work together smoothly.
- **National Incident Management System (NIMS):** A national framework that ensures all levels of government (local, state, federal) use common terminology and procedures during any incident.
- **Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD):** A coalition of nonprofits and faith-based groups (such as the Red Cross and CERT) that provide coordinated relief and recovery support alongside government agencies.

BACKGROUND

Tubbs, Kincade, LNU Lightning, and Glass—the wildfires that plagued Sonoma County during the past eight years—forced thousands of evacuations. When nature’s fury is at your doorstep, getting away is the only safe option. Will you be able to?

Highway 12 was the only route away from the 2017 Tubbs Fire for many residents on the east side of the county. Two years after the Tubbs fire, the Kincade fire threatened Healdsburg and Windsor prompting evacuation of almost 190,000 people. A year later, the Glass Fire again threatened Sonoma, Rincon and Bennett Valleys. Highway 12, the primary evacuation route, once again proved inadequate to handle the surge in traffic. Many residents were stuck in traffic for hours as the fire approached. The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) decided to explore this question: “How well are city and Sonoma County resources prepared for *future* emergency evacuations?”

Each of the county’s four major wildfires has caused significant traffic jams, largely because many Sonoma County roads cannot simultaneously accommodate incoming emergency vehicles and outgoing evacuees. Sonoma County has also experienced an increase in the number and severity of "atmospheric rivers", which bring excessive rainfall, flooding, and debris flows to lowlands, creeks, and rivers. Some motorists misjudge the depth of flooded roads and become stuck or submerged. Others have been caught by rapidly rising creeks. Many low-lying areas in the county are served by

a single bridge or single-lane road, which presents significant evacuation challenges for both residents and emergency responders.¹

The county's geography means residents are spread out across mountains, valleys, and rural plains. Thousands of residents live in remote canyons or along single lane roads, where reaching an exit route during a natural disaster can take hours. There are only a few main evacuation routes which can become bottlenecks. The entire western half of Sonoma County was told to evacuate proactively during the 2019 Kincade Fire because emergency management leadership realized that wind direction and fire spread could lead to thousands of residents being trapped with few outbound routes.

Most of Sonoma County is lightly populated and mountainous. Cell phone and internet coverage are inconsistent and frequently unavailable outside the towns, so many residents will not receive emergency alerts transmitted via digital networks. Long travel distances, limited road access, and communication gaps in remote areas are well-known constraints that significantly hinder evacuation planning.

Sonoma County also has several major earthquake fault lines, which will eventually pose entirely different evacuation challenges, but local geography and recent experience indicate that fires and flooding are the most pressing threats. This report is principally concerned with the challenges of safely evacuating residents during wildfire and flood emergencies.

*Legal Authority for Emergency Management and Local Responsibilities:
State Law Mandates for Disaster Management and Preparedness*

California's persistent threat from wildfires and floods has prompted a robust framework of state laws governing disaster management and preparedness. These laws contain state mandates for local authorities, assigning cities and counties clear responsibilities for both operational emergency response and advance planning to mitigate disaster impacts.

The California Emergency Services Act (CESA), codified as [California Gov. Code \(§8550 et seq.\)](#)², is foundational and recent legislative updates to the CESA strengthen the role of local entities in wildfire and flood preparedness. Key areas contained in the CESA include the legal structure for emergency response coordination, requirements for evacuation route planning and mapping, and the integration of modern technologies (GIS mapping, alert systems, evacuation software, etc.) in disaster preparation.

CESA defines California's emergency management framework, establishing the hierarchy of disaster response and the duties of state and local governments. Under this framework, the Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) coordinates statewide efforts, but local governments are on the front lines of both planning and response. State law makes the [State Emergency Plan](#) operative within every city and county; it requires local governing bodies to implement that plan's provisions. In practice, this means each county and city must maintain an emergency management organization and be ready to carry out the State Emergency Plan in disasters.

The CESA explicitly empowers "*the chief executives and governing bodies of political subdivisions*" (i.e. city leadership and county supervisors) with emergency authorities. Local

¹ More lives would have been lost except for the bravery of first responders and neighbors in the chaos created by these rapidly moving fires, and water fatalities would be higher without the efforts of highly trained rescue teams, including the Santa Rosa Fire Department Swift Water Rescue Team, the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office Dive Team, and the Sonoma County Search and Rescue Team.

²https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayexpandedbranch.xhtml?tocCode=GOV&division=1.&title=2.&part=&chapter=7.&article=

ordinances designate officials (such as county sheriffs, city managers, fire chiefs, etc.) who are vested with powers to proclaim local emergencies, deploy resources, and take extraordinary measures to protect life and property when disasters strike. By law, counties and cities may create *local disaster councils* via ordinance, which “shall develop plans for meeting any condition constituting a local [or state] emergency”.

Under the state’s *Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS)*, which is required by [Government Code §8607\(a\)](#)³, local governments must use standardized incident command and coordination structures during multi-agency emergencies.

Role of Local Agencies in Disaster Response

Local authorities have primary responsibility for on-the-ground disaster response in their communities. Each city and county has an emergency organization led by a director of emergency services who is statutorily empowered to implement emergency plans and direct resources. Three cities in Sonoma County (i.e., Santa Rosa, Healdsburg, and Petaluma) have their own Emergency Managers who act as “conduits” to the County’s Department of Emergency Management. While most larger cities in the county are responsible for policing and traffic control during an emergency, advance planning for roads critical to mass evacuations rests with the County.

The process whereby local officials declare a “local emergency to activate extraordinary powers and mutual aid is defined in [Gov. Code §8630](#); when a local emergency is declared, the governing body and its agencies have broad powers to control movement (including ordering evacuations), commandeer private property if needed for public use, and set curfew areas. Since Sonoma County is principally responsible for organizing and coordinating emergency evacuations, this Civil Grand Jury report is focused on evacuation planning and preparedness by County officials.

It’s worth noting that *all public employees in California are considered Disaster Service Workers by law* ([Gov. Code §§3100–3102](#))⁴ and can be called upon to perform emergency duties. This underscores the expectation that local agencies (schools, public works, etc.) will contribute to disaster response *under local leadership*. In summary, the legal framework imposes a dual obligation on local authorities: they must plan and prepare for foreseeable emergencies (through emergency plans, training, resource arrangements) and also lead the initial response when disasters occur, coordinating closely with state agencies and neighboring jurisdictions.

Role of Local Agencies in Disaster Planning and Preparedness: General Plan Safety Element

Beyond real-time response, California statutes place heavy emphasis on advance planning to reduce disaster risks. This is primarily achieved through land use planning laws and hazard mitigation requirements that compel local governments to prepare for wildfires and floods *before* they happen. The centerpiece is the General Plan Safety Element that every city and county must adopt as part of its general plan (the local long-term blueprint for development). **State law requires this safety element to comprehensively address the community’s disaster risks and strategies to mitigate them.**

Under [Government Code §65302\(g\)](#)⁵, the safety element must establish a set of goals, policies, and objectives, as well as implementation measures designed to carry out such goals, policies and objectives, to protect the community from “*unreasonable risks*” of various hazards, specifically including flooding and wildland and urban fires. The statute mandates inclusion of up-to-date

³ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=GOV§ionNum=8607

⁴ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?sectionNum=3100.&lawCode=GOV

⁵ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=GOV§ionNum=65302.

hazard mapping and policies for disaster prevention and response. For example, the law specifies that the safety element “shall include mapping of known seismic and other geologic hazards” and must “address evacuation routes ... peak load water supply requirements, and minimum road widths and clearances around structures, as those items relate to identified fire and geologic hazards.”

California law ensures that local disaster planning is an ongoing process by requiring regular evacuation plan updates and by requiring that planning take state and federal data into account. Cities and counties must periodically revisit their safety elements to reflect new knowledge of wildfire behavior, floodplain changes, climate projections, and to incorporate lessons learned from recent disasters. Fundamentally, the law charges local officials with anticipating the worst—identifying where fires or floods are likely to occur, how evacuation and response will be handled, and what steps can lessen the danger—and embedding those considerations into their community’s long-term development policies.

Over the past 15 years, the Legislature has enacted further refinements to these planning requirements for both wildfire and flood hazards:

- **Wildfire Planning ([SB 1241 and successors](#)⁶):** In 2012, Senate Bill 1241 added new obligations for jurisdictions with State Responsibility Area (SRA) wildfire zones or locally designated Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones (VHFHSZ). Cities and counties must update the safety element to address wildfire risks in these areas.
- **Flood Hazard Planning ([AB 162 and related laws](#)⁷):** After Hurricane Katrina (2005) and California’s own levee concerns, the Legislature passed AB 162 (2007) and a suite of flood safety bills (SB 5, AB 70, etc.). These require local plans to address flood hazards with greater rigor.

Local Hazard Mitigation Plans

In parallel with state planning laws, federal law encourages each community to adopt a Local Hazard Mitigation Plan (LHMP) assessing risks and identifying projects to reduce them. California has strongly incentivized integrating the LHMP into the general plan. While not a direct mandate, this policy nudges local governments to proactively plan mitigation projects for wildfires, floods, earthquakes, etc., and embed those plans in general plan policy. [Sonoma County’s local Hazard Mitigation Plan can be found online here](#)⁸.

Evacuation Route Planning Statutes and Standards

One critical aspect of disaster preparation is planning how to get people out of harm’s way when a wildfire or flood emergency strikes. Recent California legislation has zeroed in on evacuation route planning, after several disasters revealed deadly shortcomings. The 2017 wine country fires and 2018 Camp Fire in Paradise, CA showed that communities with insufficient evacuation route planning led to chaotic evacuations. State lawmakers responded with new requirements to ensure local jurisdictions map out and evaluate evacuation routes in advance.

Even before these new laws, [Government Code §65302](#)⁹ mandated that every safety element must address “*evacuation routes related to identified fire and geologic hazards*”. Considering evacuation

⁶ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201120120SB1241

⁷ http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/07-08/bill/asm/ab_0151-0200/ab_162_bill_20071010_chaptered.pdf

⁸ <https://permitsonoma.org/hazard-mitigation>

⁹ <https://legiscan.com/CA/text/AB747/id/2056749#:~:text=certain%20mandatory%20elements%2C%20including%20a,identified%20fire%20and%20geologic%20hazards>

needs in wildfire (and earthquake) scenarios has long been a part of general plan safety elements. Subsequent statutes clarified the legal mandates as follows:

AB 747 (2019)—*Evacuation Route Capacity, Safety, and Viability Analysis*

[Assembly Bill 747](#)¹⁰ (Levine, 2019) complements SB 99 by adding Government Code §65302.15, which focuses on qualitative analysis of evacuation routes. Under AB 747, the safety element *must be reviewed and updated* “as necessary to identify evacuation routes and their capacity, safety, and viability under a range of emergency scenarios.” In effect, this law requires a comprehensive evacuation analysis in local plans: *not just mapping the routes but evaluating whether those roads can actually handle an evacuation and identifying potential problems.*

Key facets of the AB 747 mandate: local governments should consider different emergency scenarios—for instance, a fast-moving wildfire on a windy day, or a major flood that cuts off certain roads—and *for each scenario assess if the evacuation routes are viable.* They must look at **capacity** (can the roads carry the volume of traffic needed to evacuate everyone? Might there be choke points?), **safety** (are the routes themselves safe from the hazard, e.g. will a wildfire likely overrun that road? are bridges seismically stable in a flood?), and **viability** (will the route remain usable, or could it be blocked by the hazard?).

Importantly, AB 747 allows that if a city or county already has done similar analysis in another document (like an Emergency Operations Plan or an LHMP), it can incorporate that by reference. Some [communities in California](#)¹¹ have since conducted detailed evacuation modeling studies to comply with AB 747, using *traffic simulation* and GIS mapping to test different disaster scenarios.

SB 99 (2019)—*Identifying At-Risk Developments with Single Access*

[Senate Bill 99](#)¹² (Nielsen, 2019) was among the first bills to emerge from post-disaster scrutiny. Effective in 2020, SB 99 requires each city and county to update the safety element to identify any residential developments in hazard areas that lack *at least two evacuation routes.* In plain terms, local planners must make a map or inventory of neighborhoods or communities that have only one road in and out in fire hazard zones or other high-risk areas. These could be mountain communities, canyon neighborhoods, or subdivisions at the end of long cul-de-sacs.

The law’s intent is to highlight these vulnerable areas so that local governments can then seek mitigation—for example, planning a secondary egress road, widening an existing road, or, at minimum, formulating special evacuation procedures for those communities. *SB 99 requires jurisdictions to confront evacuation bottlenecks during the planning stage,* rather than during the emergency itself. Notably, SB 99 came with an understanding that many existing communities have legacy road networks that are hard to change—**but identifying them is a mandatory first step.**

AB 1409 (2021)—*Identifying Evacuation Locations*

Building on the above, [Assembly Bill 1409](#)¹³ (Levine, 2021) added a further refinement: it requires that local governments must also identify **evacuation locations.** In other words, not only routes, but

¹⁰<https://legiscan.com/CA/text/AB747/id/2056749#:~:text=This%20bill%2C%20upon%20the%20next,that%20information%20in%20the%20safety>

¹¹<https://www.watsonville.gov/DocumentCenter/View/15452/Appendix-D-Emergency-Evacuation-Route-Analysis#:~:text=in%20accordance%20with%20AB%20747,D%20to%20the%20General%20Plan>

¹²<https://legiscan.com/CA/text/SB99/id/2051072>

¹³<https://legiscan.com/CA/text/AB1409/id/2435722#:~:text=a%20local%20hazard%20mitigation%20plan%2C,a%20range%20of%20emergency%20scenarios>

the destinations or sites where evacuees can go (evacuation centers, shelters, temporary refuge areas) should be considered in the plan. Having multiple evacuation centers or refuge areas is especially crucial for wildfire evacuations, where evacuees might need to be directed to a safe zone if they cannot all leave the area quickly. Identifying these locations in advance—fairgrounds, schools, community centers, large parking lots, etc.—and evaluating their capacity is now part of the planning mandate. AB 1409’s addition ensures that local plans address the *full spectrum* of evacuation: from leaving the home (routes) to reaching safety (locations). As with the other bills, this imposes new duties on local planning officials but is considered a state-mandated local program in the interest of public safety.

In sum, California law requires every locality to identify its evacuation vulnerabilities and develop a plan to address them. This exemplifies the shift toward *proactive disaster planning*: hard lessons from recent wildfires have been translated into statutory duties for cities and counties to map, evaluate, and improve evacuation logistics for the safety of their residents.

Through AB 747, SB 99, and AB 1409 (all in the last 5 years), California has significantly tightened the expectations on local jurisdictions for evacuation preparedness. These laws were directly responsive to wildfire tragedies but apply broadly to any hazard that might require evacuation (floods, tsunamis on the coast, even industrial accidents). By writing these requirements into general plan law, *the state ensures that evacuation planning isn’t just an operational afterthought but a core element of community development and public safety planning.*

Statutes also require local governments to maintain up-to-date **evacuation route maps** in their general plans and show that they have thought through contingencies. Many counties have adopted formal “*Evacuation Route Element*” documents or incorporated extensive evacuation chapters in their safety elements to comply. This also dovetails with emergency response planning: an evacuation plan on paper is implemented through **Evacuation Orders and Warnings** during an incident, so having pre-designated routes and centers makes emergency alerts more effective.

Sonoma County Emergency Management

Emergency management in Sonoma County is led by the County Department of Emergency Management (DEM). The County maintains an [Emergency Operations Plan](#)¹⁴ (EOP) that follows [NIMS/ICS](#) principles. This EOP enumerates roles to local agencies—the Sheriff’s Office, fire districts, EMS, public health, public works, etc.—for disasters. An [Emergency Operations Center](#)¹⁵ (EOC) is activated during major events. The EOC serves as the central coordination hub: while on-scene responders (police, firefighters) use ICS principles to fight the incident, the EOC collects information, requests resources, and helps manage the overall response. Regular first responders (firefighters, paramedics, police) use the standardized ICS structure for on-scene work and the EOC supports them with supplies, information, and logistics.

Sonoma County emergency management plans also involve **external partners**. Local chapters of the American Red Cross and other VOAD organizations prepare shelters and provide food, water and recovery assistance when needed. These groups have agreements to open emergency shelters along evacuation routes and to staff them with trained volunteers. Media coordination is in place: public warnings are issued through multiple channels. The County has an automated text-message alert system for cell phones. It also uses NOAA Weather Radio broadcasts and outdoor sirens in

¹⁴<https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/Main%20County%20Site/Administrative%20Support%20%26%20Fiscal%20Services/Emergency%20Management/Documents/Plans/Sonoma-County-Emergency-Operations-Plan-English.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/administrative-support-and-fiscal-services/emergency-management/organization/emergency-operations-center>

some areas. Social media (X (the entity formerly known as Twitter), Facebook) and a County emergency webpage provide updates. *Multiple alert channels* are important to reach different audiences.

DEM has some modern tools to support planning and response. Sonoma County has a capable GIS mapping department that has published an online evacuation zone map and *could* show the public evacuation routes and safe shelter locations once they are defined. Mobile apps help field units share real-time info with the EOC. Volunteer amateur radio teams stand by to assist if other communications fail. The County OES conducts training exercises to practice evacuations. However, constrained budgets and staffing mean large-scale drills are not frequent.

The Sonoma County Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) is the principal public-facing document that describes local preparedness for such emergencies; here's what the most recent version of the EOP says about its scope and substance:

“The EOP is intended to facilitate coordination between agencies and jurisdictions within Sonoma County while ensuring the protection of life, property, and the environment during disasters. In accordance with California’s Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS), this Plan provides the framework for a coordinated effort between partners and provides stability and coordination during a disaster.

This EOP outlines the specific actions that the OA will carry out when an emergency exceeds or has the potential to exceed the capacity of a single agency or jurisdiction to respond. It sets forth the organizational framework and addresses steps needed to safeguard the whole community—especially those who are most at-risk, experience the most vulnerabilities, and/or have been historically underserved.”

In June of 2024, Permit Sonoma (the County agency charged with maintaining the County General Plan) [conducted a Board of Supervisor workshop](#)¹⁶ to initiate the update of the Public Safety component of Sonoma County’s General Plan, including this reference to construction of the evacuation map mandated by state law. Here is the text of the proposed mapping process as described in the agenda materials:

“Evacuation-related assessments required by State law (Gov. Code §§ 65302(g)(1) and 65302.15) are still under development and expected to be available later this summer. These assessments will be high-level, data-oriented, and limited in scope. The assessments will be appended to the Safety Element as reference documents and may be used as informational tools for decision-making on evacuation related policy and program development at the Board’s discretion.

The assessments will provide limited information about areas of the County where evacuation conditions may be less efficient due to roadway conditions, such as the number of egress routes or roadway carrying capacity. *The results of the assessments should be viewed as sources of information and not a complete picture of evacuation considerations within the county. The assessments will not provide a comprehensive status of evacuation accessibility for individual parcels in the unincorporated area **nor specify the time it will take to evacuate any given area in any given emergency scenario.***”

¹⁶<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6784258&GUID=EAF66AF5-6DAA-4017-BCAD-DB6654091313&Options&Search>

In April of 2025, Permit Sonoma (in conjunction with DEM and Sonoma Public Infrastructure) issued [an update to the evacuations annex of the Emergency Operations Plan](#).¹⁷ This [General Plan update](#)¹⁸ included many points of interest regarding evacuations. Goal SE2 of the update is titled “Support safe and efficient emergency response and evacuation through accessible and effective alerts, improved safety or evacuation routes, and emergency response planning.”

Item SE-2J is also particularly significant and relevant to this report:

“Conduct a study to identify vulnerable areas for traffic signal improvements and contingency plans for loss of power and communications grids. Investigate adaptive signal control (ASC) systems that can adjust traffic signal timing to account for high volumes that occur during hazard events.”

Sonoma County Department of Emergency Management is the responsible party; and ***this update isn’t currently expected to be completed until 2030.***

Further, according to Goal SE2a of the update, ***DEM does not intend to fulfill the evacuation route mapping requirements established in AB747 until 2030.***

Public Alert Systems for Community Awareness and Evacuation Coordination

Rapidly notifying the public of impending danger is crucial for both wildfires and floods. After the 2017 firestorms, California passed [SB 833 \(2018\)](#)¹⁹ to push all counties toward modern, coordinated alert systems. Today, every county has an emergency mass notification system capable of *pushing emergency messages to cell phones* (via SMS text and Wireless Emergency Alerts), as well as to landline phones, email, and broadcast media.

The state OES has issued standardized **Alert & Warning Guidelines** to ensure consistent best practices—for instance, how quickly to issue alerts, using templates with clear language, and reaching vulnerable populations (including in multiple languages). SB 833 mandates that counties may not rely solely on opt-in systems and must also have the capability for *opt-out* alerts that otherwise reach everyone in an area. This was a [direct response to Sonoma County’s experience](#)²⁰ where many residents never got warnings because the system was opt-in. Now, wireless emergency alerts can be geo-targeted. For example, an evacuation order for a wildfire will trigger a loud notification on every compatible cell phone in the polygon of the evacuation zone, even if the user never signed up.

The County Sheriff is responsible for determining where and when evacuations will occur during declared emergencies. The county map has been divided into approximately 200 zones. During emergencies, the Sheriff announces which zone(s) are required to evacuate, with warnings to residents in nearby zones. The goal is to mitigate potential traffic congestion by prioritizing and phasing the addition of vehicles traveling on roads known to have limited capacity.

Communication tools are critical to the success of this approach to evacuation management: each household needs to know its designated evacuation zone and have access to at least one communication technology to receive status updates from the Sheriff.

