

2025-2026 Final Report

Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury



Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Final Report 2025-2026

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The full text of all the Grand Jury's reports is available at any Sonoma County library or online at www.sonomagrandjury.org



Para leer los informes del Gran Jurado Civil 2018-2026 en español, visite:



Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code § 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

Cover: *Sebastopol Spire*, created by artist Ned Kahn, was inspired by First Nation Totem Poles as an appreciation of the air, which they considered to be alive. The artwork sings when the wind blows and marks the entrance of a trail that meanders through the Laguna de Santa Rosa ecosystem, Sonoma County's largest watershed. The Laguna is protected by the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation with funding, in part, through the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District.

Learn more about the Laguna de Santa Rosa:



**SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA
COUNTY OF SONOMA**



Christopher Honigsberg
Presiding Judge
(707) 521-6726

Hall of Justice
600 Administration Drive
Santa Rosa, CA 95403

June 1, 2026

Dear Members of the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury:

I reviewed the Grand Jury Final report for the fiscal year 2025-2026. I find that it complies with Penal Code section 933. It is apparent from reading the reports that you each worked diligently to fulfill your obligations as a grand juror. Your hard work shows.

As a civil grand juror, you all volunteered your time to represent the citizens of Sonoma County. The job of a civil grand juror is a big responsibility and serves a vital public role. You accepted that responsibility without any hesitation. The citizens of Sonoma County owe you a debt of gratitude. I appreciate all that you do and all that you did this past year.

I always find it impressive and inspiring to know that 19 people can come together and work collaboratively on issues that affect all of us in Sonoma County. You are all to be commended for carrying on the tradition of collaboration for the public at large. On behalf of the Superior Court of Sonoma County, I applaud and thank you for all you have done.

I would especially like to thank your foreperson, Wendy Roberts, for her leadership, organization, steady hand and dedication to the work of the Grand Jury. The job of a foreperson is challenging, but she made it appear seamless and easy.

Once again, congratulations to our Civil Grand Jury. You have worked hard and done your job well. Our county is a better place thanks to your work.

Very truly yours,

Christopher Honigsberg,
Presiding Judge
Superior Court of California,
County of Sonoma

CH/ml



The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury

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June 2026

To the Citizens of Sonoma County and the Honorable Judge Christopher Honigsberg:

On behalf of the 2025-2026 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury and pursuant to California Penal Code § 933, it is my duty and privilege to present our Final Consolidated Report.

The Civil Grand Jury serves as a government watchdog by investigating matters of public interest and concern regarding city and county government, special districts, and public schools. The 2025-2026 Jury, composed of 19 court-appointed jurors, created a Continuity report of responses to prior year reports, visited the jail and Juvenile Hall, and completed eight new reports that are published on the Superior Court website as well as in this printed document.

The Grand Jury strives to effect positive change in local government by illuminating areas that deserve our accolades as well as those that warrant reform or enhanced accountability. Jurors conduct rigorous investigations and craft reports and recommendations to inform citizens and prompt constructive change.

Grand Jury service requires critical thinking, respectful dialogue, and a shared sense of civic responsibility. The 2025-2026 jurors possessed all these qualities and a wide range of knowledge and experience. Their collegiality and commitment to the work made serving as their foreperson a rewarding and humbling experience for which I am deeply grateful.

Appreciation is also due to the alternate jurors who stood ready to step in throughout the year, to County and Court staff who provided legal counsel and administrative and technology support, and to the local chapter of the Civil Grand Jurors' Association for its guidance and institutional memory.

With sincere gratitude to all,

Wendy Roberts

Wendy A. Roberts, Foreperson

2025-2026 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury

Página de resúmenes en español

Los informes del Gran Jurado en español estarán disponibles en el sitio web del Gran Jurado a partir del 1 de julio de 2026. (<https://sonoma.courts.ca.gov/general-information/civil-grand-jury/current-year-reports-and-responses>) A continuación se incluyen los resúmenes de los informes.

Revisión del Distrito de Preservación Agrícola y Espacios Abiertos del Condado de Sonoma: ¡está en su sitio web!

El Distrito de Preservación Agrícola y Espacios Abiertos (Ag + Open Space) se creó mediante una iniciativa de los votantes en 1990 y se financia con un impuesto sobre las ventas del 0,25 %. En 2006, más del 75 % de los votantes del condado de Sonoma aprobaron su financiación por otros veinte años. Como *distrito especial dependiente*, Ag + Open Space está supervisado por la Junta de Supervisores del Condado de Sonoma. A lo largo de los últimos 35 años, Ag + Open Space adquirió y protegió más de 126.000 acres de terreno y servidumbres de conservación. Este informe responde a las preguntas que cualquier contribuyente pueda tener sobre la labor de la agencia. La mayoría de estas respuestas (y más) se pueden encontrar en la página web de Ag + Open Space. El informe del Gran Jurado describe los métodos basados en la ciencia utilizados para seleccionar propiedades y servidumbres de conservación con fines de protección permanente, así como el detallado proceso de tasación empleado para establecer un precio justo. Tras una investigación exhaustiva, el Gran Jurado concluyó que Ag + Open Space está cumpliendo su misión de proteger las tierras agrícolas y los espacios abiertos en beneficio de los residentes del condado de Sonoma. Esto se lleva a cabo mediante la protección del medio ambiente, la reducción de los riesgos de incendios e inundaciones, y ofreciendo espacios para la educación y el ocio al aire libre.

Proteger a los más vulnerables contra el abuso y el abandono: por los niños

El Gran Jurado respondió a la inquietud de un ciudadano sobre la forma en que el Departamento de Servicios Sociales del Condado de Sonoma atiende las denuncias de menores en riesgo de sufrir maltrato o abandono que se reciben a través de su línea de atención “Familia, Juventud y Niños” (FY&C). La denuncia también alegaba que un menor había fallecido después de que una evaluación de la línea de atención concluyera que la situación denunciada no requería intervención. El Gran Jurado determinó que el personal de la línea de atención está compuesto por profesionales bien formados y comprometidos, cuyos juicios profesionales se ven respaldados por una sofisticada herramienta de evaluación y por la revisión de los supervisores. El Gran Jurado no pudo determinar si algún niño había fallecido después de que una evaluación de la línea directa no diera lugar a una intervención. Esta cuestión resultó en un análisis del Equipo de Revisión de Muertes Infantiles (CDRT) del Condado de Sonoma. El Gran Jurado se enteró de que el CDRT no ha publicado un informe exigido por el estado desde 2014 y no emplea muchas de las mejores prácticas utilizadas por otros equipos CDRT. Un equipo gestionado de forma más eficaz, con recursos adecuados para la elaboración de informes anuales exhaustivos, podría utilizarse para mejorar los servicios y prevenir las muertes infantiles debidas al maltrato y el abandono.

Revisión de los servicios para animales: una ciudad dormida al volante

El Gran Jurado Civil de 2025-2026 volvió a examinar las cuestiones planteadas por el Gran Jurado de 2024-2025 en relación con el incumplimiento por parte de los Servicios para Animales de la Bahía Norte (NBAS) de su contrato con la ciudad de Petaluma (la ciudad) para la prestación de servicios relacionados con los animales, la falta de supervisión por parte de la Oficina del Administrador Municipal (CMO) y la necesidad de un sistema de supervisión a nivel de todo el condado para garantizar un control y un refugio de animales humanitarios, conformes a la ley y rentables en todo el condado de Sonoma. El Gran Jurado también investigó las pruebas recientemente recibidas y confirmó que ni NBAS ni la ciudad han cumplido con los protocolos del Código Municipal de Petaluma para documentar los incidentes de mordeduras de animales y aplicar procedimientos para mitigar los riesgos para la salud y la seguridad públicas que plantean los animales peligrosos. Este informe aborda la rescisión abrupta del contrato y la sustitución de NBAS en respuesta a la indignación pública

por la desastrosa salida de NBAS como operador del Refugio de Clearlake. El Gran Jurado consideró que la crisis resultante fue consecuencia de la incapacidad de la CMO para supervisar el contrato de servicios de animales y actuar ante los incumplimientos de NBAS de manera oportuna. El Gran Jurado también determinó que, ante la presión pública, la CMO y el Consejo Municipal actuaron sin transparencia completa y sin la aprobación de resoluciones y ordenanzas exigidas por la Carta de la Ciudad de Petaluma y el Código Municipal. El Gran Jurado concluyó que el Consejo Municipal electo de Petaluma está permitiendo que el administrador municipal designado usurpe la responsabilidad del Consejo Municipal de dictar políticas y comprometer los fondos de los contribuyentes mediante resoluciones y ordenanzas que se adoptan mediante votaciones formales y registradas. En efecto, se ha silenciado la voz de los votantes.

LAFCO de Sonoma: abundan las oportunidades

La Comisión de Formación de Agencias Locales (LAFCO) de Sonoma es un organismo público creado por mandato estatal cuya función es regular los límites de las nueve ciudades incorporadas y los aproximadamente 40 distritos especiales del condado de Sonoma. Cuenta con un director ejecutivo, un analista de la comisión y un presupuesto anual de 1.184.294 dólares. La Ley de Reorganización de la Gobernanza Local Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg de 2000 exige que cada LAFCO del condado lleve a cabo periódicamente revisiones de los servicios municipales (MSR) y actualice la esfera de influencia de las ciudades y los distritos especiales aproximadamente cada cinco años. El personal de LAFCO no proporcionó muchos de los estudios sobre esferas de influencia solicitados por el Gran Jurado. Al menos 18 de las MSR revisadas por el Gran Jurado no se habían actualizado en los últimos 19 años. El Gran Jurado consideró que el sitio web de la LAFCO estaba mal organizado y carecía de información que sí proporcionaban sus equivalentes de otros condados. La agencia no facilitó descripciones formales de los puestos de trabajo. No cuenta con un plan de transición a pesar de que el director ejecutivo anunció su jubilación. Las recomendaciones del Gran Jurado animan a los comisionados de la LAFCO de Sonoma a asumir su papel de liderazgo y a elaborar descripciones de puestos, políticas y procedimientos que respalden operaciones eficientes, eficaces y que cumplan con la legislación en nombre de las partes interesadas del condado de Sonoma.

