

San Benito County: Top Community Issues

Conducted by

County of San Benito Civil Grand Jury

First Issued: July 31, 2008



**County of San Benito
Civil Grand Jury
2007-2008**

SAN BENITO COUNTY: TOP COMMUNITY ISSUES

SUMMARY

The 2007-08 San Benito County Civil Grand Jury conducted weekly interviews with city and county key public figures. Each interviewee offered his or her “Top Three” issues facing our community today. The interviews revealed a common thread of concerns and compliments. The topics covered fell into three basic categories of *economic growth and development, public safety, and water*. This report covers briefly a few of the topics within these categories mentioned most often by those interviewed.

PURPOSE OF INQUIRY

This report contains no formal findings or recommendations. It is intended to inform our residents about the most important issues currently facing our county and cities, as identified by the majority of the elected and appointed officials who were interviewed.

METHODOLOGY

Throughout its 2007-08 tenure, the Grand Jury conducted interviews with key public figures. A total of 23, one-hour interviews of individuals were conducted during weekly Grand Jury plenary sessions. Those interviewed included county supervisors; county administrative staff; city mayors and city managers; and heads of county and city law enforcement and fire safety.

Each interviewee was asked to identify his or her top concerns regarding present conditions of the community and his or her vision for its future. Jurors also asked questions pertaining to issues specific to current committee investigations.

The Grand Jury had the opportunity to conduct interviews at the beginning of its term and re-examinations of most officials toward the end of its term. This provided the opportunity for the Grand Jury to inquire about new issues and status changes to previously identified issues.

DISCUSSION

During each interview with each key public figure, the Grand Jury asked the interviewee to discuss his or her “Top Three” issues facing our community. This resulted in myriad responses, each from a slightly different perspective. Some were stated as issues, others as accomplishments. Topics included city and county budgets, city and county general plans, jobs, affordable housing, transportation infrastructure, commercial and industrial development, public safety staffing, crime, education, youth activities, the Hollister

building moratorium, the San Juan Bautista water system, and the expansion plans for the county jail and courthouse, among others.

When compiled, however, the most cited topics appeared to fit within three categories: economic growth and development, public safety, and water. The local economy could be tied to nearly any response topic.

The following sections summarize the topics within each category most often mentioned by those interviewed.

Economic Growth and Development

Many, if not all, of the issues cited by each of the interviewees have their roots in the state of our local economy. Those who included “economic growth and development” in their “Top Three” typically continued their comments by listing three to five topics to refine further the particular area of concern. This makes summarizing the primary topics in this category particularly difficult.

Attracting Businesses and Jobs

A great number of interviewees cited attracting new businesses and creating quality, high-paying local jobs as a top action issue. Each interviewee offered a variety of concerns and ideas. Most agreed that the county must attract a variety of small- to medium-sized industrial and professional businesses to locate inside the county, within easy commute of our residents. This variety of businesses should provide a mix of job opportunities, not simply minimum-wage positions. Hollister and San Juan Bautista representatives, alike, stated that they were considering creating more business or technology parks (facilities where companies could locate satellite offices). Others discussed attracting “green” industry businesses, such as the tire rubber recycling plant already in operation in this county.

Interviewees discussed the importance of attracting sales tax dollars that would otherwise go to neighboring counties. They described how city and county officials, in conjunction with citizen groups, continue to discuss the types and sizes of commercial and service businesses the county should attract. Several interviewees cited a hotel and a “big box” hardware store as examples of successful planned projects.

Other interviewees discussed our economic future in terms of our county’s “identity.” *What is unique about our county that could attract local spending?* Again, local government and citizen groups are working together to define this. Interviewees noted that San Benito County does not have a major throughway (such as Highway 101 through Monterey County) to attract visitors as they pass through the area. Instead, to attract tourism dollars, San Benito County must consider itself a “destination,” creating destination-type primary tourist attractions. Certain state and federal attractions, including Pinnacles National Monument and the Hollister Hills State Vehicular Park, exist today. Interviewees cited our agriculture industry as one of the county’s identifying features. They noted that development of agri-tourism (such as the developing wine trail) could be one component of San Benito County’s economic growth. Again, interviewees noted that this direction would require development of commercial and support businesses (gas, food, lodging, and sales of local goods) and would provide local jobs.

All interviewees included some component of material infrastructure improvement as part of their lists. Topics included utility modernization and growth, and transportation improvements. Some of these topics are covered elsewhere in this report.

Several interviewees noted that San Juan Bautista is in need of extensive and expensive infrastructure modernization (beyond that of water supply) which it cannot afford at this time. Should San Juan Bautista disincorporate, the burden would become the county's, as a whole.

Infrastructure

Countywide, the safety and capacity of the county and state highways through San Benito County was high on many of the interviewees' lists. Many cited the necessity and inevitability of some type of expansion of Highway 156 to alleviate the competition between local farm equipment, commuter traffic, and through-freight traffic. However, interviewees did not necessarily agree upon whether the current plan of expansion was the correct one. Other interviewees were as concerned about planning for increased capacity on Highway 25 to accommodate a growing commuter community now and increased tourism in the future.