The County uses a broad range of tools to (hopefully) ensure universal access to evacuation messages:

¹⁷<https://sonomacounty.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=69a0e54e9e2b48c086d122027b21c961>

¹⁸<https://permitsonoma.org/Microsites/Permit%20Sonoma/Documents/Long%20Range%20Plans/General%20Plan/Environmental%20Justice/Sonoma-County-Safety-Element-Public-Review-Draft-April-2025.pdf>

¹⁹<https://legiscan.com/CA/text/SB833/id/1820764>

²⁰<https://www.govtech.com/public-safety/california-emergency-alert-standards-move-forward-in-legislature.html#:~:text=as%20radio%20and%20television>

- **SocoAlert** is the County’s preferred method for broadcasting zone status and other emergency information since it can push messages and alerts to cellphones and other devices within specific zones rather than broadcasting unnecessarily to a larger region. SocoAlert uses a system named CodeRed, which is owned and operated by Onsolve, which in turn is operated by a company named Crisis24 which is a subsidiary of a conglomerate named Gardaworld.

For directed messaging to work via *SocoAlerts* one needs to provide information that includes their home address, phone numbers and emails after which one must agree to terms and conditions set by the CodeRed End User License Agreement. ²¹

- **Nixle** is owned and operated by Everbridge and informs residents about public safety messages, community events, and advisories. Like SocoAlert, Nixle broadcasts messages as SMS texts. *Nixle broadcasts to a zip code area so it is less specific to evacuation zones than SocoAlert.*
- **NOAA Weather Radio (NWR)** is a nationwide network of radio stations providing continuous broadcasts of weather information directly from the nearest National Weather Service office. NWR broadcasts official weather warnings, watches, forecasts, and other hazard information 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It also serves as an "all-hazards" radio network, making it an essential source for comprehensive emergency information, including natural and environmental disasters, public safety alerts, and more. One must purchase a NOAA radio or a scanner which typically cost around \$15-\$30 to receive NOAA radio broadcasts.
- **Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA)** are emergency messages sent by authorized government alerting authorities through the local mobile carrier. They provide timely and critical information about a variety of imminent threats and emergencies, such as severe weather, public safety, and AMBER alerts. They typically appear as a text-like message on your mobile device, accompanied by a distinctive sound and vibration. One must have a cell phone to receive WEA messages.
- **Emergency Alert System (EAS)** is a national public warning system in the United States, designed to enable authorities to rapidly disseminate emergency information via multiple platforms including radio, television, and cable systems. Its primary purpose is to inform the public of urgent situations ranging from severe weather warnings to national security threats.
- **Hi-Lo Sirens:** Patrol cars and public safety vehicles in the sheriff’s fleet are equipped with a specialized “Hi-Lo” siren which communicates an imminent emergency condition to all who hear it. Hi-Lo sirens are the last option to get the message out when all else fails, and do not require a device on the part of the resident. Per the Sonoma County Sheriff’s office website, if you hear the Hi-Lo siren “you are in immediate danger and must evacuate immediately”.

Other forms of emergency communications include:

- **AM radios** are the most ubiquitous method of receiving broadcast information. During the Tubbs fire AM radio became the only form of official information available to many of those directly impacted by the fire. KSRO, a Sonoma County radio station, played a crucial role in providing real-time emergency updates, evacuation notices, and critical information to residents. As the fire spread, KSRO became a lifeline for the community, offering continuous coverage, helping thousands stay informed and safe during the crisis.

²¹ The Grand Jury reviewed the [required terms and conditions](#) and discovered that the user has to agree to allow the owners of the *CodeRed* system to use this information and share it as needed to provide the notification service. These conditions may discourage some households from choosing to register for potentially life-saving emergency alerts.

- **WatchDuty** is a mobile application developed locally by Sonoma County resident John Mills. The WatchDuty app keeps users informed about real-time fire incidents, integrating data from authorized sources such as fire departments, emergency services, and citizen reporters to provide timely alerts and updates. Users receive notifications about fire locations, containment efforts, road closures, and evacuation orders. The platform is a vital enhancement to community preparedness, a tool for both residents living in wildfire-prone regions and those interested in staying informed about fire-related emergencies. WatchDuty can be used for free and also has a paid subscription service. One must have a smartphone to use it, and that phone needs internet access to get WatchDuty updates.

All of the above forms of communications (except Hi-Lo sirens) require access to a cell phone and/or computer with an internet connection. But what does a household do when power is out, cell towers are down, and the public has lost access to the internet? Local grass roots organizations have created radio communications networks in the northern areas of the County and residents in the eastern and western parts of Sonoma County are actively trying to expand these organized communications networks to the entire county.

Grassroots Organizations - Key to County Emergency Prep and Response

- **CERT (Community Emergency Response Team)** is a volunteer program that trains civilians in disaster preparedness, emergency response, and basic lifesaving skills. Sponsored by FEMA, CERT trains volunteers to assist their communities during natural disasters, fires, medical emergencies, and other crises when professional responders are overwhelmed. Members learn fire suppression, first aid, search and rescue, and disaster psychology, enabling them to provide crucial support before emergency services arrive.

There are two active CERT training hubs in Sonoma County, one organized by the Sonoma County Department of Emergency Management and the other instituted by Sonoma County fire and emergency services personnel. The Northern Sonoma County CERT organization has also been collaborating with the North Bay Communications Collective in training volunteers to use low-cost hand-held radio devices.

- **The North Bay Communications Collective (NBCC)** is a volunteer organization dedicated to providing reliable, community-based emergency communication throughout the North Bay region. Using ham radio, GMRS radios and other communication technologies, the Collective supports disaster response efforts by maintaining alternative communication networks when traditional systems fail, such as during wildfires or power outages. Their mission is to enhance disaster resilience by training volunteers and expanding emergency communication infrastructure.
- **General Mobile Radio Service (GMRS)** radio networks have been rapidly expanding in North and West Sonoma County. When power failures take down internet and cell phone service, this communication network can still be available because of county-operated GMRS repeater towers with onsite backup power.

The North Bay Communication Coalition is a key contributor to the distribution of GMRS radios to neighborhood groups who operate together as a neighborhood "net". NBCC provides GMRS radio training and provides users scripts based on HAM radio operator protocols compliant with FCC regulations.

- **The Auxiliary Communications Service (ACS)** in Sonoma County is a volunteer-based emergency communications program that supports county emergency operations. ACS provides

backup and supplemental radio communications for government agencies during disasters, ensuring reliable communication when conventional systems fail. The service plays a critical role in disaster preparedness and response by maintaining communication links between emergency responders, shelters, and other essential services.

The Civil Grand Jury has three observations related to county evacuation communications using GMRS and ACS:

1. ACS is not yet linked to all Neighborhood Nets and integrated in a formal and consistent manner into EOC operations.
2. GMRS radio network participants are not required or taught to use formal communication protocols (like the ones used by Ham radio operators). People can talk over each other or use the channel inappropriately without a structured approach to using these devices, potentially limiting channel usefulness.
3. Trained users of GMRS within a neighborhood net *could* provide traffic status through ACS to the EOC so that evacuation route information can be disseminated to the public. In all emergency evacuations, residents may find that the 911 system is overloaded. Trained GMRS radio users in a neighborhood net could also provide real time vital information regarding evacuation routes and rapidly changing fire/flood conditions, and direct emergency responders to residents in need of special assistance.

Technology to Support Wildfire and Flood Preparation & Coordination

California’s laws don’t prescribe specific disaster preparedness technologies, but in practice state and local authorities have widely adopted advanced tools to meet legal mandates and improve emergency outcomes. Here are some key categories of technology that support wildfire and flood preparation and response coordination:

- **Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Hazard Mapping:** GIS is foundational for hazard planning and situational awareness. Local agencies use GIS to map fire hazard zones, floodplains, evacuation routes, and critical infrastructure. During emergencies, GIS specialists from various agencies create *real-time interactive maps* showing wildfire perimeters, evacuation zones, and other critical data. CAL FIRE and Sonoma County Department of Emergency Management use Esri’s ArcGIS platform to maintain online “[dashboard](#)” [maps](#)²² of active incidents and evacuation orders, accessible to both responders and the public. In flood preparedness, GIS is used to model inundation areas and plan evacuation zones accordingly. Many counties have produced story maps that combine flood scenarios with evacuation route overlays to educate residents. [Sonoma County’s flood stage map can be found here](#)²³.

Overall, GIS tools fulfill a critical requirement of state law: they provide the evidence-based foundation that underpins evacuation plans. Sonoma County’s DEM maintains [interactively-updated maps](#)²⁴ for winter weather, road closures, flood stages, and a “Five Year Burn Scar” map, along with a map showing all of the County evacuation zones.

- **Evacuation Management Platforms:** Many California counties have turned to specialized evacuation management software to implement evacuation route planning mandates. One example is Zonehaven (now part of Genasys Protect), a platform that allows agencies to define

²² <https://socoemergency-sonomacounty.hub.arcgis.com/apps/69a0e54e9e2b48c086d122027b21c961>

²³ <https://sonomacounty.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=b78edb375de6457f97869703bd368f35>

²⁴ <https://socoemergency.org/emergency/maps/>

precise evacuation zones *and run simulations of evacuation traffic*²⁵. Zonehaven provides a common operating picture for multi-agency coordination of evacuations. It offers access to “*real-time weather, traffic and fire information, and models traffic and fire spread scenarios to plan and execute evacuations successfully*”.

Using such tools, emergency managers can predict how quickly a wildfire might spread toward a community and how traffic would flow if everyone evacuated at once, enabling managers to designate phased evacuations or choose which areas to evacuate versus shelter in place. For example, [Marin County implemented Zonehaven and highlighted that the tool can model potential traffic congestion](#)²⁶ during a wildfire evacuation and identify problem areas. When a wildfire ignites, the County can activate pre-drawn zones on Zonehaven’s map, and the public can see their zone status on a live map. Other tech solutions in this category include One Concern, which has offered AI-driven evacuation analytics (piloted by some California cities), and Google’s Waze Crisis Response partnership that shares road closure and traffic data with emergency ops centers.

- **Monitoring Networks and Early Warning Sensors:** Cutting-edge monitoring technology is improving early detection of wildfires and floods. **ALERTCalifornia** is a flagship effort: this advanced network of more than 1,000 cameras helps emergency managers monitor wildfires, floods, and landslides in real time. The cameras providing 360-degree live views that firefighters and emergency personnel can control remotely. Camera feeds have also been used to watch river levels and burn scar areas during heavy storms.
- **Automated Weather Stations and Remote Sensors:** Wind, humidity, and fuel moisture sensors are used in many areas, feeding data to prediction models like **FIRIS** (Fire Integrated Real-Time Intelligence System) and **WIFIRE**. FIRIS is a state-funded program that pairs infrared-equipped aircraft with a data platform to map fires and run spread projections within minutes of ignition. WIFIRE uses supercomputers to model wildfire growth and was referenced in recent fires for rapid scenario planning. On the flood side, California has thousands of stream gauges and rain gauges that send real-time data to flood control agencies. These trigger alerts when river levels reach thresholds, enabling towns downstream to be warned or evacuated early.
- **Data and Communication Platforms:** In emergency operations centers, technology like WebEOC (incident management software) is used to track resources and missions during a disaster. California has also developed SCOUT, a geospatial viewer that integrates data sources (fire perimeters, weather, traffic, shelter status, etc.) on one map for situational awareness.

DISCUSSION

The Civil Grand Jury identified several practical concerns regarding Sonoma County’s evacuation capability and opportunities for improvement of county-wide evacuation planning and implementation.

Evacuation Planning Constraints & Potential Mitigations

Do you know where the next wildfire will be?

²⁵ <https://genasys.com/press-releases/genasys-inc-announces-zonehaven-launch-in-alameda-county-ca/#:~:text=%E2%80%9COur%20Zonehaven%20SaaS%20solutions%20provide,%E2%80%9D>

²⁶ <https://www.marincounty.gov/news-releases/new-evacuation-mapping-tool-unveiled-marin-county/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20Zonehaven%20mapping%20tool%20allows,model%20traffic%20and%20fire>

No, of course not; and that's why local emergency planners say they haven't developed detailed, zone-specific residential evacuation plans for wildfire or flood emergencies. Each of the major fires in Sonoma County has impacted different neighborhoods, and the people responsible for preparation in advance of the next emergency are quick to note that "maximum flexibility" in evacuation management is an absolute requirement.

But... there are some important things we know *will* impact the outcome of the next emergency:

- The roads we have today will be the roads available during the next evacuation until remedial action is taken.
- Many Sonoma County roads aren't wide enough to support simultaneous resident evacuation and emergency vehicle ingress.
- Traffic jams happen at the same points over and over: the intersection of Petaluma Hill Road and Adobe Road, Route 12 at Farmer's Lane, Westside Road at the Healdsburg circle, the entire Sebastopol downtown, and numerous other locations throughout the County. One common feature: all of these pinch points are along critical evacuation routes.
- The areas that flood next are likely to be areas that have flooded previously.
- Fires accelerate through canyons based on prevailing wind patterns, *and these wind patterns are well known to weather analysts.*
- Every residence in the County is already mapped in the County GIS system, and though the residential census at any moment in time is fluid, *it could be known in real time* if emergency planners had tools to query public status as the emergency unfolds.
- There are only a handful of places that are sizeable enough for, and prepared to be, evacuation destinations.

Sonoma County emergency planning agencies *should* recognize the benefit of advance planning: after all, this County probably has more experience with wildfire and flooding disasters than any other county in California. During Civil Grand Jury interviews, local officials repeatedly said, "We can't make an evacuation plan in advance because we don't know where the next emergency is going to be." However, while emergency planners cannot predict the exact location of the next evacuation, they can identify in advance the specific obstacles likely to arise within each evacuation zone.

State law says that emergency operations plans must include detailed zone evacuation maps that reflect specific evacuation routes and shelter destinations for each likely emergency. State law says, and our research concludes, that advance preparation is not only possible but preferred. The City of Santa Rosa has actually already done this: its Emergency Operations Plan includes specific traffic management plans including remote traffic light controls, assignment of on-site traffic management personnel, and specific shelter destinations with permanent designation signage. In contrast, Sonoma County's EOP is essentially ad hoc: the plan and practice (according to the entities in charge of emergency management) is to figure it out on the fly, depending on what the emergency is and how it seems likely to progress.

There are only a handful of options for getting out of Sonoma Valley between Middle Rincon Road and the City of Sonoma. Significant portions of State Route 12, the main highway, are single lanes in each direction, and administration of this highway vests with the State of California. The canyons crossing Highway 12 principally run east and west, so the most dangerous fire storms in the eastern

part of the County run perpendicular to this main evacuation route—leaving some room for safe zones between blazes. There are places along Highway 12 in the Sonoma Valley where temporary evacuation points *could* be used to mitigate the risk of an overcrowded road but, to date, none have been identified.

The western half of the County is not so fortunate: the main evacuation routes (West Side Road, Occidental Road, Highway 12 and Highway 116) all run roughly parallel to the predominant wind directions during fire season, and there are few places in the most dangerous areas where temporary evacuation points or traffic management buffers could be established.

Lessons from Recent Incidents

After-action reviews provide insight. The 2019 Kincadee fire prompted one of the largest mass evacuations in the history of California. One crucial lesson: *widespread power outages* of the sort initiated by PG&E during this fire *mean crucial communications infrastructure may not work*—so advance preparation of evacuation routes and alternate communications plans are an absolute necessity.

The 2020 Glass fire, which burned across both Napa and Sonoma counties, resulted in the loss of almost 1,500 structures. The Glass fire's rapid progression underscored the necessity of defensible space around properties and the use of fire-resistant building materials.

Sonoma County has faced significant flooding in each of the past three heavy rainfall seasons. These events have highlighted the importance of comprehensive flood risk management, including the development of detailed floodplain maps, investment in infrastructure improvements, and community education on evacuation procedures. The County has worked to align its flood response strategies with lessons learned from wildfire evacuations, emphasizing the need for clear communication and accessible evacuation routes.

Evacuations during the 2024 flooding near Lake Sonoma were substantially impacted by cell tower outages and many evacuees had no updated route guidance. This points to the need for alternative notification (such as emergency radio broadcasts or amateur radio volunteers to relay new info) *and advance distribution of evacuation route maps*.

Communication Channels and Infrastructure Limitations

Sonoma County uses a variety of alert systems (NOAA radio, WEA cell alerts, social media, local news, and sirens) and has greatly improved its communications capabilities since 2017. However, a persistent problem is that **some rural residents may be out of reach of certain channels**. Rural and forest area residents won't get alerts if the signal is weak. To compensate, Sonoma County uses outdoor sirens and roadway message signs as backups but these technologies have limited reach and effectiveness.

Messages sent via SocoAlert and Nixle use SMS texting which operates through cellular services and by internet connection via wifi. Both forms of messaging are limited to 160 characters. The Civil Grand Jury has found that the emergency messages can include additional access to more detailed information by adding a URL at the end of the message. However, this assumes that the user will take the time to look, and it also assumes that an internet connection is available to the device the user is operating.

Radios are the only communication technology that has a reasonable chance of working for many people in the rural parts of the County when power lines are down, or internet connections aren't available. Going forward, Sonoma County could do more to support neighborhood safety networks:

for example, appointing volunteer block captains or enhancing community organizations' capabilities to spread warnings door-to-door and by radio. In past evacuations, neighbors often warned each other, which shows the value of grassroots communication. Having more people connected to emergency messaging networks will improve the odds that messages get through even if cell phones or internet fail.

Inter-Agency Coordination is a Challenge

In theory, Sonoma County uses the Incident Command System, but resource limits can hamper response. The County's fire districts and EMS have far fewer personnel and trucks than a big-city department. In a fast-moving disaster, small volunteer crews might be stretched thin. The Civil Grand Jury found that **clarifying roles ahead of time** is important. The Sheriff's Office will take command of issuing evacuation orders during a large wildfire, but the Emergency Operations Center will remain in control of communications management among all of the various emergency responders.

Infrastructure Vulnerabilities

Sonoma County's main evacuation routes have been, and probably will continue to be, bottlenecks for future evacuations. Highway 12 and Highway 116 each have major intersections known to gridlock during heavy traffic. Even Highway 101 has been seen to shut down due to evacuation traffic exacerbated by wildfire adjacent to the highway. If flooding or landslides close a highway, evacuees could face life-threatening delays. Sonoma County plans note alternate routes, but these often involve longer, winding backroads. One strategy is **contraflow** (reversing lanes to double outbound flow) on key highways, but that takes pre-planning and traffic control. It also helps to have at least 3 lanes for major evacuation routes: that allows for outbound traffic to have two egress lanes, leaving one ingress lane for emergency responders.

Modeling Future Evacuations: Technology Exists to Improve Wildfire and Flood Preparation

Disaster preparedness agencies elsewhere in the state have adopted advanced tools to improve emergency outcomes. More comprehensive GIS mapping of hazards is supported by advanced simulation technology to enhance disaster preparation. The state often provides funding or frameworks for these technologies, but local agencies choose and operate the specific tools. The technologies are the means to an end: compliance with statutory requirements (like advance evacuation route planning) and the ultimate goal of **saving lives and property** when wildfires rage or floods rise.

Unfortunately, there has been little investment locally in the types of tools that *could* put an informed evacuation plan in place *before* the next emergency. The Sonoma County Department of Emergency Management has literally no advanced tools to conduct the specific evacuation route planning mandated by AB 747. Without simulation applications, it's an impossible task: calculating wildfire risk for the County's many canyons is a function of fuel, wind speed and direction, and every atmospheric river has the potential to unexpectedly deliver massive amounts of water to very specific flood zones, *but without tools that incorporate NOAA and CAL OES weather data to simulate likely problems, and traffic modeling tools that estimate congestion based on evacuation traffic volume, there is no way for Sonoma County's Department of Emergency Management to develop the detailed plans that would allow each neighborhood to know what its options are or when to initiate its best-case scenarios for public safety.*

The good news is that these tools exist. They aren't cheap, and implementation would require both funding and expertise; but other counties have adopted them, and local funding sources (like 2024 Measure H) can make these tools available to all city and county emergency planners *and the residents they protect*.

Questions from the Floor

Public interest in (and questions about) emergency management is heightened during and after every evacuation emergency. The same questions keep being asked—and not answered:

- Why are most of the major evacuation routes in Sonoma County two-lane roads with inadequate capacity for major traffic events? Is anyone actively working to fix this problem?
- Does Sonoma County have the most effective tools and technologies to assist emergency responders and residents during an evacuation-level emergency?

The Civil Grand Jury asked senior County leaders to answer these questions, and the responses were somewhat disappointing. In short:

- The roads are the roads; improving them is expensive, complicated, and, in most cases, requires support from the State of California, and
- We would love to have tools to create scenario-specific evacuation plans, but they're not in the budget.

It is disheartening to hear that there is no immediate effort to imagine comprehensive roadway solutions. How much money would it take? How long would our major evacuation routes take to fix if the money was at hand? Do we even know how many miles of highway enhancement construction are needed? If Highway 12 and 116, and major county routes like Westside Road and Dry Creek Road need significant public safety improvements, where do these enhancements fit in the long list of budget priorities?

According to the General Plan update published in April, they're far down the list: Goal SE5 (a study to identify County transportation infrastructure critical for provision of emergency services such as evacuation or provide access to critical facilities located within high-risk wildfire, landslide, or flood hazard areas) isn't scheduled to be *started* until 2030. In the meantime, should we all just hope there are no emergencies?