Compras del condado de Sonoma: grandes sumas de dinero con escasa supervisión operativa

El Grupo de Compras del Condado (CPG) de Sonoma es responsable de garantizar que se sigan las políticas y los procedimientos en todo el sistema de compras descentralizado utilizado por los departamentos y organismos del condado. El CPG supervisa un gasto de aproximadamente 1.200 millones de dólares al año en bienes, servicios y mejoras de capital para llevar a cabo la labor del gobierno del condado en nombre de los contribuyentes. El Gran Jurado Civil de 2025-2026 examinó los procesos mediante los cuales el Grupo de Compras del Condado desempeña su función de supervisión. Los miembros del jurado descubrieron que el condado carece de un sistema integrado de gestión de contratos y adquisiciones de principio a fin de que pudiera mejorar las decisiones de compra y revelar oportunidades para realizar pedidos conjuntos. El CPG actual no dispone de una lista exhaustiva de las personas responsables de las compras en cada departamento. Esto dificulta los esfuerzos por impartir formación sistemática sobre políticas y procedimientos. Los escasos controles que existen no se aplican hasta que las transacciones han concluido, momento en el que ya es demasiado tarde para corregir los errores. El Grupo de Compras del Condado no tiene autoridad para imponer consecuencias significativas cuando no se siguen las políticas y los procedimientos. Los consultores externos y las auditorías internas han formulado recomendaciones para mejoras sistémicas, pero estas no se han implementado. En la actualidad, el CPG forma parte

del Departamento de Infraestructuras Públicas del condado. El Gran Jurado observó que esto plantea un posible conflicto de intereses y que hace que el CPG sea menos visible para la supervisión por parte de la Oficina Ejecutiva del Condado y la Junta de Supervisores.

Sistemas de agua y alcantarillado de la ciudad de Sebastopol: la acción aplazada tiene consecuencias

El Gran Jurado Civil de 2025-2026 confirmó las denuncias de los ciudadanos según las cuales la ciudad de Sebastopol (la ciudad) había incumplido las leyes estatales, basadas en las Proposiciones 218 y 26, que establecen cómo deben fijarse las tarifas de agua y alcantarillado. Estas leyes también exigen que las tarifas pagadas por los contribuyentes solo puedan utilizarse para prestar los servicios específicos por los que se cobran. Las tarifas pagadas por los contribuyentes se basan en el coste directo de un servicio y en una asignación justa y proporcional de los costes compartidos del funcionamiento de la administración. Los costes directos se establecen mediante estudios de tarifas. Se llevan a cabo estudios de asignación de costes para determinar qué porcentaje de los costes compartidos (indirectos) debe imputarse a los ingresos por tarifas. A continuación, los fondos asignados se transfieren al fondo general de la ciudad. Las mejores prácticas recomiendan que estos estudios se realicen cada tres a cinco años para garantizar que las tasas cubran los costes de los servicios y que la asignación de los costes indirectos al fondo general no exceda la parte justa y proporcional de los servicios indirectos. El Gran Jurado confirmó las preocupaciones de los ciudadanos de que la ciudad no había realizado estudios de tarifas y de asignación de costes a intervalos regulares. Antes de 2023, el estudio de asignación de costes más reciente se había realizado hacía más de 20 años. Basándose en un nuevo estudio, en 2024 la ciudad ajustó la tarifa de costes indirectos y devolvió unos 714.000 dólares a los fondos de empresa. El Gran Jurado estimó que, en los últimos nueve años, la ciudad había asignado en exceso unos 5,5 millones de dólares y los había transferido de los fondos empresariales de agua y alcantarillado al fondo general. Esto dejó a los fondos empresariales sin capacidad para llevar a cabo el mantenimiento necesario y las mejoras de capital en los sistemas de agua y alcantarillado. Del mismo modo, los estudios de tarifas irregulares e inexactos habían dado lugar a que los ajustes de las tarifas se quedaran rezagados con respecto a los costes directos. Esto se descubrió en 2023 y resultó en un aumento del 37 % en las tarifas de agua y alcantarillado cuando se ajustaron el 1 de julio de 2024. El Gran Jurado no encontró pruebas de irregularidades por parte de ningún empleado municipal actual o anterior y reconoce los esfuerzos que se están realizando para mejorar la situación. Al mismo tiempo, recomienda que el Consejo Municipal acepte una estimación de los fondos que se han sustraído indebidamente de los fondos empresariales y ponga en marcha un programa para restituir dichos fondos con el fin de realizar las mejoras de infraestructura necesarias.

Más allá de los titulares sobre la educación pública: comprender los retos de la consolidación y el proceso de intervención estatal

Los administradores del distrito responsables de las finanzas de las escuelas públicas del condado de Sonoma se enfrentan a una tormenta perfecta de crecientes costes operativos y de personal. También existe la pérdida de ingresos debido al descenso constante de la matriculación y a la reducción de los fondos procedentes de los gobiernos estatal y federal. Los medios centran en los distritos cuyos déficits presupuestarios extremos los han puesto en peligro de ser intervenidos por el Estado de California. El cierre de escuelas y la consolidación de distritos se discuten a menudo como posibles soluciones, pero sin una explicación de los complicados procesos y costes que conllevan. El informe elaborado por el Gran Jurado Civil de 2025-2026 ofrece más información para los lectores que desean comprender la crisis financiera a la que se enfrentan las escuelas del condado de Sonoma. Si bien no habrá soluciones sencillas ni inmediatas, el Gran Jurado recomienda que la Oficina de Educación del Condado ponga en marcha un programa para proporcionar al público la información que necesitan quienes desean ejercer una supervisión significativa de las decisiones financieras de las juntas escolares locales y actuar como defensores eficaces de políticas sólidas y cambios constructivos.

Respuestas a los informes del Gran Jurado de 2018-2024 y 2024-2025: continuidad mediante el seguimiento de investigaciones previas

Cada año, el Gran Jurado Civil del Condado de Sonoma revisa las respuestas a las recomendaciones formuladas en años anteriores e informa sobre si se han cumplido los compromisos de cambio constructivo. Esta función de supervisión ayuda a garantizar que las promesas hechas se cumplan. Los informes completos se publican en el sitio web del tribunal.

Observaciones del Gran Jurado Civil del Condado de Sonoma sobre los centros de detención del condado

El artículo 919(b) del Código Penal de California exige que el gran jurado civil de cada condado “investigue el estado y la gestión de las prisiones públicas del condado”. Aunque el condado de Sonoma no cuenta con prisiones públicas, sí dispone de dos centros de detención: el Centro Principal de Detención para Adultos (MADF) y el Centro de Detención Juvenil. El Gran Jurado Civil del Condado de Sonoma de 2025-2026 elaboró este informe basándose en las inspecciones realizadas en ambos centros en octubre de 2025 y en la información facilitada. El Gran Jurado aprendió que el MADF restableció y aumentó los programas terapéuticos y educativos para los reclusos que se habían visto restringidos por la COVID-19. El MADF dio pasos importantes para cubrir las vacantes de personal y redujo la cantidad de horas extras obligatorias. El tiempo fuera de la celda para los reclusos del MADF se ha incrementado de una hora a seis o más horas al día. Cuando el Gran Jurado lo inspeccionó, el MADF albergaba a 755 reclusos. Esta cifra incluye a 345 reclusos diagnosticados como “lidiando con problemas de salud mental” y a 254 diagnosticados con “problemas de salud mental agudos”. A pesar de los grandes esfuerzos del personal de la cárcel, muchos de estos reclusos requieren un nivel de atención que no está disponible. El Gran Jurado anima al Alguacil y a la Junta de Supervisores a que continúen sus esfuerzos para obtener fondos destinados a construir una ampliación dedicada a la salud mental en el MADF.

El Centro de Detención Juvenil también ha restablecido y ampliado el acceso a la orientación y la educación. Las instalaciones están limpias y bien gestionadas. Una colaboración financiada con subvenciones y en la que participan artistas locales ha dado lugar a unos murales magníficos que han tenido un impacto positivo en el aspecto de las instalaciones y en el estado de ánimo del personal, los voluntarios y los jóvenes allí recluidos. El objetivo general del Centro de Detención Juvenil es devolver a los jóvenes a sus comunidades con las habilidades, la educación y las experiencias que los prepararán para superar los numerosos retos a los que se enfrentarán.

Código QR

Puede consultar los informes completos en este sitio web



Review of Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District: It's On Their Website!

The 2025-2026 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) responded to a citizen query by seeking answers to questions any Sonoma County taxpayer might ask about how, and how well, the Sonoma Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag+OS) is fulfilling its voter-approved mission. The Grand Jury found virtually every answer to its questions on the website, hence the report title. The Grand Jury's extensive investigation of the agency revealed much to applaud and no serious cause for concern.

Preservation of agricultural lands and open space has been a consideration of Sonoma County planners and voters since the 1978 General Plan. It became a major focus of the 1989 General Plan. On November 6, 1990, voters passed Measures A and C that established Ag+OS as a dependent special district, overseen by the Board of Supervisors, and established a 0.25 percent sales tax for a period of 20 years to purchase property and/or conservation easements. Measure C specified that funds would be used to preserve:

- Community separators
- Scenic landscapes
- Critical habitats and riparian corridors
- Other areas of biotic significance
- Other open space areas

On November 7, 2006, more than 75% of voters extended Ag+OS funding for another 20 years.

