

# 2025-2026 Final Report

## Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury



Sebastopol Spire by Ned Kahn

Photographer: Don Roberts

# Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Final Report 2025-2026

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**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:



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

**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 en el condado de Sonoma: 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 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 Propositiones 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.

Puede consultar los informes completos en este sitio web:



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

April 30, 2026

*To view the links contained in this report, please use the QR code at the end of the report.*

## SUMMARY

Citizen interest prompted the 2025-2026 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) to investigate how, and how well, the Sonoma Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag+OS) is fulfilling its voter-approved mission.

Preservation of agricultural lands and open space has been a consideration of Sonoma County planners since the 1978 General Plan. It became a major focus of the 1989 General Plan. On November 6, 1990, Sonoma County 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 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 chose to extend Ag+OS funding for another 20 years.

Over the past 35 years, Ag+OS has acquired and stewarded property and conservation easements valued at more than \$600 million 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 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 stands alone as 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.

## BACKGROUND

### History and Timeline

Preservation of agricultural lands and open space has been a consideration since the earliest Sonoma County General Plans. It became a major focus of the 1989 General Plan. This brief history and timeline omits details which may be of interest and are readily available [to view on the Ag+OS website.](#)

**On November 6, 1990**, voters passed two Measures that were placed on the ballot to implement the 1989 General Plan: 1) Measure A established the Agricultural and Open Space Preservation District as a dependent special district with the County Board of Supervisors (BOS) serving as its Board of Directors (BOD); 2) Measure C established a 0.25 percent sales tax for a period of 20 years with an annual appropriation limit of \$40 million. The Sonoma Open Space Authority was established to receive and distribute the funds, to be used according to a five-point Expenditure Plan to purchase property and conservation easements to preserve:

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

**On November 7, 2006**, [Measure F, which can be viewed here](#), extended the original term for another 20 years, with funding to sunset in March 2031. More than 75% of voters approved The Sonoma County Open Space, Clean Water, and Farmland Protection Measure. The revised [Expenditure Plan \(available to view here\)](#) increased the emphasis on protecting the county's agricultural resources and creating spaces for public use and recreation:

- Community separators and greenbelts
- Scenic landscape units and scenic corridors
- Agriculturally productive lands
- Biotic habitat areas, riparian corridors and other areas of biotic significance
- Other open space projects
- Operation and maintenance of land

**In 2011**, in accordance with Measure F, The Sonoma Open Space Authority was reorganized into the FOC with a well-defined set of responsibilities. Functioning as an audit committee, the FOC reviews all Ag+OS expenditures, procurement practices, and annual audits, as well as all proposed acquisitions to protect against overpaying. The Fiscal Oversight Commission also reports annually to the BOD, which makes final decisions on all expenditures.

In 2021 the [Vital Lands Initiative \(VLI\) \(view here\)](#) was submitted by staff and approved by the BOD to further define priorities and criteria for Ag+OS investments. The VLI is a long-term strategic plan which refocuses Ag+OS priorities based on extensive staff and public input. It incorporates strict science-based criteria to help determine a property's conservation value. The VLI outlines how Ag+OS prioritizes conservation of Sonoma County's agricultural lands, scenic viewsheds and greenbelt areas, and land for recreation, education, and urban open space within communities.

## **Organization and Staffing**

### Governing & Advisory Bodies

The Ag+OS General Manager reports directly to the BOD and is responsible for approving all decisions related to the Expenditure Plan. When the BOS meets as the Ag+OS BOD their meetings are noticed on the BOS website. However, they are not linked as public meeting announcements on the Ag+OS website.

### Leadership & Management

The Ag+OS staff consists of specialized teams focused on land acquisition, stewardship, and community resources to steward and protect more than 126,000 acres. The General Manager has a staff of 36.5 full time employees, five of whom are direct report department managers. These include four permanent managers: an Administrative & Fiscal Services Manager, a Community Resources Manager, a Stewardship Manager, and an Acquisition Manager. There is also a Vegetation Management Coordinator whose temporary position is funded by the county's PG&E wildfire settlement.

