

# Indicators for a Sustainable San Mateo County

Eleventh Annual Report Card  
Executive Summary  
April 2007

**S**ustainable San Mateo County (SSMC) is dedicated to the long-term health of our county's environment, social equity, and economy and fosters sustainability through education. Sustainability means that we meet today's needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The eleventh annual *Indicators for a Sustainable San Mateo County* analyzes 32 indicators of sustainability and highlights actions San Mateo County and our cities are taking to move toward a more sustainable future.

An indicator is a statistic or trend that allows us to evaluate whether we are moving toward sustainability. We have chosen each indicator for its importance to the county's environment, society, and economy. The exclusion of any indicators that were analyzed in previous editions does not reflect our belief that those indicators are no longer important, but rather, the unavailability of new data to add to our previous findings.

In addition to the 32 indicators, we have identified three key issues that threaten the sustainability of the county:

- **Climate Change:** Increased temperatures may negatively impact the state's water used for drinking, flood control, hydroelectric power, agriculture, and recreation. Climate change may also increase the risk of extreme weather events and alter local habitats. Climate change is the greatest challenge today to the fundamental principle of sustainability: not compromising future generations' quality of life or ability to meet their needs.
- **Housing:** Increasingly high housing costs cause residents to live in overcrowded conditions or spend an increasingly large percentage of their incomes on housing at the expense of other needs. In order to secure affordable housing, some may choose to live far from their place of work and have long commutes, which leads to high gasoline consumption, increased air pollution, and more time away from their families.
- **Water:** San Mateo County currently is fortunate to have high-quality drinking water and sufficient water supplies for its needs, but future population growth and potential impacts from climate change threaten sustainable supplies.

No one indicator can fully capture these three issues; each issue impacts several indicators.

## SUSTAINABILITY INDICATORS

Our research shows we are moving toward sustainability in a number of areas and away from sustainability in others. The findings for many indicators were mixed; some aspects of the indicator were moving in a positive direction while other negative trends persisted. Following are brief descriptions of our findings.

### Positive Trends

- **Air Quality:** In 2006, the county continued to enjoy clean air; particle pollution is still a concern.
- **Carbon Emissions:** In 2005, carbon emissions were down 10 percent from 2001; transportation accounts for more than half of all carbon emissions.
- **Contaminated Sites:** In 2006, the number of known leaking underground storage tanks was down 37 percent from 1997.
- **Drinking Water Quality:** In 2005, drinking water continued to meet state and federal quality standards.
- **Homelessness:** In 2005, homelessness was down slightly.
- **Jobs:** In 2005, the county halted a four-year trend of job losses, adding 200 jobs.
- **Public Library Use:** In 2004-05, expenditures per capita were up 10 percent from 2003-04 and 71 percent from 1994-95.
- **Unemployment:** In 2006, unemployment rate was down for third consecutive year.
- **Water Use:** In 2004-05, water use was down eight percent to lowest level since 1997-98.

### Negative Trends

- **Agriculture:** In 2005, total production value of agriculture was down 22 percent from 1992.
- **Child Care:** In 2006, supply of licensed child care spaces was down 11 percent; affordable infant care is the highest need.
- **Children's Health:** In 2004, one quarter of fifth, seventh and ninth graders were overweight.
- **Community Health:** In 2004, over 85 percent of adults exhibited at least one behavioral risk factor (e.g. no regular physical activity, smoking) related to heart disease.
- **Crime:** In 2005, violent crime rate was up 13 percent from 2004 and 30 percent from 1999.
- **Ecological Footprint:** Average resident's use of natural resources exceeds nature's ability to replenish them.
- **Energy Use:** In 2005, energy use from electricity and natural gas was up 16 percent from 1995, however the overall capacity of solar installations grew in 2006.
- **Gasoline Use and Vehicle Fuel Efficiency:** In 2005, total gasoline consumption increased despite high gasoline prices.

### Negative Trends, *continued*

- **Housing Affordability:** The cost of the median-priced home and condominium has more than doubled in the last decade.
- **Pesticide Use:** In 2005, use of the most toxic pesticides (excluding residential use) was up 22 percent.
- **Poverty and Income Distribution:** In 2006, more than one-third of households continued to earn less than the self-sufficiency level.