Over the past 35 years, Ag+OS has acquired and stewarded more than 126,000 acres of property and conservation easements to pursue its mission of conserving Sonoma County agricultural lands and open space in perpetuity. Many of these properties bear little or no identification of the Ag+OS role in their protection. This may lead to the public being unaware of the extent of Ag+OS acquisitions. The Grand Jury sought answers to questions that any tax-paying citizen might well ask. Among the questions the Grand Jury sought to answer were several raised by members of the public:

- Is Ag+OS accomplishing what the voters approved?
- Can we be confident that Ag+OS negotiates a fair price and invests our taxes wisely?
- What added protection does Ag+OS provide compared to existing zoning and land use ordinances?

This report answers these questions and several others, based on multiple interviews and review of documents, including material that is readily available on the Ag+OS website. In it, the Grand Jury describes the process through which staff and the Ag+OS Board of Directors has established selection criteria for projects to implement the voter-approved Expenditure Plan, and the Geographic Information System (GIS)-based process through which properties are evaluated for fee title purchase or establishment of conservation easements. The report also details the rigorous appraisal process which becomes the basis for price negotiation and informs ultimate decision-making by the Board of Directors.

The Grand Jury found that Ag+OS has aligned its work closely with the Expenditure Plans approved by voters. To date, it has protected and continues to provide stewardship for more than 126,000 acres, about 12% of the county lands. Every resident and visitor to Sonoma County benefits from these acquisitions through green belts and community separators, healthy watersheds and riparian areas, parklands, playing fields, and agricultural uses that provide local produce, dairy, meat, and fiber.

The value to taxpayers is ensured both by the science-based identification of properties closely aligned with voter-approved objectives and by the rigorous appraisal process, with internal review by the Fiscal Oversight Commission (FOC). Approval by the Board of Directors is required prior to release of funds. Tax dollars are also leveraged for initial acquisitions of Community Spaces projects by grants and gifts, increasing the available funding by about 35%.

Taxpayer investment in Ag+OS will continue to pay dividends to future generations through conservation easements that are protected in perpetuity by state law. While county and city general plans and zoning ordinances can be changed by successive governments, conservation easements are protected by law for permanent stewardship.

While Ag+OS is Sonoma County's only tax-funded open space preservation entity, it has forged numerous partnerships that support its mission. Sonoma County Regional Parks and Sonoma Land Trust are frequent collaborators with Ag+OS. Together with other public and private agencies, they have established the Sonoma Valley Wildlands Collaborative, a partnership aimed at maintaining and improving ecosystem health and increasing resilience to wildfires and climate change.

In 2022 Ag+OS formed a coalition with Sonoma Water, the North Coast Resource Partnership, Humboldt County, as well as other state and local agencies to secure funding for the collection of light detection and ranging (LiDAR) images that make up the Sonoma Vegetation Map. The images have enhanced the GIS that Ag+OS uses to evaluate and analyze properties. This GIS is also used by Sonoma Emergency Management to help prepare for, and mitigate, the impact of disasters. The plan, which is undergoing an update, and maps can be viewed by visiting [Sonoma County Hazard Mitigation Plan](#) and selecting Hazard Mapper.

The collegiality reflected in these regional partnerships was also evident to the Grand Jury during its interviews with Ag+OS and Regional Parks staff. Every individual demonstrated a commitment to the organization's mission. Throughout these organizations there is a deep sense of responsibility to give the voters of Sonoma County the absolute best value for their money by preserving the land for future generations to enjoy.

FINDINGS

F1. Public meetings of the Ag+OS Board of Directors are publicly noticed by the County as Board of Supervisors meetings but do not appear on the Ag+OS website listing of public meetings. This may leave interested members of the public uninformed of the meetings.

F2. The Stewardship Reserve Fund is currently invested at the County's highly conservative low rate of return. This may be insufficient to meet the long-term goal of providing stewardship in perpetuity.

F3. The Recorder's Office does not notify Ag+OS when ownership of a protected property changes. This may impair Ag+OS stewardship of a conservation easement.

F4. Because many properties are not physically identified on site as protected by Ag+OS, members of the public may not be aware of what has been accomplished with their tax dollars.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

R1. By August 1, 2026 the Ag+OS Board of Directors/Board of Supervisors direct Ag+OS staff to include notification of Board of Directors meetings, with a link to the agenda, in the location established on its website for Public Meeting announcements.

R2. By August 1, 2026 the Board of Supervisors direct the Auditor-Controller-Treasurer-Tax Collector and the Administrator of the Sonoma County Employees' Retirement Association Investment Managers to collaborate in pursuing a higher rate of return on the Ag+OS Stewardship Reserve Fund and report their recommendations to the Board of Directors by December 31, 2026.

R3. By August 1, 2026 the Board of Supervisors direct the Recorder's Office to flag properties under Ag+OS Stewardship and create a system to notify Ag+OS of changes in ownership within 30 days of recording.

Protecting Sonoma County's Most Vulnerable from Abuse and Neglect: For the Children

SUMMARY

The Grand Jury received a request for investigation alleging that the Sonoma County Department of Human Services does not adequately protect vulnerable and abused children. In response, the Grand Jury investigated the Department's hotline for receiving reports of child abuse and endangerment. Of particular concern was the allegation that at least one child had died after the Department took no action in response to a hotline call. The allegation of a child's death led the Grand Jury to examine the work of the Sonoma County Child Death Review Team (CDRT).

The hotline is an entry point into the County's child protective services system. It is staffed by professional social workers who evaluate what, if any, further investigation is warranted when calls are received, and the appropriate timeframe for response. Social workers respond to incoming calls based on their determination of the degree of risk or endangerment to the child. An emergency determination will require further in-person assessment within 24 hours. For non-emergency cases, an in-person assessment will be completed within 10 days. If the social worker and a supervisor find no need for intervention, the case is "evaluated out," and no additional action is taken, although callers may be referred to other community resources and support services.

If a given case is evaluated out four times in 12 months, it is reexamined by hotline staff and supervisors. While responses to reports of abuse are handled in a professional and consistent manner, the Department was unable to articulate the rationale for choosing the number four as the trigger for supervisory review. It did not provide statistics on the number of children, if any, who had died or suffered abuse after their cases had been evaluated out, citing confidentiality rules. The Grand Jury was thus unable to determine if a child had actually died after being evaluated out.

A Child Death Review Team is an interagency group that assists officials in identifying suspicious child deaths. The team consists of public and private experts in forensic pathology, medicine, child protective services, and law enforcement. It is intended to generate a statistical survey of child mortality and its causes. While counties are not required to create a CDRT, if one is created, it must publish its findings, conclusions, data and recommendations annually.

The Sonoma County CDRT has not published a mandatory annual report since 2014. That report tabulated the number of child deaths from medical causes, accidents, sleep-related causes, homicide, and abuse or neglect. A significant finding was that in 22% of child deaths in the County, abuse and neglect was a direct or contributing cause. The absence of similar reports since 2014 means that data of this kind have not been made available to service providers, policymakers, or the public.

The Grand Jury also found that the Sonoma County CDRT did not employ many of the best practices used by other CDRTs in California and nationwide. For example, there is no single individual designated as chair of the team; there are no written protocols or bylaws governing the team's work; no training is provided for team members; meeting minutes are not kept; and there is no direct funding of the team's activities.

COMMENDATIONS

1. The FY&C Hotline for reporting child abuse and neglect is staffed by professional social workers who rely on the SDM tool and professional judgment in responding to reports. This results in the consistent application of services to the community.
2. Because supervisors' review of decisions by Hotline intake workers are collaborative, there is a unity of effort in reaching the best outcomes for children.

FINDINGS

F1. Family, Youth and Children Division was unable to explain the rationale for reexamining cases that had been evaluated out four times within the previous 12 months. Therefore, it is unclear whether the practice is an effective response to reports of child neglect and abuse.

F2. Because the Sonoma County CDRT lacks funding for acquisition of data and retention of records, production of its mandated reports may be impaired.

F3. By failing to report its findings for the past 12 years, the Sonoma County CDRT has not fulfilled its mandate to educate service providers, policymakers, and the public about the risk factors for child neglect, abuse and death. Annual reporting could have led to systemic improvements to alleviate or prevent risks to vulnerable children.

F4. The Sonoma County CDRT lacks leadership. Without formal leadership the CDRT has failed to meet statutory requirements.

F5. The Sonoma County CDRT is without an effective spokesperson for child advocacy in the community. This results in lost opportunities to inform and influence the many service providers and the public regarding children's health and safety in the County.

F6. The Sonoma County CDRT's failure to identify a single leader, develop written bylaws and protocols, provide training for its members, and generate minutes of its meetings has impaired the development of institutional memory.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. By October 1, 2026, the BOS shall direct the FY&C to determine the origin and efficacy of reviewing decisions to evaluate out a case which has been reported to the Hotline four times in the previous 12 months.

R2. By October 1, 2026, the BOS shall direct the Sonoma County CDRT to establish procedures, effective by April 1, 2027, that include the following:

- Identify a single individual as chairperson
- Designate a spokesperson to the community
- Create written bylaws and protocols governing its work
- Develop training for members and members' staffs
- Publish a report of its findings annually

R3. By October 1, 2026, the BOS should allocate appropriate resources to assist the Sonoma County CDRT in its activities.

Revisiting Animal Services: A City Asleep at the Wheel

The 2025-2026 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) responded to renewed citizen concerns by revisiting issues raised in the 2024-2025 Grand Jury Animal Services Report including: 1) non-compliance by North Bay Animal Services (NBAS) with its Petaluma contract; 2) underfunding and lax city oversight as contributing factors to this non-compliance; 3) the need for a suitable county-wide governance system to ensure uniformly humane, legally compliant, and cost-effective animal services for the benefit of all Sonoma County residents.

