

County Strategic Plan 2032

The strategic plan helps the County set shared priorities, align resources, and guide decision-making over time. It provides a common framework for departments, partners, and the community to understand where the County is headed and how day-to-day work contributes to longer-term results for people who live and work here.



Strategic Plan Timeline

This phased implementation approach allows the County to reflect on what was learned in its first strategic plan, engage residents and partners, and translate that input into clear focus areas, results, and indicators.



Focus Areas:

The focus areas represent the core County services that support community well-being. These focus areas were informed through extensive input from community members, County staff, and partners about the issues that matter most and where coordinated action can make the greatest difference.



Housing & Infrastructure



Health, Wellbeing & Connection



Safety & Justice



Environment, Climate & Resilience



Access to Basic Needs & Support



Economy & Job Growth

Housing & Infrastructure

Community Goal

All people in Santa Cruz County have access to affordable, safe, and stable homes supported by reliable public infrastructure and transportation.

Alignment with County Departments and Plans

A focus on built environment work in the unincorporated area of the county, led primarily by the Community Development and Infrastructure department. Indicators are aligned to the Regional Housing Needs Allocation, the County's Capital Improvement Program, and the County's Vision Zero transportation safety and planning effort. Together, these shape how housing production, infrastructure investment, and transportation systems support daily life and long-term stability for residents.

Indicators and How the County Can Influence Change

Population measures such as the share of households spending more than 30 percent of income on housing help describe the scale of housing pressure across the county. To understand where the County can most directly influence outcomes, staff are focusing on County indicators such as housing units permitted by affordability level and the number of people killed or seriously injured in traffic crashes. These measures reflect areas where County policy, permitting processes, capital investments, and safety strategies can make a meaningful difference over time.

What We Heard from the Community

Across focus groups and outreach, housing affordability was consistently described as the foundation for stability. Participants shared that when people can secure housing, including affordable and missing middle housing, outcomes improve across health, safety, education, and employment. Transportation and infrastructure were raised as essential supports for daily life and inclusion, not just as physical assets. Community members emphasized the importance of safe and accessible streets, including sidewalks, bike routes, public transit access, and road conditions, particularly for older adults, people using wheelchairs, and people who do not drive. Permitting timelines and predictability were also cited as factors that can either support or slow housing progress. A recurring theme was the need for stronger coordination between housing development and transportation and infrastructure planning.

Housing & Infrastructure Focus Area Contributors

County Departments

- Assessor-Recorder
- Community Development and Infrastructure
- County Executive Office
- General Services Department
- Public Works (Landfill, Road Crews, Sanitation)

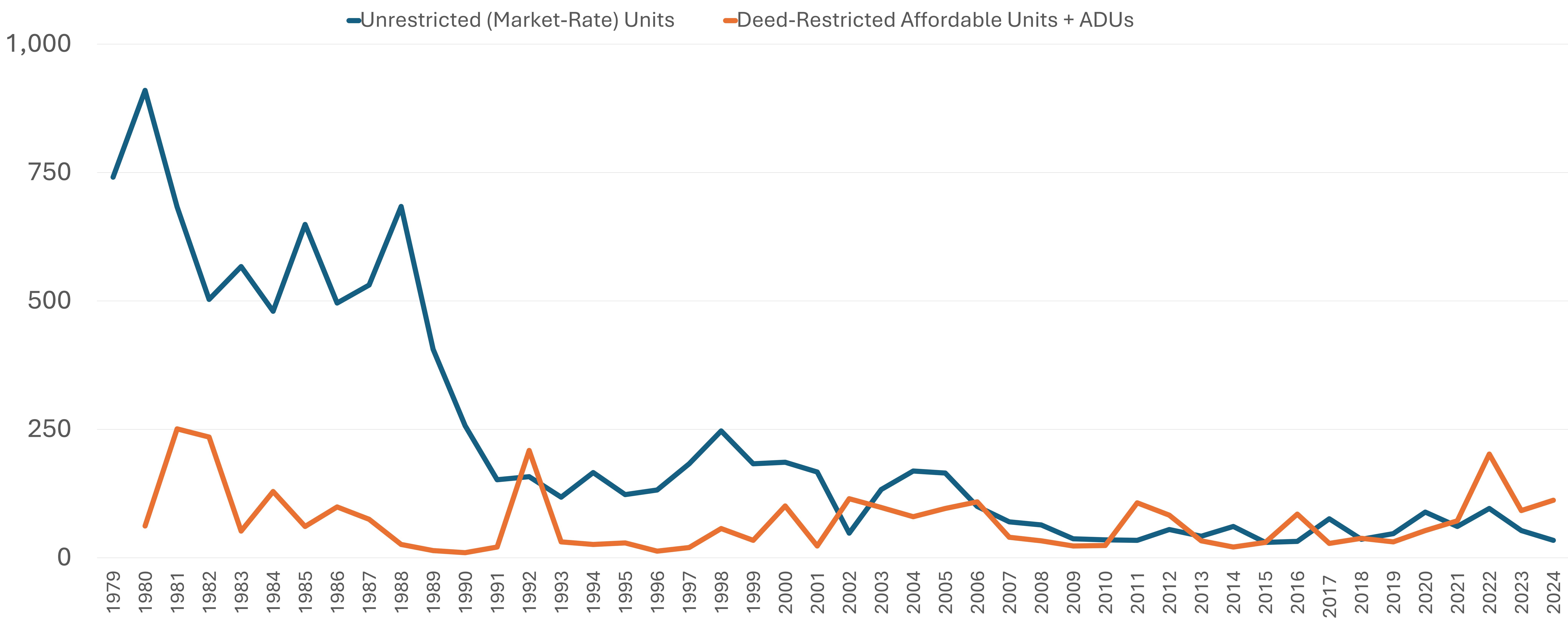
Community Partners

- Aptos Consulting
- California Apartment Association
- City of Watsonville
- Eadie Consultants
- Ecology Action
- Eden Housing
- Ifland Engineers
- Freedom Rotary
- Hello Housing
- Habitat Monterey Bay
- Housing Authority
- Housing Matters
- Housing Santa Cruz County
- MidPen Housing
- Rio Del Mar Improvement Association
- Santa Cruz Metro
- Seacliff Business Group
- Swenson
- WCK Architects

County Commissions & Advisory Bodies

- Housing for Health Partnership
- Planning Commission
- Regional Transportation Commission
- Commission on Justice and Gender
- Commission on Disabilities
- Youth Advisory Task Force

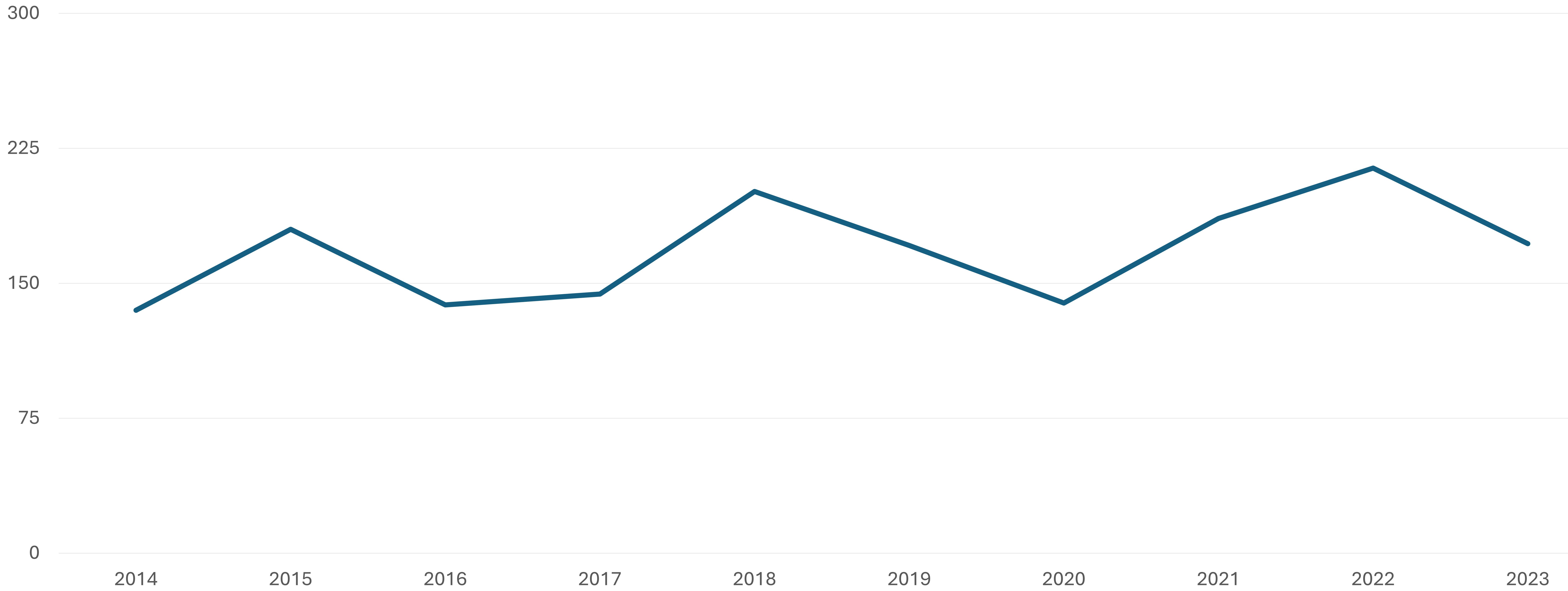
Housing Units Permitted



Helping us build housing:

