TIME TO ACT ON CLIMATE CHANGE

TWENTY-SECOND ANNUAL INDICATORS REPORT

SUSTAINABLE SAN MATEO COUNTY
SUSTAINABILITY: A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT, SOCIETY AND ECONOMY FOR THE LONG TERM

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The 2018 Indicators Report shares data on the primary drivers of local greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, impactful reduction strategies, emergent carbon capture practices, and preparations for changing temperature and weather patterns. Measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of these solutions will guide further action to remove excess carbon from the atmosphere and balance emissions as we move forward.

Over the past 10 years, municipal GHG emission measures have shown a decrease in total emissions, however, the sector with the lowest rate of decrease is transportation. 60% of the county’s GHG emissions arise from transportation practices. The largest contributor is solo driving, and the restrictive housing market compounds the problem by increasing commutes and traffic, which leads to idling engines. A healthy, diverse community offers a balance between the availability of housing and the income levels of its residents, referred to as Jobs-Housing Fit. Emerging innovations in shared transit, economically balanced housing development, and planning for multimodal transportation are transforming cities and lowering emissions. Public transportation is increasingly powered by electricity, and widespread use of zero emission vehicles is vital to achieve total decarbonization of transportation.

According to a Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) report*, energy saving strategies and the transition to a fossil fuel-free economy are the fastest and most cost effective ways to reduce emissions. For decades, forward-thinking engineers, business leaders, and policy makers have been building renewable energy systems, promoting energy efficient designs, and implementing green building practices.

*America’s Clean Energy Frontier: The Pathway to a Safer Climate Future (2017)
Food systems have a massive impact on GHG emissions on a global scale. As consumers, we can reduce our carbon footprint by choosing food with the smallest GHG footprint and not wasting the food we buy. Agriculture is a major source of global GHG emissions. Scientists have been researching ways to reduce these emissions, including looking at the role of soil and vegetation as carbon sinks.

Consumption and waste grow with the economy, the population, and rising incomes, contributing to GHG emissions abroad and in local landfills. The solution is to reduce consumption of goods and to redesign products and packaging for zero waste.

To address climate change and mitigate its current and future impacts, we need to change the way we do business. Many companies and investors are considering methods to account for the cost of waste and GHG emissions, such as putting a price on carbon. Emerging technologies are testing the feasibility of removing carbon from the air and reusing it for construction and consumer product materials.

Preparation for extreme weather, heat, flooding, sea level rise, pests, service outages, and supply shortages is vital at the individual and community level. Planning for disasters now will ensure that vulnerable communities like low-income families, the elderly, and the disabled will not be left without vital resources when disaster strikes. Local governments are working to secure water infrastructure and emergency services. As residents, emergency preparation presents an opportunity to connect with neighbors and plan for resilience.
In 2017, Peninsula Clean Energy (PCE), San Mateo County’s not-for-profit public energy provider, avoided 515 million pounds of CO2 equivalent emissions and saved customers more than $14 million on their bills. Within the first year of operation fifteen municipalities and the County government upgraded their accounts to ECO100.

In 2015, the county’s estimated Greenhouse Gas emissions were 5.2 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent, a decrease compared with 5.4 million in 2013. These reductions were achieved through planning efforts such as municipal Climate Action Plans and programs at the regional, state, and federal level. As a whole, the county is on track to meet the emissions reduction goal set by the state for 2020.

Households earning the median income in San Mateo County cannot afford to purchase the median priced home or condo in the county. Between 2016 and 2017, the median home price increased by 7%, the median price condo increased 5%, and the median rent increased by 1.4%. Only 24% of potential first-time home buyers can afford to buy an entry level home in San Mateo County.

Though sea level fluctuates, the data indicate an upward trend over time. The County Office of Sustainability produced an extensive assessment of risk from sea level rise and flooding. As seas rise, it will also be more difficult for stormwater to flow to the Bay, exacerbating flooding in low-lying areas. To help address this concern, the City/County Association of Governments developed a countywide Stormwater Resource Plan and individual municipalities are developing Green Infrastructure Plans to support more sustainable stormwater management to protect residents and vital community assets.