Of particular concern to the Grand Jury was newly acquired evidence that neither NBAS nor the City of Petaluma (City) was complying with bite incident protocols required by Petaluma Municipal Code (PMC) §9.4 to abate risks to public health and safety created by dangerous animals.

DISCUSSION

The Grand Jury observed improved conditions at the Petaluma Municipal Shelter, including substantial investments by the City in deferred maintenance. Animals appeared to be receiving appropriate food and care. However, these improvements did not extend to the organization's structure or its transparency. Financial accounting lacked effective internal controls. A Grand Jury document request to NBAS went unanswered. Likewise, a Public Records Act request to the City failed to produce complete records of dog bite incidents.

The Grand Jury's focus narrowed when the City terminated its contract with NBAS after its disastrous exit as operator of the Clearlake shelter. On March 2, 2026, the Petaluma City Council directed the City Manager's Office (CMO) to terminate the NBAS contract, effective March 31, and identify interim animal service providers through the end of the fiscal year. This action threw Petaluma and other cities with NBAS contracts into crisis mode as they scrambled to secure alternative providers.

Crisis or Consequence

The Grand Jury recognized the political urgency behind the termination. However, Jurors viewed the situation as largely preventable had the CMO provided effective contract oversight. Instead, problems had been allowed to exist and escalate for at least three years since NBAS defaulted on its contract by failing to provide required reports. Nor had the CMO complied with a 2022 City Council resolution that specifically required it to provide regular reports on NBAS performance to the City Council and to inform the City Council of all Public Records Act requests.

Process Matters

The Grand Jury observed a similar lack of respect for process in the CMO's handling of the NBAS termination and replacement and its failure to enforce PMC § 9.24 for abatement of risks posed by dangerous dogs.

Under the California Constitution, Petaluma is incorporated as a *charter city*. As such, it is bound to operate according to laws set forth in the Petaluma City Charter and PMC. Legal authority and accountability rest with the elected City Council, The Council is required to act by recorded vote of the majority. Its actions are codified through resolutions and ordinances and implemented by an appointed City Manager.

Among the City Manager's responsibilities are to ensure enforcement of applicable laws, provide the Council with recommendations, and implement Council directions as expressed

through resolutions and ordinances. An appointed City Attorney provides counsel and necessary legal services.

The CMO process for terminating and replacing NBAS bore little resemblance to that described in the City Charter. In the face of public uproar, the CMO prepared for the March 2 Council meeting by informally collecting bids for animal services through the end of the fiscal year.

The CMO staff report offered three options for Council consideration: 1) retain NBAS and immediately release a Request for Proposals (RFP) for its replacement; 2) terminate the NBAS contract for cause and choose an interim replacement from among the hastily collected bidders; or 3) shutter the shelter permanently and seek services elsewhere.

After receiving extensive public input, Council members conferred with one another and directed staff to proceed with the second option. Critical details involving animal welfare, public safety, and commitment of public funds were not addressed. No vote was taken.

The CMO delivered the termination letter to NBAS on March 4. On March 23, the CMO awarded a short-term contract to Marin Humane rather than Sonoma County Animal Services and the Humane Society of Sonoma County whose bids had been discussed during the Council meeting.

No resolution was adopted to authorize either the termination or selection of a new provider. No ordinance was passed to authorize termination of the shelter lease or approve a greatly increased commitment of public funds.

The NBAS contract was approved by resolution in 2018 and amended by resolution in 2020. The lease of the Municipal Shelter for \$1/year was approved by ordinance in 2018 and extended by ordinance in 2020. Under the City Charter, termination of these agreements also required action by the City Council through resolution and ordinance. When questioned, the CMO replied that it had all the authority it needed to proceed.

The Grand Jury encountered a similarly dismissive response to its investigation of NBAS and City non-compliance with PMC § 9.4. The PMC lays out specific requirements for documentation of bite incidents including collection of statements by animal owners, bite victims and witnesses. When an animal control officer has done a behavioral assessment and determined that a dog is dangerous, the PMC requires that s/he shall refer the incident to an administrative hearing officer to determine risk abatement conditions.

The hearing by an independent hearing officer protects public safety and the rights of the owner. The Grand Jury noted that, as written, the PMC does not protect the due process rights of animal bite victims.

The Grand Jury determined that records required by the PMC had not been produced and retained by either NBAS or the City. The CMO and City Attorney confirmed that no administrative hearings had been held.

CONCLUSION

Based on its investigation, the Grand Jury found that inadequate oversight of the NBAS contract resulted in significant negative outcomes for animals and Petaluma residents.

Ignoring NBAS non-compliance with PMC § 9.24 put public health and safety at risk and compromised the due process rights of animal owners and victims.

Observing the process for termination and replacement of NBAS, the Grand Jury concluded that the latitude granted to the CMO exceeds that allowed by the City Charter and usurps the authority and accountability of the City's elected officials. Apart from adoption of the annual budget and a statement of goals and priorities, the City Council members elected by Petaluma citizens have ceded their authority to appointed administrative officers who function without accountability to the public. The voice of the ballot box has been effectively silenced.

FINDINGS

F1. Apart from approving the annual budget and statement of goals and priorities, the Petaluma City Council has largely delegated its governing authority over Animal Services to the City Manager. This allows the City Manager to take actions that are not authorized by a recorded vote of the council members and diminishes the Council's accountability to the City's voters.

F2. By allowing NBAS to default on reporting requirements, the City Manager's Office was unable to effectively evaluate NBAS's performance and provide the bi-annual reports to the City Council as required by Resolution No. 2022-111 N.C.S.

F3. The City Manager's Office neglected to monitor NBAS's enforcement of Petaluma Municipal Code requirements for dog licensing for rabies control and for abatement of the risks posed by dangerous dogs, which created risks to public health and safety.

F4. By failing to develop a system to document and respond to citizen complaints, the City Manager's Office lost opportunities to receive and respond to community input.

F5. The City Manager's Office failed its fiduciary responsibility to review the financial stability of NBAS. This increased the risk that Petaluma and other cities that depended upon NBAS would be left without animal services they depended on for the health and safety of animals and residents.

F6. No state or county authority exists for periodic inspection of animal shelters and regulatory oversight of animal services to ensure humane conditions for animals. This enabled NBAS to contract for services with multiple cities while lacking either the funding or organizational structure to meet professional standards for shelter care and conform with state and municipal laws for rabies control and abatement of risks from dangerous animals.

F7. Petaluma Municipal Code § 9.24.020 (D) defines "hearing officer" as the manager of animal services or his/her designee. This not only appears to usurp the City Manager's responsibility stated in Petaluma Municipal Code § 1.16.060 to appoint administrative hearing officers, it may also deprive all parties of their due process rights to be heard before an independent hearing officer.

F8. The City of Petaluma failed to collect and retain documentation of dog bite incidents. Victims were unable to obtain this information for further action and the City of Petaluma was unable to evaluate Animal Control provider's compliance with Petaluma Municipal Code § 9.24.030 (A) (1).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2025-2026 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

R1. By September 7, 2026, the City Council shall direct the City Attorney to prepare and present, for City Council adoption, no later than October 5, 2026, a resolution establishing parameters and dollar thresholds for actions within the City Manager's purview and specifying those requiring City Council action by resolution or ordinance in accordance with the Petaluma City Charter.

R2. By September 7, 2026, the City Council shall direct the City Manager's Office to prepare and present to the City Council for adoption, no later than October 5, 2026, a resolution to establish how and at what intervals the City Manager's Office will update the City Council on

any Animal Services matters including bite reports, its oversight of any animal services contracts, and related citizen complaints.

R3. By September 7, 2026, the City Council shall direct the City Attorney to review and propose amendments to Petaluma City Code § 1.16.060 and/or § 9.24.020 (E) by January 4, 2027 regarding the assignment of independent administrative hearing officers in hearings held pursuant to § 9.24.040 regarding abatement conditions for dangerous or potentially dangerous dogs to ensure that due process requirements are being met.

R4. By September 7, 2026, the City Council shall direct the City Attorney to review and propose amendments to Petaluma City Code § 9.24.030 (A) (1) by January 4, 2027, to address the retention policy for copies of reports and documentation required by this Section.

R5. By September 7, 2026, the City Council shall direct the City Attorney to review and propose amendments to Petaluma City Code § 1.16.060 and/or § 9.24.020 (E) by January 4, 2027 regarding the rights of victims to request, participate in, and present evidence in a hearing pursuant to § 9.24.040 regarding abatement conditions for dangerous or potentially dangerous dogs.

R6. By September 7, 2026, the City Council shall direct the City Manager's Office to secure a contract with a pet licensing and registration platform such as DocuPet, the provider of choice for dog license management by Sonoma County and the Cities of Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park, and Healdsburg by October 5, 2026 to optimize compliance with California Health and Safety Code 121690 requiring dog licensing as the vehicle for ensuring current rabies vaccination.

R7. By September 7, 2026, the City Council shall direct the City Manager's Office to actively pursue, with other willing municipalities and Sonoma County, the establishment of a mutually agreeable form of county-wide governance for animal control and shelter care and provide quarterly progress updates to the City Council commencing November 2, 2026.

R8. By September 1, 2026, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors shall support previously endorsed efforts by the Department of Health Services to convene willing partners from Sonoma County Cities to develop a county-wide system of uniformly humane, legally compliant, and cost-effective animal services, including centralized license management for the county's dogs.



Artist Patrick Amiot—Junk Art

Sonoma Local Agency Formation Commission: Opportunities Abound

In October 2025, the 2025-26 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) met with the Executive Officer (EO) and the Chair of the Sonoma County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) to learn about the agency's work. During the presentation, the EO announced his intention to retire. The Grand Jury considered this an ideal time to gain a broader understanding of the functions of Sonoma LAFCO and the EO's role and responsibilities.