- Recognition that housing supply is central to affordability for working families.
- Incremental diversification of housing types (ADUs, Tiny Homes).
- Growing acceptance of higher density within developed areas.
- Rezoning and upzoning remove legal barriers to building.
- Increased housing approvals in specific growth areas.
- County and Housing Authority use of federal vouchers to keep people in their housing.
- Ability of faith community to use property for housing.
- State legislation streamlining approvals for multi-family and higher density housing.
- Adopted Housing Element to zone for more housing, aligned with State housing goals.
- Water use continues to become more efficient; investment in healthy aquifers.
- Working to make permitting more predictable in time and money.
- Sanitation capacity is sufficient and flow models help County focus investments.
- Housing production since 1990 has not produced enough units for local residents.
- Low property tax revenue makes developing infrastructure for housing difficult.
- Construction costs and interest rates.
- Complex, lengthy, and uncertain permitting and entitlement process.
- Perception that new housing will result in worse change than not building anything.
- History of segregation and use of zoning to restrict access to housing.
- Risk aversion and avoiding errors rather than enabling solutions.
- Limited tools to regulate second homes, short-term rentals, investment properties.
- Need for off-site improvements to aging sewer and drainage infrastructure.
- Limited local sources of capital and matching funds for housing projects.
- Limited supply of large, easily developable sites.
- Urban Services Line has not been updated since 1994.
- Lack of resources for local, first-time home buyers.
- Aging sanitation pipes and high cost of construction mean playing catch up, not building capacity.
- Geologic hazards, challenging soil conditions, flood plains, protected habitats limit buildable lots.

Individuals Killed or Seriously Injured in Crashes in Santa Cruz County



Helping us travel safely:

Setting safety and multi-use standards on major corridors (e.g., Soquel Drive).

Increasing recognition that infrastructure enables housing.

Largest State active transportation grant for Rail Trail.

Growing awareness of mobility needs for aging and disabled population.

Use of quick-build and pilot transportation projects.

Vision Zero and Active Transportation Plans align efforts across county.

Project prioritization for storm-damaged roads includes access and equity factors.

Integration of multimodal elements in road projects (bike lanes and sidewalks).

Strong collaboration across agencies.

Improvements in high-use corridors like Soquel Drive adaptive traffic signals.

Voter-approved Measure D provides critical local funding for matching federal and State dollars.

Road crew responsiveness and local knowledge is high.

State and federal transportation grants.

Hindering us from travelling safely:

Alternative transportation lanes painted next to car lanes not enough of a buffer.

Underfunding of roads due to limited property tax and flat gas tax revenues.

Climate disaster recovery requires increasing share of funding.

Primarily car-centric driven infrastructure investments.

High number of rural roads that are hard to maintain, that serve as the only access point for small communities.

Fragmented capital planning across water, roads, sewer, and drainage.

Long timelines between planning, funding, and visible completion.

Escalating costs from delays, labor and material costs.

Partial improvements that do not resolve daily mobility challenges.

Missing sidewalks, bike lanes, and transit connections.

Transportation and mobility projects are often built first in North County and last in South County.

Deferred maintenance on roads increases susceptibility to storm damage.

Health, Wellbeing & Connection

Community Goal

All people have equitable access to physical and mental health care and feel connected through safe, inclusive spaces that foster belonging.

Alignment with County Departments and Plans

A focus on population health countywide, led primarily by the Health Services Agency, including Public Health and Behavioral Health, and aligns with the Community Health Improvement Plan, the Behavioral Health Services Act Plan, and the Master Plan on Aging. It also connects to County Parks and community-based partners that create spaces for social connection, recreation, and community life.

Indicators and How the County Can Influence Change

Population measures such as years of potential life lost and routine health checkups provide insight into overall health outcomes and disparities across geography. County indicators emphasize access and responsiveness, including timely access to mental health services after a request for care. These measures reflect areas where County systems, provider networks, and service coordination can improve access and reduce barriers, particularly for youth, older adults, people with disabilities, and rural residents.

What We Heard from the Community

Participants consistently linked health to connection and belonging. People described long wait times, difficulty navigating systems, and limited services in South County and rural areas as key challenges. Youth and LGBTQ+ participants emphasized the importance of visible, affirming spaces and supports, while older adults spoke about isolation and mobility barriers. Across groups, people noted that health is shaped not only by clinical care, but by access to safe places to gather, move, and connect with others.

Health, Wellbeing & Connection Focus Area Contributors

County Departments

- Health Services Agency
- Human Services Department

Community Partners

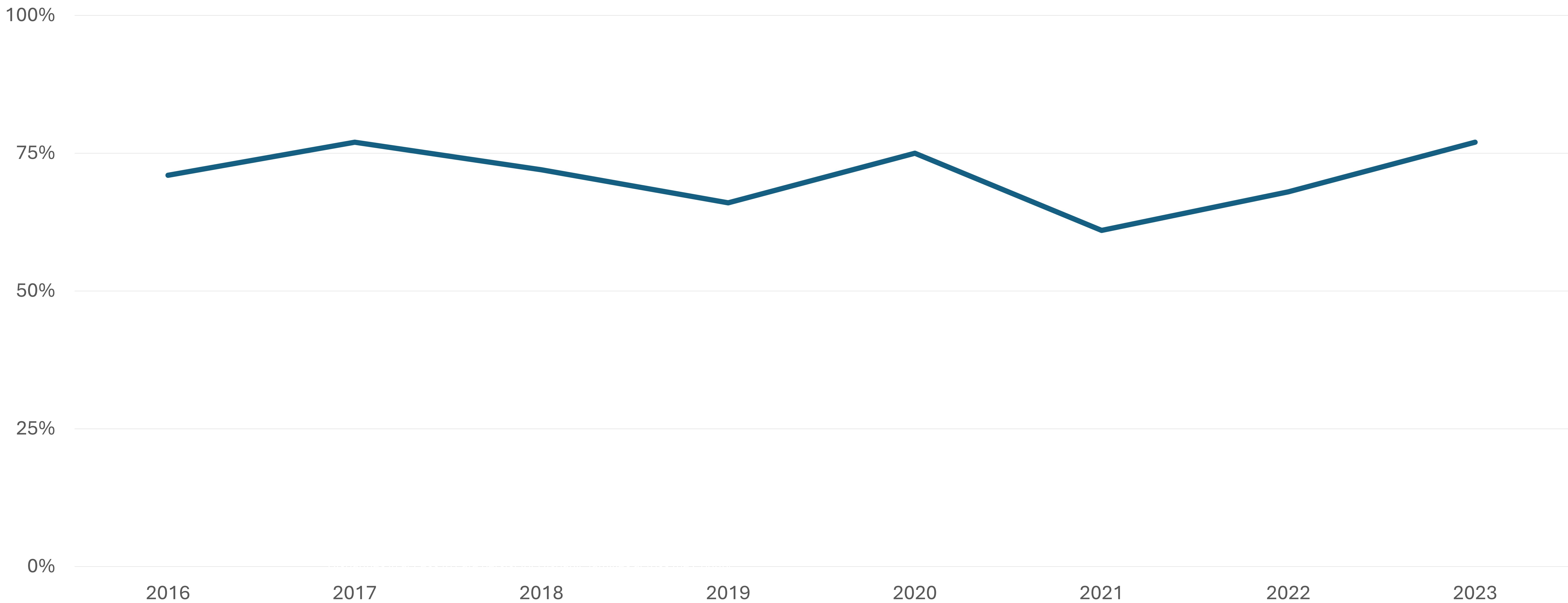
- Raices y Cariño
- Doula Network*
- Arts Council of Santa Cruz County
- Cabrillo College*
- Central CA Alliance for Health*
- Child Development Resource Center*
- Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County, Inc.*
- County Park Friends*
- DataShare Santa Cruz County*
- Dientes Community Dental Care*
- Dominican Hospital*
- Ecology Action*
- Families In Transition of Santa Cruz County, Inc.*
- First 5 Santa Cruz County*
- Hospice of Santa Cruz County*
- Housing Santa Cruz County*
- Kaiser Permanente*
- MAIA Foundation*
- Manifest MedEx*
- Monterey Bay Economic Partnership*
- Museum of Art & History
- O'Neill Sea Odyssey*
- Pajaro Valley Prevention & Student Assistance*
- Pajaro Valley Shelter Services*
- Pajaro Valley Unified School District*
- Raíces y Cariño*
- Santa Cruz Arts League
- Santa Cruz Community Health*
- Santa Cruz County Office of Education*
- Santa Cruz Crisis Stabilization Program*
- Sutter Health*
- The Diversity Center*
- UCSC Institute for Social Transformation*
- United Way of Santa Cruz County (Jovenes Sanos & Youth Action Network)
- Ventures*
- Vista Center*
- Watsonville Community Hospital*
- Watsonville Film Festival
- Watsonville Taiko*

County Commissions & Advisory Bodies

- Behavioral Health Advisory Board
- Circle on Anti-Racism, Economic, and Social Justice

**Participating in Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) & Behavioral Health Services Act (BHSA) Plan community engagement process.*

Adults who have a routine checkup in Santa Cruz County



Helping us increase routine checkups:

Consensus that preventative care is foundational to individual and community well-being.