### The Fiscal Oversight Commission

Made up of five members and an alternate appointed by the Board of Directors, the FOC provides independent fiscal oversight for Ag+OS operations by:

- Serving as an audit committee and reviewing each proposed acquisition or conveyance of interest in real property
- Reviewing any borrowing transaction for compliance
- Reviewing the annual audit
- Reviewing operations and maintenance, and procurement practices
- Reviewing internal financial records of the Open Space Special Tax Account (OSSTA)

OSSTA is managed by the Auditor-Controller-Treasurer-Tax Collector (ACTTC). It is where Ag+OS monies are collected, held, and distributed separately from other county funds. The FOC makes an annual report to the Ag+OS Board of Directors. Fourteen years of budgets and audits for Ag+OS are available to view [here](#) on their website.

### The Advisory Committee (Committee)

The Committee offers opinions and makes recommendations at the request of the Ag+OS Board of Directors or its General Manager. The 19 Members represent specific constituent

groups and are selected as follows:

- Two appointed by each County Supervisor (10)
- Three representatives from the Mayors' and Councilmembers' Association (3)
- Two youth members (2)
- One each representing agriculture, the environment, real estate or property appraisal, and business (4)

While solely advisory, the Committee provides broad-based citizen input on Ag+OS activities. Members act as ambassadors to the community and are appointed by the BOD; [information on how to apply is available to view here](#).

## METHODOLOGY

The 2025-2026 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury:

- Conducted interviews with Ag+OS and Sonoma Regional Parks staff
- Reviewed dozens of documents verifying the evaluation and appraisal processes for Ag+OS acquisitions
- Observed public meetings of the Ag+OS Advisory Board and Fiscal Oversight Commission

## DISCUSSION

### **How are properties selected for purchase and/or establishment of conservation easements?**

Ag+OS only works with willing sellers. Fee title purchases of land are rare. Most property owners apply to work with Ag+OS to protect their land through the sale of a conservation easement which forever limits the way the land can be used. Unlike county codes and zoning ordinances, conservation easements are permanent, enforceable by state law, and cannot be changed to be less restrictive. In essence, a property owner sells their development rights to Ag+OS, reducing the market value of the property.

The process, which can easily take a year or more to complete, begins when a landowner reaches out to Ag+OS. Perhaps a longtime farmer or rancher has no interested heirs to take over the family operation, or maybe someone who lives in an area of increasing development would like to ensure their corner of Sonoma County is left untouched. In some cases a conservation easement may reduce property tax liability. In any case, the conversation begins by learning what goals the landowner has for the property and what conservation value the property offers. Once an application is submitted, it is evaluated to determine which VLI goals

the property meets and how it might benefit the public.

### **How is the conservation value of an easement evaluated?**

The next step is to start an analysis of the property. Ag+OS staff have developed GIS maps to strengthen their ability to advance the mission of permanently protecting Sonoma County's diverse agricultural lands, natural resources, and scenic open spaces for future generations. Central to this effort is the creation of a comprehensive dataset from which the maps are created.

The GIS data and mapping comprise 133 layers, each one providing information about features such as soil composition, water availability, vegetation, and population density, just to name a few. A suite of more than 20 maps, called the Vital Lands Analysis, is produced for each proposed property and is an essential part of the science-based decision-making process. Before GIS was implemented, this work would take days of staff time. The compilation of this data now happens within hours of intaking a property.

Evaluation using the Vital Lands Matrix rating tool is the second part of the process. The various goals of VLI are broken down into more discrete categories and the property is then scored on how well it meets each of these criteria. Using the Vital Lands Analysis, attributes of the land are scored on how they fit with VLI goals. Scores are adjusted up for properties that meet multiple goals and there is a minimum score required for a project to progress. Together, the Vital Lands Analysis and the Vital Lands Matrix form the science-based backbone of Ag+OS' conservation easement acquisitions. A property evaluation meeting is then held for staff to review the accumulated data and decide whether to recommend it to the General Manager for advancement to the appraisal phase. Not every property that scores well advances through the program. Input from staff specialists, such as hydrologists or botanists, is of particular importance during this phase. The General Manager has the final say on whether to activate a project for further consideration.

