

COUNTY OF SANTA CRUZ

Strategic Plan

2026–2032

June 2026
County Executive Office

Nicole D. Coburn

The purpose of the strategic plan is to set forth a vision grounded in the hopes of the people that we serve. The Strategic Plan 2026–2032 was created to help do exactly that: provide a practical roadmap that reflects community values, informs County decision-making, and helps align our work with the needs of the people we serve.

Over the past two years, thousands of residents from across Santa Cruz County including farmworkers, seniors, youth, small business owners, and community members from every region, helped shape this plan through conversation and collaboration. Together, the County and community identified what matters most: a place where people can afford to live, feel safe, access care, protect the environment and build opportunity for themselves and their families.

Built from more than 4,500 points of engagement and informed by staff, community partners, and the Board of Supervisors, this plan outlines six focus areas that define our long-term priorities, along with clear goals, measurable indicators, and strategic actions to help guide progress.

Just as important as what we do is how we do it. This plan is a commitment to partnership, transparency, and accountability; values that shape not only the work ahead, but how we work together to achieve it.

Strategic Plan 2026–2032 is just not a roadmap for County government. It is a shared blueprint for Santa Cruz County's future, built together to help guide decisions, strengthen trust, and create lasting progress for the community we all call home.

Nicole D. Coburn

County Executive Officer, County of Santa Cruz

STRATEGIC PLAN OVERVIEW

County of Santa Cruz Strategic Plan 2026–2032

VISION

Santa Cruz County is a healthy, safe, and affordable community that is culturally diverse, economically inclusive, and environmentally vibrant.

MISSION

An open and responsive government, the County of Santa Cruz delivers quality, data-driven services that strengthen our community and enhance opportunity.

EQUITY STATEMENT Equity in action in Santa Cruz County is a transformative process that embraces individuals of every status, providing unwavering support, dignity, and compassion.

Through this commitment, the County ensures intentional opportunities and access, fostering an environment where everyone can thrive and belong.

COUNTY VALUES

Collaboration

Building trust, partnerships, and shared purpose

Accessibility

Removing barriers, serving every community member

Integrity

Equity, transparency, and accountability in action

IMPLEMENTATION LENSES

Health in All Policies

How will this work improve the conditions that people need to thrive?

Equity

Who stands to benefit most?
Whose perspectives need to be included?

Fiscal and Operational

How are we being good stewards of financial, natural, and community resources?

FOCUS AREAS

Housing and Infrastructure

Health, Wellbeing, and Connection

Safety and Justice

Environment, Climate and Resilience

Access to Basic Needs and Support

Economy and Job Growth

GOALS

Increase Housing Units
Permit 2,541+ units by 2032

Reduce Transportation Deaths
25% reduction

Invest in County Assets and Infrastructure
Establish condition baseline

Expand Mental Health Care
50% increase in step-down beds

Expand Parks and Gathering Spaces
15-min walk / 10-min bike

Reduce Recidivism
10% reduction over 6 years

Strengthen Ecosystem Health and Resilience
Increase public and private property protection

Climate Action Goal
Coming 2027

Reduce Homelessness
50% finding permanent housing

Federal Policy Response Goal
Coming Fall 2026

Grow Family-Wage Jobs
46% of jobs at living wage

Use AI to Improve Services
Increase staff time serving community

COMMUNITY VOICE

What We Heard

This plan was built on listening. Between 2024 and 2026, the County conducted extensive community engagement, reaching over 4,500 residents across all five supervisorial districts through town halls, surveys, focus groups, and targeted outreach to communities too often left out of formal planning processes. Every focus area, goal, and indicator in this plan reflects what we heard.

The full story is documented in the [Community and Stakeholder Engagement Report](#).

Five Themes That Cut Across Everything

Across more than 4,500 points of contact, six town halls, dozens of focus groups, and two surveys, five themes emerged with remarkable consistency, cutting across every focus area, geography, and population.

Housing is the foundation.

Housing was the top priority across every district, demographic, and engagement format. Community members described it not as an abstract policy issue but as the daily reality of spending too much, living too far from work, or not being able to stay. Until housing is stable, affordable, and resilient, progress in every other focus area will be harder to sustain.

Behavioral health is the most urgent unmet need in County services.

The County does not have enough capacity to meet demand for mental health and substance use treatment, and the consequences show up everywhere, in emergency departments, the justice system, and homelessness. This was named consistently by community members, partners, and County staff alike.

The cost of living is a cross-cutting barrier.

Wages have not kept pace with housing and living costs. This affects community members, employers, and the County's own workforce. It came up in every focus area, not just housing and the economy.

Trust is built through specific practices.

Where the County has invested in trusted messengers, bilingual staff, and consistent relationships, it has made genuine progress. Trust is not abstract, it is built through specific practices, and those practices showed up in the data as some of the most effective tools the County has.

Coordination gaps cost people.

Across focus areas, community members and partners described a system that requires too much navigation. When services are siloed, the people who pay the price are those who can least afford to advocate for themselves. This is an operational problem the County has real ability to address.

What We Heard by Focus Area

Housing and Infrastructure

Housing was the top-ranked priority in the community survey and came up across every engagement format, district, and demographic. Community members described it as the condition that shapes everything else.

Health, Wellbeing and Connection

Behavioral health was named the most urgent unmet need in County services. There is broad alignment, across community members, partners, and staff, on the need to expand treatment capacity.

Safety and Justice

Community members want safety and accountability and are also skeptical of approaches that have not worked. There was consistent interest in prevention, early intervention, and support for survivors of crime.

Environment, Climate and Resilience

The environment showed the strongest ratio of helping factors to hindering ones. What the engagement surfaced is not a lack of will but a growing gap between existing resources and the scale of climate-driven risk.

Access to Basic Needs and Support

Community members described a county with genuine assets in its network of organizations and frontline workers, alongside deep structural gaps, especially around housing instability, fragmented services, and fear of immigration enforcement.

Economy and Job Growth

The engagement revealed a clear tension: Santa Cruz County has real assets in workforce development and industry partnerships, but the cost of living has outpaced wages to the point where even employed residents are struggling to stay.

Who We Heard from Priority Communities

A core commitment of the engagement process was that the communities most impacted by County systems, and historically least included in planning decisions, would have a prominent voice. The County made deliberate efforts to reach farmworkers, immigrants and undocumented community members, youth, seniors, people experiencing homelessness, survivors of crime, small business owners in underserved areas, Black community members, LGBTQ+ community members, Mixteco speakers and Indigenous communities, rural communities including San Lorenzo Valley and Davenport, and South County communities in Pajaro Valley, Watsonville, and Freedom.

Santa Cruz County is not one place, it is a collection of hyperlocal communities, each with its own history, geography, and needs. From the mountain communities of the San Lorenzo Valley to the agricultural communities of the Pajaro Valley and the North Coast, to the unincorporated neighborhoods that straddle city limits, what works in one place may not work in another. This plan recognizes diversity as a strength. Each community has a contribution to make to a county that is better off for everyone, and each deserves strategies and investments that reflect their specific conditions.

HOW WE CREATE CHANGE

From Community Voice to Results

The Strategic Plan translates community priorities into coordinated County action. Those priorities are reflected in the County's vision, values, focus areas, and goals.