Public and private safety net clinics offer accessible primary care.

Acknowledgment that decisions across systems have health impacts.

Community organizations play a key role in connecting residents to preventive health services.

Clear focus on priority populations helps target outreach where routine care is most needed.

Recreational and outdoor opportunities promote health awareness.

Technology helps residents access health professionals and reminders.

Medi-Cal and State policy have expanded insurance coverage to low-income residents.

Preventative care visits have rebounded following pandemic.

Hindering us from increasing routine checkups:

Drug overdose deaths disproportionate among Black residents.

Disparities in access to care persist for Hispanic families across the County.

Transportation barriers, especially for disabled residents and people traveling long distances, limit access to appointments.

Fragmented systems across health, housing, and behavioral health make care difficult to navigate.

Fear of immigration enforcement discourages seeking care.

Federal actions creating additional barriers to insurance and access to care.

Public assistance and benefit challenges create instability that deprioritizes preventive health.

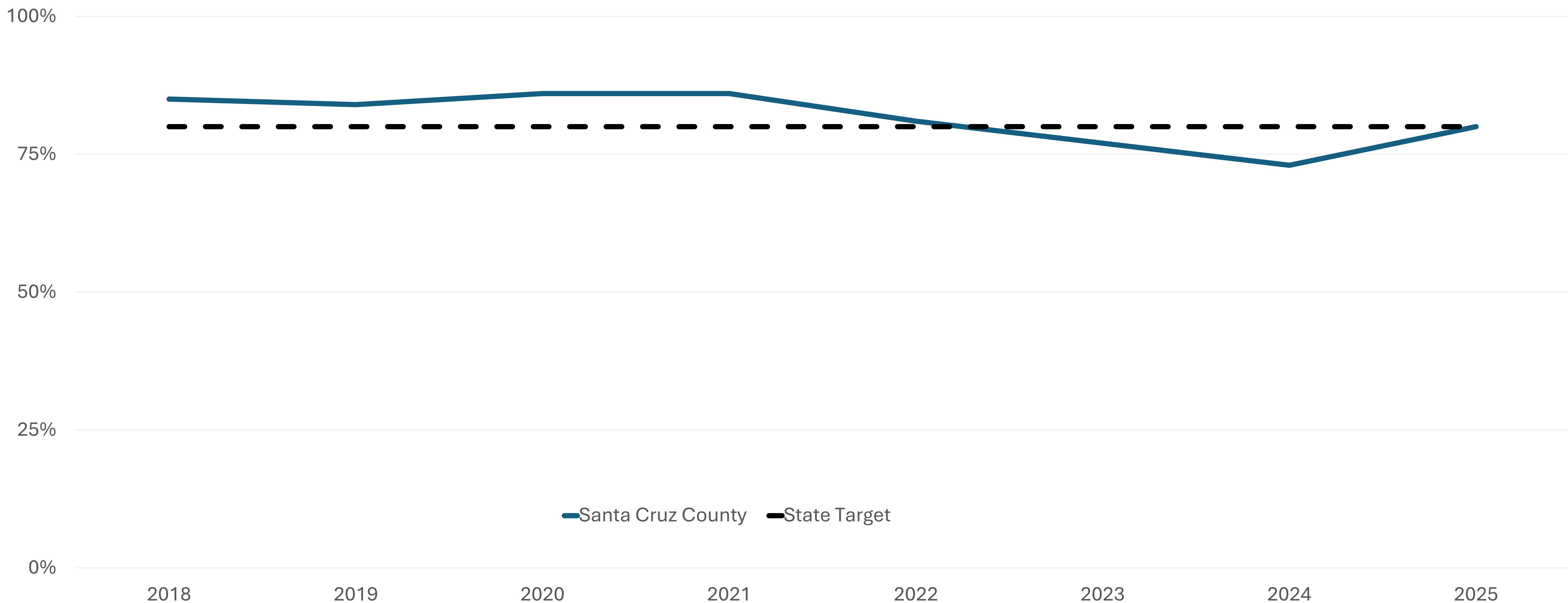
Housing costs and other factors leading to shortage of doctors and healthcare providers.

Social isolation, particularly among people with disabilities.

Funding streams for prevention are less stable than those for treatment.

Healthcare is viewed as an individual responsibility rather than a shared environmental outcome.

Timely Access to Specialty Mental Health Services



Helping us increase access to mental health services:

Growing awareness that housing stability, care coordination, and behavioral health access are interdependent.

Partnerships with law enforcement agencies, including Mental Health Liaisons.

Collaboration across client-serving agencies including County, Education, Veterans, Hospitals, and Courts.

Expanding Substance Use Services including detox, in-patient, and outpatient care.

Mobile crisis services are available 24/7/365.

New Youth Crisis Center includes 8-chair Crisis Stabilization Unit and 16-bed Crisis Residential Program.

Access team is available 24-hours per day.

Hindering us from increasing access to mental health services:

Workforce shortages in clinical, admin, and analytic roles limit ability to meet care needs.

Stigma around mental health resulting in people not seeking care.

Reliance on emergency rooms, 5150 holds, and inpatient settings as entry points to care.

State and federal funding complexity and limitations.

State payment reform resulting in lower reimbursement rates.

Regional disparities in access to care.

Safety & Justice

Community Goal

All people live in safe neighborhoods, experience fair treatment in justice systems, and strengthen community trust through prevention, accountability, and restorative practices.

Alignment with County Departments and Plans

A focus on public safety, led primarily by the County's public safety departments including the District Attorney's Office, Probation, Public Defender's Office, and Sheriff's Office, and aligns with the Community Corrections Partnership Implementation Plan, the Plan for Shared Safety, and the Probation Strategic Plan. It also reflects partnerships with the Superior Court, community-based organizations focused on prevention, diversion, and victim support, as well as restorative and neighborhood-based justice programs.

Indicators and How the County Can Influence Change

Population measures such as overall safety rates help describe community conditions, while County indicators such as the daily jail population, disaggregated by race and ethnicity, highlight areas where County decisions, programs, and alternatives to incarceration can influence outcomes. These indicators support a focus on prevention, diversion, and fair system practices rather than relying solely on enforcement metrics.

What We Heard from the Community

Community members described safety as more than enforcement. Participants emphasized trust, fairness, and prevention as central to feeling safe. Survivors and families spoke about the importance of accessible support services, while others raised concerns about gaps in diversion programs and treatment capacity. Many highlighted the value of restorative approaches and neighborhood-based solutions, especially for youth, and the need for clearer communication about how justice systems work and how people can access help.

Safety & Justice Focus Area Contributors

County Departments

- District Attorney's Office
- Probation Department
- Public Defender Office
- Sheriff-Coroner

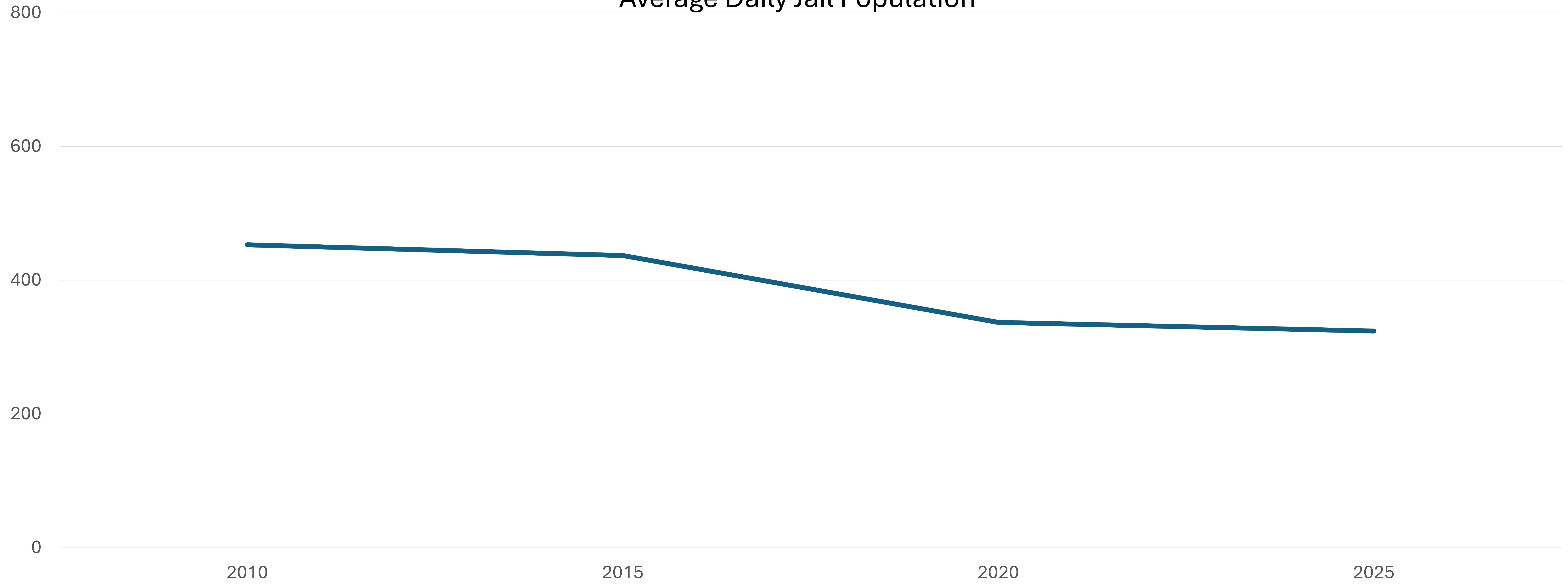
Community Partners

- Anti-Crime Team
- Barrios Unidos
- CAB's Family Advisory Council
- CASA
- City of Capitola
- City of Santa Cruz
- City of Scotts Valley
- City of Watsonville
- County Office of Education
- First 5
- MENTors
- MILPA
- Peace United Church
- Survivors of Crime

County Commissions & Advisory Bodies

- Commission on Justice and Gender
- Community Corrections Partnership
- Justice & Gender Commission
- Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Commission
- Latino Affairs Commission
- Law Enforcement Chief's Association
- Women's Commission

Average Daily Jail Population



Helping us reduce jail population:

Safety is created through prevention and accountability.