It is equally disappointing to learn that compliance with AB747 and other *state mandates* to develop and communicate zone-specific emergency evacuation plans are 2030 goals. Provision of critical services in highly impacted, systemically vulnerable communities during an emergency deserves a higher priority.

CONCLUSIONS

Sonoma County has the beginnings of a solid framework for evacuations: a written Emergency Operations Plan, an active Emergency Operations Center for coordination, multi-channel public alert systems, and a robust community of residents who recognize both the need for preparedness and the value of planning for emergencies. Collaboration with voluntary agencies provides organized shelter and aid during disasters. These foundations mean the County does not have to start from scratch during a crisis.

However, our analysis identifies areas needing attention. Communications stand out: evacuation orders and warnings must be localized, dynamic *and include immediate instructions for specific*

areas. The research evidence is clear that plain, specific alerts (especially mandatory orders when needed) save lives. Sonoma County emergency communications networks should be both hardened and capable of reaching everywhere in the county, whether through improvements in physical capacity or support for community organizations that can reach places with radio networks when cell service isn't available.

Infrastructure and logistics are another focus. Limitations of the existing road network means contingency planning *in advance* is key to public safety. Funding to reinforce key bridges, install more emergency power generators at critical communications sites (to prevent cell tower failures), or add redundancy (like more river gauges and weather sensors) would increase resilience. The most impactful and consequential fact impacting evacuations is the inadequacy of the roads required for emergency evacuations. Highway 12 in the Sonoma Valley, Westside Road between Healdsburg and the Russian River, and River Road along the Russian River are the most obvious examples of roads that are critical for emergency evacuation, yet they are single lane each way, with some area having minimal shoulders and turn-outs. Upgrading these roads will reduce the likelihood of significant traffic problems during the next emergency evacuation.

Inadequate response to legal mandates for preparedness: California's legal landscape for disaster and emergency management creates a comprehensive, multi-layered system with local authorities at its core. Statutes charge cities and counties with developing robust emergency plans, integrating wildfire and flood considerations into every facet of community planning, and continually updating those plans to reflect new risks and knowledge. The Legislature has reinforced these duties through targeted laws on evacuation planning, alerting standards, and climate resilience.

California's state-local partnership strives to ensure that whether it's a wildfire in the hills or a flood in the valleys, local authorities are prepared to lead a swift, organized, and life-saving response. California has learned from hard experience that **accountability for disaster readiness is clear:** the state sets standards and provides support, but the **operational responsibility lies with the local governments** who know their communities best.

While the framework in place provides a strong foundation to safeguard County residents from the perils of wildfires and floods, Sonoma County's approach to date is long on physical preparedness but short on anticipation. To date, Sonoma County has fallen short of state mandates for preparation of (and communication to residents about) advance preparation of evacuation routes and traffic management systems, identification of (and advance planning for) evacuation via roads that are challenges for emergency services access, and investment in technology that would enable the Department of Emergency Management to develop the detailed analysis needed to facilitate unified command and control during the next major evacuation.

Sonoma County local governments must not only respond to disasters but **prepare in advance** by mapping every flood zone and fire hazard and hardening infrastructure and development patterns against these threats. Readiness is not static. By sharpening communication protocols, shoring up critical infrastructure, fully utilizing analytic modeling technology and engaging citizens in preparedness, the County can move closer to being truly ready for the next major evacuation event. And one is coming.

FINDINGS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury determined that:

- F1. Sonoma County's Emergency Operations Plan, Hazard Mitigation Plan, and Department of Emergency Management are an excellent foundation for disaster preparation.

- F2. The County EOP is intended to be executed in an ad hoc manner without advance identification of specific evacuation routes or predesignated shelters.
- F3. Most of Sonoma County’s major evacuation routes are incapable of accommodating predictable evacuation traffic in a timely manner.
- F4. Most roads critical to emergency evacuation in the unincorporated areas of Sonoma County have no remotely managed capability for controlling traffic flow, and existing traffic controls will not be operational during power failures.
- F5. The Sonoma County Sheriff’s Office is primarily responsible for ensuring public safety during evacuations, but SCSO staffing may require temporary assignment of non-SCSO County employees for concurrent execution of household evacuation notices and evacuation route traffic management.
- F6. Organized community-based communications networks are a proven emergency resource yet remain only partly integrated into county and city emergency operations and communications infrastructures and require additional investment to provide county-wide coverage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. By December 5, 2026, the Board of Supervisors shall direct Sonoma Public Infrastructure to estimate and report the necessary cost and location of radio repeaters needed to fully implement GMRS repeaters serving the entire County.
- R2. The Board of Supervisors shall direct the Department of Emergency Management to report on the resources required to accelerate Emergency Operations Plan Annex Goals SE2 and SE5 from 2030 to 2027 by February 2, 2026, and shall evaluate this resource requirement for inclusion in the 2027 County budget.
- R3. By July 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors shall fund Department of Emergency Management acquisition of evacuation management modeling and simulation software which will facilitate advance identification of zone-specific evacuation routes and evacuation messaging.
- R4. The Board of Supervisors shall direct the Department of Emergency Management to report on the resources required to identify and include within County Evacuation Maps the location of all predesignated county-operated evacuation shelters by March 2, 2026.
- R5. By July 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors and the Sonoma County Sheriff shall review Sonoma County evacuation plans to determine whether trained and certified Sonoma County employees (using the authority granted by California Government Code [Gov. Code §§3100–3102](#)) should become a resource for emergency traffic control operations.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code §§ 933 and 933.05, the civil grand jury requires responses as follows:

- Sonoma County Board of Supervisors F1-F6, R1- R5
- Sonoma County Department of Emergency Management F1-4, F6; R2, R3, R4
- Sonoma County Public Infrastructure Department to respond to F1, F3, F4, F6; R1
- Sonoma County Sheriff to respond to F1-F6, R5

Who Can Afford to Live in Sonoma County?

A Tale of Two Cities

SUMMARY

Sonoma County, renowned for its picturesque landscapes and vibrant culture, is increasingly becoming a challenging place for many of its essential residents to call home. Service workers, agricultural laborers, teachers, and young families—the very backbone of the community—are finding it increasingly difficult to afford housing in a region where the median sales price of a home reached a staggering [\\$900,000 in April 2025](#). This price tag is simply out of reach for most homebuyers.

The pressing question becomes: how can Sonoma County make housing more affordable for these vital populations?

To address this issue, it is crucial to define what we mean by "affordable housing." The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines affordable housing as housing that costs no more than 30% of a household's gross income, encompassing both rental options and homeownership.

A report from the 2021-22 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury, titled "[Affordable Housing: Past, Present, and Future](#)¹", provided a thorough examination of the affordable housing landscape in the county. The report revealed a significant shortfall in affordable housing, a situation exacerbated by rising construction costs, intricate financing challenges, and a scarcity of available land.

Unfortunately, the situation has not improved over the past two years. The California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) has mandated that Sonoma County construct [14,562 new housing units between 2023 and 2031](#)² through the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) process. While this figure may seem substantial, organizations like the non-profit [Generation Housing](#) argue that it falls short of meeting the County's future housing needs.

The importance of fostering a diverse mix of housing options cannot be overstated. A stable community benefits everyone. It is essential for families and workers to be able to afford to stay in the area. According to the October 2024 report "[State of Housing in Sonoma County](#)"³ from Generation Housing, 31.4% of Sonoma County's workforce commutes from outside the region, a trend that strains the local economy, exacerbates traffic congestion, increases the carbon footprint, and adversely affects the health and educational outcomes of those workers and their families.

This report aims to shed light on the complexities of developing affordable housing and to showcase the strategies employed by two particular cities to promote such development. It discusses the contrasting approaches of two communities: Healdsburg, an affluent town celebrated for its tourism, historic plaza, and wine estates, and Rohnert Park, a more modest community known for its family-friendly atmosphere, Sonoma State University, and the Graton Rancheria. Both cities have received the Prohousing Designation from the State of California and are on track to meet their expanded RHNA goals, offering a glimpse of hope in the ongoing struggle for affordable housing in Sonoma County.

¹ <https://sonoma.courts.ca.gov/system/files/affordable-housing-past-present-future.pdf>

² <https://permitsonoma.org/housingelement>

³ <https://generationhousing.org/resources/>

This analysis examines the multifaceted strategies employed by these two municipalities to foster the development of affordable housing. It focuses on four critical elements: Growth Management and Land Acquisition, Entitlement Process, Financing Mechanisms, and Leadership and Community Involvement. Through a comparative case study approach, this report sets out the policies, programs, and collaborative efforts undertaken by these cities, highlighting successful interventions and persistent challenges in addressing regional housing affordability crises.

GLOSSARY

- **ABAG:** Association of Bay Area Governments
- **Affordable Housing:** As defined by HUD, housing that costs no more than 30 percent of a household's gross income
- **Deed Restricted:** A mechanism to ensure that homes or rental units remain affordable for low-income residents for a set period, typically 55 years
- **Inclusionary Housing:** A program that requires developers to build a percentage of new residential units which will be rented or sold at affordable prices based on income
- **Prevailing Wage:** The minimum hourly rate of wages and benefits that contractors must pay workers on public works projects, set by the California Department of Industrial Relations
- **Prohousing Designation:** California Department of Housing and Community Development acknowledges a jurisdiction that has gone beyond the state law to help accelerate housing production
- **RHNA:** Regional Housing Needs Allocation – State-mandated process that determines the number of housing units each city and county need
- **Surplus Property:** Per the Surplus Property Act, land owned by a local public agency that is no longer necessary for the agency's use and that has been formally declared surplus by the agency. This land is then made available for affordable housing development under certain conditions

BACKGROUND

Sonoma County is grappling with a critical shortage of affordable housing, a situation worsened by rising construction costs, intricate financing challenges, and a scarcity of available land. In 2022, the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury released a report titled “Affordable Housing: Past, Present, and Future,” which provided an in-depth analysis of the affordable housing landscape in Sonoma County. This report examined historical policies, current obstacles, and future strategies to tackle the region’s housing crisis, including a discussion of the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) process.

The California State Legislature mandates that all cities, towns, and counties proactively plan for the housing needs of their residents. This planning is executed through a Housing Element and the RHNA process. The California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) determines the total number of new homes each region must construct, and the affordability levels required to meet the diverse housing needs of its population. Once these figures are established, regional authorities, such as the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) for Sonoma County, allocate housing responsibilities among municipalities. Each municipality then updates its

Housing Element to demonstrate its capacity to zone sufficient land for the construction of the required housing units based on its RHNA allocation.

Housing Element plans operate on an eight-year cycle. The current sixth cycle (2023-2031) has set a RHNA goal of 14,562 new housing units for the county, a significant increase from the fifth cycle's goal of 8,444 units. These targets encompass a range of housing types, from very low-income to market-rate units. It is important to note that the RHNA goals do not fully capture the total housing need within each county; rather, they represent the number of units for which the county is accountable. Municipalities may not directly construct all these units but can collaborate with and/or incentivize private or non-profit developers to meet these goals.

This report focuses on two distinct communities: Healdsburg, an affluent area renowned for its wineries and tourism, and Rohnert Park, a family-oriented planned community. Both cities are on track to meet their expanded RHNA goals for 2023-2031 and have achieved a Prohousing Designation. The 2019-2020 Budget Act introduced a range of support, incentives, and accountability measures aimed at fulfilling California's housing objectives, including the establishment of the Prohousing Designation Program. This program recognizes and supports jurisdictions that exceed state housing laws to expedite housing production. Jurisdictions with a Prohousing Designation may benefit from priority processing or additional funding points when applying for various funding programs, including [Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities \(AHSC\)](#).⁴ Furthermore, this designation allows jurisdictions to apply for the [Prohousing Incentive Program \(PIP\)](#)⁵, which rewards local governments with extra funding to accelerate the production and preservation of affordable housing.

Healdsburg

Healdsburg has a long and rich history, beginning as the home of the Indigenous Pomo people. In the 19th century, the region came under Mexican control following a military campaign led by General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. In 1841, 50,000 acres were granted to Henry Delano Fitch, who introduced cattle ranching to the area. Following Fitch's death, his widow sold portions of the land to the Anglo government. Harmon Heald, who had been homesteading in the area, purchased 100 acres and formally incorporated the City of Healdsburg in 1867.

Healdsburg quickly grew into a commercial hub, supported by agriculture, timber, and mineral extraction—industries made more accessible by the Northwest Pacific Railway line. Over time, the region's agricultural base expanded to include orchards and vineyards. By the 1970s, Healdsburg began to establish itself as a premier wine-producing region, drawing estate wineries to Dry Creek and Alexander Valleys and ushering in a growing tourism industry.

During the past 40 years, the City of Healdsburg has transformed from a small town serving the surrounding northern Sonoma County agriculture and other resource-based industries into a vibrant community-center of the county's wine industry, as well as an attraction for destination-based tourism. Healdsburg growth has been influenced by the county's wine industry, and the city's central plaza where award-winning restaurants, destination-oriented retail, and wine tasting shops now dominate retail space. The plaza's pleasant surrounding residential neighborhoods, protected by planning policies and ballot-based growth restrictions, have all contributed to this transformation.

Healdsburg's fiscal and economic policies have been highly successful—the expanded retail uses, restaurants and lodging have created a stable and growing tax base for the city which supports high

⁴ <http://www.hcd.ca.gov/grants-and-funding/programs-active/affordable-housing-and-sustainable-communities>

⁵ <https://www.hcd.ca.gov/grants-and-funding/programs-active/prohousing-incentive-program>

levels of municipal services to its residents. Increasing home values have led to substantial reinvestment and improvement of the existing housing stock, new development, including higher density housing and lodging, and revitalization of existing commercial buildings.

However, this success has created a housing market that has become unaffordable to long-term residents and families with young children. The city’s teachers, agricultural, and hospitality workers are increasingly displaced by rising land prices driven by a supply-constrained market. With a continuing decrease in working families and full-time residents, a variety of demographic effects have set in, including an overall aging of the population, a reduction in school-age population and attendance in local public schools, and a decrease in the percentage of Hispanic households, which have, over the recent decades, become the foundation of the local workforce serving agriculture, construction, retail, and lodging industries and which still comprise over 30 percent of the City’s population.

Rohnert Park

Rohnert Park, originally agricultural land tied to the Rohnert family and seed farming in the early 20th century, was developed as one of the first planned communities in the United States in the 1950s and officially incorporated in 1962. The intent was to develop a family-oriented community with cohesive neighborhoods, where no child would have to walk more than one-third of a mile to school. At the time, each neighborhood would have 200 to 250 homes around local schools and parks.

At incorporation, Rohnert Park was 2.1 square miles with a population of 2,775. Growth exploded in the 1970s and 80s, when two-thirds of the current housing units were built. By 1999, the city occupied 6.9 square miles, nearly half of which was dedicated to residential use for its population of approximately 41,000. Since the year 2000, the city has continued to grow in size and add population. As of January 1, 2020, the city had a population of 44,330 and land area of approximately 7.7 square miles. Rohnert Park is the third largest city in Sonoma County and has the highest population density in the county at over 6,000 residents per square mile.

Housing Goals for Healdsburg and Rohnert Park

Below are charts which describe the Regional Housing Needs Assessment Goals for both communities, detailing the number of units by income category.

Healdsburg

In the fifth cycle (2014-2022), Healdsburg’s RHNA goal was to build 157 housing units. The city built 342 units, exceeding its goal in all income categories. For the sixth cycle, Healdsburg’s goal is 476 units. The city anticipates building 977 units, again exceeding goals in all income categories. Table 1 was provided to the Grand Jury by Healdsburg Housing staff.

Table 1: Healdsburg Housing Progress (2023-31 RHNA)

Metric	Extremely Low Income	Very Low Income	Low Income	Moderate Income	Above Moderate Income	Totals
RHNA Target	83	107	109	49	128	476
Total, Credits	54	174	161	75	513	977

See Appendix A for income range chart.

Rohnert Park

For the fifth cycle, Rohnert Park’s RHNA goal was 899 new houses. It actually built 1,978, although the majority were above moderate income. Rohnert Park’s sixth cycle RHNA goal is 1,580 units. Table 2, provided to the Grand Jury by Rohnert Park Housing staff, shows the city plans to build 2,834 units, again exceeding their RHNA goal.

Table 2: Rohnert Park Housing Progress (2023-31 RHNA)

Metric	Very Low Income	Low Income	Moderate Income	Above Moderate Income	Total
RHNA Target	399	230	265	686	1,580
Total Units (Credits + Sites)	375	208	128	2,123	2,834

This report will discuss the unique aspects of each city and the strategies each employed to build community will and secure the essential land and financing to make it a reality.

METHODOLOGY

The 2024-2025 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury conducted its investigation into affordable housing issues in the cities of Rohnert Park and Healdsburg. This inquiry was prompted by ongoing community concerns regarding the adequacy, availability, and planning of affordable housing in compliance with state mandates, particularly those related to the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA).

To understand the scope and nuances of affordable housing efforts in these two cities, the Grand Jury undertook the following activities:

- **Interviews:** The Grand Jury conducted confidential interviews with city officials and staff from the affordable housing departments of both Rohnert Park and Healdsburg. Members of the respective city councils were also interviewed to gain insight into local housing policy priorities and political considerations.
- **Media Review:** The Grand Jury reviewed reports and articles from local and regional mass media sources.
- **Housing Advocate Input:** Conversations were held with unaffiliated housing advocates and nonprofit representatives working within Sonoma County. These advocates provided perspectives on systemic barriers, funding limitations, and the lived experiences of residents impacted by the lack of affordable housing.
- **Document and Data Analysis:** The Grand Jury reviewed housing element updates submitted by each city, planning commission meeting records, and RHNA allocation data as provided by the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD). Additional online sources were used to verify state laws and regulatory frameworks governing local housing obligations, per the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG).

DISCUSSION

The following discussion focuses on the key components each city is utilizing to reach its goals. The strategies of the cities differ but ultimately result in exceeding their housing targets. The salient ingredients of each city's success are the depth of understanding of necessary resources and development of community will. The catalyst in both cases is a knowledgeable, dedicated staff.

The following sections of the discussion will focus on the individual facets of each city's comprehensive strategy to accomplish their goals. Examples from each city are shown.

1. Introduction: Key Components for Affordable Housing Development

The creation and preservation of affordable housing in urban and suburban environments necessitate a multi-pronged approach addressing systemic barriers and leveraging local assets. This section investigates how two Sonoma County cities, Healdsburg and Rohnert Park, have addressed four pivotal elements influencing affordable housing provision:

1. Growth Management and Land Acquisition
2. Entitlement Process
3. Financing
4. Leadership and Community Involvement

1.1 Growth Management and Land Acquisition Strategies

Effective urban planning requires cities to balance growth pressures with the imperative to acquire land suitable for affordable housing development in a cost-efficient manner. Both Healdsburg and Rohnert Park have instituted growth management strategies to regulate residential expansion.

Growth Management Ordinances and General Plans

[Healdsburg's Measure M⁶](#), enacted in 2000, established limits on residential building permits within the City's urban growth boundary. Subsequent modifications via [Measure P \(2018\)⁷](#) and [Measure H \(2020\)⁸](#) aimed to increase affordable housing opportunities by adjusting these permit allocations. Conversely, Rohnert Park utilizes its General Plan, specific plan areas, and zoning ordinances as primary instruments for growth management, thereby facilitating orderly development aligned with regional housing needs assessments. The City monitors demographic trends, employment data, and commute patterns to inform development strategies and address workforce housing requirements.

Healdsburg: Adaptive Growth Management

[Healdsburg's 2000 Growth Management Ordinance \(GMO\)⁹](#) restricted the City to an average issuance of 30 residential building permits annually (maximum 90 per triennium), a measure intended to preserve the City's perceived small-town character. In response to escalating housing affordability concerns, Measure P (2018) authorized an additional average of 50 annual permits for multi-family rental units, restricted to households earning up to 160% of the Area Median Income (AMI). Measure H (2020) subsequently expanded this allowance to include for-sale units. An attempt in 2024 to further modify the GMO, Measure O, proposed allowing multi-family housing along designated Healdsburg Avenue corridors to stimulate middle-income and workforce housing.

⁶<https://healdsburg.gov/AgendaCenter/ViewFile/Item/3147?fileID=24038>

⁷[https://ballotpedia.org/Healdsburg,_California,_Measure_P,_Additional_Housing_Permits_for_Rental_Units_\(November_2018\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Healdsburg,_California,_Measure_P,_Additional_Housing_Permits_for_Rental_Units_(November_2018))

⁸ [https://ballotpedia.org/Healdsburg,_California,_Measure_H,_Income-Restricted_Housing_for_Rent_or_Sale_Ordinance_\(March_2020\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Healdsburg,_California,_Measure_H,_Income-Restricted_Housing_for_Rent_or_Sale_Ordinance_(March_2020))

⁹ <http://www.ci.healdsburg.ca.us/DocumentCenter/View/766/Growth-Management-Ordinance-Policies-and-Procedures-PDF>

This measure was not adopted by voters. Data from the Grand Jury's interviews suggests that voter concerns centered on potential dilution of downtown character and insufficient safeguards for community interests within the proposed legislation. Nevertheless, the legislative intent underlying Measure O remains a significant consideration for Healdsburg's housing leadership.

Rohnert Park: Urban Growth Boundaries and Exemptions

Rohnert Park adopted its Urban Growth Boundaries Act ([Measure N](#))¹⁰ in 2000 to demarcate areas for development and mitigate urban sprawl. The City's [Growth Management Ordinance \(#667\)](#)¹¹, established in 2001, aimed to align new housing development with infrastructure and public service capacities, stipulating a 1% annual population growth cap (approximately 225 new housing units per annum). Notably, this ordinance exempts specific housing categories, including affordable units for low- and very low-income households, accessory dwelling units (ADUs), model homes, mobile home park conversions, residential infill projects, and conversions of non-residential properties to residential use. Such legislative provisions indicate a pro-housing orientation within the electorate.