### **Can we be confident that Ag+OS negotiates a fair price and invests our taxes wisely?**

All real estate transactions begin with a fair appraisal of the property in question. Ag+OS has a list of vetted appraisers and issues a request for proposal for each project. After proposals are received, Ag+OS staff review them to determine which vendor is a good fit for the project based on their area of expertise and ability to complete the work within an accepted timeline.

All appraisals regarding finalized transactions are public record. Jurors reviewed appraisals for two completed transactions. The first was for a fee title property (River Lane in Guerneville). The second was for a conservation easement (McClelland Dairy in Petaluma). The first step is the same in either case; the appraiser seeks out comparable properties. Adjustments are then made to include a variety of factors like location, acreage, shape of the property, site improvements, topography, utilities, and allowable development under current zoning. A final opinion of market value of the property is determined and this value represents the property's highest and best use. That value is crucial because it represents the maximum that Ag+OS can pay for an outright purchase.

If the project involves acquisition of a conservation easement, a second step is necessary and another set of adjustments to value are made, accounting for the potential restrictions with which the conservation easement would burden the property. Adjustments might include zoning changes (which can substantially reduce or eliminate the potential for future development of the parcels); changes to the number of legal parcels the property is divided into; possible public use in the future of all or a portion of the property; and impacts on current farming operations. The adjustments are detailed in the appraisal report and help determine a final opinion of value of the subject property after encumbrance with the conservation easement.

At this point the estimated value after the conservation easement is subtracted from the estimated value before the conservation easement. The difference between those two numbers gives the Concluded Impact on Value of Conservation Easement (Impact Value). It is important to stress that Impact Value forms the ceiling price that Ag+OS can pay to conclude this transaction. If a price can be successfully negotiated at or below the Impact Value of the easement, then the transaction can continue.

In the case of the appraisal for the McClelland Dairy property the values worked out as follows:

Value without conservation easement:	\$5,570,000
Estimated value after easement in place:	<u>(\$2,960,000)</u>
Impact Value:	\$2,610,000

A second appraiser is then engaged to review the report and either confirm its conclusion or recommend modifications. Staff can now begin negotiating with the landowner using the Impact Value as their maximum allowable price.

After a price has been agreed to, Ag+OS staff prepare a presentation for the Fiscal Oversight Commission. The FOC does not have final authority to approve or deny the proposed transaction, but they do review all the project documents including maps, VLA, VLM, appraisals, and the conservation easement document. Review by the FOC is the penultimate step in the rigorous process that Ag+OS completes for every property transaction it undertakes. The final decision to approve or reject the project lies with the Ag+OS Board of Directors (Sonoma County Board of Supervisors).