Diversion & treatment are legitimate justice responses.

Community trust is foundational to safety.

Mental health & housing are safety issues.

Existing diversion & alternative to custody pathways (restorative justice, neighborhood courts, pretrial).

Law enforcement partnerships like Mental Health Liaisons.

Access to safety net services like food, housing navigation, and job training.

District Attorney advocacy for victims and survivors of crime.

Programs like Public Defender holistic defense that support reentry & coordinated connection to resources.

Cross-agency collaboration (Sheriff, Probation, DA, PD, Behavioral Health, CBOs).

De-escalation and crisis intervention techniques reduce arrests during mental health crises.

Trusted CBOs that prevent system escalation by meeting needs earlier.

Prevention-focused approaches like after-school programs & youth engagement.

Hindering us from reducing jail population:

Mistrust between communities and justice system.

The length of booking, court, and release timelines.

Impacts of unresolved trauma and victimhood leading to justice system.

Historical racial and ethnic disparities continue to impact outcomes.

Limited access to visitation, community support, and legal teams while in jail.

Homelessness and untreated illnesses viewed as primarily a safety issue.

Lack of substance use disorder inpatient beds and long waitlists.

Federal policy changes and benefit cuts.

People with low or no income have limited access to bail.

Some diversion programs only apply to serious charges or prison exposure, missing early intervention opportunities.

Limited after-hours crisis response.

High level of behavioral health needs in jail.

Lack of secure mental health beds to divert people from incarceration.

Understaffing of law enforcement, mental health liaisons, and outreach staff limits safe responses, prevention, and follow-up outside of jail.

Environment, Climate & Resilience

Community Goal

All people are prepared for climate and natural hazards, benefit from clean air and water, and live alongside healthy ecosystems that support both human wellbeing and native species.

Alignment with County Departments and Plans

A focus on our natural environment, primarily led by Office of Response, Recovery, and Resilience (OR3), Environmental Health, Parks, and community partners through the Climate Action and Adaptation Plan, Local Hazard Mitigation Plan, Measure Q Vision Plan, and regional conservation efforts. These plans guide how the County prepares for climate impacts, protects natural resources, and invests in long-term resilience.

Indicators and How the County Can Influence Change

Population measures such as greenhouse gas emissions and water quality describe environmental conditions across the county. County indicators focus on tangible actions, including parcels protected and lane miles treated for hazard mitigation. These measures reflect County decisions about land use, infrastructure, and environmental stewardship that directly affect community resilience.

What We Heard from the Community

Residents expressed strong concern about wildfire risk, flooding, water quality, and access to parks and open space. Rural communities emphasized preparedness and infrastructure resilience, while others highlighted the role of parks and natural areas in health and quality of life. Participants also raised the importance of protecting ecosystems and species as part of long-term community wellbeing.

Environment, Climate & Resilience Focus Area Contributors

County Departments

- Office of Response, Recovery, and Resilience
- Parks, Open Space, and Cultural Services

Community Partners

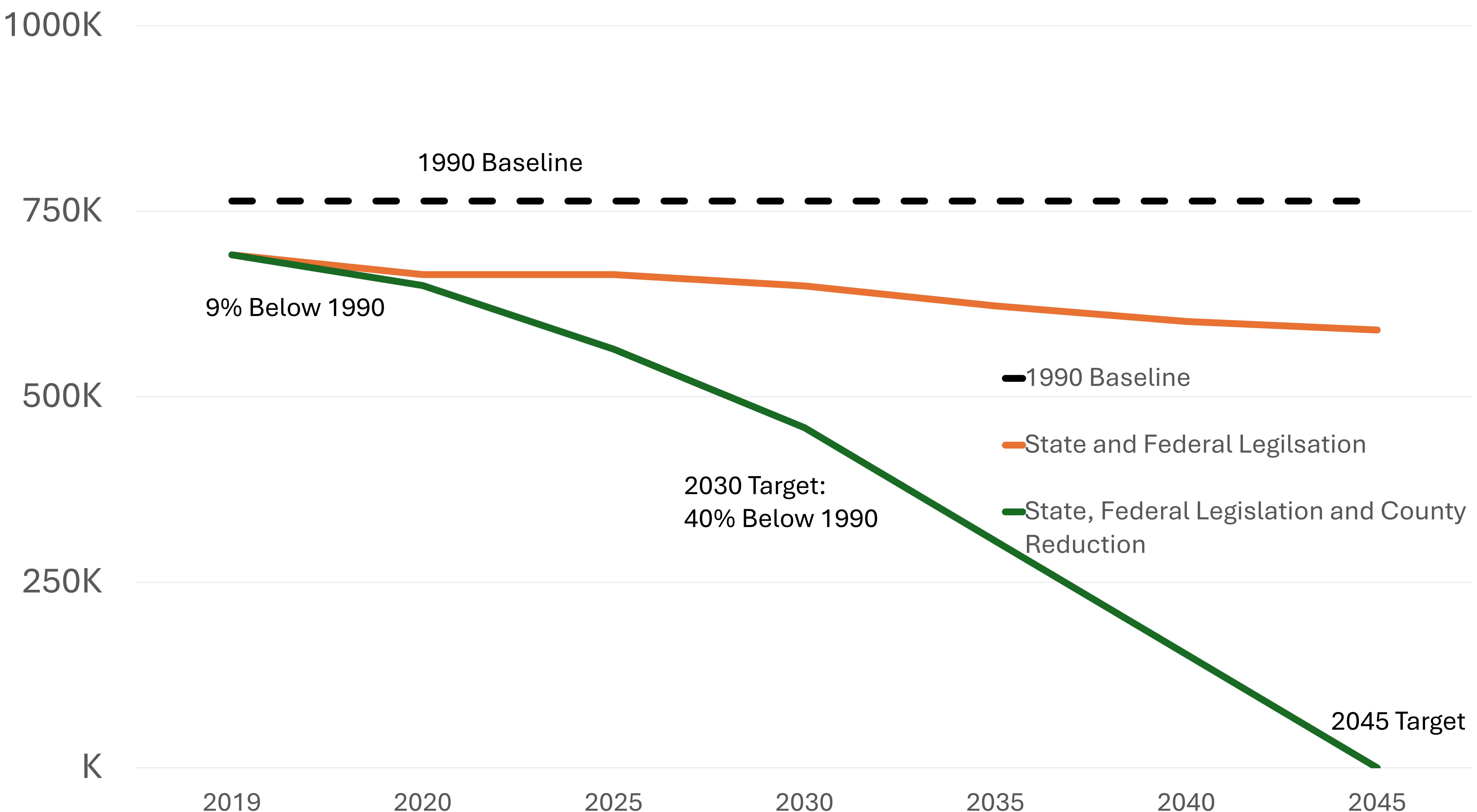
- Big Creek Lumber*
- Bike Santa Cruz County*
- Building with Purpose*
- CalFire*
- Central Coast Energy Services*
- Citizens for Climate Lobby*
- Cities of: Capitola, Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley, Watsonville*
- Eat for Earth*
- Ecology Action*
- Elkhorn Slough Foundation*
- Equity Transit Santa Cruz*
- Fish Wise*
- Friends of Santa Cruz State Parks*
- Friends of the North Coast*
- Healthy Oceans Healthy People*
- Homeless Garden Project*
- It's Our Home*
- Land Trust of Santa Cruz County*
- Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute*
- Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary Foundation*
- O'Neill Sea Odyssey*
- Organic Farmers Research Foundation*
- Regeneracion Pajaro Valley*
- Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz Co.*
- Santa Cruz Climate Action Network*
- Santa Cruz Hub for Sustainable Living*
- Santa Cruz Mountain Stewardship Network*
- Santa Cruz Puma Project*
- Santa Cruz YIMBY*
- Save Our Shores*
- Santa Cruz Mountain Trails Stewardship*
- The Bird School Project*
- The Oceans Voice*
- The Otter Project Inc*
- UCSC Climate Coalition*
- Valley Women's Club*
- Ventana Wilderness Alliance*
- Watsonville Wetlands Watch*
- Wild Farm Alliance*