1.2 Land Acquisition Mechanisms

Municipalities employ diverse strategies for acquiring land suitable for affordable housing. These include the disposition of surplus lands, partnerships with community land trusts, and the formation of public-private partnerships. Along with direct land acquisition, cities develop incentive programs designed to encourage developers to integrate affordable units into larger, mixed-use projects. Within Sonoma County, prevalent strategies include the use of surplus land, land banking, and navigating the land entitlement process.

Surplus Land Utilization

Cities may sell or lease publicly owned land for affordable housing development, subject to compliance with California's [Surplus Land Act \(SLA\)](#)¹². The SLA was updated in August 2024 to further incentivize affordable housing through streamlined disposition processes. Key SLA provisions mandate:

- Formal declaration of land as surplus by local agencies at regular public meetings.
- Submission of annual surplus property inventory reports to HCD.
- Maintenance by HCD of a list of interested affordable housing developers known as "sponsors".

If land is not sold or leased to a sponsor, the public entity must record an Affordable Housing Covenant mandating at least 15% affordable units in any future project comprising 10 or more units.

Healdsburg Example: In 2003, Healdsburg's former Redevelopment Agency acquired a property at 155 Dry Creek Road for \$1.8 million that was designated for low to moderate-income housing. Following the surplus land process and securing an exemption, the city transferred the property to [Burbank Housing](#)¹³, a non-profit housing development corporation, for the nominal sum of \$1. An additional \$1.7 million in grants has been secured for construction, with Burbank Housing actively pursuing \$9.7 million in farmworker housing grants and tax credits.

Rohnert Park Example: Over a decade ago, Rohnert Park purchased a 30-acre parcel for \$12.5 million for a proposed downtown mixed-use development. The city, in collaboration with HCD,

¹⁰ <https://www.northbaybiz.com/2008/02/29/preserving-rohnert-parks-potential/>

¹¹ https://rpcity.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=4&clip_id=358&meta_id=33318

¹² <http://www.hcd.ca.gov/planning-and-community-development/public-lands-affordable-housing-development>

¹³ <https://burbankhousing.org/>

designated this parcel as surplus, formulated a detailed development plan incorporating 150,000 sq. ft. of retail space and 400 residential units (25% designated affordable). It subsequently selected a developer via a competitive bidding process.

Land Banking

Land banking involves the acquisition and holding of land by public or private entities for future development, often prioritized for affordable housing or community revitalization. This strategy may encompass undeveloped, vacant, or blighted properties.

Healdsburg Example: The city is currently exploring the establishment of a Housing Trust Fund to support land banking for future affordable housing initiatives. This fund may evolve into a Housing Land Trust, with the primary objective of securing land for long-term affordability, operating independently but in alignment with city housing goals.

Rohnert Park Example: The aforementioned acquisition of the 30-acre downtown parcel for \$12.5 million, using city funds, also exemplifies land banking for future mixed-use development.

2. The Entitlement Process

A significant portion of Sonoma County's undeveloped land requires regulatory entitlements prior to residential or other forms of development. This process entails adherence to zoning regulations, land use policies, environmental review (California Environmental Quality [Act](#)), and public input, culminating in the issuance of necessary permits and approvals.

Both Healdsburg and Rohnert Park have implemented measures to streamline their entitlement processes to meet sixth Cycle Housing Element objectives. These include offering early developer feedback and utilizing Development Agreements (DAs) for large-scale projects. DAs are negotiated contracts specifying terms for land use, public benefits, project timelines, and vesting rights, providing developers with regulatory certainty.

Healdsburg Example: The city provides no-cost pre-application meetings, offers fast-track processing for ADUs and affordable housing projects, and has established formal written pre-application procedures. Furthermore, Healdsburg prepares Program Environmental Impact Reports (EIRs) to reduce environmental review costs and timelines for projects covered under these programmatic assessments. The city actively applies state housing laws.

Rohnert Park Example: The city offers optional pre-application meetings with multidisciplinary staff to provide early project feedback. Upon formal application submission, projects undergo a structured review process, typically involving three-week cycles for staff feedback. Larger multifamily projects generally necessitate Site Plan and Architectural Review, a process taking approximately 90 days from application completeness to approval. While most projects receive administrative approval, Planning Commission review may be required under specific circumstances.

3. Financing Affordable Housing

Financing constitutes a critical, albeit complex, component of new housing development. A comprehensive delineation of the intricate and innovative financing strategies that influence the scope and viability of affordable housing projects is beyond the purview of this report. This section, therefore, offers only a foundational overview. Affordable housing finance typically necessitates a confluence of public funding, private investment, and strategic partnerships.

The [Low-Income Housing Tax Credit \(LIHTC\)](#)¹⁴ program serves as the principal federal instrument supporting affordable rental housing, incentivizing developers through Federal tax credits. Municipalities augment these efforts by offering local incentives such as land donations, impact fee waivers, and density bonuses.

“Inclusionary housing” has emerged as a significant mechanism for affordable housing production in Sonoma County. As housing valuations increase, cities incentivize developers and landowners by allowing higher-value property development contingent upon the inclusion of affordable units. A typical inclusionary housing program might mandate that 10-30% of new residential units be sold or rented to lower-income households. California state policy empowers municipalities to implement such local inclusionary policies.

Most municipalities require deed restrictions for a minimum of 45 years for for-sale projects and 55 years for rental projects on units approved under inclusionary housing programs that receive city financial assistance or state housing density bonuses. These restrictions ensure long-term affordability for targeted income groups and dictate terms concerning sale, rent controls, and property aesthetics. Cities also employ other financing tools, including fee waivers, density bonuses, public-private partnerships, and state funding allocations.

3.1 City-Specific Financing Examples

Healdsburg: A Multi-Tiered Approach

Healdsburg has advanced its affordable housing initiatives through a combination of inclusionary housing mandates, state funding, and targeted special taxes.

Inclusionary Housing: Healdsburg requires 20% of residential units to be affordable. Through negotiated Development Agreements (DA), the city has secured affordable housing units in significant developments such as the Mill District, North Village, Montage, and Hotel Trio. A notable provision in Healdsburg's DAs requires developers to obtain “certificates of occupancy” for affordable housing units prior to constructing market-rate units.

Project & Unit Allocation:

- Mill District: 42 units (The Randall), 30 Middle Income Units
- Hotel Trio: 37 Unit Citrine Apartments (Low-to-Moderate Income)
- North Village: 53 Very Low-Low Income, 27 Middle Income
- Montage: 110 Affordable Units

State Funding: In August 2024, Healdsburg secured \$21.1 million in state funding via the Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities (AHSC) program for Phase 1 of the Saggio Hills development. This phase, targeting households earning between 16–60% of area median income (AMI), will deliver 48 affordable rental units within a larger 118-unit project. The funds will support the construction of these 48 units, a 3,000-square-foot community building, and essential infrastructure and transportation improvements with broader community benefits. Notably, Saggio Hills achieved the highest score in the [Rural Innovation Project Area \(RIPA\)](#),¹⁵ reflecting strong

¹⁴ [http://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RS22389#:~:text=The%20low-income%20housing%20tax%20credit%20\(LIHTC\)%20program%20is,from%2050%25%20to%2025%25](http://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RS22389#:~:text=The%20low-income%20housing%20tax%20credit%20(LIHTC)%20program%20is,from%2050%25%20to%2025%25;);

¹⁵ https://sgc.ca.gov/grant-programs/ahsc/docs/20250325-AHSC_R9_Program_Overview_PDF_ADA.pdf

alignment with state objectives for greenhouse gas emission reduction. The development is projected to reduce 3,880 metric tons of CO₂ equivalent over its lifespan.

Funding Allocation:

- \$15.3 million: Housing development (48 affordable rental units, associated infrastructure).
- \$5.2 million: Public works and transportation (Healdsburg Shuttle expansion with ZEV, multi-use trails, sidewalk enhancements, new bus shelters, CalVans vanpools).
- \$605,750: Community programs (transit passes, legal aid, workforce development, improved internet access).

Special Taxes: The Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT), levied on lodging establishments, was increased by Healdsburg voters via [Measure S¹⁶](#) in 2016. This authorized a 2% increase, raising the maximum rate from 12% to 14%, generating approximately \$1.5 million annually, with all additional revenue restricted to supporting affordable housing services and programs.

Rohnert Park: Diverse Financial Instruments

Rohnert Park has employed inclusionary housing, state funding, density bonuses, and essential housing bond financing to bolster its affordable housing efforts.

Inclusionary Housing: Rohnert Park is undergoing significant residential growth. During the sixth housing cycle, the city anticipates the construction of 2,834 new housing units, of which 587 are projected for very low- and low-income households, and 128 for moderate-income households. Rohnert Park's inclusionary housing policies require that all new developments of 50 units or more include 15% affordable housing units. Generally, the city requires market-rate developers to donate land to non-profit housing developers, who then secure financing (e.g., LIHTCs) for affordable unit construction. These completed projects are typically owned and managed by the non-profit entities. Development agreements may stipulate various arrangements for land dedication and financing, sometimes requiring certificates of occupancy for affordable units before market-rate construction can proceed. For instance, in the Willow Glen subdivision, the developer partnered with Burbank Housing for the construction of 38 low-income rental units, sharing construction and financing responsibilities, and also built affordable duet units sold via the Sonoma Land Trust.

State Funding: In August 2024, Rohnert Park secured \$670,000 through the state's Prohousing Incentive Program (PIP). These funds are designated for predevelopment activities for affordable housing units in downtown Rohnert Park.

Density Bonus: Density bonus programs, mandated by California law, incentivize developers to include affordable units by permitting increased project density beyond standard zoning regulations. While Rohnert Park currently has a density bonus program, the city is conducting a feasibility study for a Supplemental Density Bonus Program. This study will examine provisions such as deeper affordability levels, a higher proportion of affordable units, units for individuals exiting homelessness, and universal design standards. The study is slated for completion by July 2026, with recommendations to be presented to the Planning Commission and City Council by year-end 2026, potentially leading to municipal code adoption within six months thereafter.

Essential Housing Bond Financing: Rohnert Park is a member of the California Statewide Communities Development Authority (CSCDA), a Joint Powers Authority (JPA). CSCDA administers the Workforce Housing Program, issuing tax-exempt governmental purpose bonds to

¹⁶ [https://ballotpedia.org/Healdsburg,_California,_Hotel_Tax_Adjustment,_Measure_S_\(November_2016\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Healdsburg,_California,_Hotel_Tax_Adjustment,_Measure_S_(November_2016))

acquire existing market-rate apartment buildings and convert them to rent-restricted housing for lower- and moderate-income households. The city has authorized the JPA to issue approximately \$191,264,100 in bonds. This entails foregoing an estimated \$337,346 in annual property tax revenue and committing staff resources (200 hours for program establishment and 200 hours per acquisition project). This initiative is projected to deliver at least 222 affordable housing units (99 very-low-income, 57 low-income, 66 moderate-income). The city is also committed to a 2027 evaluation of housing production, with provisions for designating additional sites if RHNA obligations are not met.

4. Leadership and Community Involvement

Leadership Dynamics: For the purposes of this analysis, leadership encompasses the city councils and dedicated housing staff. A salient finding is the recognition by leadership in both municipalities that sustainable community development is untenable if it displaces the working-class populations—including farmworkers, caregivers, teachers, and service workers—who form the socio-economic bedrock of the region. City councils in both Healdsburg and Rohnert Park have demonstrated a consistent alignment on the concept of affordable housing as a core, nonpartisan community priority, thus creating a political foundation conducive to pursuing ambitious initiatives. This commitment is manifested through strategic planning, funding allocations, and policy reforms, supported by knowledgeable and empowered staff.

The collaboration between housing staff and city councils is instrumental to the success of the affordable housing effort. Their efforts are focused on strategic planning, developing regulatory frameworks, resource allocation, and community engagement.

Healdsburg: Structured Collaboration

Recently, the Healdsburg City Council approved the establishment of a formal Housing Department and authorized a new position dedicated to implementing its housing strategy. Key collaborative activities include:

- **Strategic Planning:** Housing staff and the City Council collaboratively develop affordable housing targets, considering market conditions, infrastructure capacity, community service needs, and resource availability.
- **Policy Development and Implementation:** The City Council enacts ordinances such as inclusionary zoning policies, while housing staff ensure effective implementation and monitor ongoing compliance.
- **Resource Allocation:** The City Council actively engages in generating financial resources and supports viable affordable housing initiatives.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Housing staff engage with developers and non-profit organizations to leverage resources and expertise, with City Council support in negotiating agreements aligned with affordable housing objectives.

Rohnert Park: Integrated Policy-Making

Rohnert Park's collaborative approach involves:

- **Collaborative Policy-Making:** The City Council and housing staff jointly create and refine policies, such as density bonuses and streamlined approval processes, to facilitate affordable housing development, and continually review policies to reflect evolving needs.

- **Project Evaluation and Approval:** Housing staff evaluate housing proposals for viability and goal alignment, referring meritorious projects to the City Council for review, amendment, or approval, ensuring conformity with community priorities.
- **Incentive Programs:** Housing staff design, implement, and manage incentive programs (e.g., reduced fees, infrastructure support), which, upon Council approval, encourage development.
- **Regular Reporting and Assessment:** Housing staff monitor projects and provide ongoing updates to the City Council on successes and failures, ensuring policies remain current.
- **Public Engagement Initiatives:** Both entities prioritize public involvement through transparent communication and public hearings, fostering a collaborative environment. This close partnership between municipal staff and elected officials is essential for crafting and implementing effective, integrated, and well-supported affordable housing strategies.

5. Community Involvement and the "Community Will"

While legally mandated community review is a component of every proposed housing project, the successful realization of affordable housing objectives usually hinges on a proactive "community will." This implies a recognized and enthusiastically embraced need for housing by community stakeholders, driven by motivations ranging from expanding the tax base to providing housing for essential service workers. The Spanish term "chispa," or "spark," aptly describes a driving force observed in both Healdsburg and Rohnert Park, crucial for fostering a proactive, "yes in my backyard" (YIMBY) stance.

Healdsburg: Catalyzing Engagement

Healdsburg's increasing affluence has exacerbated the problem of housing affordability for long-term residents, families, and service industry workers, a situation compounded by state-mandated housing goals. The "spark" in Healdsburg was significantly fanned by the Housing Element Working Group (HEWG), a diverse nine-person body including representatives from the business community, individuals with lived experience of homelessness, non-profits, renters, the planning commission, faith-based organizations, and the community at large. The HEWG, in conjunction with housing staff, developed the roadmap for the 6th cycle Housing Element. Through their analysis and community surveys, the Growth Management Ordinance (GMO) was identified as the primary governmental constraint on development, while high construction costs (land, materials, labor) were noted as the principal non-governmental constraints.

The following from Healdsburg's "Housing Element" and from the Grand Jury's interviews illustrate the city's outreach, philosophy, and culture:

- A community outreach interview captured the sentiment: "Aquí en Healdsburg la renta es muy caro... Tres o más personas tienen que vivir juntos para cubrir la renta." (English: "Here in Healdsburg, the rent is very expensive... Three or more people need to live together to cover the rent.")
- A comment by an HEWG member highlighted the city's partnership with Reach for Home, a non-profit addressing homelessness, emphasizing a personalized approach: "In Healdsburg, they know those experiencing homelessness by name, not numbers..."
- Another HEWG committee member underscored the necessity of trust between the community, local legislature, and developers, alongside a clear, transparent plan for housing development.

This holistic, community-centric approach has yielded significant outcomes:

- Increasing deed-restricted affordable housing to over 10% of total housing stock in eight years.
- Passage of Measure S, allocating 2% of TOT revenue (approx. \$1.5M annually) to affordable housing.
- Passage of Measures P and H, allowing middle-income deed-restricted housing outside GMO constraints, allowing middle-income deed-restricted housing outside GMO constraints.
- Negotiating workforce housing inclusion in hotel developments.
- Preserving 39 units of older, lower rent housing (often referred to as naturally occurring) affordable housing and establishing 10 units for Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH), a term used to combine long-term affordable housing with supportive services to help individuals, particularly those experiencing chronic homelessness, achieve housing stability.
- Planning 168 affordable units on two city-owned sites.
- Developing a Navigation Center providing homes for 11 formerly homeless families/individuals.
- Securing over \$7 million in [Project Homekey](#)¹⁷ funding for an interim housing program.
- Establishing a formal Housing Department and new staff positions.

Healdsburg's coordinated efforts have exceeded fifth Cycle Housing Element goals and established a foundation for the sixth Cycle, driven by this "spark" of community will.

Rohnert Park: Proactive Outreach and Planning

Rohnert Park has emerged as a regional leader, surpassing its fifth Cycle Housing Element goal (1,794 units) and positioning itself to exceed the sixth cycle requirement (1,580 units, 2023–2031). This achievement reflects a strong community commitment. Rohnert Park's demographic—younger and less affluent than the county average—faces significant rental cost burdens. In response, City leadership, including a supportive mayor and city council, empowered housing staff to conduct broad public engagement and community-based planning.

Key outreach elements included:

- A [Housing Element](#)¹⁸ webpage attracting over 1,200 email subscribers.
- A bilingual housing needs survey (Dec 2021) with 1,344 responses.
- Five public workshops engaging over 30 stakeholders, including the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria.
- Citywide newsletter distribution and targeted social media campaigns.
- Door-to-door outreach in Spanish-speaking communities, distributing over 1,000 door hangers with multilingual QR-coded survey access.
- Repeated outreach in 2023 for feedback on the draft Housing Element.
- A community-wide survey offering incentives generated over 1,500 comments, indicating strong public interest in addressing affordability, homelessness, and infrastructure related to new housing.

¹⁷ www.hcd.ca.gov/grants-and-funding/homekey

¹⁸ http://www.rpccity.org/city_hall/departments/development_services/housing/housing_element_2023-2031x

This consistent, multilingual, and inclusive approach fostered an informed and supportive resident base, reflecting a proactive "community will" instrumental in advancing Rohnert Park's affordable housing objectives.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of Healdsburg and Rohnert Park demonstrate that addressing affordable housing challenges requires a synergistic combination of adaptive growth management, strategic land acquisition, streamlined entitlement processes, diverse financing mechanisms, and robust leadership, along with deep community involvement. While specific instruments and approaches may vary based on local contexts, the underlying commitment to proactive planning and collaborative engagement appears to be a crucial determinant of success in expanding affordable housing opportunities. The Grand Jury concluded that the key ingredient of this collaborative engagement is community will, which exists within Healdsburg and Rohnert Park and should be fostered throughout the county.

The Grand Jury believes that cities, unincorporated municipalities and the County can learn from each other by meeting periodically, sharing experiences and identifying best practices. Rohnert Park and Healdsburg housing staff, community members and city leadership generously shared their successes and challenges with the Civil Grand Jury, and we strongly encourage the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, housing staff, city mayors, city council members, grassroots representatives, and housing advocates throughout Sonoma County to meet with and learn from each other.

FINDINGS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury determined that:

- F1. Adaptive growth management is crucial but faces limits: Both Healdsburg (Measures P & H) and Rohnert Park (exemptions for affordable housing within its GMO) have actively adapted their growth management ordinances to facilitate affordable housing. However, community concerns regarding local character and a perceived lack of safeguards can limit further expansions, as evidenced by the failure of Healdsburg's Measure O.
- F2. Strategic use of public land is a key lever: Both municipalities used land banking (e.g., Healdsburg's 155 Dry Creek Road, Rohnert Park's 30-acre downtown parcel) and then went through the surplus property process to make sites available for affordable housing development.
- F3. A diverse portfolio of financing mechanisms is employed: Cities do not rely on a single funding source. Healdsburg utilizes inclusionary housing, significant state grants (e.g., \$21.1 million AHSC for Saggio Hills), and dedicated local revenue from special taxes (Measure S TOT). Rohnert Park also uses inclusionary housing, state pro-housing incentives, density bonuses, and innovative bond financing through the CSCDA Workforce Housing Program.
- F4. Streamlined entitlement processes expedite development: Both Healdsburg (no-cost pre-application meetings, fast-tracking) and Rohnert Park (optional pre-application meetings, structured review cycles) have implemented measures to streamline their entitlement processes, offering early feedback and utilizing Development Agreements (DAs) to provide certainty for developers of affordable housing.
- F5. Aligned political leadership and empowered staff are foundational: The success in both cities is partly attributed to city councils that view affordable housing as a nonpartisan, moral imperative, coupled with knowledgeable and empowered housing staff who can effectively implement

strategic plans, policy reforms, and resource allocation. Healdsburg even established a dedicated Housing Department.

F6. Proactive and inclusive community engagement cultivates "community will": Both cities demonstrated that extensive, tailored community involvement—such as Healdsburg's diverse Housing Element Working Group (HEWG) and Rohnert Park's broad, multilingual outreach and surveys—is essential for building public understanding and the "community will" (or "chispa") needed to support and overcome opposition to affordable housing projects.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. By January 30, 2026, Healdsburg and Rohnert Park will each create an ongoing community engagement plan, which includes multilingual community outreach and education, surveys, public workshops, and dedicated working groups.
- R2. By January 30, 2026, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors (BOS) and each of the nine city councils will agree to create an ongoing Affordable Housing Collaborative, which includes jurisdiction leaders, community members, grass roots organizations and housing advocates, who will share both positive and negative experiences and identify “best practices.”