Housing

Several interviewees placed housing development in their "Top Three" list. The concern is mainly for housing in and around Hollister, considering the lifting of the moratorium. Interviewees noted that they believe that local planning and the current real estate market will prevent excessive, short-term growth. Concerns of these interviewees focused more on the mix of housing types. Many expressed the desire for additional "affordable" housing and for "mixed-use" redevelopment in the Hollister downtown area.

Growth and Harmony

Many interviewees stressed that growth should be managed. Plans should consider San Benito County's unique character and should balance its agricultural heritage while accommodating the growth of both business and population. Some interviewees talked about the hiring an economic development director to guide a cohesive, countywide plan.

Public Safety

Gang-Related Crime

By far, the most common public safety concern cited was increasing gang related crime, without sufficient law enforcement staff to address it. No one interviewed, however, could tell the Grand Jury just what documented percentage of local crime is attributable to gang activity.

Many interviewees remarked they have participated or are participating in meetings and task forces discussing how best to approach the issue. Many county and Hollister officials remarked that available funds limit what can be devoted to the three-prong approach of prevention, intervention, and suppression.

Interviewees said that law enforcement is doing its part to address suppression, with the available staff. They stated further that local governments and residents must work together to do a better job to produce and coordinate activities to address the prevention and intervention components. Youth and family education programs and youth activity programs are in place but require better advertising and coordination; all require more funding and parent participation.

Some interviewees cited the lack of available higher education options and the lack of local, good-paying jobs as contributors to the problem. Several interviewees would like to see the youth apprenticeship program restarted in this county.

Public Safety Staffing

Many of those interviewed stated that our law enforcement and fire protection staffs are too low, primarily at the city level. Contributing to this issue are continued budget cuts. Some interviewees mentioned that because we are a smaller community, recruiting and retaining qualified officers is difficult, when compared to large cities.

Some interviewees noted that police staff in Hollister is about half the number desired. Due to lack of staff, the department now prioritizes call response, requiring the self-reporting of property crimes. Both Hollister and San Juan Bautista work with the county Sheriff to cover serious crimes. However, due to lack of funds, San Juan Bautista has cut its patrols by half.

Interviewees noted that both cities lack sufficient fire protection force or equipment. In San Juan Bautista, the volunteer force has increased. However, since many of the volunteers live or work outside of the area, 24-hour immediate response cannot be guaranteed.

Many interviewees were particularly concerned about fire protection in San Juan Bautista. They cited the combination of a lack of modernized infrastructure (the old water main and few buildings with fire protection sprinklers) and the very old buildings (with dry wood, antiquated electrical wiring, and common-wall construction) makes the downtown a very high risk for catastrophic fire. Again, cooperation with county, state, and other forces from outside this county helps to fill the gaps in fire response.

Many interviewees commended our law enforcement and fire response leaders for their quality performance and preparedness considering the budget and staffing challenges.

Funding

Repeatedly, interviewees cited that adequate funds would go a long way to resolve many of the public safety issues. However, interviewees commented that, in the current economy, relief is not yet in sight. At the City of Hollister level, some interviewees averred that Measure T funds would be made available for police and fire. Some interviewees noted that the intention is to add 4 police officers this fiscal year and 3 to 4 more the following year.. However, each also noted it was too early to tell how the funds would be allocated or how much funds would be available. With the economy's downturn, the amount of expected funds would have to be adjusted.

Water

Water issues are important California-wide. San Benito County is no exception. Concerns expressed by interviewees focused on local water availability, quality, and quantity.

On the positive side, most expressed confidence that the Hollister wastewater treatment plant would be completed on time. This will remove the building moratorium. However, many interviewees emphasized the hope that this would also increase confidence in the strengths of San Benito County to attract additional small- and medium-sized businesses to further increase local jobs and tax base.

Still at issue, however, is freshwater availability and quality in San Juan Bautista, Hollister, and the unincorporated areas of our county.

Of greatest notoriety is the loss of the EDA grant to build the much needed freshwater and wastewater systems for San Juan Bautista. The primary implications are well documented. However, loss of the grant money also had indirect consequences. For instance, the upgrade of the city's water main will be delayed. The existing system provides inadequate volume to fight a substantial fire in the downtown area, making emergency response even more difficult.

In Hollister, officials project that the city has an adequate freshwater source to year 2025. However, this water will become gradually "harder" as more reclaimed and local groundwater sources (containing dissolved salts) are combined with outside source water. To accommodate the growing community beyond 2025, some interviewees encouraged that we begin developing additional resources now.

Some interviewees stated that, countywide, residents and agriculture businesses alike are encountering water quality and quantity issues. By nature, the valley's groundwater contains a certain amount of metals and salts, noted the interviewees, and many years of agricultural activity have increased these concentrations. Groundwater is plentiful but expensive. It requires energy to pump from the ground and increasingly more processing or dilution to make it usable. More than one interviewee mentioned that the recent reduction of the external agricultural water source has forced all to reconsider our water usage and processing. Although no one offered a single solution, all noted that it was important that the issue was being raised now, before it becomes a crisis.

Interviewees remarked that these water issues are not insurmountable. However, solutions require dollars; dollars that the cities and county do not necessarily have budgeted. Ironically, one interviewee observed, although economic growth would mean increased resource use, it would also mean an increased tax base to help fund solutions to these issues.

FINDINGS

Not applicable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Not applicable.

RESPONSE REQUIRED

Not applicable.