County Commissions & Advisory Bodies

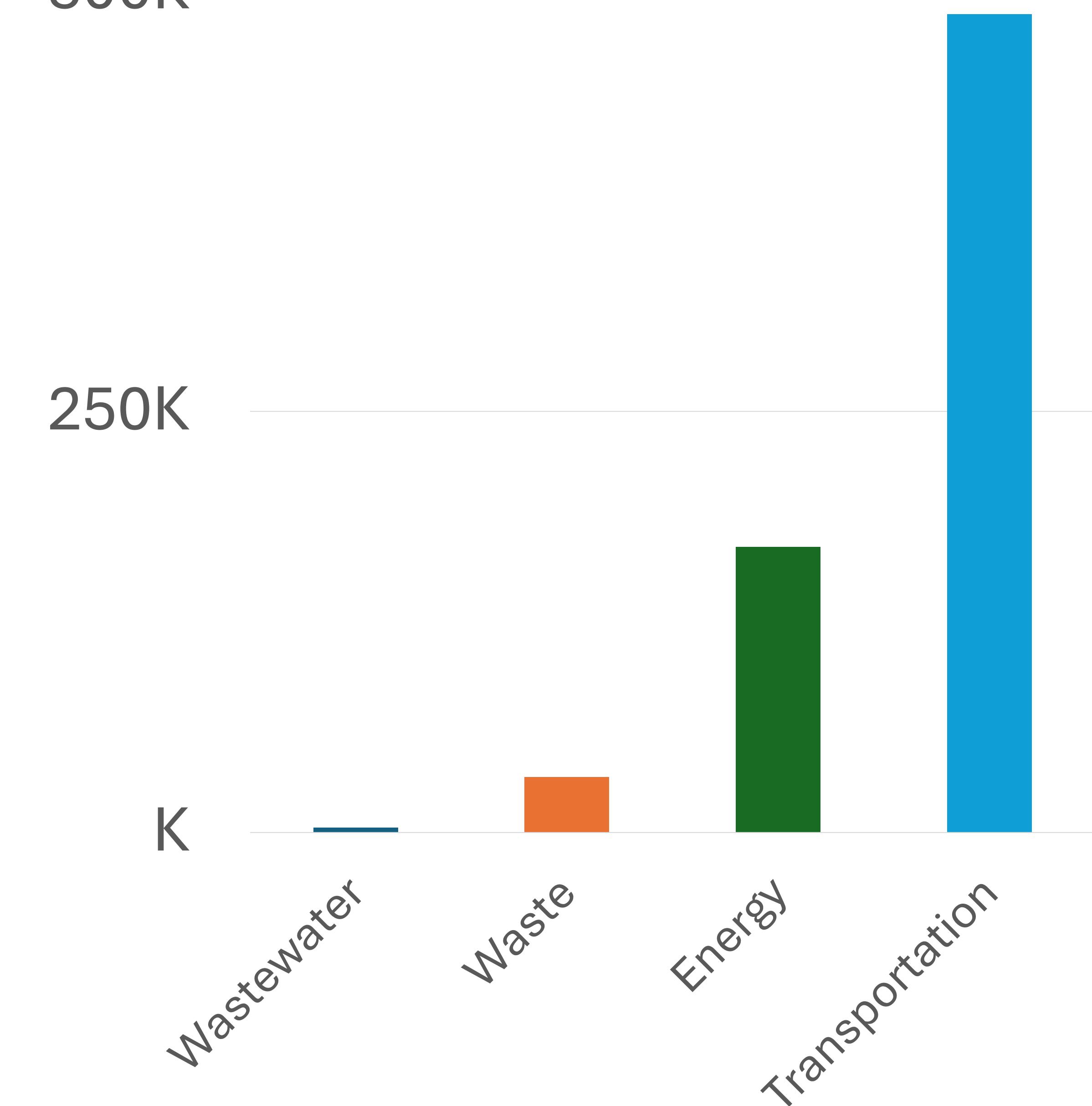
- Commission on the Environment
- Fish and Wildlife Commission
- Parks & Open Space Commission

**Participating in Climate Action and Adaptation Plan, Measure Q, and Local Hazard Mitigation Plan community engagement processes.*

Greenhouse Gas Emissions (Metric Tons CO2e)



Greenhouse Gas Emissions By Sector



Helping us reduce greenhouse gas emissions:

County and Cities have adopted Climate Action plans and align on reducing emissions.

Natural lands, working lands, and coastal ecosystems are viewed as assets, not just amenities.

Investments in alternative transportation like bike lanes, trails.

County departments integrated climate considerations into policy analysis.

Water use continues to be more efficient, with less water serving more connections.

Higher density urban housing has become more acceptable; passage of Housing Element.

Broad acceptance that climate change is real and impacting the county.

County leadership in establishing Central Coast Community Energy.

Rise of E-Bikes as an alternative to automobiles.

Measure Q passed to support land conservation, restoration, and nature-based climate solutions.

Hindering us from reducing greenhouse gas emissions:

Climate action perceived as competing with housing, infrastructure, and economic priorities.

Climate responsibilities are spread across many agencies, creating coordination and capacity challenges.

Lack of fast, high-capacity transit alternatives to single-occupancy vehicles.

Climate-related risks continue to intensify.

Low-density, older housing stock is energy hungry.

Across all sectors county residents are more likely to commute to jobs outside the county.

Lack of federal and State funding leaves local funding inadequate relative to transformation required.

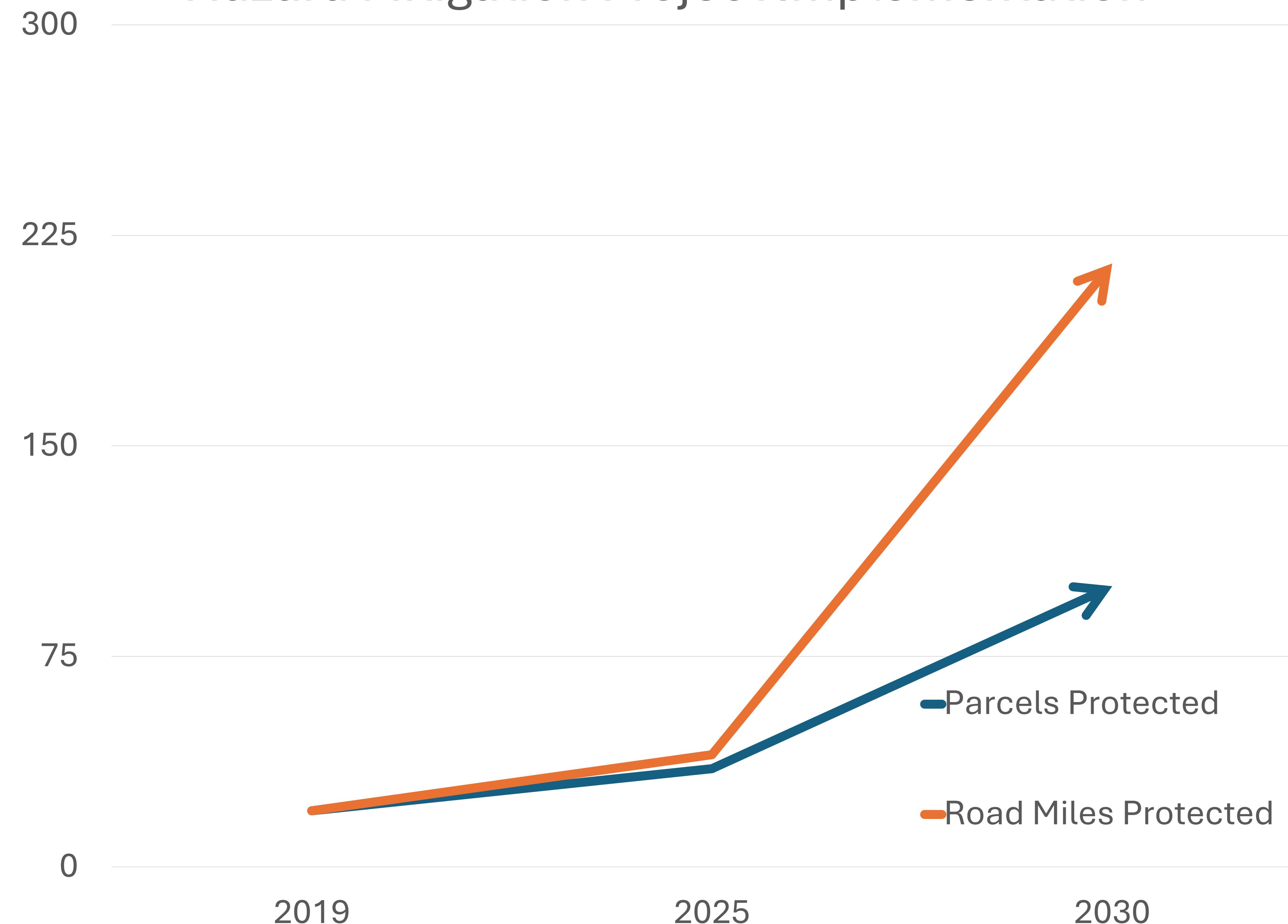
Retrofitting existing buildings and infrastructure is costly compared to new construction.