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code §§ 933 and 933.05, the Grand Jury requires responses as follows:

- F1-6. City Councils of Healdsburg and Rohnert Park.
- R1. City Councils of Healdsburg and Rohnert Park.
- R2. Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

INVITED RESPONSES

- R2: Mayor, Cloverdale; Mayor, Cotati; Mayor, Petaluma; Mayor, Santa Rosa; Mayor, Sebastopol; Mayor, Sonoma.

The governing bodies indicated above should be aware that their comments and responses must be conducted subject to the notice, agenda and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

City of Healdsburg. (c. 2023). City of Healdsburg [6th Cycle] Housing Element. Healdsburg, CA: City of Healdsburg, Planning Department.

City of Healdsburg. (Various Years). Growth Management Ordinance (GMO) (Healdsburg Municipal Code Title 18, Appendix A, as amended by Measure M (2000), Measure P (2018), Measure H (2020). Healdsburg, CA: City of Healdsburg.

City of Healdsburg. (2018). Measure S: Transient Occupancy Tax Increase for Affordable Housing. Healdsburg, CA: City of Healdsburg.

City of Rohnert Park. (c. 2023). City of Rohnert Park [6th Cycle] Housing Element. Rohnert Park, CA: City of Rohnert Park, Development Services Department.

City of Rohnert Park. (2000). Measure N: Urban Growth Boundaries Act. Rohnert Park, CA: City of Rohnert Park.

City of Rohnert Park. (2001). Growth Management Ordinance (#667). Rohnert Park, CA: City of Rohnert Park.

California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD). (Various Years). Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities (AHSC) Program Guidelines. Sacramento, CA: HCD.

California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD). (Various Years). Prohousing Incentive Program (PIP) Guidelines. Sacramento, CA: HCD.

California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD). (Various Years). Surplus Land Act (Government Code sections 54220-54234) - Guidelines and Notices. Sacramento, CA: HCD.

California Statewide Communities Development Authority (CSCDA). (Various Years). Workforce Housing Program Information/Materials. Walnut Creek, CA: CSCDA.

Generation Housing (2024). “State of Housing in Sonoma County”

Interviews conducted by Sonoma County Grand Jury. (c. 2023-2024). With Healdsburg City officials, housing staff, HEWG members, and other community stakeholders.

State of California. California Government Code. Sections relevant to Housing Elements (e.g., Article 10.6, § 65580 et seq.), Density Bonus Law (e.g., § 65915 et seq.), and other housing legislation mentioned (SB 9, SB 35, SB 330, AB 2162, Government Code Section 65583.1(c)).

Sonoma County Civic Grand Jury (2022-2023). “Affordable Housing: Past, Present, and Future”

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.

APPENDIX

[Income Limits for Affordable Housing in Sonoma County \(2025\)](https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/incomelimits#local)¹⁹ There are multiple definitions of low-income limits for affordable housing. The above link provides charts for state programs and for federal programs for Sonoma County. All limits are based on the percentage of Area Median Income and Household size. The charts below provide income limits and rent limits for both state and federal programs.

State and Local Programs Income Limits*

The income limits below apply to the following programs: Sonoma County Density Bonus, Sonoma County Second Dwelling Unit, County Fund for Housing, California Redevelopment Law

These Income Limits apply only to Sonoma County Community Development Commission assisted units. They are **not** to be used as a guide for programs regulated by any agency other than the Sonoma County Community Development Commission. Please contact staff with any questions or concerns.

These Income Limits do not apply to CDBG, HOME or NSP restricted units. Please refer to separate schedule for these units which are regulated by federal income limits set annually by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. *Effective June 1, 2025*

¹⁹ <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/incomelimits#local>

PERSONS IN HOUSEHOLD	(15% AREA MEDIAN INCOME) ACUTELY LOW INCOME	EXTREMELY LOW INCOME	(50% AREA MEDIAN INCOME) VERY LOW INCOME	60% AREA MEDIAN INCOME	(80% AREA MEDIAN INCOME) LOW INCOME	(100% AREA MEDIAN INCOME) MEDIAN INCOME	(120% AREA MEDIAN INCOME) MODERATE INCOME
1	\$13,850	\$31,750	\$52,850	\$63,420	\$84,650	\$92,400	\$110,900
2	15,850	36,250	60,400	72,480	96,750	105,600	126,700
3	17,800	40,800	67,950	81,540	108,850	118,800	142,550
4	19,800	45,300	75,500	90,600	120,900	132,000	158,400
5	21,400	48,950	81,550	97,860	130,600	142,550	171,050
6	22,950	52,550	87,600	105,120	140,250	153,100	183,750
7	24,550	56,200	93,650	112,380	149,950	163,700	196,400
8	26,150	59,800	99,700	119,640	159,600	174,250	209,100

*The California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) has made its final decision to implement a new State Income Limit Hold Harmless (HH) Policy beginning 2013.

Maximum Rent Limits : Uses Formula in California Health & Safety Code 50052.5 & 50053

UNIT SIZE PERSONS IN HOUSEHOLD (MINIMUM – MAXIMUM)	EXTREMELY LOW INCOME RENT LIMIT	VERY LOW INCOME RENT LIMIT	LOW INCOME RENT LIMIT	Low Income 80% Rent Limit
Studio (1-2)	\$794	\$1,321	\$1,586	\$2,116
1 Bedroom (1-4)	906	1,510	1,812	2,419
2 Bedroom (2-6)	1020	1,699	2,039	2,721
3 Bedroom (3-8)	1133	1,888	2,265	3,023
4 Bedroom (4-10)	1224	2,039	2,447	3,265

Utility Allowance: Subtract from the maximum rent the approved utility allowance for any utilities that the tenant pays in addition to the rent. Confirm the appropriate utility allowance with the Sonoma County Community Development Commission.

Assumption: The rents are computed based on the income limits for an assumed household size equal to the number of bedrooms in the unit plus one person. For example, the rents for a three-bedroom unit are based upon the income limits for a four-person household.

Federal Programs Income Limits: The income limits below apply to the following programs: [Home Investment Partnerships Program \(HOME\)](#), [Community Development Block Grant Program \(CDBG\)](#), Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP), and Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG). These income limits apply only to Sonoma County Community Development Commission assisted units. They are NOT to be used as a guide for programs regulated by any agency other than the Sonoma County Community Development Commission.

These Income Limits do not apply to state or locally regulated programs (Density Bonus, Second Dwelling Unit, County Fund for Housing, California Redevelopment Law). These units are regulated by state income limits set annually by the California Department of Housing and Community Development.

Area Median Income for a 4-person household: \$128,100

PERSONS IN HOUSEHOLD	30% AREA MEDIAN INCOME	VERY LOW INCOME (50% AMI) HOME LOW	60% AREA MEDIAN INCOME	LOW INCOME (80% AMI) HOME HIGH
1	\$31,750	\$52,850	\$63,420	\$84,650
2	36,250	60,400	72,480	96,750
3	40,800	67,950	81,540	108,850
4	45,300	75,500	90,600	120,900
5	48,950	81,550	97,860	130,600
6	52,550	87,600	105,120	140,250
7	56,200	93,650	112,380	149,950
8	59,800	99,700	119,640	159,600

Rent Limits: Maximum rent limits for all HOME, CDBG, and NSP Units as set by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

RENT LEVEL	STUDIO	1 BEDROOM	2 BEDROOM	3 BEDROOM	4 BEDROOM
HOME Low (Very Low-Income - 50%)	\$1,321	\$1,415	\$1,698	\$1,963	\$2,190
HOME High (Low Income - 65%)	\$1,699	\$1,821	\$2,187	\$2,519	\$2,790

Sonoma County's Surplus Property Disposal

Housekeeping takes time but pays long-term benefits

SUMMARY

What happens to county assets when they reach the end of their useful life or are no longer needed? Is office furniture, computer equipment, and other items given away or discarded? What about vehicles used by county employees? What happens to vacant land and unused or under-used buildings? Is Sonoma County effectively managing these assets?

The purpose of this investigation was to answer these questions and evaluate the effectiveness of the County's process for handling surplus assets. Specifically, the investigation sought to determine:

- What is the Sonoma County's process for declaring and disposing of surplus property?
- Is the process sufficient to ensure the orderly disposal of surplus property?

The Grand Jury found that the county has a well-organized process for disposing of rolling stock, machinery, and equipment, including office furniture and computer equipment but the county does not systematically manage its land portfolio.

The county lacks a structured process for identifying and managing surplus land and buildings. But selling surplus land assets has two key benefits:

1. Returning government land to the private sector generates property tax revenue while government lands are exempt from taxation.
2. Putting unused land to productive use benefits the community, unlike vacant property that provides no value.

The Grand Jury found that the county should take steps to manage its land holdings and share information with the public about public lands available for other uses.

BACKGROUND

The investigation considers the following types of property:

Rolling Stock – Vehicles and wheeled equipment

Other Assets – Office furniture, machinery, and equipment

Land and Buildings – Real Estate

The County of Sonoma holds significant capital assets, with annual capital expenditures about \$100 million annually. As of the audit ending June 30, 2023, the county reported over \$1.5 billion in governmental capital assets. While many of these assets are infrastructure-related—such as roads and right-of-way assets—the county still maintains a substantial inventory of land, buildings, and machinery. All these assets are managed by different divisions within the Sonoma County Public Infrastructure Department.

County of Sonoma
Specific Capital Assets as of 6/30/2024
 (ALL AMOUNT IN MILLIONS, NET OF DEPRECIATION)

	Governmental
Land	\$357
Buildings and Improvements	\$261
Machinery and Equipment	\$ 38
Total	\$656

Source: Financial Audit Ending June 30, 2024

Some of these assets may be worth much more than that shown on the county’s financials because the assets are valued at historical cost. Land and buildings that have been held by the county for a long time usually are worth much more than that shown on the county’s audit.

Disposal of Surplus Personal Property (Vehicles, Equipment, Furnishings)

The disposal of surplus personal property by counties is governed by California Government Code §§ 25500–25510.

Key Provisions:

1. Authority: The county's board of supervisors may authorize the sale or disposal of personal property that is no longer needed for public use.
2. Methods of Disposal: Surplus personal property may be disposed of through:
 - a. Public auction.
 - b. Sealed bids.
 - c. Negotiated sales.
3. Unclaimed Property: For unclaimed personal property, counties may adopt regulations for its care, restitution, sale, or destruction, provided they:
 - a. Hold the property for at least three months.
 - b. Provide notice of sale at least five days before the sale.

Sonoma County Ordinances regarding Surplus Property and Disposal

Like all counties in California, Sonoma County has its own local ordinances in the Municipal Code that define the county’s rules for identifying and disposing of surplus property. [Chapter 2, Article 5, Division 1, Section 2-59](#) says: *Any item no longer required by any county department shall be declared surplus and transferred to the custody of the purchasing agent. If the purchasing agent finds that no other county department has need for such an item it shall be declared surplus. Any such item or group of related items may then be advertised and sold or otherwise disposed of by the purchasing agent, by whatever method and procedure will return the greatest value to the county.*

Obsolete items of no value may be destroyed or discarded.” [Article 15](#) details the procedures for selling surplus property *other than real property* (land and buildings).

Unlike other county assets, land has additional requirements that complicate its management. The principal law governing land sales is the Surplus Land Act (SLA).

[The Surplus Land Act \(SLA\) \(Gov. Code §§ 54220–54234\)](#) was enacted in 1968 to ensure that publicly owned land no longer needed for government purposes is offered first for public use and affordable housing, rather than private commercial development. Under the original law, local agencies must declare a parcel “surplus” (or “exempt surplus” in certain cases) before disposing of it, and notify housing, school and park districts that the land is available. The Act prioritized parks, schools and “housing development” when surplus land is sold or leased.

Over time, California’s acute housing shortage spurred stronger SLA requirements. In 2014 the law was amended (AB 2135) to define affordable housing proposals more clearly (for example, requiring at least 15% affordable units) and to streamline negotiations. A more sweeping overhaul came in 2019 with AB 1486 specifying that agencies must negotiate exclusively with the affordable-housing proposal offering the most units and deepest affordability and requiring local agencies to inventory all publicly owned land and report it to the state.

Assembly Bill 1486 significantly amended the SLA to enhance transparency and enforce compliance. Key provisions included:

- Requiring agencies to notify the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) before disposing of surplus land.
- Mandating a 60-day negotiation period with interested affordable housing developers.
- Defining exactly what counts as surplus (any agency-owned land not needed for government operations)
- Imposing penalties for non-compliance, including fines up to 30% of the land’s sale price.

These amendments also gave the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) greater oversight. HCD now reviews all surplus-land notices, collects data in housing element reports, and can (in conjunction with the Attorney General) impose penalties for noncompliance. In practice, HCD’s 2021–2024 guidelines explain that agencies must formally declare surplus land at a public meeting, send a Notice of Availability to HCD and other public entities, and negotiate for 60–90 days with any interested affordable-housing developer before selling or leasing the land.

Most recently, the Legislature passed SB 240 (2023) to update rules for state surplus land (disposals by the Department of General Services). SB 240 makes development of surplus state land for affordable housing a by-right, CEQA-exempt project, removing environmental-review hurdles. It also adds transitional housing for formerly incarcerated individuals as an eligible prioritized use, on par with affordable housing and parks.

To recap, key SLA provisions:

- Local agencies must formally declare land as surplus at a regular public meeting.
- Agencies must submit an annual surplus property report to HCD.
- HCD maintains a list of developers (“sponsors”) interested in purchasing or leasing surplus property for affordable housing.
- If an agency fails to sell or lease surplus property to a sponsor, it must attach an Affordable Housing Covenant requiring that 15% of units in any project of 10 or more units be affordable.
- Projects on surplus land must pay prevailing wage, the minimum hourly rate of wages and benefits that contractors must pay workers on public works projects, set by the California Department of Industrial Relations.

The SLA process is complex and requires knowledgeable staff with strong working relationships with HCD to navigate this law. Sometimes it can cause delays due to [procedural](#) requirements, but it is the law of the land.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury conducted interviews with management staff within the Public Infrastructure Division who might deal with above mentioned property as well as real estate professionals from Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park, Sonoma County CDC and non-profit affordable housing developers.

DOCUMENTS

The following types of documents were obtained:

- Internal documents showing processes for surplus property disposal
- Board of Supervisor reports
- Documents summarizing the Surplus Lands Act
- Customized reports regarding surplus property

Additionally, the Grand Jury reviewed a County Geographical Information System (GIS) that shows all county-owned/leased land parcels and structures. This system's information is not available to the public.

DISCUSSION

Each year, the County of Sonoma spends tens of millions of dollars on real estate, rolling stock (vehicles and equipment), and many smaller assets. Over time, much of this property is no longer needed by the county and should be disposed of. However, this property often retains residual value. Therefore, the orderly disposal of surplus property not only returns financial resources to the county but also provides useful assets to other parties.

Fleet Management and Funding

The county owns approximately 1,600 vehicles (light, medium, and heavy) with a combined replacement value of approximately \$68 million. The average lifespan of these vehicles is eight years, though heavy equipment may have a significantly longer useful life.

Vehicles are purchased, maintained, and disposed of by the Fleet Management Division.

Fleet Management oversees the Accumulated Capital Outlay (ACO) Fund, which funds vehicle replacement. Each county department "leases" vehicles from Fleet Management and pays a monthly fee into the ACO. When a vehicle needs to be replaced, the ACO fund generally covers the cost—unless the replacement cost exceeds the accumulated funds for that vehicle.

Surplus vehicles are auctioned through [First Capitol Auction](#), a company specializing in government vehicle sales. Vehicles typically sell at or above Blue Book value. Proceeds from the auctions are returned to the ACO fund to support future vehicle purchases. The process appeared orderly, efficient and effective.

Surplus Property Statistics Rolling Stock (Wheeled Vehicles and Equipment) Disposal Proceeds			
2024 (to Sept. 2024)	2023	2022	2021
\$598,163	\$649,376	\$891,708	\$1,032,751

Other Assets (Machinery and Equipment Except for Rolling Stock)

These government assets represent the smallest dollar value of the assets reviewed by the Grand Jury.

County departments are required to declare property surplus and release it to the Purchasing Division. The Purchasing Division inventories the surplus property and determines whether another county department can reuse it. If no internal use is found, the property is listed for public auction through a different entity than used for vehicle sales, www.publicsurplus.com, a company used by many public agencies in California.

Surplus property is sold “as is.” Most items are in poor condition and do not command high prices. In 2023, at least 10 county departments released surplus property to the Purchasing Division for disposal. The Grand Jury noted that except for the Information Services Division, the other departments did not provide a great deal of surplus to Purchasing. The following chart, *Surplus Property Statistics*, shows the number of items sold by fiscal year and the amount of money recovered:

Surplus Property Statistics Equipment and Machinery Except for Rolling Stock								
Fiscal Year	Public Sale		County Reuse		Non-profit use		Total	
	\$	# of Lots	\$	# of Lots	\$	# of Lots	\$	# of Lots
21/22	\$50,200	247	\$28,100	20	\$8,300	5	\$86,000	272
22/23	\$26,300	593	\$97,500	16	\$57,900	29	\$181,700	638
23/24	\$54,600	545	\$54,100	24	\$39,700	9	\$148,400	578

Land, Buildings, and Improvements

At present, Sonoma County has no land designated as surplus. In recent years, the county has disposed of relatively few land assets. One notable sale, the Chanate property, the former site of the Norton Behavioral Health Center on Chanate Road, took seven years to complete. However now, all California local governments must follow the Surplus Land Act.

The county does not have a process for reviewing county-owned properties to determine whether they are fully used or should be considered for surplus designation. Some of the insights gained by the Grand Jury were:

- The Real Estate Division responds to requests from departments for real estate transactions but does not initiate actions on real property.
- County departments rarely initiate a process requesting that land assigned to the department be considered for other use, mainly due to the fact that departments are not in the land management business.

- The county maintains a GIS system showing all properties and structures, but the system does not reflect a property's current use, *nor is it available to the public*.
- County staff do not regularly review properties using the GIS system, and the system does not provide enough information to make informed decisions about property use.
- The Grand Jury reviewed 20 of the largest properties with structures and needed county staff assistance to interpret the GIS data. They found no land that seemed ripe for alternative uses.
- The Real Estate Division does not have expertise in affordable housing or working with the State Housing and Community Development (HCD) Department. Sonoma Community Development Commission (CDC) and Permit Sonoma are the county entities most knowledgeable concerning affordable housing.

Comparison to Santa Rosa: The City of Santa Rosa has developed a process for reviewing its land assets and making them available for sale. The Real Estate Services Division provides centralized real estate services to city departments. Staff regularly review city-owned properties and determine whether they should be declared surplus. Santa Rosa staff have strong relationships with HCD and experience with the SLA process. Santa Rosa maintains a website, "City-Owned Surplus Land," connected to HCD, allowing the public to see available properties.

CONCLUSIONS

- The jury was impressed by the Fleet Division's comprehensive approach to vehicle management.
- The management of other assets (non-vehicle and non-real estate property) had low dollar value and the disposal process appeared adequate.
- No single department is tasked or has sufficient expertise to evaluate the best use of the county's real estate assets.
- The Surplus Land Act complicates the sale of government property and requires specific expertise to navigate the law.
- Information about the county's most valuable assets (land and buildings) is not readily available to the public.

COMMENDATION

The Grand Jury found that the County of Sonoma's Fleet Operation efficiently and cost effectively disposes of the County's rolling stock, earning the county substantial revenue each year.

FINDINGS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury determined that:

- F1. All but Information Services uses the Purchasing Division's surplus disposal process sparingly, suggesting that many potential assets are not being disposed of timely when they are no longer needed.
- F2. The Real Estate Division is staffed as a service bureau; it does not actively pursue management of the county's real estate assets. Rather, it acts on request by departments to buy, sell or lease land. If it does not have a request, it does not act.

- F3. No comprehensive list exists that classifies the county's properties; the county does not know if it is managing its land assets to their best use.
- F4. No single division is responsible for the disposal of the county's land assets. Appropriate disposal requires expertise in real estate, affordable housing and economic development. Furthermore, no county entity is systemically evaluating land for its potential use for affordable housing or economic development.
- F5. No online access is provided for public viewing of county properties. As a result, underutilized lands are not easily identified and pursued by the public.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. By December 31, 2025, the Board of Supervisors will direct their Sonoma Public Infrastructure Agency to develop a list of all the county's properties in three parts: properties which have a use or restriction precluding it from other uses; properties currently full utilized; and, properties potentially available for reuse now or in the near future.
- R2. By June 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors will direct County Executive to form a multi-disciplinary team with expertise in real estate, affordable housing and economic development to review underused land assets for potential reuse or sale.
- R3. By December 1, 2026, after the county develops a plan to evaluate properties, the Board of Supervisors will designate some periodic land review, such as every three to five years because land use changes and properties once needed may no longer be needed in the future.
- R4. By December 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors will direct County GIS to make the Sonoma County Surplus Property map publicly available.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code §§ 933 and 933.05, the Civil Grand Jury requires responses as follows:

- Sonoma County Board of Supervisors (Findings F1-F4, R1, R2, R3, R4)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Reference for Vehicle Disposals: First Capitol Auction, www.bayareaautoauctions.com/listings/First-Capitol-Auction-Inc
- Reference for Other Property Disposals: Public Surplus, www.publicsurplus.com
- [Updated Surplus Land Act Guidelines](#), California Department of Housing (HCD), August 2024.
- "Chanate Campus Sale", Board of Supervisors' Meeting, November 16, 2021, Item #67A.
- ["Surplus Land Act Needs a Reality Check for Rural Parcels"](#), [Daily Journal](#), April 25, 2025

Responses to the 2023-2024 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Reports

Providing Continuity by Following Through on Previous Investigations

The 2024-2025 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury has reviewed the responses to the investigations and recommendations made by the 2023-2024 Grand Jury. The 2023-2024 Grand Jury issued five investigative reports. This summary addresses the responses from the responsible entities named in those reports. Although respondents did not adopt all Recommendations, their responses do comply with the requirements of the Penal Code, except where noted.