### Mixed Findings

- **Bay and Ocean Water Quality:** San Francisco Bay is classified as an impaired body of water under the Clean Water Act; most beaches have good water quality.
- **Child Abuse:** In 2005, child abuse referrals were down for third straight year, but remain high among African American children.
- **Education:** In 2006, Academic Performance Index scores continued to rise; it is unclear whether all children have an equal opportunity to excel.
- **Genuine Progress Indicator:** County's actual economic well-being 44 percent below that reported by conventional measure.
- **Green Building:** In 2006, more local governments were encouraging green building strategies, but only the county has a formal green building policy.
- **Health Care:** In 2005, the percentage of residents with health insurance was up from 2003; health care costs grew by 10 percent in 2006.
- **Land Use and Habitat Protection:** Land use has been fairly stable since 1990, but could be disrupted by expected population growth.
- **Parks and Open Space:** There are over 110,000 acres of parkland and open space; it is unclear if recreational opportunities and access are equal across communities.
- **Population:** Population is up nearly six percent over the last 10 years.
- **Transportation:** In 2005, daily vehicle hours of delay were down 30 percent from 2001; driving alone was the mode of choice for 70 percent of commuters.
- **Solid Waste:** In 2005, solid waste disposal was up two percent from 2004, but was still down 16 percent since 2000.
- **Voter Participation:** In 2006, voter turnout was up from 2005 and last midterm election, but still less than half of eligible voters voted.

## CITY AND COUNTY ACTIONS AND POLICIES

Local governments play an integral role in building a sustainable future. SSMC asked San Mateo County, the 20 cities in the county, and the San Mateo County Community College District to describe their actions and policies related to carbon emissions (which are a contributor to climate change), housing, and water. Following is a sampling of what is happening in the county.

### Climate Change

- High-mileage, low-emission vehicles such as hybrids have been purchased for government operations in Redwood City, Burlingame, San Carlos, Foster City, Menlo Park, the City of San Mateo, and South San Francisco.
- Renewable energy technologies have been installed in public facilities, such as solar panels in San Carlos, cogeneration systems at the Community College District and the Millbrae sewage plant, and solar heating in Brisbane and Menlo Park.
- Investments in energy efficiency have been made, such as the replacement of inefficient incandescent lighting with fluorescent lights in public facilities in many cities and the replacement of traditional traffic lights with long-lasting light-emitting diodes (LEDs) and low-power traffic lights in Foster City, San Carlos, and Millbrae.
- Alternative transportation schemes have been developed such as bicycle lanes, shuttle services, housing and commercial developments near public transit, incentives for city employees to use public transit, and requirements that developers of commercial properties implement traffic reduction plans.

### Housing

- Inclusionary housing policies have been adopted in 16 jurisdictions, with affordability requirements ranging from 10 percent to the 20 percent required in Colma, East Palo Alto, Foster City, South San Francisco, and unincorporated San Mateo County.
- Transit-oriented development projects near Caltrain and BART stations in San Bruno, the City of San Mateo, Redwood City, Menlo Park, Burlingame, South San Francisco, San Carlos, and unincorporated San Mateo County are either being planned, in construction, or completed.

### Housing, continued

- Habitat for Humanity projects have been completed in Daly City, Redwood City, East Palo Alto, and Menlo Park. There is also a current project in Brisbane.
- A number of cities have policies encouraging higher-density housing and mixed-use development in their downtowns or along transit corridors.
- Awareness of green building is growing and many cities encourage different green building strategies. A number of green building projects have been developed, such as the Shorebreeze Envirohomes in East Palo Alto and San Mateo County's new Youth Services Center.

### Water

- San Mateo County and cities such as Foster City and South San Francisco are attempting to reduce water use in parks through the use of computer-managed irrigation equipment.
- Foster City, San Carlos, South San Francisco, and the Community College District have installed synthetic turfs or alternative grasses such as tall fescue in selected parks and sports fields. These reduce water usage and require lower maintenance. Synthetic turfs also eliminate the need for pesticides and fertilizers.
- A number of cities provide rebates to qualified residents to install water-saving toilets and washers.
- Daly City is using surplus water from wet years to recharge its aquifer. Other North County cities and the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission are exploring greater coordination in aquifer management.
- Pacifica's Calera Creek Water Recycling Plant generates up to three million gallons of tertiary recycled wastewater each day. Other cities use recycled water for landscaped city properties or deliver it to customers with large watering needs, such as golf courses.

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David Brower, founder, Friends of the Earth  
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San Mateo  
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