The State of California created LAFCOs to encourage the orderly formation of local governmental agencies, preserve agricultural land resources and discourage urban sprawl. LAFCOs are responsible for coordinating logical and timely changes in local governmental boundaries; conducting special studies that review ways to reorganize, simplify, and streamline governmental structure; and prepare mandatory Sphere of Influence reporting for each city and special district within the county.

The Grand Jury began with a review of Sonoma LAFCO processes. The Grand Jury discovered that some key policies hadn't been updated for more than a decade. Information on the website was not complete or well organized. Roles of staff members were poorly defined, and many mandatory reports were last updated more than ten years ago.

The Grand Jury compared the Sonoma LAFCO with other Northern California LAFCOs of similar complexity. The Grand Jury found that Sonoma LAFCO lacked clear, comprehensive reports and strategy documents that were provided by other California LAFCOs with similar budgets, staffing levels, and total number of cities and special districts.

Some requested evidence of mandatory reporting required under Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000 (CKH) was not provided to the Grand Jury for review. The Grand Jury learned that reports and studies that are mandated under the CKH were not being completed as frequently as required by the CKH and Sonoma LAFCO's own policy.

The Grand Jury learned that there are no written job descriptions specific to the Sonoma LAFCO EO and its staff. Job descriptions are a foundational tool to clarify roles, ensure legal compliance, and inform expectations. Lack of clear job descriptions leads to uncertainty, inconsistency and disorganization. Further, the EO and staff are employees of Sonoma County, which can give the appearance of a conflict of interest for an organization that is an independent entity.

The Grand Jury found that Sonoma LAFCO has no strategic plan. The Grand Jury is also concerned with the lack of any succession planning, especially considering the EO's announced intention to retire.

FINDINGS

- F1. No evidence was made available to the Grand Jury to confirm that counsel or the Sonoma LAFCO Commission reviewed the decision not to require Municipal Service Reviews every 5 years. Without a legal opinion or Commission approval, this practice may be non-compliant with the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000.
- F2. Lack of published strategic planning documents inhibits a proactive approach to engagement with the Sonoma LAFCO cities and special districts. As a result, Sonoma LAFCO members and the community lack a clear vision of its goals.
- F3. The Sonoma LAFCO policy and procedure document provided to the Civil Grand Jury had not been updated in more than 12 years. Without periodic review and updates, the policies and procedures may not be keeping up with changing regulations or best practices.

- F4. Current Sonoma LAFCO policy does not require Municipal Service Reviews to be performed every five years. For some cities and special districts within Sonoma County, Municipal Service Reviews have not been performed in nearly 20 years. As a result, Sonoma LAFCO members are not receiving value for their required annual dues and the public is not provided timely analysis of cities and special districts.
- F5. Sonoma LAFCO is not performing Sphere of Influence updates every five years. As a result, Sonoma LAFCO may not be in compliance with their own policy and the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000. Sonoma LAFCO members and the community are not receiving valuable information from updated Sphere of Influence studies.
- F6. Comparable LAFCOs with similar budget and staffing are producing MSRs and SOI studies every five years for applicable entities under their jurisdiction, demonstrating that Sonoma LAFCO should also be able to produce MSRs and SOI studies within the five-year timeframe set forth in the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000. Lacking MSR and SOI updates and appropriate transparency, Sonoma LAFCO is not meeting its responsibilities to the community.
- F7. There are no job descriptions specific to the Sonoma LAFCO Executive Officer and staff, raising concern for a lack of clear roles and responsibilities within Sonoma LAFCO, and, in some cases, appropriate training. This can result in errors and inefficiencies.
- F8. The Executive Officer and staff of Sonoma LAFCO are employees of Sonoma County, which could be perceived as creating a conflict of interest or a lack of independence.
- F9. Information on the Sonoma LAFCO website is not routinely maintained, is difficult to navigate, and does not provide timely updates on meeting outcomes. This prevents Sonoma County residents from accessing information related to Sonoma LAFCO.
- F10. Sonoma LAFCO does not have a succession plan for the Executive Officer. Without a succession plan, transition in leadership can result in negative consequences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. The Grand Jury recommends the Commission obtain a legal opinion on the frequency and requirements of Municipal Service Reviews and Sphere of Influence studies necessary to be compliant with the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000 by 10/31/26.
- R2. The Grand Jury recommends the Commission review the existing policy for Municipal Service Reviews and Sphere of Influence updates and consider amending the policy to ensure compliance with the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000 by 12/31/26.
- R3. The Grand Jury recommends the Commission direct the Executive Officer to create a strategic plan to execute Sphere of Influence updates and Municipal Service Reviews to comply with the legal opinion obtained per Recommendation 1 of this report. This plan should be presented to the Commission for consideration by 12/31/2026.
- R4. The Grand Jury recommends the Commission direct the Executive Officer to review and evaluate the staffing levels and budgets of other comparable LAFCOs to gain a better understanding of what can be accomplished within staffing and budgetary constraints and provide a written report with findings and recommendations to the Commission by 3/31/27.

- R5. The Grand Jury recommends the Commission direct the Executive Officer to evaluate Sonoma LAFCO's effectiveness by requesting performance review feedback from member cities and special districts. Sonoma LAFCO should publish their findings and plan(s) of action by 3/31/27.
- R6. The Grand Jury recommends the Commission direct the Executive Officer to create position descriptions that are specific to Sonoma LAFCO roles for Commission review by 10/1/26.
- R7. The Commission should evaluate benefits vs. challenges of using the County of Sonoma for employment and other services to determine if costs are competitive and providing optimal results by 12/31/26.

- R8. The Grand Jury recommends the Commission direct the Executive Officer to create a plan for website updates to improve the website's accessibility and ensure the website contains timely access to Commission meeting minutes and important records by 9/30/26 and implemented by 3/31/27.
- R9. The Grand Jury recommends the Commission develop a succession plan that supports smooth transition of leadership. The succession plan should include, at minimum, the identification of skills needed for leadership, leadership tasks, the skills and knowledge of staff, and the appropriate interim delegation of leadership responsibilities by 9/30/26.
- R10. The Grand Jury recommends the Commission direct the Executive Officer to identify staff training needs by 9/30/26 and implemented staff training by 3/31/27.

Sonoma County Purchasing: Big Dollars with Low Operational Oversight

Sonoma County Purchasing Group is responsible for ensuring that purchasing policies and procedures are followed in spending the County's \$1.2 billion budget for Services & Supplies, Capital Assets and Capital Expenditures. Sonoma County residents should know where their tax dollars are spent, trust the county's procurement processes are safe from waste and abuse, and that purchasing processes use tax dollars in an efficient and effective manner for the benefit of County residents. The 2025-26 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury evaluated the design of the county's procurement program. This investigation found:

- Most findings from a 2023 Sonoma County Internal Audit report have not been implemented. Recommendations from an external consultant report also issued in 2023 have not been evaluated for implementation.
- Limited actions have been taken by the Purchasing Group to oversee policy and procedure compliance. Existing controls are performed after purchasing or contract decisions are made which means that they wouldn't detect a conflict with policy in time for it to be addressed.
- The Purchasing Group does not have a way to create meaningful consequences when purchasing policies and procedures are not followed. Internal audit and external consultants have made suggestions to improve this but no steps have been taken to implement their recommendations.
- There are inadequate procedures and limited training to support the important role that departments play in purchasing.
- With decentralized purchasing responsibility by County departments and agencies, the Purchasing Group is not aware of which department staff perform purchasing. This is an impediment to training and purchasing oversight.
- The organizational location of the Purchasing Group with a large County department creates a potential conflict of interest and makes it less visible for oversight by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and the Board of Supervisors (BOS).
- There has been significant turnover in the leadership of the Purchasing Group. When hired in 2025, the current Purchasing Group manager lacked public procurement background. Over a year later, this Purchasing Agent did not hold appropriate certification. This conflicts with the required minimum qualifications for the position.

- Sonoma County does not have an end-to-end, integrated contract and procurement management system which could enhance purchasing decisions and offer additional opportunities for combined (blanket) purchase orders.
- Additional resources may be needed to adopt needed changes.

FINDINGS

- F1. Most recommendations from the internal and the external audits completed in 2023 have not been implemented. Unaddressed, these findings could have financial and operational impacts to county taxpayers.
- F2. Current purchasing and contract controls are insufficient to confirm that the approved purchasing process is followed. Without appropriate oversight of the purchasing process, there is undue financial and operational risk to Sonoma County.
- F3. Significant consequences for noncompliance with purchasing policies and procedures do not exist. Without consequences, county departments and agencies are not held accountable for their actions related to purchasing.
- F4. Limited purchasing procedures exist to guide individual departments in meeting applicable requirements. Lacking effective procedures, departments may not comply with County policy and may cause financial losses.
- F5. While departments are responsible for much of their purchasing needs, they have not received comprehensive training. This can result in noncompliance with purchasing policies and procedures and financial loss.
- F6. The Purchasing group reports to the Director of Sonoma Public Infrastructure which creates the appearance of a conflict of interest and may affect the independence of the Purchasing group.
- F7. The Purchasing group is part of a larger organization, and its organizational placement may limit the Purchasing group's effectiveness in obtaining appropriate support from Sonoma County leadership for needed changes.
- F8. Sonoma County is not in compliance with the minimum qualifications requirement set forth in the job description that the Purchasing Agent (PA) have or acquire appropriate professional certification. Furthermore, high turnover in the PA position and the decision to hire a Purchasing Agent without demonstrated knowledge or experience in public procurement

may have a negative impact to the group’s ability to effectively oversee purchasing and lead in implementing changes.

F9. Sonoma County lacks a full-cycle, integrated contract and procurement management system that would support the efficient implementation and tracking of Purchasing activities. Without such a tool, the procurement process may be inefficient and miss opportunities to make better and more cost-effective purchase and contract decisions.