BACKGROUND

The Civil Grand Jury system in California exists to promote effective and efficient local government. The Penal Code gives the Grand Jury broad investigative powers to provide oversight to county and city governments and special districts within Sonoma County, bringing positive change in the best interest of all residents.

Each year the Grand Jury investigates local government institutions and issues reports containing the results of these investigations. Within each report are Findings that lead to Recommendations for improvement. Governing bodies and officials are required to respond to the Findings and Recommendations in a form and within a timeframe set out by the Penal Code. Boards are required to respond within 90 days of the release of a grand jury's report; elected officials are required to respond within 60 days, ([Penal Code 933.05](#)) with a copy to their governing board.

Succeeding grand juries review these responses and determine whether they meet the requirements of the Penal Code. This review establishes continuity from one grand jury to the next. The seated grand jury may evaluate responses for adequacy and determine whether appropriate steps have been taken to implement Recommendations.

METHODOLOGY: The Grand Jury evaluated responses for compliance using the governing sections of [Penal Code 933.05](#).

DISCUSSION

According to the Penal Code, governing bodies and officials are required to respond to *Findings* in Grand Jury reports and the respondent shall indicate one of the following:

The respondent agrees with the Finding.

The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the Finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the Finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.

According to the Penal Code, as to each Grand Jury *Recommendation*, the respondent shall report one of the following actions:

The Recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implementation action.

The Recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a timeframe for implementation.

The Recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the Grand Jury report.

The Recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.

CONCLUSION

The 2023-2024 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury concluded that the responses to the 2023-2024 Grand Jury Recommendations are in compliance with the Penal Code. In addition, the 2024-2025 Grand Jury has included its observations on those responses.

A copy of the full 2023-2024 Grand Jury report and responses received can be located [within the County of Sonoma, Superior Court of California website](#)

2023-2024 Grand Jury Response Summary Chart

Election Integrity in Sonoma County

Respondents: BOS: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

ROV: Registrar Of Voters

FINDINGS		RESPONSES	2024-25 GJ OBSERVATIONS
Findings F1-F8	BOS ROV	I (we) agree with the findings numbered: F1-F8 I (we) agree with the findings numbered: FI-F8.	The Grand Jury acknowledges that all Findings have been accepted as reported.
RECOMMENDATIONS & RESPONSES		2024-25 GJ OBSERVATIONS	
<p>R1 By September 1, 2024, ROV develop and begin execution of an ongoing process designed to ensure that internal procedural documentation is created and kept current.</p> <p>ROV Response: "This recommendation is in the process of being implemented with estimated completion by September 1, 2024. The Registrar of Voters is working on a formal policy for documenting internal procedures and training multiple staff members, as well as updating, reviewing, and utilizing existing training manuals."</p> <p>ROV Update: "The office policy has been implemented but is not something we would post on our website. There will be a lot of documentation being done this year, as we do not have a major election, and are working on documenting internal processes."</p>		<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this Recommendation has been partially implemented but will also need implementation in the future.</p>	
<p>R2 By June 30, 2025, the Board of Supervisors develop and approve a long-term plan to provide ROV with a facility that better accommodates space and physical security requirements.</p> <p>BOS Response: "This recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the future. Sonoma Public infrastructure and Registrar of Voters are currently coordinating and seeking a location for a new facility for the ROV. Funding allocations will be determined during Budget Hearings in June 2025 if a site has been identified."</p> <p>ROV Update: "We worked with the County Safety and Risk Management teams, as well as County Emergency Management, and local law enforcement to continue enhancing safety measures for the November election. There was a heightened law enforcement presence in the community, as well as Emergency Management staff in the ROV office to coordinate with any issues. We have some grant funding that we have been informed will be available soon, and we are working on planning for that. We continue to look for a new facility that would have the ability to implement more safety enhancements, which are limited in our current building."</p> <p>BOS Update: "According to an update received in March of 2025, no new site has been identified."</p>		<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this Recommendation will be implemented in the future.</p> <p>As of March 2025, the Board of Supervisors authorized the Clerk of BOS to publish an intent to purchase property located at 3800 and 3850 Brickway Blvd, Santa Rosa.</p>	
<p>R3a By August 31, 2024, the Board of Supervisors and ROV develop and implement a plan for enhancing existing ROV security measures and developing new security measures based on recurring threat assessments and recommendations by qualified authorities.</p>		<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this recommendation has been implemented.</p>	
<p>ROV Response: "This recommendation is in the process of implementation. The Registrar of Voters has been improving and enhancing security measures based on assessments and recommendations since receiving them and will continue to do so as funding and capacity allows...security cameras added to more areas of the office... Physical security has been enhanced... ROV has been working closer with the Department of Emergency Management and local law enforcement to increase communication and planning for elections."</p> <p>ROV Update: "We did implement some of the recommendations for the 2024 cycle, including Narcan being available, having detailed procedures for threats being reported from polling sites, waterfall quick references being available at all desks to cover emergency situations, and lockdown procedures being enhanced. We had a Sheriff Deputy on site for 2 days (expanded coverage), and poll workers were required to take a Workplace Violence Prevention and Reporting training. Some suggestions were unable to be implemented, such as formalizing a backup location in case of emergency."</p> <p>BOS Response: "This recommendation is in the process of implementation. The Board of Supervisors agrees with the Registrar of Voters' response."</p>			
<p>R3b By July 31, 2024, ROV create and maintain a record of all incidents of abusive or threatening behavior to support future risk and threat assessment analysis.</p> <p>ROV Response: "This recommendation has been implemented. The Registrar of Voters has created a tracking spreadsheet for staff and extra-help employees to log any instances of abusive or threatening behavior...and provided to the appropriate authorities"</p>		<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this Recommendation has been implemented.</p>	
<p>R 3c By July 31,2024, ROV evaluate all recommendations that resulted from its meeting with the Emergency Management Department and establish an implementation schedule for the recommendations it adopts.</p>		<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this Recommendation has been implemented.</p>	

<p>ROV Response: “This recommendation is in the process of implementation. The Registrar of Voters has been working to evaluate recommendations and questions that arose from the table-top exercise and implement feasible solutions. The ROV will continue that process and develop a timeline for implementation of recommendations by the end of July.”</p> <p>ROV Update: “We did implement some of the recommendations for the 2024 cycle, including Narcan being readily available, having detailed procedures for threats being reported from polling sites, waterfall quick references being available at all desks to cover emergency situations, and lockdown procedures being enhanced. We had a Sheriff Deputy on site for 2 days (expanded coverage), and poll workers were required to take a Workplace Violence Prevention and Reporting training. Some suggestions were unable to be implemented, such as formalizing a backup location in case of emergency.”</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this Recommendation has been partially implemented but will also need implementation in the future.</p>
<p>R4. By December 31, 2024, the Board of Supervisors allocate resources for a project to create a publicly accessible Sonoma County Elections database to enable ready access to, and analysis of, past election results.</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this Recommendation has been implemented.</p>
<p>ROV Response: “This recommendation is in process and will continue to be implemented as funding is made available. The Registrar of Voters entered into a contract... <i>to take old election records and convert them into a searchable database for the public.</i> ...The first phase, covering years 2013-2020, should be accomplished early in 2024-2025 fiscal. Future work ...<i>will be accomplished as funding is allocated by the Board of Supervisors in the annual budget.</i>”</p> <p>BOS Response: “This recommendation is in process and will continue to be implemented as funding is available. The Registrar of Voters can allocate existing funding in future years for this project. If existing funding does not have capacity, then a program change request can be submitted through the Budget process. The Board of Supervisors will consider the program change request for a funding allocation during the annual Budget Hearings in the context of other budget requests.”</p>	

Is Fire Safety a Priority in Sonoma County?

Respondent: BOS: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

FINDINGS & RESPONSES	2024-25 GJ OBSERVATIONS
<p>Finding F1: Sonoma County’s Fire Safety Ordinance permits “Same Practical Effect” mitigation within the State Responsibility Area that is inconsistent with the Grand Jury’s interpretation of the State Minimum Fire Safety Regulations.</p> <p>Finding F2: Permit Sonoma is permitting development exceptions within the State Responsibility Area that are not congruent with the Grand Jury’s interpretation of the State Minimum Fire Safety Regulations.</p> <p>BOS Response: F1 and F2: “We disagree wholly or in part with this Finding...The County agrees that it implements the State Minimum Fire Safety Regulations in a way that is incongruent with the Grand Jury’s interpretations. However, while the County thanks and commends the Grand Jury for diving deep into such a critical issue, the County maintains that the Grand Jury’s interpretations are incorrect because they are based on legal and factual inaccuracies. <u>To address the Grand Jury’s findings, it is important to correct the historic legal and factual premises upon which the Findings are based.</u> The entire response from County Counsel can be read at the website referenced at the bottom of this page.</p> <p>Finding 3: Fire Safety mitigation approvals are considered by Permit Sonoma on a case-by-case basis during the permit application process but are not always publicly noticed or reviewed when issued.</p> <p>BOS Response: “The County partially disagrees with this Finding. Permit applications fall into two general categories – ministerial and discretionary. Staff review ministerial applications, such as building permits, for compliance with standards or qualifications for same practical effect finding. Discretionary applications, including same practical effects determinations, are publicly noticed.”</p> <p>Finding 4: Citizens and first responder safety is properly considered during permit review and approval, and local firefighter leadership believe that Permit Sonoma is doing its job appropriately.</p> <p>BOS Response: “The County agrees with this Finding.</p>	
RECOMMENDATIONS & RESPONSES	2024-25 GJ OBSERVATIONS
<p>R1. By November 1, 2024, the Board of Supervisors will direct Permit Sonoma to publish an applicant’s guide to fire safety ingress and egress requirements and mitigation procedures for applications on roads that do not meet FSR requirements.</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this recommendation will be implemented in the future.</p>

<p>BOS Response: "Recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the future. Permit Sonoma updated its website links to PRC § 4290 and Fire Safe Regulations. The website additionally has illustrations to assist applicants with complying with the County's Fire Safe Standards or the Fire Safe Regulations. Permit Sonoma has an application form to request an exception to standards which can be found on its website. The Board of Supervisors directs Permit Sonoma to publish additional materials related the Fire Safe Regulation's requirements and the forms and process for applying for an exception to standards."</p> <p>BOS Update: "In Progress; estimated Completion Date: After 03/31/2025" "Outcome: This is in process. The form that is used and submitted to BOF is that same prior to the GJ Report. We are adapting it to be Accessible and posted on the new Web Page as a single source page for the public to go to. This will not be completed till after the adoption process of the new LRA FHSZ Maps are released by CALFIRE, as it relates to the language in Title 14 for areas in the LRA VHFSZ. This will be included in the same regulatory exceptions process. ...we will have a web site that will allow the public to know and respond before an exception is granted or denied, Exceptions will be tracked by permit type and all records and communications will be accessible from Permit Sonoma data base on the applicant's records or application number."</p>	
<p>R2 By November 1, 2024, the Board of Supervisors will direct Permit Sonoma to include administrative review of all exceptional fire safety mitigation plans to the list of permits needing approval by either Permit Sonoma Design Review Committee or Permit Sonoma Project Review Advisory Committee.</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this Recommendation has been implemented.</p>
<p>BOS Response: "The recommendation will not be implemented as written due to pending code amendments expected to be considered by the Board by December 7, 2024, that will eliminate the Design Review Committee and Project Review Advisory Committee to streamline the permitting process in compliance with State housing law. Instead, the Director will provide direct review and approval of ministerial and discretionary Fire Marshal Same Practical Effect Determinations, before posting them within the department's permitting system. Approximately 15 determinations are made annually. For discretionary permits with exceptions to standards, public notice is already provided prior to adoption and all application materials are available to the public upon request. When the discretionary permit requires a public hearing, application materials, including the exception to standards application, are posted online prior to the noticed public hearing. Annually, Permit Sonoma will post prominently on its website a summary of Same Practical Effect Determinations with individual determinations attached."</p>	
<p>R3 By November 1, 2024, the Board of Supervisors will direct Permit Sonoma to meet and confer with all independent Fire Prevention agencies to review its mitigation and appeal procedures by February 1, 2025.</p> <p>BOS Response: "Recommendation R3 has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the future consistent with the timeline in the recommendation. The Board of Supervisors directs Permit Sonoma to meet and confer with the fire prevention agencies and solicit comments on its forms and procedures for applying for and reviewing exceptions to standards."</p> <p>BOS Update: "Completed 1/6/2025. When a request for Exception is applied for the County Fire Marshal is the approving authority based on the authority granted to by CalFire as the Inspection Authority. We will continue to consult with local Fire Districts when exceptions are applied. Appeals to exceptions will follow the county appeals process set by the county and Permit Sonoma as adopted."</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this Recommendation has been implemented.</p>
<p>R4 By November 1, 2024, the Board of Supervisors will direct Permit Sonoma to identify and map all roads within the SRA that don't meet State FSR standards and publish that map on the County Department of Emergency Management website by February 28, 2025.</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this recommendation will be implemented in the future.</p>
<p>BOS Response: "Recommendation R4 has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the future for public roads only. The Board of Supervisors directs Permit Sonoma to work with Sonoma Public Infrastructure and the Department of Emergency Management to identify and map public roads in the SRA and indicate whether they meet the standards of the Fire Safe Regulations. These maps will be made publicly available on the county's online mapping hub. <i>Mapping private roads is not feasible because the County does not have legal access to those roads and tree coverage and aerial image limitations prohibit effective remote analysis.</i>"</p> <p>BOS Update: Status: "In progress; estimated Completion Date December 2025. This is a very large project, currently the county understands the public Road Network. This will require some time to develop into an online map for the public. We hope this can be completed before the end of the year with a draft map available in July 2025."</p>	

Sonoma County Taxes & Spending

Respondents: ACTTC: Auditor, Controller, Treasurer, Tax Collector ROV: Registrar of Voters/Assessor BOS: Board of Supervisors

FINDINGS & RESPONSES
<p>Finding 1 The total amount and source of tax collections is not published in a useful, publicly accessible format by any government entity.</p> <p>ACTTC Response: "I (we) agree with the finding."</p> <p>Finding 2 The actual amount of money being spent to address public need is not published in a useful, publicly accessible format by any government entity.</p> <p>BOS Response: "We disagree wholly or partially with this finding. The County Administrator's Office and the Auditor-Controller-Treasurer-Tax Collector publish a range of useful information on spending to address public needs. A comprehensive, cross-governmental report is not provided by any entity and would not be feasible given the array of different agencies and services being provided, as well as the fact that many expenditures address multiple needs."</p> <p>Finding 3 The Sonoma County Office of Education publishes no report summarizing how much, in total, is being collected, spent, or borrowed to pay for public education in Sonoma County.</p>

<p>Finding 4 The County Auditor/Controller/Treasurer/Tax Collector Citizens’ Report, a helpful document, doesn’t answer major questions about tax revenue or spending. ACTTC Response: “I (we) agree with this finding.”</p> <p>Finding 5 The County Auditor doesn’t have the resources needed to conduct performance audits throughout County government. ACTTC Response: “We disagree wholly or in part with this finding. The County Auditor has resources to conduct some performance audits of County programs and departments. Audit engagements are prioritized and selected by the ACTTC through a risk assessment process.” BOS Response: “We disagree wholly or in part with this finding. The County Auditor has funds to conduct selected audits as determined by the elected Auditor.”</p> <p>Finding 6 The County Assessor doesn’t have the resources needed to eliminate a significant assessment backlog. As a consequence, many taxpayers will get hit with significant back-dated property tax bills when this assessment backlog is cleared. Finding 7 Sonoma County sales tax rates are among the highest in California. ACTTC Response: “We disagree wholly or in part with this finding. According to information published by the California Department of Tax and Fee Administration, Sonoma County is tied for 9th highest sales tax rate for California counties and no Sonoma County cities are in the top 90 sales tax rates for California.” BOS Response: “We disagree wholly or in part with this finding. According to information published by the California Department of Tax and Fee Administration, last updated on 7/1/2024, sales taxes in unincorporated counties range from 7.25% to 10.25%. Sonoma County’s rate of 8.5% is in the middle of this range. Additionally, while some cities have higher tax rates due to voter approved tax measures, no city in Sonoma County has a tax rate in the top 90 cities in California.”</p> <p>Finding 8 Citizen Oversight Committees are frequently inoperative, largely ineffective, and have no authority. BOS Response: “We disagree wholly or in part with this finding. Citizen Oversight Committees provide valuable service reviewing expenditures for compliance with expenditure plans. The purpose of the unelected committees is to inform and advise relevant governing bodies and the public to ensure that agencies are held accountable.”</p>	
RECOMMENDATIONS & RESPONSES	2024-25 GJ OBSERVATIONS
<p>R1 By December 27, 2024, the Board of Supervisors shall direct and fund the Controller to modify County financial systems such that spending classification data capture enables cross-agency categoric reporting for fiscal 2026 onward.</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this Recommendation will not be implemented.</p>
<p>BOS Response: “This recommendation will not be implemented because it is not reasonable or is not warranted. Many of the entities discussed (including School Districts, Special Districts, and cities) do not utilize County financial systems and the Board of Supervisors does not have the authority to compel them to do so. More importantly, if the County Controller were to undertake such a comprehensive report for all taxing entities within the County, those entities would have to bear the cost. The responsibility for tracking tax collection and spending properly lies with the taxing entity. It is not part of the statutory duties of the County Controller. If the County were to fund the comprehensive report, it would constitute a gift of public funds by the County in violation of California Constitution, article XVI, § 6. (See, e.g., Edgemont Community Services District v City of Moreno Valley (1995) 36 Cal. App. 4th 1157 [finding that shifting the cost of a public agency’s obligations to another public agency violates the constitutional prohibition on gifts of public funds].) Even if all entities agreed to create a shared system and to pay their portion of the costs for the system, implementation would require extensive work to gather cross-agency requirements and develop a system that meets the needs of all entities. Such a process and system, if possible, would be very expensive to implement and implementation would take a number of years and be highly disruptive to the operations of the entities involved.</p>	
<p>R2 By February 28, 2025 the Board of Supervisors, ACTTC and County Office of Education shall jointly determine personnel and professional services needed to make the Citizens’ Report a comprehensive presentation of all Sonoma County property and sales tax collections and expenditures.</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this Recommendation will not be implemented.</p>
<p>BOS Response: “This recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable. The County of Sonoma, as defined for accounting purposes, does not include the incorporated cities, school districts or independent special districts in Sonoma County; therefore, it would be inappropriate to include financial data extraneous to the County of Sonoma in the Citizens’ Report. The purpose of the Citizens’ Report, an optional document, is to communicate selected financial information from the County of Sonoma’s Annual Comprehensive Financial Report. As noted in our prior response, were a separate joint report to be created, the other entities would need to share in the cost of compiling the data and producing a comprehensive report to avoid the constitutional prohibition against gifts of public funds.”</p> <p>ACTTC Response: “This recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable. Preparing a non-mandated, cross-governmental tax and spending report would detract from the ACTTC’s ability to provide mandated and auditing services to and for benefit of the public and local government agencies. Additionally, the County of Sonoma, as defined for reporting purposes, does not include the incorporated cities, school districts, or independent special districts in Sonoma County; therefore, it would be inappropriate to include financial data extraneous to the County of Sonoma in the Citizens’ Report.” The purpose of the Citizens’ Report, an optional document, is to communicate selected financial information from the County of Sonoma’s Annual Comprehensive Financial Report</p>	
<p>R3 By June 30, 2025, the Board of Supervisors shall fund the ACTTC so the Citizens’ Report includes this categorized information for fiscal years 2026 and onward.</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this recommendation will not be implemented.</p>
<p>BOS Response: “This recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable. As noted above, it is not appropriate to include the information described in the Citizens’ Report.</p>	

<p>R4 By June 30, 2025, the Board of Supervisors shall fund and authorize staffing sufficient for the Auditor to conduct appropriate performance audits each fiscal year from 2026 onward</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this recommendation may be implemented in the future.</p>
<p>BOS Response: “This recommendation requires further analysis. The Auditor’s Office has been significantly impacted by a string of disasters, beginning with the 2017 wildfires, that have impacted the County. During this period, existing Audit staff was partially diverted toward necessary work to ensure compliance with state and federal requirements to receive disaster funding. The unit has only recently returned to full-time audit work. The Board of Supervisors will consider any requests for additional staffing that are made by the Auditor-Controller-Treasurer-Tax Collector as part of the FY 2025-2026 budget process. Given the limited resources available to the County, any additions will need to be considered in relation to other County needs and funding cannot be guaranteed.</p>	
<p>R5 By December 28, 2024 the Board of Supervisors shall fund and authorize temporary staffing to enable the Assessor’s Office to eliminate the assessment backlog within 12 months.</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this Recommendation may be implemented in the future.</p>
<p>BOS Response: “This recommendation requires further analysis. The Assessor’s Office continues to meet state-mandated timelines for assessments. Since FY 2021-22 the Board of Supervisors has authorized 10.2 FTE additional positions for the Assessor’s Office, an increase of 16% to staffing in that unit. This includes 1.0 term-limited position added during the FY 24-25 budget process. Given the significant timeframe for training and certification requirements, the full effect of these additions is not yet clear. The Board of Supervisors will consider any requests for additional resources made by the Clerk-Recorder-Assessor. Given the limited resources available to the County, further additions will need to be considered in relation to other County needs. Additionally, any new positions added will require training similar to prior additions, making elimination of a backlog in 12 months unlikely.”</p>	