The plan is designed to create alignment across departments, plans, budgets, and partnerships. Values guide how we work. Implementation lenses guide how we make decisions. Focus areas identify where we concentrate our efforts. Goals and indicators help us measure progress and adjust over time.

Together, these elements create a shared framework for improving outcomes and ensuring accountability to the people we serve.



OUR FOUNDATION

Vision, Mission and Equity Statement

Our Vision

Santa Cruz County is a healthy, safe, and affordable community that is culturally diverse, economically inclusive, and environmentally vibrant.

Our Mission

An open and responsive government, the County of Santa Cruz delivers quality, data-driven services that strengthen our community and enhance opportunity.

County Equity Statement

Equity in action in Santa Cruz County is a transformative process that embraces individuals of every status, providing unwavering support, dignity, and compassion.

Through this commitment, the County ensures intentional opportunities and access, fostering an environment where everyone can thrive and belong.

OUR MANDATE

County of Santa Cruz Services

The Board of Supervisors governs the Santa Cruz County unincorporated area and is the executive and legislative governing body of the County of Santa Cruz. The Board directs overall operations of the various County departments and districts by establishing policies and approving the budgets and financing for all of County government and certain special districts.

The County provides a broad spectrum of services, principally State and federal services. In unincorporated areas outside of the four city jurisdictions, extensive municipal services are also provided. A non-exhaustive list is provided below.

Countywide Services

- Health and Welfare
- Adult and Juvenile Detention
- District Attorney and Public Defender
- Elections
- Records
- Local Tax Collection
- Parks Services
- Agricultural Safety

Unincorporated Municipal Services

- Road and Bridge Maintenance
- Police Protection
- Animal Services
- Zoning and Planning
- Building Permits and Inspection
- Sanitation and Solid Waste

HOW WE SHOW UP

County Values

Our three values define who we are as an organization, how we treat residents, how we work with partners, and how we hold ourselves accountable.

Collaboration

We show up for each other and our community, building trust, partnerships, and shared purpose to deliver services that truly make a difference.

In Practice

- We share information and coordinate across departments and community partners.
- We build relationships through listening and following through on our commitments.
- We treat community members as partners, not just recipients of services.

Accessibility

We remove barriers, ensure equitable access, and serve every community member with clarity and empathy.

In Practice

- We communicate clearly and meet people where they are.
- We remove barriers like language, operating hours, and are solutions oriented.
- We work with the needs of those most impacted in mind.

Integrity

We earn trust by acting with equity, transparency, and accountability, and by owning our actions and outcomes.

In Practice

- We are honest, set clear expectations, and maintain high standards.
- We are accountable to community outcomes, not just process.
- We use disaggregated data to focus our work and illuminate disparities.

HOW WE DECIDE

Implementation Lenses

Our three implementation lenses are the evaluation framework we apply when designing programs, making resource decisions, and reviewing outcomes. They are built into how we analyze and report on progress across all County work.

Health in All Policies Lens

Health and wellbeing are shaped by decisions made across all sectors, including housing, transportation, economic opportunity, safety, and more. This lens asks us to consider those connections in every area of our work.

When evaluating programs and decisions, we ask:

- How will this work improve the conditions that people need to thrive?
- How are we aligning people, organizations, and systems around a shared result?

Equity Lens

Every decision should advance belonging, inclusion, and access, especially for those who have historically been underserved or excluded.

When evaluating programs and decisions, we ask:

- Who stands to benefit most?
- Whose perspectives need to be included?
- How are we increasing access? (location, ability, technology, language, process)

Fiscal and Operational Lens

Good intentions require sustainable resources and accountable execution. This lens ensures we are transparent about what we spend, honest about what works, and disciplined about continuous improvement.

When evaluating programs and decisions, we ask:

- What is our result and how will we know we are making progress?
- How are we being good stewards of financial, natural, and community resources?

WHAT WE WORK ON

Focus Areas and Community Goals

Our six focus areas represent the broad domains where the County has significant influence. Each is anchored by a community goal and tracked through population-level and county-level indicators.

FOCUS AREA 1

Housing and Infrastructure

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

Population Indicators

Countywide conditions tracked by geography and population group.

- Households spending more than 30% of income on housing (by geography)

County Indicators

What the County directly produces or influences.

- Housing Units Permitted by Income Level (current Housing Element cycle)
- Individuals Killed or Seriously Injured in Traffic Crashes
- Pavement Condition Index

Related Plans and Goals: Housing Element 2023 · Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz · General Plan · Pro-Housing Designation · Capital Improvement Program · Active Transportation Plan · Regional Transportation Plan · Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan

FOCUS AREA 2

Health, Wellbeing and Connection

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

Population Indicators

Countywide conditions tracked by geography and population group.

- Years of potential life lost (by geography)
- Self-reported poor mental health days

County Indicators

What the County directly produces or influences.

- Adults who have had a routine checkup (by geography)
- Access to Mental Health Services within Ten Days of Request
- Percent of Households within 15-minute walk or 10-minute bike ride of community space

Related Plans and Goals: Community Health Improvement Plan · Behavioral Health Services Act Plan · Master Plan on Aging · Parks Master Plan · Access to Care Agreements

FOCUS AREA 3

Safety and Justice

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

Population Indicators

Countywide conditions tracked by geography and population group.

- Crime Rate (by geography)

County Indicators

What the County directly produces or influences.

- Recidivism Rate (by race/ethnicity)
- Rearrest Rate (by race/ethnicity)
- Victim Support Services Data
- Neighborhood Justice Conferences
- County Jail Population (by race/ethnicity)

Related Plans and Goals: Blueprint for Shared Safety · Community Corrections Partnership Plan · Probation Strategic Plan · Behavioral Health Services Act Plan · Community Health Improvement Plan

FOCUS AREA 4

Environment, Climate and Resilience

Desired Future: All people are prepared for climate and natural hazards, benefit from clean air and sustainable water, and access healthy ecosystems that support the well-being of both native species and humans.

Population Indicators

Countywide conditions tracked by geography and population group.

- Greenhouse Gas Emissions (by industry)
- Water Quality (by geography)
- Air Quality (by geography)

County Indicators

What the County directly produces or influences.

- Parcels Protected and Lane Miles Treated for Hazard Mitigation
- Acres of Parkland Actively Managed

Related Plans and Goals: Climate Action and Adaptation Plan · Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan · Measure Q Vision Plan and Implementation · Capital Improvement Program · Parks Master Plan · Parks Strategic Plan

FOCUS AREA 5

Access to Basic Needs and Support

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

Population Indicators

Countywide conditions tracked by geography and population group.

- Point-in-Time Count of People Experiencing Homelessness (by geography)
- Access to Health Insurance (by race/ethnicity)

County Indicators

What the County directly produces or influences.

- Households Exiting to Permanent Housing
- CalFresh Utilization Rate (by race/ethnicity)
- Medi-Cal Utilization Rate

Related Plans and Goals: Continuum of Care Plan · Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz · Housing Element · Behavioral Health Services Act Plan · Community Health Improvement Plan · Master Plan on Aging · Child, Youth and Family Well-being Partnership

FOCUS AREA 6

Economy and Job Growth

Desired Future: 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.