Existing development is auto-oriented and energy intensive.

A large share of emissions is tied to systems that are beyond County control (energy markets, transportation behavior).

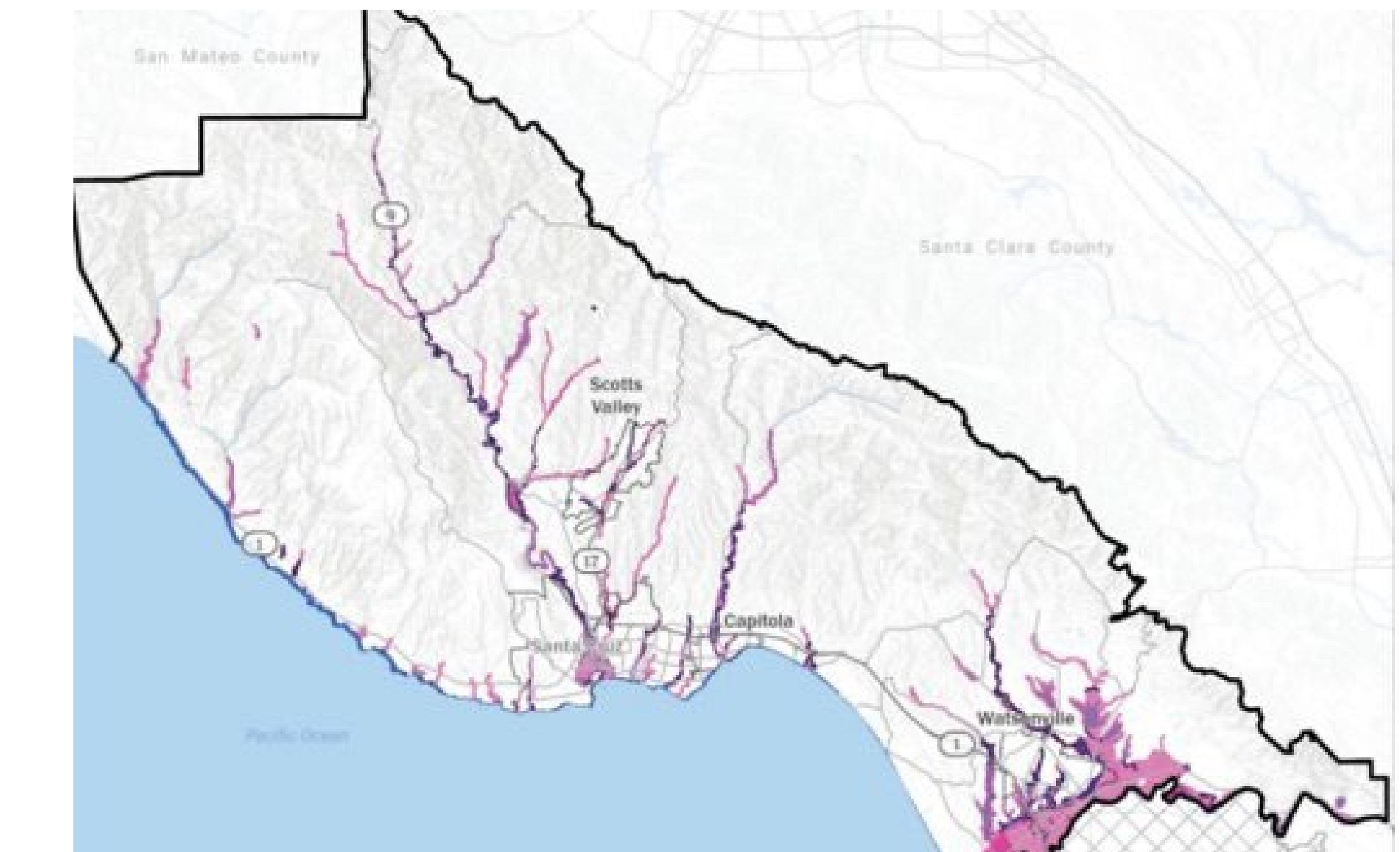
Pollution and emission risks are historically borne by residents with the least resources.

Hazard Mitigation Project Implementation



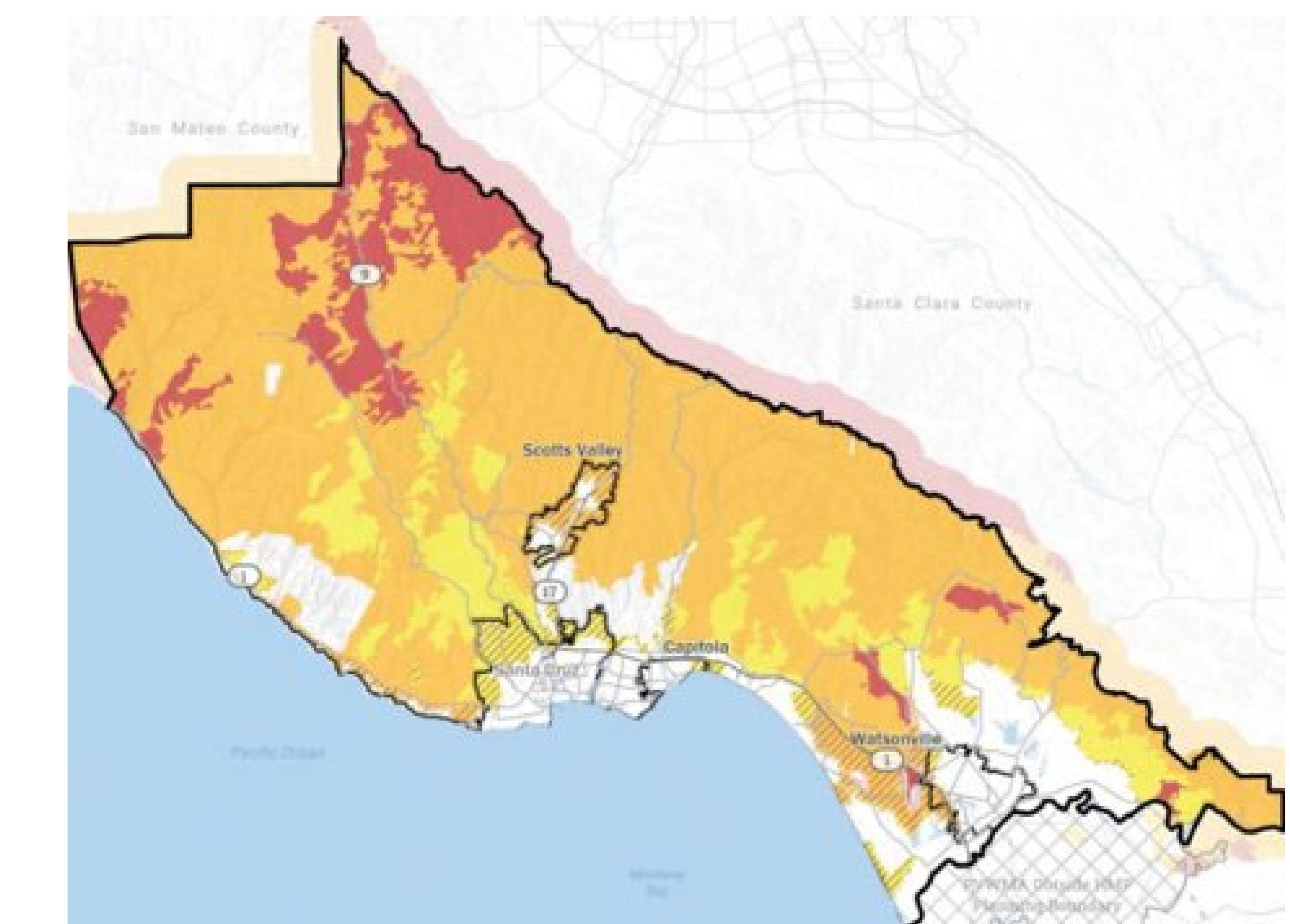
FLOOD EXPOSURE

9,200 people	Population living in 100-year and 500-year FEMA flood zones
3,000 parcels	Number of parcels located in 100-year and 500-year FEMA flood zones
\$2.9 billion	Estimated total market value of property located in 100-year and 500-year FEMA flood zones
265 facilities	Critical facilities located in 100-year and 500-year FEMA flood zones
170 miles	Miles of lifeline infrastructure located in 100-year and 500-year FEMA flood zones



WILDFIRE EXPOSURE

51,600 people	Population living in high and very high fire hazard zones
18,800 parcels	Number of parcels located in high and very high fire hazard zones
\$20 billion	Estimated total market value of property located in high and very high fire hazard zones
2,780 facilities	Critical facilities located in high and very high fire hazard zones
1,900 miles	Miles of lifeline infrastructure located in high and very high fire hazard zones



Helping us protect roads and parcels:

Increase in sense of shared community responsibility following major disasters.

Insurance market driving interest in neighborhood Firewise certification.

Formation of dedicated agency to manage Pajaro River flood risk across multiple jurisdictions.

