Sustainable San Mateo County
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Contact: Mollie Carter, mollie@sustainablesanmateo.org, 415-871-5514

In-Depth Report Focuses on an Equitable Expansion of the Protective Tree Canopy in San Mateo County

Urban trees are often considered scenery, but they work as vital community infrastructure, cooling streets and homes, slowing stormwater runoff, making walking and outdoor activity more comfortable and supporting physical and mental health. The benefits of canopy, however, are not shared evenly in San Mateo County, leaving vulnerable communities at increased risk. **Sustainable San Mateo County's Indicators Report** on **"Tree Canopy Equity in San Mateo County"** offers a shared countywide baseline and prioritization framework for protection and equitable planting. Drawing on USDA and CAL FIRE canopy data, census tract measures of community vulnerability, and interviews with city staff, planting organizations and community partners, the report shows where canopy stands and how it has changed, identifies Planting Priority Zones where low canopy and vulnerability converge, and examines the challenges and opportunities in growing and preserving the urban forest. The 70-page report was unveiled October 23, 2026, at a presentation with four experts in Redwood City and can be accessed at **bit.ly/2026_Indicators_Report**.

Each year, Sustainable San Mateo County's (SSMC's) Indicators Report shares in-depth research on one critical issue in the county and includes comprehensive data, insightful maps and visualizations, case studies, profiles, and recommended solutions and policy initiatives.

After SSMC Executive Director Sarah Hubbard presented the report, a series of expert speakers discussed how cities, the County and tree planting organizations can work together to expand and protect canopy, through long-term planning, lasting partnerships and concrete commitments. Speakers included **Jean-Paul Renaud**, Canopy Executive Directors; **Robin Kim**, Public Works Superintendent for Redwood City; **David Grabel**, CityTrees President; and **Brent Johnson,** Integrated Natural Resource Manager for the County of Santa Clara.

This year's report recommends these and other key actions:

1. **Adopt an urban forest plan** with clear, neighborhood-level canopy targets
2. **Protect the existing urban forest** through preservation ordinances, development review and incentives for retention
3. Support and incentivize **trees on private property**
4. **Budget for maintenance and fund tree canopy as infrastructure**
5. Invest in **community education and engagement**
6. **Coordinate at the county level** and support lower-capacity jurisdictions

The report found:

- **Low and Decreasing Overall Canopy**:
    - Urban canopy across San Mateo County's jurisdictions averaged 21% in 2022, ranging from 7% in South San Francisco to 58% in Portola Valley.
    - At schools statewide, the mean tree coverage is 6.4%. In San Mateo County, 42% of public K-12 schools had less than 5% canopy. [Fig. A]
    - Between 2018 and 2022, urban tree canopy cover decreased by about 2% across California, reaching an average of 14.5%. In the same period, every jurisdiction of San Mateo County except Portola Valley lost urban tree canopy coverage. [Fig 7]
- **Inequitable Distribution**:
    - Of the 170 census tracts analyzed in San Mateo County, over a third (61 tracts) have 10% canopy or less while **nearly two thirds (109 tracts) have 20% or less–the threshold the report uses to define low canopy.** [Fig. 4]
- **Socially Vulnerable Communities at Higher Risk**:
    - 320,000 people, 43% of the county, live in low-canopy census where people of color are 70%+ of residents. The average canopy coverage is just 11% in these tracts, compared to 30% in predominantly white areas. [Fig. 8]
    - 162,000 people, 22% of the county, live in low-canopy tracts where with a majority of low-to-moderate income households. Their average canopy coverage is 12%. [Fig. 9]
- **Three Priority Zones Identified that Have 20% or Less Canopy and Social Vulnerability, Plus [**Fig 15**]:**
    - Cooling Priority: 12+ projected extreme heat days per year
    - Health Priority: 11+ emergency visits for heart attacks per 10,000 residents
    - Canopy Equity Priority: neither cooling or health burden elevated, but 20% or less canopy
- **Current Programs are Inefficient:**
    - Two cities have adopted Urban Forest Master Plans (South San Francisco, East Palo Alto)
    - All but one of the 19 cities with Climate Action Plans include trees in their plans, but few address care after planting, name funding or pair canopy targets with tracking.

Founded in 1992, Sustainable San Mateo County is a nonprofit dedicated to providing the solutions, accountability and political will to provide a sustainable future for everyone in the county. For more information about SSMC, visit **sustainablesanmateo.org** or email **info@sustainablesanmateo.org**.

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