Population Indicators

Countywide conditions tracked by geography and population group.

- Local Employment Rate (by geography)
- Job Quality (disaggregated by tier, age, race, gender)
- Broadband Access (by geography)

County Indicators

What the County directly produces or influences.

- County Workforce (disaggregated by tier, age, race, gender)
- County Staff Time Spent in Direct Service

Related Plans and Goals: Economic Development Strategy · Workforce Development Plan · County AI Strategy · General Plan · Broadband Master Plan

STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS

Goals at a Glance

Six focus areas, shaped by community voice and data, organize the County's priorities. Ten goals identify where the County will focus its efforts on aligned results. Each goal is listed under its primary focus area; supporting focus areas are noted below each goal.

Housing and Infrastructure	Health, Wellbeing and Connection	Safety and Justice	Environment, Climate and Resilience	Access to Basic Needs and Support	Economy and Job Growth
Increase Permitted Housing Units <i>Permit over 2,541 housing units by 2032</i>	Expand Mental Health Care Capacity <i>50% increase in step-down treatment beds</i>	Reduce Recidivism, Strengthen Accountability <i>10% reduction in recidivism rate over 6 years</i>	Strengthen Ecosystem Health and Resilience <i>Increase in public and private property protected</i>	Reduce Homelessness and Increase Permanent Housing <i>Maintain above 50% of households finding permanent housing</i>	Grow Family-Wage Jobs <i>46% of jobs at Tier 1–2 wages</i>
Reduce Transportation Deaths and Injuries <i>25% reduction in killed or seriously injured</i>	Expand Parks and Gathering Spaces <i>Establish baseline; work toward 15-min walk / 10-min bike</i>		<i>Climate Action Goal (Coming Spring 2027)</i>	<i>Federal Policy Response Goal (Coming Fall 2026)</i>	Use AI to Improve Service Delivery <i>Increase staff time directly serving community</i>
Invest in County Assets & Infrastructure <i>Establish condition baseline</i>					

Setting a Direction, Staying Flexible

Two goals are designated as coming soon. This is intentional. The County is committed to a plan that sets a clear direction and remains responsive to current conditions, not one that locks in answers before the questions are fully formed.

The Federal Policy Response Goal will be developed by Fall 2026 to respond to the evolving impact of federal policy changes on County services and residents. The Climate Action Goal will be developed in 2027, aligned with the County's next Climate Action and Adaptation Plan update.

HOUSING AND INFRASTRUCTURE GOAL:

Increase Permitted Housing Units

Primary Alignment Plan: **Housing Element 2023-31** **Also supports:** Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz; Pro-Housing Designation; Workforce Development Plan; Capital Improvement Program

Goal Statement

Permit over 2,541 housing units by 2032 in Santa Cruz County so residents can access stable, affordable housing, by mobilizing County departments to implement the pro-housing policies, programs, and investments in the 2023 Housing Element across all income levels.

Why This Goal

The County of Santa Cruz must continue addressing a housing shortage that affects residents and the local workforce across all income levels. Housing costs are high for many local households relative to their incomes, making it difficult for residents and workers to remain in the community. These conditions affect both renters and homeowners, renters who face displacement pressures and rapidly rising costs, and homeowners who struggle to afford maintenance, improvements, or to help family members find stable housing nearby. These conditions also impact the County's ability to support workforce stability, economic growth, and overall wellbeing. Community and Board input show strong alignment around the need to increase housing supply, particularly for very low-, low-, and moderate-income households. This goal focuses on aligning County efforts to meet local housing needs by building on existing plans and partnerships, streamlining permitting, aligning infrastructure investments with housing development, and strengthening partnerships to accelerate production.

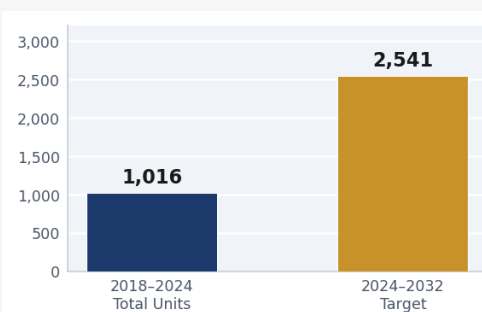
What's Helping

- Strong alignment across County, community, and industry partners on the need for more housing
- Existing plans and partnerships, Housing Element, Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz, Pro-Housing Designation
- Public and institutional interest in reducing regulatory complexity

Performance Measurement

Primary Indicator

Housing Units Permitted by Income Level (Housing Element cycle, target 2,541+ by 2032)



Source: Santa Cruz County Planning Dept. Housing Element Annual Report

Related Indicators

- Households spending >30% of income on housing
- Housing projects entitled or approved
- Permitting and processing timelines

What's in the Way

- High development costs, tariffs, labor, materials, interest rates, insurance
- Complex state and local regulations creating uncertainty for County staff and developers
- Limited available land and infrastructure constraints
- Fiscal uncertainty and inadequate local tax base for implementation

Implementation Through Our Lenses

Health in All Policies

How will this work improve the conditions that people need to thrive?

How are we aligning people, organizations, and systems around a shared result?

Housing stability is the foundation of health, economic mobility, and wellbeing. This goal addresses housing as a core driver of health, particularly for low-income households, the County workforce, and residents at risk of displacement.

Future objectives may include:

- Seek pathways for housing that primarily serves people contributing to our community
- Work with property owners and faith communities to increase units on existing sites
- Increase climate resilience of new and existing housing
- Coordinate housing retention and homelessness prevention activities with other jurisdictions and partner agencies

Equity

Who stands to benefit most?

Whose perspectives need to be included?

How are we making participation and access possible?

Lower-income households and renters are more likely to experience housing cost burden and displacement pressures, with limited access to affordable options. Prioritizing production across income levels, and prioritizing affordable development, is essential to building inclusive communities.

Future objectives may include:

- Prioritize housing production for local households and the local workforce
- Expand access to homeownership, including first-time homebuyer programs
- Remove obstacles to new housing that integrates people of all abilities, backgrounds, and income levels

Fiscal and Operational

What is our result and how will we know we are making progress?

How are we being good stewards of financial, natural, and community resources?

Housing production requires coordination across County departments, efficient processes, and sustainable funding. The County must align its own operations and resources to meet the commitments in the Housing Element.

Future objectives may include:

- Streamline permitting and development review processes
- Utilize County property for development of workforce and affordable housing
- Identify funding and financing mechanisms to support housing production
- Focus growth and infrastructure investment in urban areas to preserve open space

HOUSING AND INFRASTRUCTURE GOAL:

Reduce Transportation Deaths and Serious Injuries

Primary Alignment Plan: Local Road Safety Plan **Also supports:** Active Transportation Plan; Local Hazard Mitigation Plan; Climate Action and Adaptation Plan; Rural Highways Safety Plan

Goal Statement

Reduce transportation deaths and serious injuries by 25% in unincorporated Santa Cruz County so people can travel safely, through targeted infrastructure improvements, regional coordination, and investments in active and public transportation.