Measure Q passed by voters providing a long-term, sustainable source of investment and local match for adaptation and mitigation projects.

State 'green tape' initiatives lowering cost and complexity of wildfire risk reduction and multi-benefit projects.

County department (OR3) dedicated to coordinating resources and response regionally.

Growing acknowledgement that repeated disaster-repair cycle is unaffordable.

Vulnerability assessments have identified specific infrastructure at risk from flooding, sea level rise, and wildfire, and can support prioritization of limited resources.

Existing land use, environmental review, and capital planning processes incorporate hazard considerations.

Historical underinvestment in South County (i.e., Pajaro Levee system) due to low property values deflating federal benefit/cost ratios.

Limited funding for repair and maintenance compounds infrastructure vulnerability to hazards, reinforcing a repetitive cycle of damage and repair.

Many at-risk roads, bridges, and parcels were built under historical climate assumptions that no longer hold.

Cancellation of primary federal mitigation grant program (BRIC) and uncertainty regarding future FEMA assistance.

Data on completed mitigation outcomes is not yet systematically tracked; implementation is fragmented across many departments.

Vulnerable development often co-occurs with sensitive habitat areas, which drives up complexity and cost of implementing mitigation projects.

Mitigation requires action across jurisdictional boundaries and public/private lands, limiting what the County can achieve on its own.

Housing unaffordability / lack of options for residents to relocate to safer areas.

Limited ability of the County to modify vulnerability of legacy development due to location / proximity to hazards; limited implementation of buyout programs.

Hindering us from protecting roads and parcels:

Access to Basic Needs & Support

Community Goal

All people can meet basic needs and access care that promotes safety, stability, and dignity.

Alignment with County Departments and Plans

A focus on the County's core safety-net role, primarily led by Human Services, Housing for Health, and partnerships with community-based and faith-based organizations. It aligns with efforts related to Master Plan on Aging and Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz County, ensuring access and dignity for our most vulnerable community members.

Indicators and How the County Can Influence Change

Population measures such as the Point-in-Time Count and insurance coverage help describe community needs. County indicators emphasize system performance, including exits to permanent housing and CalFresh utilization by race and ethnicity. These indicators highlight where County processes, outreach, and coordination can reduce barriers and improve access.

What We Heard from the Community

Participants emphasized that access, not just availability, is the key challenge. People described difficulty navigating systems, inconsistent information, and fear or stigma as barriers to getting help. Trusted messengers, culturally responsive outreach, and simplified processes were frequently named as factors that help people access services earlier and avoid crisis.

Access to Basic Needs & Support Focus Area Contributors

County Departments

- Continuum of Care
- District Attorney's Office
- Health Services Agency
 - Children's Behavioral Health
 - Employee Benefits Service Division
 - Family & Children Services
- Human Services Department
 - Adult Protective Services
 - Child Support Services
 - Family & Children's Services
- Probation Dept

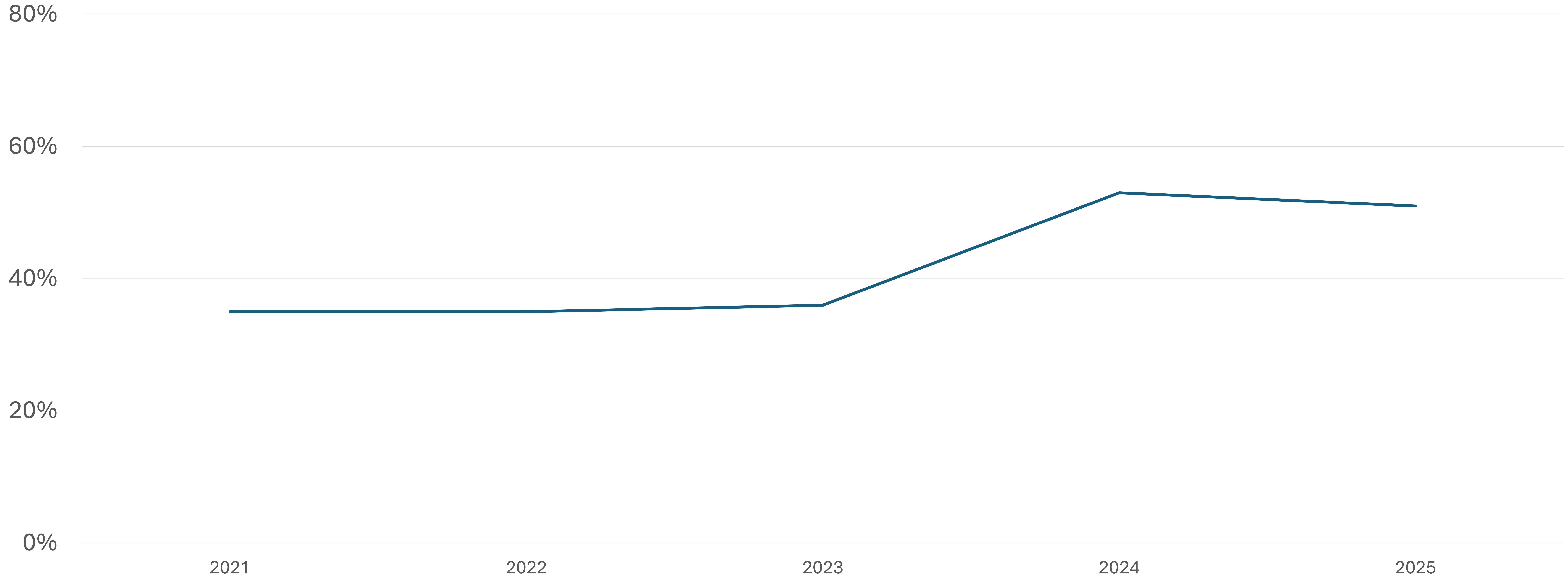
Community Partners

- Association of Faith Communities
- Children's Network
- Cities of Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley, Watsonville
- Community Bridges
- County Office of Education
- Cradle to Career
- First 5
- Housing 4 Health Lived Experience Groups
- Housing Authority
- Positive Discipline Community Resources
- United Way
- Ventures
- Walnut Ave Family & Women's Center

County Commissions & Advisory Bodies

- First 5 Commission
- In-Home Supportive Services Commission
- Latino Affairs Commission
- Seniors Commission
- Youth Advisory Task Force

Percent of Households Exiting to Permanent Housing



Helping us reduce homelessness:

Increased affordable housing and subsidies for extremely low-income households.

Increased coordination and resources shared between North and South County.

Changes to State and local regulations make it easier to build more housing of various types.

Eviction protection and prevention programs to keep people from becoming homeless at all.

Strong alignment of partners through local Continuum of Care for coordinated entry to housing.

Local landlords accepting incentives to accept residents with housing vouchers.

Landlords accepting housing vouchers.

Employment, education, training for higher-paying jobs that increase household income.

Increase in permanent supportive housing capacity.

Growing alignment that supply of extremely low-income housing needs to increase.

Making it easier to apply for affordable housing opportunities and wait lists.

Increase in shelter capacity.

Hindering us from reducing homelessness:

Limited supply of very affordable units and long waitlist for vouchers slow exits.

Heavy reliance on unstable federal and State funding leads to reactive program design rather than outcome-driven investment.

Seniors and people with disabilities are fastest growing homeless demographic.

Lack of quality ongoing support after people secure housing.

Permitting requirements and excessive red tape.

Even "affordable housing" is often unaffordable for very low-income households.

Prevention remains under-resourced compared to crisis response, leading to higher inflow and slower exit rates.

Narrative that homelessness is a choice or a result primarily of substance use or mental health.

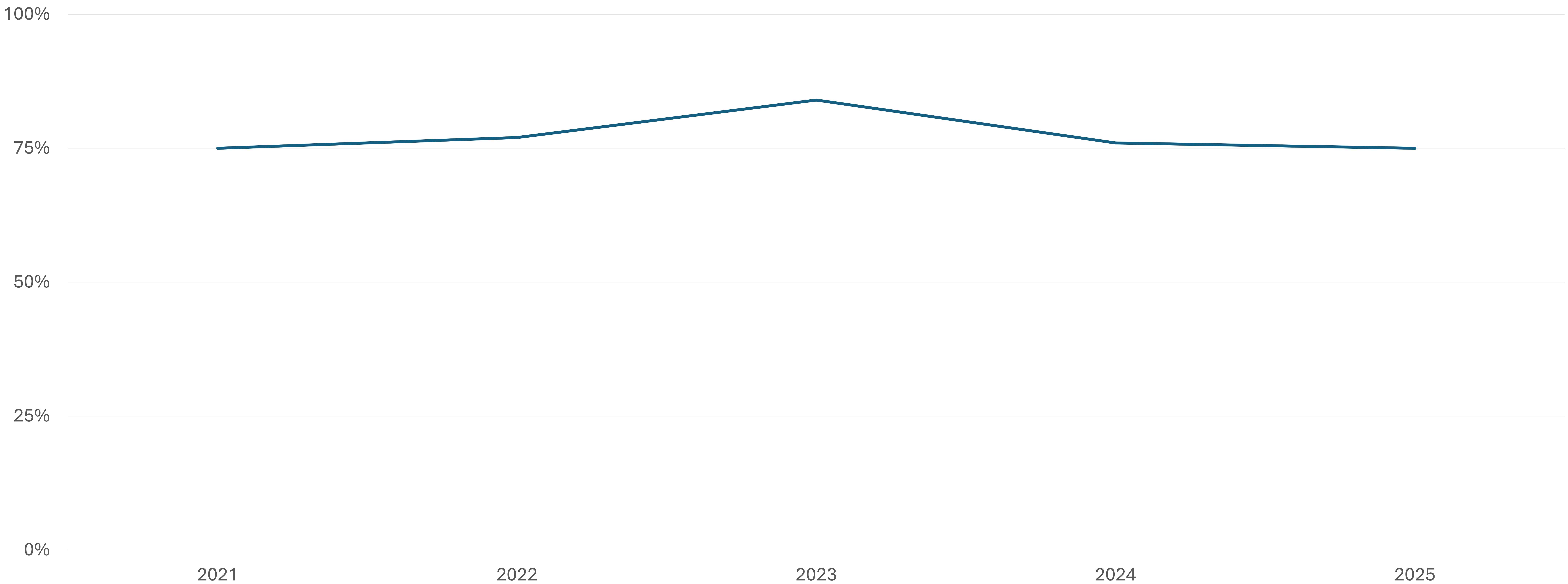
Many households still need support after being housed, and post-housing services are insufficient.