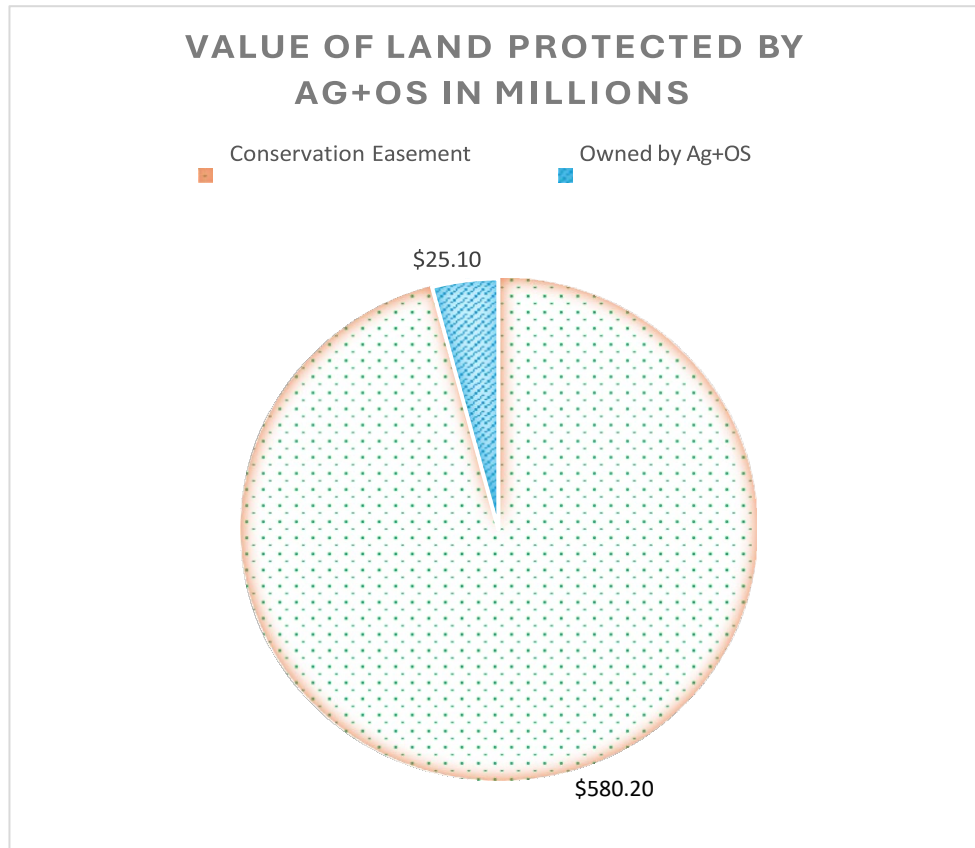


Figure 1. 95% of the land value protected by Ag+OS is in conservation easements

The graph above reflects an ongoing Ag+OS policy that is worth specific mention. As previously described, there are two main ways Ag+OS uses land acquisition to perform its preservation work: fee title transactions (acquiring outright ownership of land) and the purchase of conservation easements. Conservation easements are Ag+OS’ most cost-effective tool when weighed against the expense of oversight, maintenance and operations, and complexities of owning land in Sonoma County. Conservation easements yield the necessary protection sought by Ag+OS and are more financially feasible than becoming owners of more and more property. Where fee title acquisition is the only option for a particular transaction, it is intended that this ownership will ultimately be transferred. On all such purchases a conservation easement and recreation covenant, if applicable, are recorded before the land is conveyed (to Regional Parks, for example) or sold so that Ag+OS has still met its obligation to protect the land.

**What added protection does Ag+OS provide compared to existing zoning and land use ordinances?**

The General Plan and zoning ordinances can be changed by city and county governments as they see fit to meet the current needs of the broader community, and the community must abide by them. Changes to a code or ordinance which a council or board makes this year might

be reversed by a newly elected body. On the other hand, conservation easements are permanent, voluntary agreements between a willing landowner and Ag+OS which are protected and enforceable by California State law. Additionally, mandatory stewardship of the easement provides a consistent level of monitoring oversight unmatched by local codes and ordinances. The voluntary nature of the agreement allows for far more restrictive limits than city or county codes can enforce.

Once established, a conservation easement binds the landowner, and all future owners of that land, to abide by the restrictions set forth. The restrictions aim to protect and preserve the property, and its natural resources, as is. When written, each easement is tailored to the property it will protect. For example, a creek side property may contain protections for riparian habitat and oak wildland preservation. Some easements have specific language outlining protections for native or at-risk species found there.

While the easement is permanent, it can be altered but only if it preserves or increases the current level of protection. There is a well-designed process for landowners to apply for changes to their conservation easements. Certain small changes are allowable provided the owner promptly notifies Ag+OS. Some amendments require the landowner to secure Ag+OS permission. A conservation easement can never be adjusted to be less restrictive or protective.

There are guidelines in each document outlining the handling of potential violations, ranging from corrective action as a recovery path for a minor violation, mediation, or arbitration for more serious violations, all the way to the courts, if needed. California's open space laws are codified in Civil Code [§ 815 \(view here\)](#) and are overseen by the state Attorney General's Office. As one interviewee explained to us, the conservation easements written by Ag+OS "are dedicated to open space under state law. They are perpetual in nature. They can only be rescinded by a vote of the people or an act of legislature."

### **What does "Protected Forever" mean?**

In the simplest terms, the landowner is voluntarily selling their rights to develop the land to Ag+OS and agreeing to restrict how they will use it. In return, Ag+OS pays the landowner for those rights and becomes a permanent stewardship partner, monitoring the easement forever. During our interviews with the staff, jurors noted the repeated mention of Ag+OS working to build relationships with the conservation easement landowners. Ag+OS continues to work with landowners after the conservation easement has been written, to ensure that the landowner is meeting their obligations of conservation.