Why This Goal

Santa Cruz County's transportation system connects people to jobs, housing, and community, but safety risks and infrastructure conditions vary significantly across the county. Much of the County's responsibility is within the unincorporated area, where rural roads face ongoing maintenance challenges due to aging infrastructure, limited funding, and geographic constraints. Community and Board input highlight the need to both maintain existing infrastructure and redesign systems to improve safety outcomes. As the County considers where housing and jobs should be concentrated, focusing investment within urban areas will improve safety, mobility, and long-term sustainability. This goal focuses on aligning transportation investments around safety and efficiency, requiring additional revenue for road maintenance, stronger coordination with city and regional partners, and proven approaches such as the rail trail and safer street design.

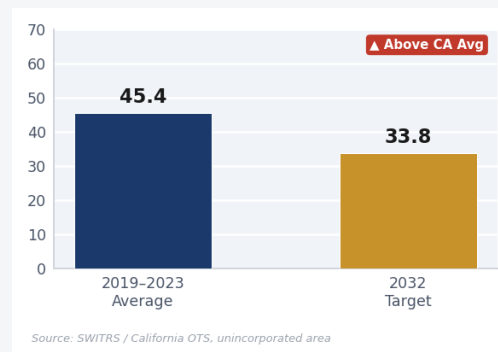
What's Helping

- Strong regional planning partnerships across jurisdictions and agencies
- Existing investments in road safety, active transportation, and transit
- Community interest in safer streets and alternative transportation options

Performance Measurement

Primary Indicator

Individuals Killed or Seriously Injured in Traffic Crashes



Related Indicators

- Pavement Condition Index
- Access to transportation (car, bus, bikes, pedestrian) by geography
- Vehicle Miles Traveled and travel time

What's in the Way

- Aging and under-maintained road infrastructure
- Rural road conditions and limited connectivity
- High cost of infrastructure improvements and maintenance
- Insufficient dedicated funding for safety projects

Implementation Through Our Lenses

Health in All Policies

How will this work improve the conditions that people need to thrive?

How are we aligning people, organizations, and systems around a shared result?

Transportation safety is a direct driver of physical health, and access to safe, reliable transportation shapes whether people can get to jobs, services, and care. This goal addresses transportation as a health equity issue, particularly for pedestrians, cyclists, and rural residents.

Future objectives may include:

- Coordinate with cities and regional agencies on transportation investments
- Expand the rail trail as a dedicated pedestrian and bicycle facility
- Ensure safe evacuation corridors and resilient infrastructure for all communities
- Align land use, housing, and transportation planning along urban corridors

Equity

Who stands to benefit most?

Whose perspectives need to be included?

How are we making participation and access possible?

Traffic crashes are concentrated in specific corridors and rural areas, where infrastructure conditions and travel distances increase risk. Santa Cruz County also experiences a high rate of bicycle-related injuries compared to similar communities. Equity means directing investment where the risk is highest.

Future objectives may include:

- Prioritize safety improvements in high-risk corridors and underserved communities
- Improve infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists
- Expand access to safe, reliable transportation options
- Reduce geographic barriers to jobs, services, and community spaces

Fiscal and Operational

What is our result and how will we know we are making progress?

How are we being good stewards of financial, natural, and community resources?

Infrastructure investments require long-term planning, coordination, and sustainable funding. The County cannot meet its transportation safety goals without new revenue sources and disciplined prioritization of the capital program.

Future objectives may include:

- Identify and implement new revenue sources for road maintenance and safety improvements
- Expand use of project prioritization tools to guide capital investments
- Leverage state and federal funding to support long-term infrastructure needs
- Monitor and plan for the impacts of driverless and automated vehicle technology on infrastructure needs and safety outcomes

HOUSING AND INFRASTRUCTURE GOAL:

Invest in County Assets and Infrastructure

Primary Alignment Plan: Capital Improvement Program **Also supports:** General Plan, Parks Master Plan, Sanitation District Capital Improvement Program; Climate Action and Adaptation Plan; Local Hazard Mitigation Plan; Zero Waste Plan

Goal Statement

Prioritize investment in County-owned and maintained infrastructure, including facilities, parks, land, drainage systems, culverts, groundwater, sanitation and septic systems, and recycling and solid waste facilities.

Why This Goal

The County owns and operates many public assets that people rely on every day, including buildings, parks, drainage systems, culverts, sanitation and septic infrastructure, and solid waste facilities. These assets support public services, protect public health, strengthen resilience to floods, storms, and wildfires, and provide the infrastructure needed for existing and future housing.

Many of these assets are aging and need repair or replacement. Delaying maintenance can increase costs, disrupt services, create safety risks, and limit opportunities for housing and community development. This goal focuses on understanding what the County owns, assessing its condition, and making smart investments that keep infrastructure safe, reliable, and resilient while supporting housing, community wellbeing, and responsible stewardship of public resources.

What's Helping

- Existing CIP and technical expertise to plan, maintain, and improve infrastructure
- Strong community and Board support for investing in resilience of public assets from climate and disaster impacts
- Willingness to pursue grants, partnerships, and innovative funding strategies to address needs

Performance Measurement

Primary Indicator

Percent of County infrastructure assets in fair or better condition (establish baseline by 2027)

Related Indicators

- Deferred maintenance backlog (\$)
- Capital investment in infrastructure
- Percent of storm drainage systems and culverts inspected and maintained on schedule
- Percent of County facilities in fair or better condition
- Percent of parks and public lands maintained to standard
- Percent of sanitation, septic, and solid waste infrastructure meeting standards

What's in the Way

- Significant deferred maintenance and aging infrastructure across multiple asset types
- Limited funding and competing priorities for capital investment
- Incomplete information about asset conditions and long-term infrastructure needs across the County

Implementation Through Our Lenses

Health in All Policies

How will this work improve the conditions that people need to thrive?

How are we aligning people, organizations, and systems around a shared result?

Public infrastructure plays a critical role in protecting health. Safe drinking water, wastewater treatment, septic systems, drainage infrastructure, recycling and waste management systems, parks, and public facilities all help prevent illness, protect natural resources, and support quality of life. By maintaining and investing in these systems, the County can improve public health, environmental sustainability, and community resilience.

Future objectives may include:

- Ensure sanitation and wastewater infrastructure supports existing and future housing
- Increase waste diversion and increase recycling and resource recovery efforts
- Support groundwater recharge and conservation, and other sustainable water projects

Equity

Who stands to benefit most?

Whose perspectives need to be included?

How are we making participation and access possible?

Infrastructure investments shape where people can live, work, and thrive. As the County plans for future housing, transportation, and climate needs, infrastructure decisions should balance current conditions with long-term community goals. Transparent, data-informed prioritization can help ensure investments support the greatest community benefit, strengthen resilience, and align with planned growth and development patterns.

Future objectives may include:

- Prioritize infrastructure investments that support housing, transportation, and community development goals
- Use condition, service, and population data to guide infrastructure investment
- Engage communities in identifying infrastructure needs and priorities

Fiscal and Operational

What is our result and how will we know we are making progress?

How are we being good stewards of financial, natural, and community resources?

Maintaining infrastructure costs less than replacing it after it fails. Reducing deferred maintenance requires understanding what the County owns, assessing asset conditions, and making strategic investments over time. A strong Capital Improvement Program helps the County prioritize projects, improve resilience, support housing and community development, and make the best use of public resources.