Closure or reduction of day services without plans for replacement creates instability to housing pathways.

Misaligned definitions of success, eligibility rules, and data systems across jurisdictions complicate exits and funding eligibility.

Economic instability and poverty make it harder for households to sustain permanent housing.

Food Assistance Participation Rate



Helping us increase food assistance participation:

Ease of access to food benefits for those that can navigate an online system.

Strong community partnerships increase enrollment through trusted messengers.

Establishment of South County Government Center increases access to benefits in South County.

Food seen as a basic need everyone deserves and foundational to health.

Programs to deliver food to seniors provide meals and combat isolation.

Strong State and local data systems allow for real-time tracking of participation and churn.

Long local history of support for local food banks.

State expansion of eligibility has increased eligibility and access to food.

Schools and healthcare settings are supporting enrollment in benefits and nourishment at their sites.

Benefits can be accessed by phone for individuals who do not want to apply online or visit an office.

Hindering us from increasing food assistance participation:

Increasing complexity of eligibility rules and verification requirements deter applications.

Rural areas face access barriers related to transportation and connectivity.

High cost of living forces people to go without food if they choose to pay their rent and utilities.

Stigma around public benefits discourages eligible households from applying.

Gap between eligibility and participation among eligible households.

High cost of eating healthy despite healthy food produced on central coast.

Limited staffing and funding for proactive outreach.

Federal reintroduction of work requirements will reduce the number of people enrolled in benefits.

Fear and mistrust of government system, particularly among immigrant and mixed-status households.

Economy & Job Growth

Community Goal

All people have access to quality jobs, small business opportunities, and career pathways that allow them to earn a living wage in Santa Cruz County.

Alignment with County Departments and Plans

A focus on economic development and job growth, primarily led by the Workforce Development Board. It aligns with the County's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, and partnerships with education institutions, employers, and chambers of commerce. It connects workforce, education, housing, and broadband investments that support economic participation.

Indicators and How the County Can Influence Change

Population measures such as employment rates describe overall economic conditions. County indicators focus on job quality and broadband access, reflecting areas where the County can influence training pipelines, employer partnerships, and infrastructure that enables people to work and learn locally.

What We Heard from the Community

Residents spoke less about job growth and more about affordability and stability. Working families, youth, and South County participants emphasized the gap between wages and cost of living, limited local job opportunities, and the importance of career pathways tied to health care, public service, and emerging industries. Small businesses highlighted the need for support navigating regulations and accessing capital. Finally, access to fast and reliable broadband internet was raised as a way to both participate in the economy and stay connected to community and essential services.

Economy & Job Growth Focus Area Contributors

County Departments

- Assessor-Recorder
- Auditor Controller Treasurer Tax Collector
- County Executive Office
- County Clerk-Elections
- Information Services

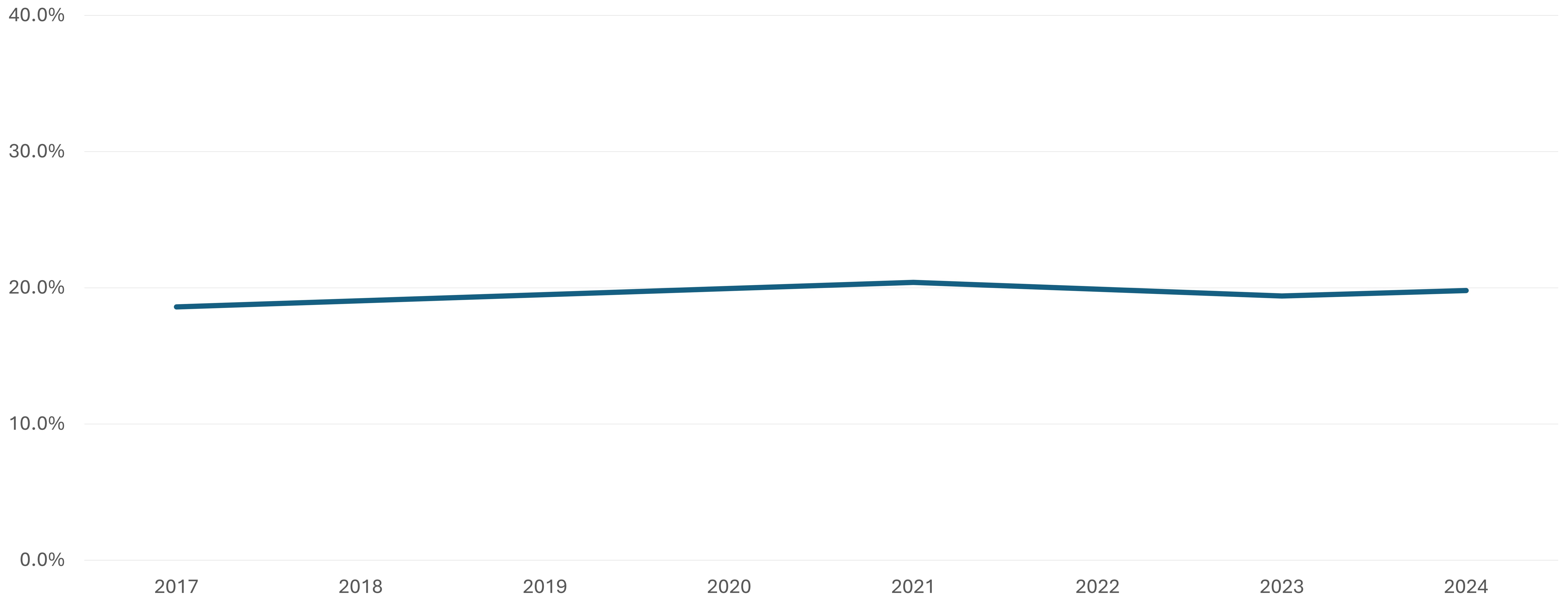
Community Partners

- Arts Council Santa Cruz County
- Capitola Chamber of Commerce
- Digital Nest
- Drone, Aviation, and Robotics Technology (DART)
- Farm Bureau
- Freedom Rotary
- La Selva Beach Improvement Association
- Museum of Art and History
- Plaza Virgil Merchant Association
- Santa Cruz Area Chamber of Commerce
- San Lorenzo Valley Roundtable
- Santa Cruz Arts League
- Seacliff Improvement Association
- UC Santa Cruz
- Ventures
- Visit Santa Cruz County
- Watsonville Film Festival
- Women in Leadership for Diverse Representation

County Commissions & Advisory Bodies

- Workforce Development Board

Tier 1 (Family Wage) Jobs as a share of all County Jobs



Helping us increase Family Wage Jobs:

Housing affordability and job quality are understood to be linked.

Local leaders see job quality as central to county's future.

Employment is stable despite aging and declining population.

Local career pathways: drone technology, trades, applied technical training.

Upskilling programs for workers to move into higher paying roles.

Active workforce partners like Workforce Development Board, Cabrillo College, El Pajaro CDC, UCSC.

Educational attainment among residents is high and improving.

Sector partners like DART and Digital Nest providing career pathways for family wage jobs.

Growing need for family wage employees in medical and defense, aerospace, and transportation manufacturing.

Hindering us from increasing Family Wage jobs:

Assumption that high-cost-of-living is "just how it is."

Across all sectors county residents are more likely to commute to jobs outside the county.

Tension between protecting current conditions and making changes to attract families and new workers.

Housing costs extremely high relative to wages. Working age adults are leaving.

Family wage benchmarks feel unattainable for small businesses.

Job growth is concentrated in low wage sectors like tourism and hospitality.

Low commercial vacancy and high operating costs create barriers for small and mid-sized employers.

High cost of doing business.

County geography produces inconsistent access to programs, incentives, and supports.

Rapidly aging population; with 1 in 3 residents over 60 by 2030.

Downtown and commercial corridors show ongoing vacancy.