Any new owner, whether purchaser or heir, is encumbered by the conservation easement. The landowner is required to notify Ag+OS if the land is sold so the work of monitoring the easements can continue, uninterrupted. This could be a weakness in the process as there is no automatic notification to Ag+OS by the Recorder's Office when property changes hands. Not every owner makes timely notification, and new owners may not fully understand their obligations.

With approximately 300 easements, the monitoring work can be daunting. Ag+OS experienced a backlog of monitoring visits after unavoidable complications created by years of wildfire, followed by COVID restrictions. The goal of the stewardship department has been

on-site monitoring of each easement every 18 months. However, Ag+OS has recently adopted a new policy that allows them to use fine scale satellite imagery for their 18-month monitoring. This allows for effective, efficient, remote monitoring by stewardship staff. The new policy is aligned with methods endorsed by the Land Trust Alliance, a nonprofit organization that sets standards for conservation entities and land trusts nationwide. The frequency of site visits has now been shifted to every three to five years.

### **How is “Protected Forever” funded?**

The stewardship work will never stop, but the special tax funding source might. The current ballot measure will sunset in 2031 but Ag+OS will still have an obligation to protect our valuable natural lands and resources. To this end, Ag+OS has been depositing a portion of the special tax money into a Stewardship Reserve Fund that will finance the mandatory, perpetual work of monitoring conservation easements. The Stewardship Reserve Fund is managed by ACTTC alongside other county funds.

ACTTC prioritizes short term liquidity for its investments and the returns are lower than can be achieved via longer term investment strategies, such as those realized by the Sonoma County Employees’ Retirement Association. Currently, the funds are not optimally invested to ensure adequate funding forever. Due to the structure of Ag+OS as a dependent special district of the county, there is a need for specialized investment guidance. The staff has taken steps to engage investment advisory services for this purpose.

### **Has Ag+OS accomplished what the voters wanted, and who benefits from their work?**

Ag+OS has aligned its work closely with the Expenditure Plans approved by Sonoma County voters. Every Sonoma County resident and visitor benefits from the work of Ag+OS, either directly or indirectly. Ag+OS has protected 126,000 acres, or roughly 12% of the county, and these lands perform vital functions for us all.

Since the inception of Ag+OS, creation and maintenance of community separators and green belts have been a priority. The beauty of our county has an inherent value as well as a practical value. The protected spaces between our populated areas help deter urban sprawl and minimize the impacts of heat islands. These areas are also some of our most recognizable landscapes, providing scenic corridors between and among our population centers. Each Sonoma County city has a distinct character that is preserved, in part, by the spaces between neighboring communities.

Our communities have been rooted in agriculture and their identities are often tied to historic crops and products. The investment that Ag+OS makes in agricultural land helps support our county’s economy and our access to local products like fresh produce, meat, eggs, dairy, and fiber. Additionally, agricultural open spaces, like grazing lands, are opportunities for groundwater recharge, helping us to maintain a healthy water supply.

Conservation of riparian corridors supports healthy waterways and provides habitat for our diverse wildlife. Healthy watersheds are also supported by riparian corridor conservation. The

ability of these waterways and their surrounds to absorb and release rainwater in efficient ways is vital to mitigating catastrophic flooding. Some of the conservation easements Ag+OS holds are specifically targeted to riparian areas. More than 144 miles of Coho and Steelhead salmonid habitat has been conserved so far. Connected, conserved lands are a goal for Ag+OS. [These protected lands \(view a map here\)](#) are habitats for a multitude of beneficial species of animals and plants, some of which are unique to Sonoma County.

Most of the land protected through conservation easements is not accessible to the general public but a few of the properties can be enjoyed through public outings offered by Ag+OS and its partners, and many of their educational programs take place on these lands. In 2025, more than 5,000 individuals participated in the public outings offered by Ag+OS, and more than 14,000 students were served by their educational programs.