Future objectives may include:

- Complete condition assessments for major infrastructure assets
- Develop a multi-year plan to reduce deferred maintenance
- Incorporate resilience, sustainability, and long-term community benefit into project prioritization criteria

HEALTH, WELLBEING AND CONNECTION GOAL:

Expand Mental Health Care Capacity

Primary Alignment Plan: Behavioral Health Services Act Plan **Also supports:** Community Health Improvement Plan; Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz; Community Corrections Partnership; Master Plan on Aging

Goal Statement

Achieve a 50% increase in step-down treatment beds in Santa Cruz County so residents can receive timely and appropriate mental health care close to home, by expanding community-based treatment capacity, including residential and inpatient facilities.

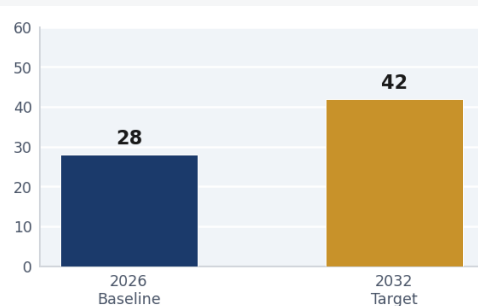
Why This Goal

Behavioral health needs are a significant driver of community wellbeing across Santa Cruz County. While access to initial services has improved, community and Board input highlight gaps in levels of care, including residential treatment, inpatient beds, and step-down facilities. These gaps contribute to repeated cycles through emergency services, the justice system, and homelessness. Community and Board input show strong alignment around expanding treatment capacity and improving how residents access and move through care. This goal builds on existing partnerships and plans to expand mental health care capacity, while improving coordination across providers. Future objectives may include evaluating options for new or expanded mental health facilities, strengthening coordination across providers, and aligning behavioral health with housing, justice, and education systems to support long-term stability.

Performance Measurement

Primary Indicator

Total treatment beds (step-down, residential, and inpatient)



Source: Santa Cruz County Behavioral Health, 2026

Related Indicators

- Access to Mental Health Services Within Ten Days of Request
- Access to Follow-Up Appointment Within 30 Days
- Emergency department utilization
- Housing stability for individuals receiving care

What's Helping

- Existing behavioral health partnerships and service providers
- Strong alignment across systems on the need for expanded treatment capacity
- Integration of behavioral health with housing and justice systems

What's in the Way

- Limited behavioral health treatment beds and residential capacity
- Workforce shortages in behavioral health and clinical services
- Fragmented system navigation across providers and services

Implementation Through Our Lenses

Health in All Policies

How will this work improve the conditions that people need to thrive?

How are we aligning people, organizations, and systems around a shared result?

Mental health is a direct driver of wellbeing, and is closely connected to housing stability, safety, and economic participation. Expanding care capacity requires coordination across health, housing, and justice systems.

Future objectives may include:

- Increase treatment capacity, beds and staffing
- Retain people in care to achieve sustained wellbeing
- Partner to ensure mild-to-moderate mental health needs are met in community settings

Equity

Who stands to benefit most?

Whose perspectives need to be included?

How are we making participation and access possible?

Some residents face barriers related to language, transportation, and cost, and access to higher levels of care varies across geography. System navigation can be complex, and cultural barriers and stigma may also prevent people from seeking or receiving care.

Future objectives may include:

- Improve utilization by Black and Latino communities through trusted supports
- Increase culturally responsive and accessible services
- Reduce barriers to timely and appropriate care across geography

Fiscal and Operational

What is our result and how will we know we are making progress?

How are we being good stewards of financial, natural, and community resources?

Expanding treatment capacity requires coordination, long-term investment, and sustainable funding. The County must build a workforce pipeline and advocate for state funding aligned with local needs.

Future objectives may include:

- Collaborate on career pipelines for mental health professionals
- Align with partners, including public safety and education, to advocate for fewer and better-funded state initiatives
- Bring costs and utilization trends in line with statewide averages

HEALTH, WELLBEING AND CONNECTION GOAL:

Expand Parks and Gathering Spaces

Primary Alignment Plan: **Parks Strategic Plan** **Also supports:** Master Plan on Aging; Housing Element; Active Transportation Plan; Community Health Improvement Plan

Goal Statement

Ensure every resident is within a 15-minute walk or 10-minute bike ride of a park or gathering space in Santa Cruz County, starting with a baseline inventory and expanding access through extended hours, new partnerships, and infrastructure investment.

Why This Goal

Santa Cruz County has a wide range of public and parks, community spaces, schools, libraries, and other facilities that support gathering and connection. However, community input highlights that these spaces are not equally accessible and are often underutilized, particularly during evenings and weekends. Access can be limited by cost, location, awareness, and how spaces are managed. Community and Board input emphasize making better use of existing assets and investing in facilities and infrastructure that connect denser communities with open space and activities. This goal focuses on building a network of community gathering spaces by establishing a baseline inventory, partnering to expand shared use of schools and other facilities, and planning for new facilities and infrastructure in growing parts of the county.

Performance Measurement

Primary Indicator

Establish a baseline inventory of parks and gathering spaces; work toward 15-min walk / 10-min bike access standard

Baseline to be established

*Countywide inventory of
community gathering spaces*

Key partners:

Parks Dept · School Districts
Faith Communities · City Partners

Related Indicators

- Self-reported poor mental health days
- Parks Utilization

What's Helping

- Existing parks, libraries, schools, and community facilities across the county
- Strong community interest in spaces for older adults and youth
- Existing programming through parks, schools, and community organizations

What's in the Way

- Limited access to spaces during evenings and weekends
- Underutilization of existing public and community facilities
- Barriers related to cost, transportation, and awareness
- Lack of coordination across agencies and organizations

Implementation Through Our Lenses

Health in All Policies

How will this work improve the conditions that people need to thrive?

How are we aligning people, organizations, and systems around a shared result?

Community connection is closely tied to mental health, physical health, safety, and economic wellbeing. Third spaces like parks, places that are neither home nor work, are a direct driver of social connection and belonging.

Future objectives may include:

- Partner with school districts to expand shared use of facilities
- Strengthen partnerships with faith-based organizations, school districts, and local businesses
- Align parks investments and community spaces with housing, transportation, and land use planning

Equity

Who stands to benefit most?

Whose perspectives need to be included?

How are we making participation and access possible?

Access to parks and community spaces is not consistent across the county. Youth, older adults, and residents in South County have fewer accessible gathering places. Cost, transportation, and awareness create barriers to participation.

Future objectives may include:

- Expand access to free or low-cost gathering spaces
- Increase availability of parks and community spaces during evenings and weekends
- Improve inclusive design, signage, and outreach including language access

Fiscal and Operational

What is our result and how will we know we are making progress?

How are we being good stewards of financial, natural, and community resources?

Maximizing the use of existing parks and facilities can improve outcomes without requiring significant new capital investment. A countywide inventory is the essential first step to coordinated planning.