MADF A/K/A “The County Jail”: Déjà vu all over again

Respondents: SCSO: elected Sonoma County Sheriff’s Office BOS: Board of Supervisors

<p>FINDINGS & RESPONSES</p>
<p>Finding F1 There are a large number of mentally ill inmates held in the MADF whose needs are not being met.</p> <p>F1 SCSO Response: “The respondent partially agrees with the finding. The Sheriff’s Office meets the needs of this population to the extent possible with the limited resources available. The lack of mental health treatment is not limited to MADF, but the community as a whole. Many inmates could potentially be better served in LPS or offsite mental health facilities, but statewide, these options are rarely available. The Sheriff’s Office holds a contract to provide behavioral health care services to inmates. We also provide a broad range of programming to address various needs across the population. The Sheriff’s Office agrees that the MADF was not built to accommodate this population. The addition of the Behavioral Health Housing Unit (BHHU) would provide additional resources and an environment more conducive to meeting the needs of this population. However, expanding mental health treatment throughout Sonoma County would help lower the number of incarcerated persons in the Sheriff’s custody.”</p> <p>BOS Response: “We disagree wholly or partially with this finding. The Board of Supervisors agrees with the Sonoma County Sheriff’s Office.”</p> <p>Finding 2 The planned MADF mental health extension, “on hold” since 2016, would increase the safety of correctional officers and inmates and make more room in the Main Jail for programming.</p> <p>F2 SCSO Response: “The respondent partially agrees with the finding. Safety for both correctional staff and incarcerated persons is optimized when inmates can be appropriately housed based on their designated housing classification. Construction of the BHHU will increase the County’s ability to provide an increased variety of appropriate housing for incarcerated persons. In addition, construction of the BHHU will increase the County’s ability to provide quality mental health treatment for our incarcerated population, within a dedicated therapeutic environment. It would provide the County with a secure, purpose-built mental health facility, rather than using standard detention-only facilities. This would allow for more comprehensive competency restoration programs in addition to other programming.”</p> <p>BOS Response: “We disagree wholly or partially with this finding. The Board of Supervisors agrees with the Sonoma County Sheriff’s Office.”</p> <p>Finding 3 There is a persistent deficiency in OCA time for inmates, especially those in the modules for the mentally ill.</p> <p>F3 SCSO Response: “The respondent disagrees with the finding. The sheriff’s Office acknowledges that providing OCA time for inmates during a staffing crisis was extremely difficult. Our staff worked diligently to find innovative ways to provide OCA time for inmates, including contracting to house inmates in Solano County. Thanks to the aggressive and successful hiring efforts, we’ve been able to improve the amount of OCA time for our MADF inmates. It should also be acknowledged since the COVID-19 pandemic there have been times when large groups of incarcerated persons could not be out of the cells at one time in an effort to decrease the spread of COVID. As our staffing levels continue to improve, the Sheriff’s Office will be able to accommodate increased OCA for those incarcerated persons that present unique challenges and cannot safely mix in a large group setting.”</p> <p>BOS Response: “We disagree wholly or partially with this finding. The Board of Supervisors agrees with the Sonoma County Sheriff’s Office.”</p> <p>Finding 4 There has been a chronic staffing shortage in the MADF.</p> <p>F4 SCSO Response: “The respondent agrees with the finding. During the COVID shutdown, the county suspended hiring for a period of time, creating significant vacancy levels for many job classes. Post COVID-19 pandemic, low employment rates, economic factors, and societal shifts have had significant impacts on the labor market. Practically all employers have been affected by the extraordinarily challenging labor market. Overall, the County vacancy rate has been higher than past years and some job classes have particularly troubling vacancy rates. This has greatly impacted the Sheriff’s Office in critical job classifications as societal shifts have had a significant impact on interest in law enforcement, dispatch, and correctional careers. Correctional job classes have historically been some of the most challenging job classes to fill. There is a cyclical correlation between excessive mandatory overtime requirements (resulting from extreme vacancy rates) and newly hired correctional staff separating shortly after being hired. This cycle has resulted in a few years where the hiring successes had little impact due to a high number of separations. Due to extensive efforts from Sheriff’s management, the sheriff’s Office has made significant strides in filling correctional deputy vacancies. As of July 26, 2024, there are only 5 vacancies in the correctional deputy job class at the Sheriff’s Office. However, unavailable staff (staff unable to work in the facility due to injury illness, training, and other leaves) continue to cause a strain on employees working in the Detention Division, as overtime is needed to backfill staff who are unavailable due to various types of leaves.”</p> <p>Finding 5 Mandatory staff overtime is excessive and a detriment to the safety, security, and health of both officers and inmates.</p>

<p>F5 SCSO Response: “The respondent partially agrees with the finding. The Sheriff’s Office Detention Division operates a facility 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with fixed post positions. In order to ensure the safety, security, and health of inmates, and to meet the required state mandates, staff work mandatory overtime shifts to ensure coverage of fixed post positions. The Sheriff’s Office acknowledges that mandatory staff overtime has been excessive and not sustainable for employee safety, security, and retention. High vacancy rates have created a problematic cycle of stress and pressure on employees who must work more overtime and carry increased workloads, which then can result in employee leave and employee separation, thus exacerbating the vacancy rates and operational issues.</p> <p>These high vacancy rates have caused significant operational issues and service delivery challenges and are creating an untenable long-term work environment. Lowering the mandated overtime per employee, while still meeting operational mandates, safety, and security requirements, has been of the utmost importance to the sheriff and his executive team. The Sheriff’s Office has dedicated significant resources towards filling vacancies and has had success thus far. With the successful hiring efforts and reduced vacancies, mandatory overtime has begun to decrease. With further decreases in mandatory overtime projected, the Sheriff’s Office looks forward to increased correctional deputy safety, security, and retention.”</p> <p>BoS Response: “We disagree wholly or partially with this finding. The Board of Supervisors agrees with the Sonoma County Sheriff’s Office.</p>		
<p>RECOMMENDATIONS & RESPONSES</p>		<p>2024-25 GJ OBSERVATIONS</p>
<p>R1 By December 31, 2024, SCSO will develop a plan to provide mental health treatment based on inmates’ specific and individual mental health needs.”</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this recommendation has been implemented.</p>	
<p>SCSO Response: “The recommendation has been implemented. The Sheriff’s Office understands the importance of providing mental health treatment based on the incarcerated person’s specific and individual mental health needs. In partnership with our contracted Behavior Health provider, Wellpath, the Sheriff’s Office has and will continue to provide mental health treatment based on the needs of the individual.”</p>		
<p>R2 By December 31, 2024, the Board of Supervisors will develop a plan to fund construction of the mental health extension.</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this recommendation may be implemented in the future.</p>	
<p>BOS Response: “This recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the future, if warranted. The Board of Supervisors recognizes the importance of providing treatment for inmates with mental health and medical needs. The Board of Supervisors and County Executive will continue to work with the Sheriff’s Office to monitor the capacity of the MADF with respect to correctional officers and inmate safety and will continue to evaluate the need for additional resources. Requests for additional resources to complete the funding plan of the Behavioral Health Housing until will be consider as part of the annual countywide budget development process. The current cost estimate for construction of a Behavioral Health Housing Unit is \$65 million, of which the County currently has \$39 million in funds identified. The unfunded gap for construction of a facility is \$26 million.”</p>		
<p>R3 By December 31, 2024, SCSO will develop a process to discharge inmates that takes their specific and individual medical and behavioral health needs into account.</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this recommendation has been implemented.</p>	
<p>SCSO Response: “The recommendation will be implemented as the number of case managers/discharge planners increases at the jail. SCSO currently contracts with CFMG/Wellpath for 1.6 FTE discharge planners: 1.0 FTE working specifically with behavioral health patients, and 0.6 FTE addressing the needs of medication-assisted treatment (MAT) participants, The SCSO service contract with GEO Reentry Services for jail-based substance use disorder treatment (SUDT) services includes 1.0 FTE Reentry Counselor/Discharge Planner to address the needs of SUDT services and MAT participants through the development of comprehensive discharge and reentry plans and connecting participants to needed services. Implementation of the State’s expansion of Medi-Cal services to the justice-involved population via California Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal (CalAIM) and a corresponding grant awarded to the Sheriff’s Office for implementation will result in the addition of 2.0 FTE County Behavioral Health Senior Client Support Specialists who will provide case management and system navigation services to incarcerated individuals and connect them to post-release providers. An additional 0.4 -1.0 FTE CFMG/Wellpath MAT discharge planner will also be added as needed for the planned MAT program expansion. It should also be noted that incarcerated persons who are independently financially stable or possessing strong support systems do not typically require the services of a discharge planner.”</p>		
<p>R4 By December 31, 2024, SCSO will provide all eligible inmates at least ten hours of OCA per week.</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this recommendation has been implemented.</p>	
<p>SCSO Response: “The recommendation has already been implemented. In the Spring of 2023, the sheriff’s Office started planning for anticipated changes to the Title 15 Minimum Jail Standards requirements for exercise and out of cell time. Prior to April 2023, the minimum requirement for exercise and out of cell time was three hours distributed over a period of seven days. Effective April 1,2023, Title 15 standards changed to ten hours of out of cell time distributed over a period of seven days (to include three hours of exercise and seven hours of recreation). In April and May 2023, Correctional Deputies received training on the new Title 15 minimum jail standards. Effective June 2023, a change in our Classification/Housing Plan was implemented to meet Title 15 requirements of ten hours of out of cell time distributed over a period of seven days. Starting June 2023, all general population and protective custody population housing modules saw a significant adjustment to out of cell operations. Minimum, medium, and maximum-security incarcerated persons began mixing in larger groups for out of cell and recreation time. This resulted in a significant reduction of mix group numbers in these housing areas and an increase in out of cell activity. Currently, the Detention Division is meeting the minimum out of cell requirement of ten hours over a seven-day period in these housing areas. There are several areas of the Main Adult Detention Facility where incarcerated persons are classified at higher levels or require small mix groups for out of cell activity. In these housing areas, out of cell activity schedules are challenging as we strive to meet the needs of the individual while maintaining a safe environment for our staff and the incarcerated persons in our care. Our Classification Team continues to work with jail operations to come up with innovative ways to accomplish our goal of ten hours of out of cell activity over a seven-day period. In January 2024, a portion of our mental health population was shifted to a new housing location that included larger dayroom areas as well as smaller, separate day rooms to accommodate smaller mix groups or individuals during out of cell time. As a result, the individuals in this housing location are receiving at or above ten hours of out of cell activity over a seven-day period. As our staffing levels continue to improve, the Sheriff’s Office Detention Division will re-open two of our closed housing modules at the Main Adult Detention Facility. This will allow for increased out of cell activity for those incarcerated persons that present unique challenges and cannot safely mix in a large group setting.”</p>		

<p>R5 By June 30, 2025, the SCSO will have a vacancy rate in its Corrections Unit of less than 10%.</p> <p>SCSO Response: “This recommendation has already been implemented. The Sheriff’s Office currently has 208 FTEs in the Correctional Deputy job class. As of July 25, 2024, there are 5 vacancies. The current vacancy rate in the Correctional Deputy job class is 2.4%.”</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this recommendation has been implemented.</p>
<p>R6 By December 31, 2024, mandated monthly overtime for SCSO Corrections Officers will average no more than 25 hours a month.</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this recommendation will not be implemented.</p>
<p>SCSO Response: “The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not reasonable and could potentially violate state mandates pertaining to operating a correctional facility. The Sheriff’s Office acknowledges the importance of having a minimal amount of overtime per month for our correctional deputies. The Sheriff’s Office is unable to control many factors that contribute to overtime. Aspects such as employee separation, vacation leave, sick leave, FMLA leave, work related injury, non-work-related injury and training make up many reasons for increased overtime hours for our employees. The Correctional Deputy job class is primarily composed of fixed post positions. Therefore, the most efficient method to alleviate overtime for our correctional deputies would be to increase allocations in the correctional deputy job class. More allocations would provide relief staffing, or staffing used to cover vacant posts due to vacation, training, injury, and illness. There are currently 208 allocations in the correctional deputy job class. In FY 08-09, there were 246 allocations for correctional deputies. Over the course of several years correctional deputy positions have been eliminated, eliminating relief coverage. Therefore, any vacant posts due to vacation, training, injury and illness results in an increased need for mandatory overtime coverage. An increase in allocations would allow the Sheriff’s Office to efficiently backfill employees on various types of leave with full-time employees, thus reducing the total overtime per month. For this response to be reasonable, an increase in overall allocations would be necessary.”</p>	

Often Reported, Never Repaired: Department of Health Services

Respondents: DHS: Dept. of Health Services; ACTTC: Auditor/Controller/Treasurer/Tax Collector; SPI: Public infrastructure; HR: SoCo Human Resources; BOS: Board of Supervisors

FINDINGS & RESPONSES
<p>Finding 1 DHS contracting practices and procedures are chaotic, inefficient, and take too long. This results in delayed execution of contracts, delays in vendor payments, and local County health services missing for extended periods.</p> <p>BOS Response: “We disagree partially with these findings. The characterization of DHS contracting procedures as chaotic is misleading and misses a broader issue. While we agree that most of the County’s contracting and procurement processes take too long, most of those processes are dictated by State statute (not County requirements) and there is little flexibility within those statutes. It is important to remark that Federal and State funding requirements are complex and inflexible. The number of mandated changes after the pandemic have greatly contributed to not being able to design efficient and sustainable systems as regulatory agencies guidance is constantly revised.”</p> <p>DHS Response: “We disagree partially with this finding. We agree that some of the contracting practices and procedures are inefficient and take too long. It is important to remark that contracting and procurement issues are not exclusively specific to Department of Health Services (DHS) given the interfaces with other county departments that influence DHS processes. The processes have been impacted by the reality of transitioning out of non- disaster operations which has been complicated to complete given staffing vacancies, and new hires’ learning curves not only in the Department of Health Services but also in the other departments we interface with. Also, it is important to recognize that Federal and State funding requirements are complex and inflexible. The number of mandated changes after the pandemic have greatly contributed to not being able to design efficient and sustainable systems as regulatory agencies guidance is constantly revised.”</p> <p>“As a summary we offer the following information: Stricter Accountability Measures: California has introduced rigorous reporting standards tied to state funding, especially under the Homeless Housing, Assistance, and Prevention (HHAP) program. Counties must submit detailed plans with quantifiable, data-driven goals. These plans are subject to regular monitoring, and funding is contingent upon meeting specific benchmarks. Medicaid and Medicare: reporting requirements have significantly impacted all counties by increasing administrative complexity and putting pressure on current baseline procurement and financial capacity. These changes have been crucial in ensuring compliance and effective use of healthcare funds but have also presented considerable challenges to county governments. This includes demonstrating improvements in patient care, reductions in hospital readmissions, and enhanced behavioral health services. The need to collect and report on these metrics has forced counties to rapidly integrate new data collection and reporting tools without the benefit of having final regulations.”</p> <p>ACTTC Response: “We disagree partially with this finding. ACTTC staff supports vendor payments after departments have completed their internal process. We agree that vendor payments delays exist. However, ACTTC staff is not involved in the department’s contracting process and cannot opine the cause of contract related delays.”</p> <p>Finding 2 DHS processes for procurement needs identification, RFP generation, and competitive sourcing take too long to execute and aren’t clearly competitive.</p> <p>DHS Response: “We disagree partially with this finding. We do agree with the inconsistent timing of some of the RFPs run in the department and are looking to address these inconsistencies. We disagree that procurements aren’t clearly competitive, that there is no identification, or competitive sourcing. Not unlike what other counties and the nation face, it is unfortunate the behavioral health system is strained by workforce shortages, inadequate infrastructure, high demand, and funding limitations, all of which contribute to challenges in providing timely and effective care to those in need. Given this, there are few providers qualified to provide the services needed within Sonoma County, and in those situations, competitive bidding is not a viable option. This has caused clients to be served in another county. We hold bidder’s conferences, which is a common practice, so that providers can provide feedback and answer questions. We work closely with Sonoma County Public Infrastructure-purchasing division to ensure we are following appropriate RFP protocols and procedures. We follow sole source procurement procedures and single source procedures while applicable RFP procedures are scheduled as appropriate.”</p> <p>Finding 3 Chronic short staffing and employee turnover have led to a significant loss of institutional knowledge.</p>

<p>BOS Response: “We disagree partially with this finding. We agree with the Department of Human Resources’ response to this finding.”</p> <p>DHS Response: “We disagree wholly or partially with this finding. Currently, it is difficult for DHS to substantiate this claim. While short staffing and employee turnover historically lead to a loss of institutional knowledge, DHS does not track this information.”</p> <p>ACTTC RESPONSE: I (we) agree with finding F3.</p> <p>HR Response: “We disagree partially with this finding. Currently, it is difficult for the Human Resources Department to substantiate this claim. While short staffing and employee turnover historically lead to a loss of institutional knowledge, Human Resources does not have sufficient information to validate this finding.”</p> <p>SPI Response: “We disagree wholly with this finding. SPI does not track this information.”</p> <p>F4 Inadequate delegation of authority and a toxic work culture inhibits individual decision-making and contributes to DHS’s failure to perform effectively.</p> <p>DHS Response: “We disagree wholly. Staff has daylighted late payments to providers and late behavioral health contracts that seem to have been an issue within the Department of Health Services for 10 plus years. This was feedback received not only from staff, but also from behavioral health providers. We provided a short-term solution with 6-month advance payments in fiscal year 23-24 and called administration staff back into the office who had been working remotely during the COVID pandemic. Staffing vacancies had also been a factor, but in just over one year we have improved staffing vacancies; decreasing our overall department vacancies by 9% (from 23% in July 2023 to 14% in June 2024). Management believes morale has improved as critical vacancies have been filled.”</p> <p>F4. HR Response: “We disagree partially with this finding. Currently, it is difficult for the Human Resources Department to substantiate this claim. However, during FY 2024125 Human Resources will be launching a county-wide employee engagement survey which will provide us with the data needed to develop and implement strategies to incorporate survey outcomes into future operational planning. HR will work with a consultant to analyze the responses to gain insights into employee satisfaction, engagement levels, and specific areas needing attention. These strategies will aim to improve work culture and foster a positive and productive work environment, with the goal of improving employee retention and sense of belonging.”</p> <p>SPI Response: “We disagree partially with this finding. SPI agrees generally that short staffing and employee turnover can lead to loss of institutional knowledge however SPI does not track this information.”</p> <p>F5 DHS Fiscal and County general accounting process doesn’t require or retain all information needed for post-fact analysis of who is being paid, whether the payment was the result of a no-bid contract, or whether payment documentation matches funding source requirements.</p> <p>ACTTC RESPONSE: “We disagree wholly or partially with this finding. ACTTC fiscal policies RE-2 and RE-3 define department responsibilities and procedures for grant compliance, monitoring, and reporting. All information uploaded to the County financial system is retained pursuant to adopted retention schedules.”</p> <p>SPI Response: “We disagree wholly or partially with this finding. This is an overly broad statement with very vague language. The County, and particularly the Department of Health Services, is a highly regulated agency where federal and state funding sources require this information All information used in federal and state funding is retained pursuant to retention schedules.”</p> <p>F6 County Purchasing and Internal Audit failed to require that DHS follow mandated procurement policies.</p> <p>BOS Response: “We disagree partially with this finding. We agree with the Sonoma Public Infrastructure’s response to this finding.”</p> <p>ACTTC RESPONSE: “We disagree wholly or partially with this finding. Internal Audit is not responsible for enforcing procurement policies. Internal Audit issued a procurement audit report in August 2023, which Included a DHS procurement related finding. The Procurement Process Audit Report is available on our website under "Fiscal Year End June 30,2022. Please see the link to our website below: https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/auditor-controller-treasurer-tax-collector/audit-reports”</p> <p>SPI Response: “We disagree wholly or partially with this finding. While SPI has developed templates for procurement of goods and services that are generally applicable County-wide, these policies do not displace the specialized procedures that certain departments like DHS must follow. Their practices and procedures are designed to address the mandates of federal and state funding sources. As noted, departments may consult SPI staff for guidance and best practices or may elect to conduct their own processes in accordance with established policies.”</p> <p>F7 The BOS failed to require changes to DHS procurement procedures despite published reports that DHS has been violating County procurement policy.</p> <p>BOS Response: “We disagree partially with this finding. The Board of Supervisors called for a new Request for Proposals for homeless services following the issuance of the Pisenti & Brinker, LLC agreed upon procedures report regarding DEMA Consulting & Management.”</p> <p>ACTTC RESPONSE: “We disagree wholly or partially with this finding. The BoS called for DHS to conduct a new competitive Request For Proposal event for homeless services following the issuance of the Pisenti & Brinker, LLC agreed-upon procedures report regarding DEMA Consulting & Management.”</p>	
RECOMMENDATIONS & RESPONSES	2024-25 GJ OBSERVATIONS
<p>R1 By December 31, 2024, DHS will initiate regular public reports of the programs for which an award has been or is intended to be made (including those programs without a contractor), the contracts in effect, the date of execution of every contract, the contract term, and explanations for any contracts not executed prior to the effective service start date (F1, F2).</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this recommendation will not be implemented.</p>
<p>DHS Response: “This recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable. Award information is already publicly accessible and provided via board items. The County Executive now requires DHS staff to attach executed contract documents, and when an executed contract is not feasible as negotiations may be in flux, a sample contract and/or authority to execute is conditioned upon County Counsel’s approval. DHS programming has in excess of six hundred contracts within a fiscal year. Adding workload to create new public reports for information that can be made available by the existing Public Request Act process will be labor intensive and duplicative in some cases. The recommendation is not deemed to be a reasonable at this time given the many changes state and federal agencies have required of the county. Doing so would further increase complexity and delays .”</p>	