The category of Other Open Space Projects listed in the 2006 Expenditure Plan includes many of the acquisitions most familiar to, and most valued by, Sonoma County residents. Approximately 50% of the land we now access as Sonoma County Regional Parks was originally acquired by Ag+OS and then transferred for management by Regional Parks. When the property is transferred, Ag+OS retains not only a conservation easement, but usually a recreation covenant as well. This requires that the land be permanently protected and kept open to the public for recreational use.

In a recent application of its GIS technology, Ag+OS has worked with Regional Parks to develop a Park Gap Analysis to better understand what publicly accessible space exists and where new projects or improvements would expand opportunities for outdoor activity by people with a wide range of interests and abilities. The Expenditure Plan also allows Ag+OS to invest up to 10% of its revenue to provide initial public access to newly opened areas. Funding for interim parking or trail improvements gets people out on the land more quickly.

Many other publicly accessible open space projects throughout the county are the result of Ag+OS Community Spaces matching grants program, which can be [viewed here](#). The program provides a portion of necessary funding for projects initiated by city governments, county agencies, and unincorporated communities throughout the county.

As illustrated in the graph below, an acquisition funding commitment by Ag+OS draws matching funds of approximately one a dollar for every two it contributes to a Community Spaces project. Projects include city parks, town squares, creek restorations, soccer/playing fields, and community gardens. [You can explore the map of these projects here](#).



Figure 2. Community Spaces Projects receive roughly 65% of their acquisition funding from Ag+OS and 35% from community partners

### What has made this organization so effective?

Ag+OS is an organization with a strictly defined scope and a prescribed Expenditure Plan. They are dedicated to their mission but must be selective with their limited resources. To accomplish these goals, Ag+OS has evolved its methods to ensure that taxpayers are getting excellent value for their money. Ag+OS stands alone as Sonoma’s only taxpayer-funded open space preservation entity, but they have numerous partners in their mission.

Sonoma County Regional Parks and Sonoma Land Trust are two organizations that are frequent collaborators with Ag+OS. All three have a deep commitment to open space and the benefits it provides, and they work cooperatively to accomplish their common goals. Together, with public and private agencies in the land conservation and management sectors, they established the [Sonoma Valley Wildlands Collaborative \(view here\)](#) a partnership aimed at maintaining and improving ecosystem health and increasing resilience to wildfires and climate change.

Climate resilience benefits all of us. In 2022 Ag+OS formed a coalition with Sonoma Water and the North Coast Resource Partnership to secure funding for the collection of light detection and ranging (LiDAR) images that make up the [Sonoma Vegetation Map \(VegMap available to view here\)](#). The VegMap can be used as a conservation planning tool monitoring vegetation, carbon, and the hydrology of our landscape. The LiDAR-enhanced images have strengthened the GIS that Ag+OS uses to evaluate and analyze properties. Funding and cooperation for the VegMap involved broad collaboration among several organizations,

including the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, The Nature Conservancy, the University of Maryland, and NASA. That GIS is also used by Sonoma Emergency Management to help prepare for and mitigate the impact of disasters.

There were some common threads to the interviews conducted by the Grand Jury during this investigation. Every individual we interviewed demonstrated a commitment to the cause of preserving open space; a dedication to providing Sonoma County voters with the best value for their tax dollars; and expertise in their chosen fields. Jurors were impressed by the professionalism and knowledge of the staff of Ag+OS and the passion they have for their voter-approved mission. They find the work fulfilling and deeply meaningful. Every interviewee was enthusiastic about their area of expertise and the opportunity to discuss their crucial work. Throughout Ag+OS there is a 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.



## What work remains to be done?

The voter-approved Measure F funding will sunset in 2031. If voters approve another measure to continue the sales tax, Ag+OS will continue to buy conservation easements and further protect our agricultural lands and open space, helping Sonoma continue to build climate resilience. They would provide more matching grants and make more open spaces available to the public. They would also be positioned to bolster the Stewardship Fund that is required to perpetually steward and monitor all the lands they have protected.