Future objectives may include:

- Create and maintain a countywide inventory of parks and community gathering spaces
- Improve coordination across departments and partner organizations
- Update parks and other master plans to connect denser communities to open space and activity centers

SAFETY AND JUSTICE GOAL:

Reduce Recidivism and Strengthen Accountability

Primary Alignment Plan: **Blueprint for Shared Safety** **Also supports:** Community Corrections Partnership; Behavioral Health Services Act Plan; Probation Strategic Plan; Community Health Improvement Plan; Superior Court Strategic Plan

Goal Statement

Reduce the recidivism rate by 10% over six years to increase public safety and strengthen accountability for survivors of crime by scaling diversion, improving system coordination, and expanding prevention and reentry supports.

Why This Goal

Santa Cruz County residents consistently identified safety as a core priority, alongside a strong desire for a justice system that is fair, accountable, and focused on prevention. People want accountability for harm, support for survivors, and systems that help prevent future harm from occurring. Community and Board input highlighted that many individuals cycle through the justice system because underlying conditions such as untreated mental illness, substance use disorders, housing instability, trauma, and limited economic opportunity are not addressed. When those cycles continue, communities experience ongoing instability and survivors continue to pay the price. Residents emphasized the importance of fair treatment, restorative approaches, and building trust between communities and County systems. This goal reflects the understanding that long-term safety depends both on accountability and on creating meaningful opportunities for people to successfully return to and contribute to their communities.

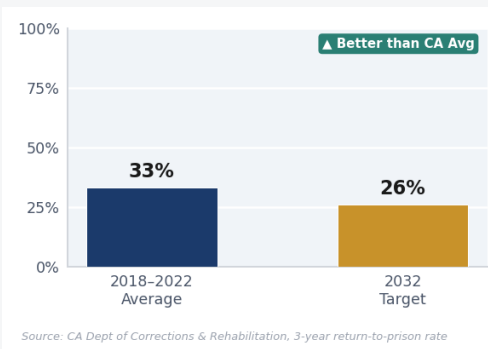
What's Helping

- Existing diversion and alternative response programs
- Behavioral health and social service partnerships
- Community-based organizations supporting prevention and reentry

Performance Measurement

Primary Indicator

Recidivism Rate (disaggregated by race/ethnicity)



Related Indicators

- Crime Rate (by geography)
- Rearrest Rate (by race/ethnicity)
- Victim Support Services Data
- Neighborhood Justice Conferences
- County Jail Population

What's in the Way

- Behavioral health needs driving justice system involvement
- Limited coordination across justice, health, and housing systems
- Lack of stable housing contributing to repeated system involvement
- Limited prevention and youth development opportunities

Implementation Through Our Lenses

Health in All Policies

How will this work improve the conditions that people need to thrive?

How are we aligning people, organizations, and systems around a shared result?

Public safety outcomes are directly shaped by community safety, housing stability, economic opportunity, and behavioral health, all drivers of health. This goal addresses justice involvement as a health and equity issue as much as a public safety one.

Future objectives may include:

- Strengthen partnerships with school districts, higher education, and workforce systems to expand youth opportunity and career pathways
- Invest in prevention and early interventions that keep young people connected to community
- Improve coordination across justice, behavioral health, housing, and workforce partners

Equity

Who stands to benefit most?

Whose perspectives need to be included?

How are we making participation and access possible?

Black and Latino residents are overrepresented in the jail population and victims of crime, and face barriers accessing timely support. Equity means both reducing disparities in who enters the justice system and ensuring victims receive support they need.

Future objectives may include:

- Expand diversion and alternative response pathways with community organizations
- Work with schools, families, and community partners to ensure youth have access to safe spaces, mentors, learning opportunities, and career pathways.
- Expand victims' access to support regardless of where or when they ask for it
- Use technology, including local DNA testing capacity, to improve access to timely and equitable justice outcomes

Fiscal and Operational

What is our result and how will we know we are making progress?

How are we being good stewards of financial, natural, and community resources?

Improving coordination across systems can strengthen accountability, support victims, and lead to better outcomes while making more effective use of existing resources. The County must be transparent about what is working and what is not.

Future objectives may include:

- Evaluate options for expanding mental health treatment facilities and capacity
- Align investments across departments and partners to reduce duplication and increase impact
- Strengthen transparency and consistency in justice system processes

ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE AND RESILIENCE GOAL:

Strengthen Ecosystem Health and Climate Resilience

Primary Alignment Plan: Local Hazard Mitigation Plan **Also supports:** Climate Action and Adaptation Plan; Measure Q Vision Plan; Capital Improvement Program; Parks Master Plan; Local Road Safety Plan

Goal Statement

Increase the number of sites where active ecosystem management is underway in unincorporated Santa Cruz County, so communities, infrastructure, and natural systems are better able to withstand, adapt to, and recover from climate-driven impacts such as wildfire and flooding.

Why This Goal

Santa Cruz County's natural environment is central to its identity, economy, and quality of life, and is increasingly stressed by wildfire, flooding, and climate-related hazards. Recent disasters have highlighted the vulnerability of infrastructure, housing, and natural systems, particularly in rural and high-risk areas. Healthy ecosystems, including our natural lands and County parks, are more resilient to natural disasters and help protect surrounding communities. Through management of forests, watersheds, trails, beaches, habitat areas, and recreational lands, we can reduce wildfire risk, improve watershed function, restore habitat, and provide accessible places where residents can connect with nature. This goal aligns resilience efforts across County plans and partners by scaling existing mitigation and preparedness efforts, strengthening coordination with regional and state agencies, and prioritizing investments in high-risk areas.

What's Helping

- Regional partnerships for ecosystem resilience and hazard mitigation
- Existing ecosystems, water, climate, and hazard mitigation plans
- Existing County parks, beaches, forests, and open space assets
- Community awareness and support for environmental protection

Performance Measurement

Primary Indicator

Parcels Protected and Lane Miles Treated for Hazard Mitigation

Baseline to be established

Parcels under active ecosystem management

Key partners:

Resource Conservation District
CAL FIRE · State Parks · UCSC

Related Indicators

- Forest/wildland acreage managed
- Acres of restored floodplain, wetland, and creek/river banks
- Properties participating in fire-wise and chipping programs
- Greenhouse Gas Emissions; Water Quality (by geography); Air Quality

What's in the Way

- Increasing frequency and severity of climate-driven extreme events
- Vulnerable infrastructure and residential development in high-hazard areas
- High cost of resilience, mitigation, restoration, and management projects
- Decreased federal funding support for stewardship and maintenance

Implementation Through Our Lenses

Health in All Policies

How will this work improve the conditions that people need to thrive?

How are we aligning people, organizations, and systems around a shared result?

Clean air, clean water, and protection from natural hazards are direct drivers of health. Climate resilience affects every community, but not equally. This goal addresses environment and climate as a health issue, particularly for communities living closest to wildfire and flood risk.

Future objectives may include:

- Coordinate with regional, state, and federal partners on resilience efforts
- Align climate, housing, and infrastructure planning
- Integrate resilience and hazard mitigation into land use and capital planning decisions
- Strengthen partnerships for emergency preparedness and response

Equity

Who stands to benefit most?

Whose perspectives need to be included?

How are we making participation and access possible?

Climate risks are not evenly distributed. Rural and hillside communities face higher wildfire risk, while flood-prone areas affect specific regions such as the Pajaro and San Lorenzo valleys. Some communities have fewer resources to prepare for and recover from disasters.