F10. Recommendations from internal and external audit reports to improve Sonoma County purchasing processes may require additional resources. If additional staff and budget are not allocated, then some recommended actions to manage financial and operational risk may not be feasible to achieve.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors:

R1. Direct the County Executive Office to review the purchasing Internal Audit report issued in 2023 and the 2023 report from Civic Initiatives LLC to determine further recommendations and appropriate timeframe for implementation. This should be completed by 12/31/26.

R2. Direct the County Executive Office to implement processes to review and confirm that updated Purchasing policies and procedures are followed by individual departments. This should be completed by 12/31/26, and annually thereafter.

R3. Direct the County Executive Office to identify the actions taken by individual departments to confirm purchasing policies and procedures are followed. This should be completed by 12/31/26.

R4. Direct the County Executive Office to evaluate options presented by the Internal Audit report and the Civic Initiatives LLC report to create checks and balances for purchasing compliance. The solution selected or created should include a method to improve department accountability in following purchasing policies and procedures. This evaluation should be completed by 12/31/26 and the implementation of the selected plan should be by 12/31/27.

R5. Direct the County Executive office to create comprehensive purchasing procedures and communicate them to individual departments. These should be of similar quality to the procedures prepared by Civic Initiatives LLC. This should be completed by 12/31/26.

R6. Direct the County Executive office to require that each department and agency provide the Purchasing group with the names of individuals responsible for purchasing and contracting. Additionally, a method to keep this list current should be implemented. This should be completed by 12/31/26.

R7. Direct the County Human Resources and Purchasing groups to work together to provide comprehensive purchasing training that covers contracts and the purchase of goods and services. This training should be provided to all individuals responsible for purchasing and/or contracting and should be completed by 6/30/27.

R8. Direct the County Executive Office to consider options to relocate the Purchasing Group within the County organizational structure to alleviate the appearance of any conflict of interest and increase proximity to the leadership. This should be completed by 12/31/26.

R9. Direct the Chief Executive Office to ensure that Department Heads comply with approved hiring practices related to minimum qualification requirements by 12/31/26.

R10. Direct the County Executive office to revisit the procurement software proposal previously presented to the CEO, including figures for any potential cost savings to the County. This should be completed by 12/31/26.

R11. Direct the Chief Executive Office to provide appropriate resources to implement changes recommended in the internal and external audit reports issued in 2023 and this Grand Jury report. This should be completed by 3/31/27.

CITY OF SEBASTOPOL’S WATER AND SEWER SYSTEMS: Deferred Action has Consequences

SUMMARY

The 2025-2026 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) responded to two citizen complaints by undertaking an investigation into the City of Sebastopol’s (the City) management of its Water and Wastewater Enterprise Funds (Enterprise Funds). These funds depend on ratepayer fees to provide potable water for consumption and fire protection and to maintain the infrastructure required to deliver water and remove wastewater through the sanitary sewer and stormwater systems.

The citizen requests for a Grand Jury investigation included evidence the City was not complying with state laws that establish how user *fees* differ from *taxes* and how fees may be established. In 1996, California voters passed Proposition 218 (Prop 218), also known as The Right to Vote on Taxes Act. Prop 218 required that new taxes be approved by a two-thirds vote of affected citizens. In 2010, the passage of Proposition 26 (Prop 26) further distinguished between a general tax and a “special tax” or *fee*. A key difference is that a special tax or *fee* is

for a specific service that benefits identifiable properties. It may not exceed the reasonable costs of providing the service plus a reasonable proportion of the shared or indirect costs of government operations, such as legal services and general administration. Revenue from a fee may only be used to provide the specific service for which it is charged.

To set fees in accordance with state law, cities typically engage consultants at three-to-five-year intervals to conduct two types of studies. A rate study determines the direct costs of a service and how it will be shared among ratepayers. A cost allocation study examines the city’s general administrative costs and establishes what percentage should be allocated to each department or function. It results in a cost allocation plan (CAP).

The complaints alleged and the Grand Jury confirmed that, prior to 2023, the City had not conducted a cost allocation study and revised its CAP for more than 20 years. The cost allocation rates were adjusted in 2024 to conform with the new study, but to date, no steps have been taken to restore lost Enterprise Funds that are sorely needed to pay for deferred

maintenance and system upgrades. When a new CAP study was conducted in 2024, it revealed that the City had overallocated indirect costs to the Enterprise Funds. The Grand Jury estimated that the overallocation had resulted in approximately \$5.5 million dollars being moved from the Enterprise Funds into the City's general fund over the past nine years.

The complaints also questioned the legitimacy of the greatly increased water and sewer rates that took effect on July 1, 2024. The Grand Jury learned that while the City had conducted rate studies, rates had not been adjusted sufficiently to cover increased costs. After the 2019, rate study, new rates set for 2019 through 2023 did not anticipate the impact of successful water conservation programs. Because the rates were based on consumption, less consumption resulted in less revenue. Based on its 2023 rate study, the City adjusted the fees to compensate for lower consumption. This resulted in a shocking 37% increase in water and sewer fees effective July 1, 2024, with approximately 4% annual increases scheduled for each of the next four years.

The Grand Jury found that the Enterprise Funds' insolvency resulted from a combination of overallocation of indirect costs and insufficient user fees that were based on infrequent rate studies and adjustments and on inaccurate projections of usage for fees in place between 2019 and 2023. Despite steps the City has taken to correct course, Sebastopol's Water and Wastewater systems suffer from years of underfunding that have resulted in deferred maintenance and neglected upgrades.

This report describes the laws governing how cities may establish user rates for services such as management of water and wastewater. It explains how the City departed from these laws by over-allocating shared, indirect costs to its Enterprise Funds, thereby shifting money intended to support specific services into its general operating budget. To enhance public information and awareness, the report also describes critical infrastructure which residents depend on for potable water and fire protection and the removal of wastewater and stormwater.

CONCLUSION

The Grand Jury was encouraged that the City has taken steps to right the ship. After conducting overdue studies, it has reduced the allocation of indirect costs to the Enterprise Funds and adopted painful but necessary water and wastewater rates. In November 2025, the City Council reinstated the Enterprise Fund Oversight Committee that will advise the City regarding the operation of the Enterprise Funds. The Grand Jury views this as a positive step to ensure future compliance and improved performance of the Enterprise Funds for their intended purpose.

FINDINGS

F1. The Grand Jury estimated that the City's failure to update its Cost Allocation Plan for more than 20 years resulted in the City over-allocating approximately \$5.5 million of indirect costs to the Enterprise Funds. This was non-compliant with Proposition 218 and left the Enterprise Funds without sufficient money for maintenance and capital improvements.

F2. When the City updated its Cost Allocation Plan in 2024, reduced allocation of indirect costs left approximately \$714,000 in the Enterprise Funds to be used for systems maintenance and capital improvements.

F3. Because the rate study conducted by the City in 2019 underestimated a reduction in consumption due to conservation measures, the rate adjustment for 2019-2023 was insufficient to keep pace with escalating costs. This resulted in the need for a 37% increase on July 1, 2024, which has been difficult for many ratepayers to accept.

F4. In November 2025, the City Council reinstated an Enterprise Fund Oversight Committee. This promises to provide the City Council with insights and expertise regarding decisions concerning oversight of these critical systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Grand Jury recommends that the Sebastopol City Council:

R1. By October 1, 2026, commit to fully comply with Proposition 218 by conducting cost allocation and rate studies at least within 3-5 years intervals and adjusting its cost allocation and ratepayer fees accordingly.

R2. By October 1, 2026, reach an agreement on the dollar value of mis-allocated indirect costs and commit to a repayment schedule to restore funds transferred from the Enterprise Funds to the general fund by over-allocation of indirect costs. This money can be used to implement critical improvements identified in the Master Plan.

R3. By October 1, 2026, consider adding a Certified Public Accountant to the Enterprise Fund Oversight Committee to assist the City Council and City Manager with fiscal compliance, analysis, and transparency.

Behind the Headlines of Public Education: Understanding the Challenges to Consolidation and the Process of State Takeover

SUMMARY

Media have provided extensive coverage of Sonoma County's public schools this year as districts announced school closures, staff layoffs and budget cuts. In some districts, financial problems were dire enough that there was the possibility of a takeover by the state's Fiscal Crisis and Management Assessment Team (FCMAT).

The 2025-2026 Civil Grand Jury explored issues behind the districts' financial distress, beginning with the 2010-2011 Grand Jury investigation on district consolidation. In its report,

the Grand Jury recommended that the county determine potential cost savings of consolidating some of its 40 school districts.

In the ensuing 15 years, the Sonoma County Office of Education has conducted three consolidation studies. The studies evaluated options and found benefits to consolidation, but no meaningful progress has been made to do so. The need for consolidation remains as the county's student population continues to decrease and personnel costs rise.

The 2025-2026 Grand Jury’s investigation identified obstacles to consolidating districts. It found challenges at state, county, and local levels of education governance. At the state level, the first obstacle is a multi-year legislative process for consolidating school districts that includes a study, voter approval, community reviews and the creation of a new district.

County offices of education monitor district budgets but lack authority to act until a district is failing financially. At the local level, administrators, faculty, staff and the families they serve are often reluctant to disrupt their familiar school community and merge into a larger organization with different policies and approaches.

A final obstacle is the ways schools are funded. The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) was introduced in 2014. It is considered an improvement from prior school funding methods, but it creates disincentives for schools to consolidate.

With fewer students, increased health and safety challenges and no clear path to consolidation, several Sonoma County school districts are dealing with growing financial concerns. A few districts are facing the possibility of a state takeover, an event that has a long path to resolution.

BACKGROUND

There isn’t any factor that stands out as the sole reason why Sonoma County school districts are struggling financially, but a few issues have emerged in the last 15 years. These include:

Too Many Schools

Low birthrates, the high cost of family housing, and the impacts of wildfires and COVID have contributed to Sonoma County having more schools than are needed to serve current and estimated future student populations.