## 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.

## REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code §§ 933 and 933.05, the Civil Grand Jury requires responses as follows: From the following governing boards within 90 days:

- Sonoma County Board of Supervisors (R2, R3, F2, F3)
- Ag+OS Board of Directors (R1, F1)

## INVITED RESPONSES

Responses are invited from the following within 90 days:

- General Manager of Ag+OS with a copy to the County Executive Officer (R1, R2, R3, F1, F2, F3)

## GLOSSARY

Concluded Impact on Value of a Conservation Easement (Impact Value), is the dollar value of a conservation easement, determined by the difference between the appraised value of land before and after establishment of the conservation easement's restrictions.

Conservation Easement is a power vested in a nonprofit or a governmental entity to restrict the exercise of rights otherwise held by a landowner so as to achieve certain conservation purposes.

Dependent Special District is a limited-purpose local government unit closely tied to another unit of local government.

Geographic Information System (GIS) is a computer-based conceptualized framework used for organizing and analyzing data related to positions on Earth's surface.

Recreation Covenant is a legally binding agreement that mandates land be open for the public to be used for recreational purposes.

Vital Lands Analysis (VLA) is the suite of maps used to evaluate a property's alignment with various Vital Lands Initiative goals.

Vital Lands Initiative (VLI) is a long-range comprehensive plan to prioritize the land conservation activities of Ag+OS through 2031. The full report is available [here](#).

Vital Lands Matrix (VLM) is the science-based scoring matrix used to evaluate how well a property meets Vital Lands Initiative goals.



Artist Patrick Amiot—Junk Art

*To view the links contained in this report, please use this QR code to access the online version of this report*



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

May 12, 2026



Hope In Her Hands illustration by Veronica Napoles © 2026

*To view the links contained in this report, please use the QR code at the end of the report.*

## SUMMARY

In response to a complainant's request for investigation, the Grand Jury researched the operation of the Department of Human Services Child Protection Hotline. The Grand Jury found that responses by hotline social workers to reports of abuse were handled in a professional and consistent manner.

Hotline staff decisions to further investigate are supported by a sophisticated screening tool and professional judgement. When no further investigation is made, the report is said to be "Evaluated Out (EO)." If a given case is evaluated out four times in 12 months, it is reexamined by the hotline staff and department supervisors. However, it is unclear whether this 4 EO protocol is the optimal threshold for intervention to prevent child abuse or neglect.

The complainant's allegation that a child had died after being evaluated out led the Grand Jury to examine the work of the Sonoma County Child Death Review Team (CDRT), an interagency group charged by statute with identifying unanticipated or accidental child deaths and developing a statistical description of deaths as an overall indicator of the status of children in the County. The Grand Jury learned that the CDRT has not published a mandatory annual report since 2014. The Grand Jury also

found that the Sonoma County CDRT did not employ many of the best practices used by other CDRT teams in California and nationwide.

## BACKGROUND

The Grand Jury received a request for investigation alleging that the Sonoma County Department of Human Services failed to protect vulnerable and abused children whose cases are handled by the Department's Family, Youth and Children Division (FY&C). One focus of the complaint was FY&C's telephone hotline for receiving calls reporting child abuse or endangerment. The complainant alleged that at least one child had died after FY&C failed to respond to a hotline call reporting abuse. Accordingly, the Grand Jury investigated the operation of the hotline in depth to determine if any children had, in fact, died or suffered severe harm after being reported to the hotline. This investigation led to an examination of the work of Sonoma County's CDRT which, among other things, creates a statistical survey of child mortality and its causes.

## METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury interviewed social workers and supervisors who work on the FY&C hotline, individuals who participate in the CDRT, current and former legal professionals, and child advocates.

The Grand Jury also researched the law and literature pertaining to CDRTs in California and nationwide.

## DISCUSSION

### The Child Protection Hotline

The hotline maintained by FY&C operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is staffed by professional social workers. It is an entry point into the County's child protective services system. When a call concerning child endangerment is received, social workers evaluate what, if any, further investigation is warranted, and the appropriate timeframe for response.

Since 2010, this process has relied on the Structured Decision Making (SDM) system, a suite of online applications in wide use nationwide and mandatory in California. The SDM consists of evidence-based decision trees that provide a standardized framework in which social workers apply professional judgement to arrive at an objective appraisal of each case. The [SDM Manual is available for review here](#).