Future objectives may include:

- Prioritize mitigation efforts in high-risk and underserved areas
- Expand outdoor education and stewardship programs through County parklands
- Strengthen infrastructure in vulnerable communities
- Reduce disparities in exposure to environmental hazards

Fiscal and Operational

What is our result and how will we know we are making progress?

How are we being good stewards of financial, natural, and community resources?

Resilience investments require long-term coordination, disciplined prioritization, and creative funding. The County must make the most of limited resources by aligning plans and leveraging state and federal partnerships.

Future objectives may include:

- Identify and secure funding for resilience and mitigation projects
- Improve coordination across departments and jurisdictions
- Expand use of prioritization tools to guide resilience investments
- Continue to align County investments with watershed, wildfire, and climate goals
- Leverage state and federal funding opportunities

ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE AND RESILIENCE GOAL:

Climate Action Goal

Primary Alignment Plan: **Climate Action and Adaptation Plan**

Coming 2027

This goal will be developed in 2027, aligned with the County's next Climate Action and Adaptation Plan (CAAP) update. It will set the County's direction on climate mitigation and adaptation through the remainder of this strategic plan period.

The 2027 CAAP update will incorporate the latest climate science, updated greenhouse gas inventories, and lessons learned from recent extreme weather events. Aligning this goal with that process ensures the County is acting on the most current evidence and community input available, rather than looking at targets that may be superseded before the plan cycle ends.

In the interim, the County's ecosystem health and resilience goal (above) addresses the most immediate climate adaptation priorities, including wildfire risk reduction, flood management, and habitat restoration.

ACCESS TO BASIC NEEDS AND SUPPORT GOAL:

Reduce Homelessness and Increase Permanent Housing

Primary Alignment Plan: **Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz** **Also supports:** Housing Element; Behavioral Health Services Act Plan; Community Health Improvement Plan; Child Youth and Family Well-Being Partnership

Goal Statement

Maintain above 50% the share of households finding permanent housing in Santa Cruz County so more people can achieve lasting stability, by aligning housing, health, and social service systems and strengthening coordinated entry.

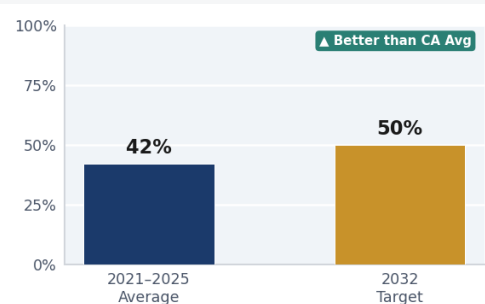
Why This Goal

Homelessness in Santa Cruz County is driven by a combination of high housing costs, limited supply of affordable and supportive housing, and gaps in services integration, especially for those struggling with disabling health conditions. These conditions make it difficult for individuals and families to exit homelessness and maintain long-term stability. Community and Board input consistently highlight the need for housing solutions paired with high-quality, integrated services tailored to address underlying needs. This goal focuses on aligning housing, health, and social service systems to reduce homelessness and improve housing stability, building on existing partnerships and programs to increase the availability of supportive housing, strengthen coordinated entry, and improve connections between housing and care systems.

Performance Measurement

Primary Indicator

Percent of Households Exiting to Permanent Housing (maintain above 50%)



Source: CA Homeless Data Integration System (HDIS)

Related Indicators

- Annual Point-in-Time Count of People Experiencing Homelessness
- Severe Housing Problems

What's Helping

- Strong network of service providers and community-based organizations
- Existing housing and supportive service programs
- Alignment across partners on the need for deeply affordable housing and coordinated services

What's in the Way

- Lack of housing affordable to those with extremely low incomes
- Behavioral health and substance use treatment gaps
- High cost of housing relative to income
- Fragmented service delivery and system navigation challenges

Implementation Through Our Lenses

Health in All Policies

How will this work improve the conditions that people need to thrive?

How are we aligning people, organizations, and systems around a shared result?

Housing is a foundational driver of health. People cannot achieve stability in health, employment, or safety without stable housing. This goal addresses homelessness as a health emergency requiring alignment across housing, health, and justice systems.

Future objectives may include:

- Continue to permit housing aligned with the County's goals
- Improve and stabilize coordinated entry and service integration and coordination systems
- Integrate housing with healthcare and justice system efforts

Equity

Who stands to benefit most?

Whose perspectives need to be included?

How are we making participation and access possible?

African Americans, Native Americans, LGBTQ+ communities, and men are disproportionately represented among people experiencing homelessness. Adults with disabilities are also a growing segment. Access to housing and services varies across geography, and system navigation can be complex. Equity means directing resources toward those with the greatest need and fewest options.

Future objectives may include:

- Expand access to housing and services across county communities
- Focused services for aging and disabled populations and other disproportionately impacted populations
- Reduce barriers to securing and keeping housing
- Expand and target homelessness prevention efforts

Fiscal and Operational

What is our result and how will we know we are making progress?

How are we being good stewards of financial, natural, and community resources?

Reducing homelessness requires coordinated investment and effective use of resources. The County must improve how services are coordinated, track outcomes rigorously, and leverage every available dollar.

Future objectives may include:

- Improve coordination to reduce duplication and gaps and improve client outcomes
- Leverage state and federal funding
- Use data to track outcomes and improve performance

ACCESS TO BASIC NEEDS AND SUPPORT GOAL:

Federal Policy Response Goal

Primary Alignment Plan: **SHIELD (Safeguarding Health, Inclusion, Essential Services, and Local Defense)**

Coming Fall 2026

This goal is under development and will be finalized by Fall 2026. It will address the County's response to the evolving impact of federal policy changes on County services, residents, and the communities we serve.

Federal policy shifts, including changes to funding streams, eligibility rules, and enforcement priorities, are creating real and immediate consequences for Santa Cruz County residents, particularly those accessing health coverage, food assistance, housing support, and immigration-related services. The County is committed to developing a clear, coordinated response grounded in the same community engagement and data analysis that shaped this plan.

This goal will identify specific County actions, partnerships, and investments to protect resident access to services, support community-based organizations on the front lines of response, and advocate for equitable federal and state policy.

ECONOMY AND JOB GROWTH GOAL:

Grow Family-Wage Jobs

Primary Alignment Plan: Workforce Development Plan **Also supports:** Economic Development Strategy; Broadband Master Plan; Housing Element; County Office of Education Strategic Plan; Cabrillo 2030

Goal Statement

Grow the share of family-wage jobs to 46% in Santa Cruz County so more residents can move into stable, higher-wage work, by scaling workforce partnerships, expanding career pathways, and aligning economic development efforts around high-growth industries.

Why This Goal

Biotechnology, healthcare, defense manufacturing and aviation, including emerging drone technologies, and proximity to Silicon Valley create pathways to family-wage jobs in Santa Cruz County. At the same time, tourism, hospitality, and agriculture remain essential to the local economy and community identity. Community and Board input, reinforced by data, show that the County already has strong assets: active workforce and labor partners, career pathways, and upskilling programs that are helping residents move into higher-paying roles. Advances in AI and automation are reshaping many of these industries, creating both new opportunities and potential disruptions. This goal focuses on scaling these priority factors and aligning the County's economic development efforts around them, complemented by strengthening coordination across systems, supporting career mobility over time, and improving job quality across industries.