Above Average Number of Students Identified as Needing Special Education

California law requires school districts to assess students with identifiable learning disabilities and create an individualized education plan (IEP) if needed. The average cost of specialized services adds approximately \$26,000 per identified student. Sonoma County has more students identified as special needs than the state average.

Cost of Teacher and Staff Contracts

Generally, 85-90% of a district’s budget is for salaries, benefits, and training. Frequently, school districts respond to budget shortfalls by reducing staff. This can result in negative impacts on schools and children. In recent years, schools have responded to safety risks with facilities improvements and new safety officer positions.

Loss of State and Federal Funds

Through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund of 2020-2021, schools received additional funds for COVID-19-related needs. Those funds have ended and some districts, who opted to spend funds on ongoing costs, are struggling the most financially.

CHALLENGES TO CONSOLIDATING SCHOOL DISTRICTS

The number of school districts in Sonoma County remains at 40, despite a drop in student population that is expected to continue even as costs rise. Combining school districts is still a plausible solution for reducing costs. Unfortunately, there are significant obstacles to consolidation of school districts.

1) The Legal Process

The state of California has specific requirements for changing school district boundaries, including voter approval. It is a multi-year process beginning with a study to identify options. SCOE has commissioned three such studies in the last five years. Although one study showed potential cost savings over time by consolidating nine Santa Rosa elementary schools with the Santa Rosa High School district, this would take extensive time and effort.

2) Community

Any community losing its district is likely to oppose consolidation. Administrators, teachers, parents, and current students will feel the shift from being part of their existing school community to joining a larger district with new rules, new schedules, and new budget priorities.

3) Governance

There are three levels of education management in California: state, county office of education, and local district. All three levels operate with a commitment to ensure that public education is equitable, accountable, and responsive to the public’s concerns.

4) How Schools are Funded

In 2014, California introduced the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). The LCFF was designed to provide a more equitable and transparent way of funding, giving each district more authority for decision making. With LCFF, state resources are allocated based on performance measures that each district provides. The components of the Local Control Funding Formula include:

- A base grant calculated on Average Daily Attendance (ADA)—the number of days a student attends divided by the total number of school days.
- A supplement grant; 20% of the adjusted base grant multiplied by ADA to help students in need
- A concentration grant: 65% of the base grant multiplied by the ADA for schools with student populations that include 55% of students with higher needs
- Add-ons for such things as transportation, art, and music education
- A cost of living adjustment

With the transition to LCFF, school districts have more decision-making power in how state funds are spent. In exchange, school districts must show how they will use these funds by documenting student data, performance, needs, and anticipated outcomes. Districts do this with a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), which was developed to describe how the district will spend the funds to improve student outcomes.

Since 2000, no California school districts have been consolidated, largely because of the LCFF. The current state funding system will reduce the total funds received for a newly consolidated district. For example, the 2024 feasibility study by Christy White, Inc. shows that consolidating the nine elementary districts with the Santa Rosa High School district would result in cost savings. But it would also result in a loss of \$21 million annually in state funds because the combined student population would no longer qualify for additional need and concentration grant funds. It would be years before the cost savings would be realized.

Sonoma County is experiencing the worst effects of declining enrollment and barriers to district consolidation. The number of excess schools is leading to financial problems which are being addressed with cutbacks, school closures and staff layoffs. It is difficult to measure the emotional impact on students, parents, and staff and the loss to the community.

STATE TAKEOVER

In 1991, the State of California established a takeover process for districts that may not be able to meet current and future financial obligations. AB1200 imposes oversight of budgets and operations for districts experiencing fiscal distress. It also created the FCMAT to provide management assistance, professional training, and support for public schools. When a school district is unable to stay within its budget, FCMAT investigates the issues and provides a written report with findings and recommendations.

Sonoma County districts receive ongoing fiscal monitoring by SCOE. Districts submit their projected budgets for review. SCOE is then tasked with approving, disapproving, or conditionally approving these budgets. Indicators of a district’s fiscal health include reserve levels and salary and benefit costs. As the school year progresses, districts submit two budget updates – one in the fall and another in the spring. SCOE assigns the district a certification of positive, qualified, or negative.

SCOE is required to assist districts that are struggling to balance their budgets. The degree of assistance is designated by tiers, the first of which may include assigning a fiscal expert, conducting a study of financial conditions, or requiring a proposal for addressing the issues. SCOE can also assign the state’s FCMAT team to review the financials of any struggling district.

Districts in exceptional distress may request an emergency state loan to provide the district with sufficient funds to pay its regular bills and meet special loan-related obligations. With a state loan, the state Superintendent of Public Instruction appoints and oversees an administrator who has full control over the district’s budgets and policies. The district superintendent is removed, and the school board loses all decision-making authority.

There are significant costs to a district that receives an emergency loan, including having to pay back principal and interest and cover insurance costs. Costs also include payment of salaries to fiscal experts, auditors and others hired to provide assistance.

To return to local control, a district needs to show good management. FCMAT sets performance standards for the district in the areas of financial management, student achievement, personnel management, facilities management, and community relations. This process typically takes several years. Once the administrator assigned by the state leaves, the state Superintendent of Public Instruction appoints a trustee to oversee the district until the loan is paid back in full.

FINDING

F1. Complex policy and financial constraints that impact critical decisions by public school boards are poorly understood by the public. This limits the public's ability to provide meaningful oversight and advocate for sound decision making by local school boards.

RECOMMENDATION

The Grand Jury recommends that:

R1. Commencing in 2027, the Sonoma County Superintendent of Education will direct SCOE staff to develop and implement a plan to educate the public concerning school district budget management to enable residents to provide meaningful input and act more effectively as advocates of sound financial planning by district school boards

RESPONSES TO SONOMA COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY REPORTS 2018-2019 THROUGH 2023-2024 and 2024-2025: Providing Continuity by Following Through on Previous Investigations

Each year the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury produces a Continuity Report to review official responses to Findings and Recommendations in reports produced in prior years. Responses are reviewed for completeness and compliance with Penal Code § 933.05. The Penal Code requires governing boards of the county, cities, and special districts and elected county officials to respond to grand jury Recommendations in one of four ways:

- The Recommendation is accepted and has already been implemented.
- The Recommendation is rejected, and no further action will be taken.
- The Recommendation requires further analysis (which should be completed within six months of publication of the grand jury report).
- The Recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the future.

Governing boards of the county, cities, and special districts are required to respond within 90 days. Responses from elected county officials are required within 60 days.

No follow-up (by either the Civil Grand Jury or the respondent) is required when Recommendations are accepted or rejected. However, when the respondent indicates that a Recommendation requires further analysis, the public is entitled to know what resulted from that analysis. Substantive issues may not be resolved by the time the subsequent grand jury issues its Continuity Report. Responses stating that "further analysis is required" or that "Recommendations will be implemented in the future" are a commitment to action. Without follow up, this can result in important issues getting kicked down the road.

The 2025-2026 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury produced two Continuity Reports. One reviewed all unresolved items listed reports published by Civil Grand Juries from 2018-2019 through 2023-2024. The other reviewed unresolved items from reports published by the 2024-2025 Civil Grand Jury.

- Responses to Civil Grand Jury Reports for 2018-2024
- Responses to the 2024-2025 Civil Grand Jury Reports

The Civil Grand Jury requested updates to responses that promised further analysis or future action to see whether these commitments had been fulfilled and/or promised actions had been

taken. The reports show the status of findings and recommendations that were not resolved in prior years' reports, and whether government commitments for future action were eventually met. We're pleased to note that most government commitments were fulfilled.

The full reports are available on the court website and may be accessed using the QR codes provided below.

- **Responses to Civil Grand Jury Reports for 2018-2024**



- **Responses to the 2024-2025 Civil Grand Jury Reports**



Sonoma County 2025-2026 Civil Grand Jury Observation of the County’s Detention Facilities

California Penal Code Section § 919(b) requires that each county’s civil grand jury “inquire into the condition and management of the public prisons within the county”.

While Sonoma County has no public prisons, it has two detention facilities: the Main Adult Detention Facility (MADF) and the Juvenile Hall.

The Penal Code does not require a formal report of the Grand Jury’s inquiry. Instead, the Sonoma County 2025-2026 Civil Grand Jury prepared this review based on inspections of the two facilities that it conducted in October, 2025 and information and documents provided at that time.

Both MADF and Juvenile Hall are also inspected by the California Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC) to be sure they meet California Title 15 requirements. The BSCC inspection of MADF was completed on February 24, 2026. The Juvenile Hall inspection by the BSCC was completed on April 29, 2025. The BSCC reports received by the Grand Jury, indicate that both facilities were in compliance with the minimum [Title 15 California Code of Regulations](#) “Crime Prevention and Corrections”

Sonoma County Main Adult Detention Facility (aka: The County Jail)

From 2019 to 2023, Sonoma County’s law enforcement found it very difficult to fill vacancies. A large number of vacancies were created by staff members retiring during the COVID epidemic. Due to the vacancies, Sonoma County resorted to mandatory overtime in order to maintain staffing levels. This also led to the closing of the North County Detention Facility and contracting with Solano County to house some prisoners that could not be housed in the MADF. Prisoners had to be kept in their cells for all but an hour a day due to possible COVID contamination and lack of staff to monitor them when they were out of their cells. The MADF also had to cancel many of the successful prisoner programs they had implemented. ([View Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury 2023-2024 Report.](#))

In 2024, the County Human Services and Sheriff’s Departments intensified employee recruitment resulting in numerous vacancies being filled. Recruitment is an ongoing process to maintain staffing levels. The 2025-2026 Grand Jury found that mandatory overtime has been reduced from over 100 plus hours per officer per month to fewer than 20 hours per officer. Out of cell exercise time has increased from one hour per day to six plus hours per day. With staffing levels returning to normal MADF has been able to reinstate prisoner programs and consider additional programs. Among the current programs:

Five Keys High School - The Sonoma County Jail does not offer a GED preparation program. Instead, it operates an accredited high school program on site that allows eligible incarcerated individuals to earn high school credits toward a traditional high school diploma, rather than a GED certificate.