<p>R2 By November 1st, 2024, DHS and County Human Resources departments shall submit a recruitment and retention plan to the County Executive to reduce DHS vacancies to no more than 10% of authorized non-field positions. (F3, F4)</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this recommendation may be implemented in the future.</p>
<p>DHS Response: “This recommendation requires further analysis. We are unclear of the definition of what “non-field” positions is referring to. DHS does not track vacancy rates by whether the position serves in a “field” setting or not. We are, however, happy to report that the DHS HR team now has a regular monthly meeting with the County’s central HR with the goal of improving vacancy rates. We now have two analysts in County HR dedicated to working with DHS on our recruitment and retention goals.”</p> <p>HR RESPONSE: “This recommendation requires further analysis. We are unclear of the definition of what "non-field" positions is referring to. DHS does not track vacancy rates by whether the position serves in a "field" setting or not. Nonetheless, we offer the following information. The challenges the Department of Health Services has faced the last several years to fill healthcare related positions are not unique to Sonoma County. There is a shortage of individuals entering the industry and an insufficient number of qualified individuals interested in changing employers right now to fill vacancies at both private and public employers. This shortage has greatly contributed to the department’s inability to quickly fill positions in some job classifications as well as an increased vacancy rate, when coupled with the significant growth the department that has experienced in recent years (the number of allocated positions has increased 37% between the start of Fiscal Years 2019/20 and 2024/25.) The job classifications with the highest number of vacant allocations in the Department of Health Services include Behavioral Health Clinician Intern/Clinician, Alcohol and Other Drug Services Counselor I/II, Senior Client Support Specialist, and Environmental Health Specialist Trainee I/II. Positions in these job classifications require either specific education, work experience, and/or professional licensure, which significantly limits the number of qualified applicants the County receives and subsequently progress through examination and selection processes. As of June 28, 2024, the overall vacancy rate for the Department of Health Services was 14.50%. When excluding positions in the aforementioned four job classifications with the department’s highest numbers of vacancies, which are also amongst the County’s most difficult to fill, the vacancy rate drops to 10.79%. This rate includes positions that work in administration, clinical, and field settings. Human Resources and the Department of Health Services need further clarification to identify what specific positions are being referred to as "authorized non-field positions" in order for Human Resources to determine what the adjusted vacancy rate with that parameter applied. Central Human Resources and the Health Services Department are and will continue meeting regularly to discuss recruitment needs and remain expeditious in developing and continuing efforts to reduce the department's vacancy rate. The two departments have recently collaborated on a tracking mechanism which allows staff to identify the length of time various recruitment, examination, and selection process steps take to complete, determine if there are any "pain points" or delays at any steps in the process, and implement solutions with the intent to reduce delays for future recruitments. Staff are also currently looking at ways to be more strategic in recruiting, examining, and selecting individuals for hard-to-fill job classifications. Current strategies include evaluating the efficacy of recruitment advertising, examination, department selection, and pre-employment processes to maximize visibility, remove hurdles and/or barriers that may cause qualified individuals from either not applying or opting out of the process, and reduce lengthy/protracted timelines which make the County less competitive compared to private sector employers for similar types of positions. As efforts in these areas progress, both departments anticipate Health Services' vacancy rate will continue to decline. Should that not occur, or should additional attention be warranted, the departments will engage with the County Executive if determined necessary at the time.”</p> <p>HR Update: “DHS has been working both internally within the department and with central HR to evaluate current practices and implement process improvements with the goal to reduce vacancy rates and the time it takes to fill positions across the department, not just those who interact with the public. As of 2/18/25 the vacancy rate was 12.22% (739.83 FTE; 90.42 vacant). The department’s vacancy rate on August 7,2024 was 15.11% (731.83 FTE; 110.56 vacant).”</p>	
<p>R3 By December 31, 2025, the Board of Supervisors will request, and County Auditor will complete and publish, a comprehensive audit report on DHS procurement processes and procedures, contract administration oversight and compliance with County procurement policy and publicly present said report to the Board of Supervisors. (F1, F3, F6, F7)</p>	<p>The Grand Jury acknowledges that this recommendation may be implemented in the future.</p>
<p>BOS Response: “This recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the future if warranted. Currently, the County is undergoing a countywide risk assessment which includes DHS contract administration and ACTTC management. Upon conclusion of the assessment, departments will determine the appropriate steps to ensure departmental compliance with County procurement policies. The County Executive will work with departments to evaluate the need for additional resources which will be made through the countywide budget process.</p> <p>This recommendation will be completed as soon as possible; however, it is not currently known if it can be completed and presented to the Board by December 31, 2025.”</p> <p>BOS Update: “No additional internal reports and/or recommendations for improvement have been produced by DHS since the Countywide risk assessment was initiated. Operational processes for initiating, approving, and managing contract payments <i>have</i> been changed since the initial update: 1/12th payment approach recommendation considered and approved by the Board. Approved 10/15/24 - https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6888956&GUID=682AA542-F038-44FC-9514-AE2E7FD49265</p> <p>FYE 23/24 expedited payment Approved 10/15/24 - https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6892948&GUID=BB681D0D-F2A5-402C-8AC5-4FE4F5FB33A0</p> <p>On November 22, 2024, we engaged municipal fiscal consultant to provide executive-level project assistance to DHS staff in preparing their Fiscal Year 2025/26 budget, including providing recommendations to department leadership on budget and fiscal best practices.</p> <p>Since October 15, 2024 a retired Human Services contract coordinator has been assisting DHS in reviewing its contract and RFP procedures, templates, annual timelines, and internal processes.</p> <p>Since November 18, 2024, retired Health and Human Services Director from Solano County has been assisting DHS in a variety of operational areas and providing advice and guidance on various fiscal processes and best practices.”</p>	

ACTTC Response: “This recommendation has not been implemented but will be implemented in the future if warranted. The ACTTC - Internal Audit Division (IA) issued an audit report of the Sonoma County Procurement Process in August 2023. The report includes a finding that Department of Health Services (DHS) contracts are being single or sole sourced without Purchasing Agent approval. This finding was identified as a Risk Classification B: Significant Control Weakness. The report summarizes testing of 23 of 94 DHS contracts, which found that all 23 were not competitively bid for at least ten years. The IA countywide risk assessment includes DHS contract administration. ACTTC management will evaluate the appropriate scope and resources needed to complete an audit of DHS procurement processes and procedures, contract administration oversight and compliance with County procurement policy. The size and scope of the audit and available resources will determine when a DHS contract audit can be included in the annual Audit Plan. This recommendation will be completed as soon as possible; however, it is not currently known if it can be completed and presented to the Board by December 31, 2025. ACTTC management is also aware that the CEO has engaged a procurement consulting firm to review the purchasing lifecycle and grant subaward processes for the seven Safety Net departments including DHS. An initial report for this engagement is expected in September 2024. The findings and recommendations from this report, as well as the time needed to implement accepted recommendations, may also impact the scope and timing of IA's audit of DHS procurement processes, contract administration and compliance with County policies.”

ACTTC Update: ... “my office has been working on a strategic initiative to enhance the independence and effectiveness of Internal Audit (IA) and ensure that IA operates in compliance with the Institute of Internal Auditors’ Global Audit Standards. This includes updates to the Internal Audit Charter and increased engagement and oversight of the Internal Audit function by the Board of Supervisors. On March 25, 2025, the ACTTC will present our recommendations to the Board of Supervisors and request that the Board approve updates to the Internal Audit Charter and establish an independent Audit Committee, which will include two members of the Board and a member of the public. Additionally, the ACTTC will include a request for two additional audit staff in the FY 2025-26 requested budget. Internal Audit currently has four staff, made up of three Senior Internal Auditors, and one Audit Manager who also serves as the Chief Audit Executive. The FY 2025-26 requested budget also includes \$75,000 for professional services, which will allow IA to contract with external firms to perform audits that IA does not have sufficient resources or expertise to perform.”

“The FY 25-26 risk assessment is still in development and should be completed later this Spring and will be used to inform the 25-26 Audit Plan. Although the risk assessment is not completed, Internal Audit (IA) anticipates that an audit of DHS contract administration and oversight will be included in the FY2025-26 audit plan. Planning for this audit has not begun and IA has not determined the resource requirements to perform the audit. Separately, the County CEO and HR departments entered into an agreement with a consulting firm (Municipal Resources Group, LLC) to, in part, review and redesign of DHS’s contracting and procurement. To avoid a duplication of effort, IA’s initial audit of DHS will likely focus on contract administration, monitoring, payments and the design of related procedures and controls. IA will consider auditing DHS procurement procedures and purchasing policy compliance in a future engagement. The decision to have the DHS audit performed by staff or an external accounting firm has not been determined.”

R4 By January 1, 2025, County Purchasing and the County Controller shall implement a system that ensures all no-bid and sole-sourced contracts are identified, accounted for as such, publicly reported, and have required supporting documentation and waivers on file. (F3, F4, F5 F6)

The Grand Jury acknowledges that this Recommendation will be implemented in the future.

ACTTC Response: “This recommendation will be implemented in the future. Pursuant to the Sonoma County Service Agreement Policy (Policy), the Purchasing Agent administers the Policy and approves Single/Sole Source waiver requests. ACTTC staff is working with the Sonoma County Public Infrastructure - Purchasing Division to implement recommendations in R4. Staff is evaluating identification and reporting strategies, and financial system functionality. The recommendation will be implemented as soon as possible; however, it is not currently known if the recommendation can be fully implemented by January 1, 2025.”

ACTTC Update: “ACTTC and Sonoma County Public Infrastructure – Purchasing Division (Purchasing) staff collaborated to create functionality in the financial system to allow Purchasing staff to flag Sole Source or Single Source waivers on Purchase Orders (POs). Purchasing will also have the ability run a Sole/Single Source Waiver report (not currently available). These changes will go-live in the County’s financial system on March 10, 2025 as part of a system update. Purchasing, with support from ACTTC staff, is still working on an implementation plan to make this a required field (requires a lookback on all open POs), ensure all Single and Sole Sources waivers are identified and captured, and lastly how best to make the information publicly available.”

SPI Response: “This recommendation has not been implemented but will in the future. The SPI Purchasing Division is currently working with the Auditor's Office to implement a step in the County's financial system (EFS) that would require departments to indicate whether they had fully procured a contract or had a single/sole source waiver approved by the Purchasing Agent. This would potentially also create the ability to run reports. Since this change will require evaluation of current system capabilities, it is unknown whether it could be implemented by the recommended 1/1/2025 date. The department will however, work with staff to implement as soon as possible. The recommendation states that a system shall be implemented ensuring "all no-bid and sole-sourced contracts are identified, accounted for as such, publicly reported, and have required supporting documentation and waivers on file. **SPI agrees with this recommendation “with the exception of all no-bid and sole sourced contracts.”** Delegated authority established by the Board and by policy allow for departments to procure goods and services without as follows: Under Sonoma County Ordinance No. 4654 and the Sonoma County Procurement of Goods and Equipment Policy. County departments may make direct purchases under \$7,000. Additionally, under the Sonoma County Service Agreements policy, departments may enter into short form agreements (\$5,000) and under. Alternatively, they may conduct an RFP or request a Single/Source waiver. Therefore, documentation and waivers would not be tracked and reported for these instances. It should also be noted that this information would not include contracts for services that are expressly exempt from competitive bidding requirements, such as architectural services, engineering services, and outside legal services. It is important to note that State law exempts these types of services from competitive solicitation because the County is required to select the desired provider based on their special training and experience, not based on cost. For these types of services, the County only solicits requests for qualifications or requests for proposals”

Responses to Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Reports 2018-2019 through 2021-2022

Every year the Civil Grand Jury produces a Continuity Report reviewing official responses to the previous year's Grand Jury reports. Agencies and elected officials that receive a Civil Grand Jury report are required to respond to it in one of three ways:

- The report's findings may be wholly accepted, or rejected, as written.
- The report's findings may be partially accepted and partially rejected, or
- The report's findings require further analysis.

No follow-up action (by either the Civil Grand Jury or the respondent) is required in cases where findings are accepted or rejected. When the respondent indicated that a recommendation required further analysis, however, the public is entitled to know what that analysis concluded; this report will tell you.

Similarly, regarding a report's recommendations, agencies and elected officials must respond in one of four ways:

- The recommendation is accepted and has already been implemented.
- The recommendation is rejected and no further action will be taken.
- The recommendation requires further analysis (which should be completed within six months of publication of the Grand Jury report).
- The recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the future.

State law requires the heads of government agencies and elected officials to respond within 60 days of the Civil Grand Jury's issuance of a report with a copy to the governing board; boards, councils and agencies run by boards are allowed an additional 30 days. Of course, substantive issues may not be resolved by the time the subsequent Civil Grand Jury issues its Continuity Report. Responses stating that "further analysis is required" or that "recommendations will be implemented in the future" are a commitment to action that probably won't be monitored or reported: this can be a convenient way for respondents to kick the can down the road (and sometimes hope it goes unnoticed).

This year, the Sonoma County Grand Jury reviewed all unresolved items listed in the "Civil Grand Jury 4 Year Continuity Report" published by the 2023-2024 Civil Grand Jury. The Civil Grand Jury requested agency updates to recommendations that promised further analysis or future action to see whether these commitments had been fulfilled and/or promised actions had been taken by these agencies.

The following tables show the status of findings and recommendations that were not resolved in prior years' reports, and whether government commitments for future action were eventually met. We're pleased to note that most government commitments were fulfilled and here the Grand Jury is equally pleased to share the list of items still outstanding.

Civil Grand Jury Report 2018-2019 Unfulfilled Commitments

THE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH BUDGET: A Perfect Storm

Unresolved Recommendations and <i>Current Status</i>	Implemented
<p>R5 DHS will continue and expedite the Community Based Organization (CBO) contract evaluation and build performance metrics.</p> <p>Current Status: DHS has stated that it drafted and adopted specific budgetary policies and procedures in the summer of 2019 to address this finding. CAO staff continues to work closely with DHS Finance on budgetary matters—through the normal budget cycle and through board items. Despite this response, from 2022 to the present, DHS contract performance has been problematic, and no performance metrics are being published.</p>	No

Civil Grand Jury Report 2019-2020 Updated

All recommendations resolved.

Civil Grand Jury Report 2020-2021 Unfulfilled Commitments

BROADBAND ACCESS IN SONOMA COUNTY: Broadband IS a Utility; The Quiet Crisis of Availability

Unresolved Recommendations and <i>Current Status</i>	Implemented
<p>R1 The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors consider recognizing and designating broadband as a “Utility” that needs prioritization by October 31, 2021.</p> <p>Current Status: On March 2, 2021, the BOS approved a 5-year strategic plan that includes broadband deployment and access. It does not include designation of broadband service as a utility.</p>	Partially, no further follow-up recommended
<p>R4, R7, R8, R9 and R10 Current Status: These recommendations depend on broadband’s being designated as a utility. See R1.</p>	Partially, no further follow-up recommended

COUNTY JAIL INMATE TELEPHONE AND COMMISSARY:

Overcharging a Captive Population

<p>Unresolved Recommendations and Current Status</p>	<p>Implemented</p>
<p>R2 By September 30, 2021, the Sheriff’s Office develop a new communications model to provide for sufficient telephone kiosks to allow the inmate population free telephone and video visitation for at least 90 minutes per week until such time as a new communication contract is in effect.</p> <p><i>Current Status:</i> According to the Sheriff’s Office, inmates are allowed 70 minutes of phone calls per week at a cost to them of \$.07 per minute. Prior to Covid, inmates were charged \$.21 per minute. There are no additional telephone kiosks in place and there are no video visits.</p>	<p>Partially, no further follow-up recommended</p>
<p>R5 The Sheriff’s Office reevaluate its commissary markup to be in line with grocery store, as opposed to convenience store, pricing, on or before September 1, 2021.</p> <p><i>Current Status:</i> The commissary is now run by Summit, an outside company. More items are available to inmates, some at a lower cost, but many items are still marked up much more than grocery store prices.</p>	<p>Partially complete</p>
<p>R6 By September 30, 2021, the Sheriff’s Office, using the reserve Inmate Welfare Trust funds, resume all inmate programs in existence pre-Covid, with funding at the same level once Covid restrictions are lifted.</p> <p><i>Current Status:</i> According to the Sheriff’s Office, inmate programs are being resumed. In-person classes as well as online classes are now offered.</p>	<p>Partially complete</p>
<p>R7 The Sheriff’s Office restructure the 10-member Inmate Welfare Trust Committee by December 31, 2021, to include more diverse representation, for example, community members, financial analysts, social workers and educators to bring the Committee more in line with the requirements of Penal Code 5006 regarding commission membership standards to State Prisons.</p> <p><i>Current Status:</i> The jail does not have to abide by the penal code for state prisons. However, according to the Sheriff’s Office there are now two civilians on the Inmate Welfare Trust Committee, including one educator. The remaining committee members are composed of Sheriff’s Office staff.</p>	<p>Resolved</p>

COVID MITIGATION AND THE COUNTY JAIL And its Unexpected Consequences

Unresolved Recommendations and <i>Current Status</i>	Implemented
<p>R1 The Sheriff’s Office develop, no later than September 1, 2021, a policy to restore out of cell activity, in person and video visitation, and all programs to pre-pandemic levels.</p> <p><i>Current Status:</i> In-person visits, and some classes and programs for inmates, have been resumed. There is little out-of-cell-activity and there are no video visits.</p>	Partially
<p>R4 The Sheriff’s Office and the Board of Supervisors work together to develop a plan by December 31, 2021, to increase the contracted Wellpath resources to fund four additional Wellpath discharge planners for mental health and medical assignment to the Main Adult Detention Facility.</p> <p><i>Current Status:</i> Wellpath services have increased per 2023-24 Grand Jury report responses.</p>	Resolved
<p>R6 The Sheriff’s Office implement a surveillance-testing program and require 100% participation by all unvaccinated jail staff by September 1, 2021.</p> <p><i>Current Status:</i> The Public Health Order regarding Covid has been rescinded, so the vaccine mandate is no longer applicable.</p>	N/A, Resolved

Civil Grand Jury Report 2021-2022 Updated Responses

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES: Dedication Overcame Dysfunction

Unresolved Recommendations and <i>Current Status</i>	Implemented
<p>R8 By December 31, 2022, the Board of Supervisors will consult with the Human Resources Department to consider establishing an Ombudsperson for County employees to provide a neutral means to voice issues of concern.</p> <p><i>Current Status:</i> The Human Resources Department responded that it plans to conduct an employee-engagement survey in 2024 to determine the best path forward.</p>	Partially, survey in progress in 2025
<p>R13 By December 31, 2022, the Board of Supervisors and County Administrator’s Office work with the Department of Health Services executive leadership team in developing an actionable plan to address work culture issues, including retaliation, harassment and bullying.</p> <p><i>Current Status:</i> DHS responded that it hired an equity manager in March of 2022 who was then hired away by Marin County. Recruitment is underway to fill this position. DHS developed an equity plan in December of 2022.</p>	Partially, no further follow-up recommended

<p>R14 By December 31, 2022, the Board of Supervisors direct the County Administrator’s Office to work with the Department of Health Services’ executive leadership team to develop a clearly defined and actionable plan for internal communication that includes greater transparency and staff participation throughout the department.</p> <p><i>Current Status:</i> DHS responded that it published an internal newsletter, <i>DHS Connect</i>, in the fall of 2022. Video clips of DHS employees were produced in November of 2023 and used in promotional material to recruit staff.</p>	<p>Partially, no further follow-up recommended</p>
<p>R16 By March 1, 2023, the Board of Supervisors direct the County Administrator’s Office and the County Human Resources Department to develop a plan for the Board’s review and consideration whereby the County Human Resources Department has oversight authority over all satellite human resource divisions.</p> <p><i>Current Status:</i> The Human Resources Department responded that it will work with a consultant in 2024 to develop recommendations regarding oversight of all satellite-department human resources functions.</p>	<p>Resolved via County org restructure</p>

SMART DECISION-MAKING: Citizen Feedback is Critical for Success

<p>Unresolved Recommendations and Current Status</p>	<p>Implemented</p>
<p>R4 By January 31, 2023, the Board of Directors require written Citizen’s Oversight Committee analysis and recommendations prior to all strategic decisions whether or not incorporated in the five-year Strategic Plan.</p> <p><i>Current Status:</i> The COC bylaws require the COC to issue reports, on at least an annual basis, on issues related to the Strategic Plan, but not on all strategic decisions.</p>	<p>Partially resolved</p>

In summary, the tables above give an update of the recommendations of the Civil Grand Jury reports of 2018-2019, 2019-2020, 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 that were unanswered when the follow-up reports were published. While there are still unresolved issues, this update shows the progress made after the Civil Grand Juries’ terms expired.



Back row standing, L to R: Edward Campaña, George Greeley, Mike Brady, Marc Andrade, Nancy Fowler

Front row seated L to R: Cecily Wallis, Tom McMains, Karen Rocco (Foreperson), Wendy Roberts (Foreperson Pro Tem), Wynne Grossman

(Not pictured: Andy Cohen, Rob Hunter, Eric Frost, Troy Rohde)