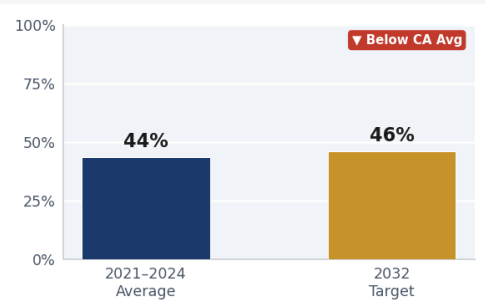
What's Helping

- Active workforce partners, Workforce Board, Cabrillo, El Pajaro CDC, UCSC
- Local career pathways in trades, drone technology, and applied technical training
- Upskilling programs moving workers into higher-paying roles

Performance Measurement

Primary Indicator

Job Quality (disaggregated by wage tier, age, race, gender)



Related Indicators

- Educational Attainment
- Local Employment Rate
- Households spending >30% of income on housing
- Broadband access

What's in the Way

- Housing costs are extremely high relative to wages
- Rapidly aging population
- High cost of doing business

Implementation Through Our Lenses

Health in All Policies

How will this work improve the conditions that people need to thrive?

How are we aligning people, organizations, and systems around a shared result?

Economic opportunity is a direct driver of health, access to good jobs shapes housing stability, food security, and overall wellbeing. This goal addresses jobs as health infrastructure, particularly for workers in South County and those in lower-wage industries.

Future objectives may include:

- Align workforce, housing, infrastructure, and transportation systems
- Strengthen partnerships with high-growth industries
- Invest in housing, childcare, and other supports that retain and attract working-age people
- Develop a Business Registration to identify local businesses and support outreach

Equity

Who stands to benefit most?

Whose perspectives need to be included?

How are we making participation and access possible?

Black and Latino residents have rising educational attainment but still lower levels overall. Workers in South County are more concentrated in lower-wage jobs, and housing and transportation challenges limit access to job centers. Equity means creating pathways that reach those with the furthest to travel.

Future objectives may include:

- Collaborate with school districts, universities, and workforce development partners to increase educational attainment, job training, and careers in relevant industries
- Create paths to employee ownership for retiring business owners
- Partner with trades and unions to increase apprenticeship participation

Fiscal and Operational

What is our result and how will we know we are making progress?

How are we being good stewards of financial, natural, and community resources?

Aligning workforce and economic development improves outcomes and makes better use of public resources. The County must create the conditions for private investment while ensuring public dollars go toward high-impact partnerships.

Future objectives may include:

- Pursue policy and code changes that attract growing businesses
- Build workforce housing that families can afford
- Identify funding and financing mechanisms to support infrastructure for housing and commercial development

ECONOMY AND JOB GROWTH GOAL:

Use AI to Improve Service Delivery

Primary Alignment Plan: County AI Strategy **Also supports:** County Operational Plan; Workforce Development Plan; Broadband Master Plan

Goal Statement

Increase the share of County staff time spent directly serving community in Santa Cruz County, using artificial intelligence to reduce administrative burden while ensuring responsible, transparent, and equitable use of technology.

Why This Goal

Artificial intelligence and data tools are rapidly changing how organizations deliver services and interact with the public. At the County of Santa Cruz, these tools present an opportunity to reduce administrative burden, improve access to services, and allow staff to spend more time working directly with residents. Critically, AI also allows the County to use its own data and knowledge of local needs to build custom tools, reducing dependence on expensive vendors whose products may carry data security risks and may not meet our exact operational needs. This goal builds on the County's existing AI Goal, guided by principles that elevate the value of human work, avoid surveillance-based uses, consider environmental impacts, and ensure that technology does not reinforce inequities.

Performance Measurement

Primary Indicator

Staff time directly serving community (increase from baseline)

Baseline to be established

*Staff time in direct
community service*

Key partners:

County Depts · ISD
Vendor Partners · Peer Counties

Related Indicators

- Service response and processing times
- Public engagement and service usage
- Resident satisfaction with County services

What's Helping

- Existing data systems and interest in improving service delivery
- Staff expertise and openness to using technology to improve outcomes
- Opportunities to reduce administrative burden and focus on higher-value work

What's in the Way

- Risk of reinforcing bias or inequitable outcomes if not implemented carefully
- Concerns about privacy and inappropriate surveillance
- Non-standard or inequitable access to AI tools and platforms
- Energy use and environmental impact of AI systems

Implementation Through Our Lenses

Health in All Policies

How will this work improve the conditions that people need to thrive?

How are we aligning people, organizations, and systems around a shared result?

AI can improve coordination across systems and make services more accessible, but only if implemented with explicit attention to how it affects the people who rely on those services. This goal addresses AI as a tool for improving health-related service delivery, not just operational efficiency.

Future objectives may include:

- Improve coordination across departments through shared data tools
- Expand access to services through digital platforms
- Support decision-making across health, housing, and safety systems
- Partner with other counties and agencies on responsible AI use

Equity

Who stands to benefit most?

Whose perspectives need to be included?

How are we making participation and access possible?

AI systems can improve access to services but also carry real risks if not implemented carefully. Residents with limited digital access, language barriers, or distrust of government systems may be left behind, or harmed, if equity is not built into design and governance.

Future objectives may include:

- Ensure AI tools are designed and tested to avoid reinforcing bias
- Improve access to services across language, geography, and digital access
- Increase transparency in how AI is used in decision-making

Fiscal and Operational

What is our result and how will we know we are making progress?

How are we being good stewards of financial, natural, and community resources?

AI can improve efficiency and reduce administrative burden, but requires clear governance, accountability, and honest accounting of costs, including energy use. By building custom tools grounded in local data and community needs, the County can reduce costly vendor dependence and keep public dollars working for residents.

Future objectives may include:

- Establish standards and governance for AI use
- Prioritize use cases that increase staff time in direct service to residents
- Build custom tools using County data and local needs rather than relying on expensive third-party vendor solutions
- Evaluate costs, benefits, and environmental impacts of AI systems
- Provide staff training and support for responsible implementation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With Gratitude

This plan is the result of an extraordinary collective effort. The County of Santa Cruz is grateful to everyone who contributed their time, expertise, and voice to this work.

Community, Board of Supervisors, and County Staff

This plan would not exist without the more than 4,500 community members who participated in town halls, surveys, focus groups, and tabling events across all five supervisorial districts. Their honesty and commitment to a better Santa Cruz County are the foundation of every page that follows.

The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors provided critical direction and guidance throughout the planning process.

Manu Koenig 1st District	Kimberly De Serpa 2nd District	Justin Cummings 3rd District	Felipe Hernandez 4th District	Monica Martinez 5th District (Chair)
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Hundreds of County staff across every department contributed their knowledge, time, and expertise about how the County can better serve the community.

Design Team

The following leaders shaped the direction, priorities, and strategies in this plan through sustained engagement over two years.

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County Values and Implementation Lens Team

The following County staff helped develop the County's shared values and implementation lenses, ensuring the Strategic Plan reflects how we will work together, make decisions, and deliver results.

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