Anger Management - A structured group class that teaches participants to recognize, understand, and manage anger using evidence-based techniques to improve emotional regulation and reduce aggressive behavior.

GEO – MRT (Moral Reconation Therapy) - A cognitive-behavioral intervention that addresses criminal thinking patterns and improves moral reasoning, decision-making, and prosocial behavior to reduce recidivism.

GEO – Maintaining My Recovery - A recovery maintenance program reinforcing sobriety skills, relapse prevention strategies, and long-term recovery planning.

GEO – CBISA 1 (Cognitive Behavioral Interventions for Substance Abuse I) - An evidence-based cognitive-behavioral curriculum focused on identifying substance use triggers and developing coping strategies to prevent relapse.

GEO – CBISA 2 (Cognitive Behavioral Interventions for Substance Abuse II) - A continuation of CBISA 1 that builds on cognitive-behavioral skills and strengthens long-term recovery tools and behavioral change strategies.

(GEO is a company that provides re-entry services and is contract by the MADF)

Job Skills - A vocational readiness course covering résumé development, interview preparation, workplace expectations, and job search techniques to improve post-release employment outcomes.

Santa Rosa Junior College – Communications - A college-level communications course designed to strengthen written, verbal, and interpersonal communication skills to support academic and workforce success.

Parenting - A skills-based class that promotes healthy parenting practices, effective communication with children, and strengthening of family relationships.

Relapse Prevention - A structured program teaching participants to identify high-risk situations, manage cravings, and develop individualized plans to maintain sobriety

One issue that continues to plague the jail is the large number of inmates with mental and behavioral health issues. Some of these inmates are pending court appearances or serving time imposed by court sentencing. Others have been found not competent for court appearance, and/or are considered a danger to themselves, or to others. Some of these individuals could be handled and monitored by behavioral health facilities if beds and space were available. While the jail staff does a good job of trying to place these individuals in care facilities after they must be released, they lack sufficient beds and program space in outside facilities to monitor them. Many are homeless or destitute and cannot afford private care facilities. This is not a Grand Jury investigation, however, based on its inquiry into the detention facilities of Sonoma County, the Grand Jury supports the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury 2023-2024 report recommendation that the Board of Supervisors and the Sheriff continue to seek funds, either through grants or state /federal funds that can be used to build a mental health addition to the MADF (see Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Report 2023-2024) and/or obtain bed space in a secure behavioral health facility.

INMATE POPULATION SUMMARY MADF - October 2025

MADF	Count	Percentage
Sentenced Males	193	26%
Sentenced Females	26	3%
Unsentenced Males	480	63%
Unsentenced Females	56	8%
Total Count	755	100%

TOTAL MENTAL HEALTH POPULATION - October 2025

Total Mental Involved Inmates	345
Total Mental Health Acute Inmates	254

Sonoma County Juvenile Hall

Juvenile Hall is a direct supervision facility run by the Juvenile Division of the Probation Department. Direct supervision means that a Juvenile Hall staff member is with each group of detainees throughout the day. The facility can house 120 detainees. At time of the Grand Jury visit, the Juvenile Hall facility was at less than half of its capacity. They also contract with other counties to house some of their detainees. This usually accounts for 10 detainees. One of Juvenile Probation's goals is to work with the youth to resolve any issues that keep them from being returned to a stable home environment.

Juvenile Hall is kept very clean, and the Juvenile Hall Staff have created therapeutic spaces to support rehabilitation. Murals brighten the rooms and bring intrigue and wonder to areas that lacked color, helping to reduce stress and promote a calmer atmosphere for staff and detainees.

Juvenile Hall, like the county jail, had to temporarily shut down many group programs during COVID to avoid spreading the virus. It has since reinstated many of the programs including aggression training, healthy relationships, drug and alcohol counseling, and others. Staff also work with community organizations who provide services at Juvenile Hall that can be accessed by the detainees when they return to their families, such as Boys and Girls Club. One important aspect of the programs is a focus on education. Detainees have access to grade appropriate classes and have a library available. Detainees are also able to continue their education with online community college courses. Some complete enough credits to transfer into four-year colleges after their release. The Grand Jury observed volunteers who were providing reading and academic support.

The facility has a music studio where detainees can learn how to play instruments and record their music using professional recording equipment. Staff and detainees, worked together to build an aquaponics green house where detainees grow herbs and vegetables in addition to a regular garden.

COMMENDATION

The Grand Jury commends the MADF and Juvenile Hall staff and volunteers for their dedication and work ethic in providing supervision and guidance for the troubled individuals in our communities.



Photos provided by The Sonoma County Probation Department which partnered with artists Amanda Lynn and MJ Lindo-Lawyer (pictured above with the Juvenile Hall Director Kilee Willson) to create nine large murals at Sonoma County Juvenile Hall. The project was funded through AB 178, which supports improvements to juvenile halls in California, and the Youth Programs and Facilities Grant Program Part A, which helps redesign therapeutic and programming spaces.





Above and right: Missy Lemley, Judicial Assistant to the Presiding Judge; Chief Justice Patricia Guerrero; Presiding Judge Christopher Honigsberg; Court Executive Assistant Julie Wilcox. Photos courtesy Patty Bird.

The new Sonoma County Hall of Justice

On May 29, 2026, California Chief Justice Patricia Guerrero joined Presiding Judge of the Sonoma County Superior Court, Christopher Honigsberg in a ribbon cutting ceremony to mark completion of the County's new Hall of Justice.

The project was first proposed fifteen years ago by the Judicial Council of California as part of the state judicial branch construction program. Primary funding came from court fees, penal-



ties and assessments with current state support. Begun during the COVID-19 pandemic, construction of the 167,147 square-foot project encountered numerous delays and cost increases. The current authorized budget of \$231.7 million includes a Sonoma County contribution of \$9 million for the tunnel that allows safe passage of inmates from the Main Adult Detention Facility to the new courthouse.

Moving from the existing sixty-year-old courthouse will benefit all residents of Sonoma County with improved safety, efficiency, access to justice, and overall public service.



Christopher Chung/© The Press Democrat



Chief Justice Patricia Guerrero and Presiding Judge Christopher Honigsberg. Photo courtesy Patty Bird.



Front Row (L to R) Susan Mills, Diane Sobol, Mary Ellen Pastorino, Wendy Roberts [Foreperson], Ann Scarff, Tom McMains [Sergeant-At-Arms], Mayra Aguilar, Jeffrey Cowan, Melanie Saweliew, Lucille Bressemer, Richard Pollack, Mike Brady [Foreperson Pro Tem]. Back Row (L to R) Andrea Cameron, Eileen Berry, Clayton Engstrom, Kim Bruno, John Koos, Jay Kacirk. Not pictured: John Mangiafridda. Photo credit: Ron Chestnut

You Can Make a Difference in Sonoma County

The community depends on people like you to get involved in civic engagement and participatory governance. All Sonoma County citizens can play an active role in local government; there are many avenues to become involved. You can attend:

- Sonoma County Board of Supervisors meetings
- City Council and School Board meetings
- Independent Office of Law Enforcement Review and Outreach (IOLERO) meetings
- Sonoma County Behavioral/Mental Health Board meetings
- Meetings of every independent agency funded with taxpayers dollars.

and... *you can serve on the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury!*

Why would you want to serve on the Civil Grand Jury? Well, for one thing, there's the money: jurors are paid a handsome stipend of \$15 for the ~2 hour weekly group meeting and \$12.50 for team meetings. With prep work and research time, most grand jurors average \$.50 to \$1.00 per working hour! You'll meet the people who run local government and find out what they're doing (and why they think it's important). You can find out where more than \$3 billion of your tax money goes, and why the services procured are so important to the neediest citizens of this county. And, most important, it's a way to give a little something back to your community. Applications are open annually from February through May.

Civil Grand Juror Application forms are available online at www.sonomagrandjury.org or in person at:

**Sonoma County Superior Court
600 Administration Drive, Room 106
Santa Rosa, California 95403
707-521-6501**

Request for Investigative Review

If you have a grievance that falls within the jurisdiction of the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury, you have the right to file a request for review. The Civil Grand Jury is authorized to investigate the operational behavior of any county, city, or independent agency that spends public money. It is not a criminal grand jury: if you think you know about a crime against people or property, go to the police, or the district attorney; the Civil Grand Jury's job is to investigate government operations, not individual crimes.

All requests and investigations are confidential, and not all requests warrant a Civil Grand Jury investigation. Request for Investigative Review forms are available in both English and Spanish. The forms are available at: <https://sonoma.courts.ca.gov/system/files/grand-jury/requestforinvestigativereview.pdf>



Call for a Sustainable and Diverse Civil Grand Jury

The Civil Grand Jury is the watchdog for the citizens of Sonoma County. The need for a dedicated and diverse group of people to come together and take a hard look at the issues in local government has never been greater. Disinformation and misinformation is proof of the need for vigilance and critical thinking.

Recruiting 19 regular and alternate jurors is challenging: it requires a pool of at least 50 applicants. It's even harder to have the jury reflect local population demographics. In 2009, the sitting Grand Jury published a report that clearly articulated the key elements of the problem; fielding a strong, contemporary, and diverse pool of prospective jurors willing and able to do the work of the people is not easy. The findings and recommendations in the 2009 report are just as current today. If you value the purpose and work of the Civil Grand Jury, we ask you to please read the 2009 Grand Jury report. Or, even better, join the Grand Jury yourself and make a difference.