Social workers respond to incoming calls based on their determination of the degree of risk or endangerment to the child. An emergency determination requires further in-person assessment within 24 hours. For non-emergency cases, an in-person assessment is completed within 10 days. If the social worker finds 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.

Hotline social workers frequently consult with supervisors while assessing cases, and supervisors regularly review decisions to investigate or evaluate out a given case. All decisions to respond or evaluate out are made by hotline supervisors. When a case has been evaluated out four times within the previous 12 months, it is subjected to review by supervisors and staff. However, FY&C was unable to articulate the rationale for choosing the number four as the trigger for such review. The Grand Jury questioned whether four incidents is the optimal threshold for a more thorough review.

The Grand Jury sought statistics on the number of children, if any, who had died or suffered abuse after their cases had been evaluated out. FY&C did not provide that information, citing confidentiality rules. Without this information, the Grand Jury could not determine the effectiveness of the process. It is unclear whether the agency uses these data to evaluate the impact of its decisions.

### **Child Death Review Team**

A Child Death Review Team (CDRT) is an interagency group that assists officials in identifying and reviewing suspicious child deaths. It also facilitates communication among the various entities involved in child abuse and neglect cases. California Penal Code §11174.32 is the statutory basis for CDRTs. In developing such a team, a county may solicit suggestions and comments from, among others, experts in forensic pathology, pediatricians, coroners, medical examiners, child protective services, county health department staff, and law enforcement personnel. The statute anticipates that a county will develop protocols to help determine whether abuse or neglect contributed to a child's death. It also anticipates the creation of statistical data. Notably, CDRTs are not mandatory. Counties *may* but are not required to establish a CDRT. However, once a CDRT is established, it must publish its findings, conclusions, data and recommendations annually. [View California Penal Code § 11174.32 here.](#)

One consequence of the non-mandatory nature of PC § 11174.32 has been a wide variation in responses to the statute among California's 58 counties. A 2023 survey conducted by the California Citizen Review Panel on Critical Incidents (CICRP) found that 10 counties do not have a fully functioning CDRT. There is a lack of understanding on the part of CDRTs as to whether their role is investigative, deliberative, or administrative. CDRTs have expressed a need for statewide guidance and training.

The Sonoma County CDRT was established in 1993 to further the purposes of PC § 11174.32. Members of the team include experts in forensic pathology, social and health services staff, physicians, law enforcement personnel, and district attorneys. That is, professionals whose work can involve child death cases. The team makeup reflects the areas of expertise cited in PC § 11174.32.

When the Grand Jury turned its attention to the CDRT, it learned that the required annual report had not been issued since 2014. This led to an examination of the work of the CDRT, and to an inquiry into standards applicable to such work.

The 2014 CDRT 5-Year Report presented data on the deaths of children for the years 2008-2012. Though it covered five years, it demonstrates the kind of information an annual report should provide. It reviewed the numbers of deaths from medical causes, accidents, sleep-related causes, homicide, and abuse or neglect. The report examined statistical trends, and contextualized the data by age, gender, and ethnicity. A significant finding was that in 22% of child deaths, abuse and neglect was a direct or contributing cause. The absence of an annual CDRT report since 2014 means that data of this kind is not available to service providers, policymakers, or the public, and therefore cannot be used to

strengthen protection of vulnerable children. [View the 2008-2012 Child Death Review Team 5 Year Report here.](#)

## **CICRP Toolkit**

In 1996, the California Department of Social Services established Citizen Review Panels, in accordance with federal guidelines. These panels consist of volunteers who are child welfare professionals, educators, community leaders, former recipients of social services, and others with relevant experience. One such panel is the CICRP, which focuses on reducing child fatalities and near-fatalities caused by abuse or neglect.

Considering the inconsistent implementation of CDRTs throughout California, CICRP developed a Toolkit for use by counties wishing to create or improve CDRTs. [CDRT Toolkit - Child and Family Policy Institute of California is available for review here.](#)

The Toolkit emphasizes the need for detailed operating protocols, bylaws, and strong leadership. It provides links to state and national resources and offers numerous other aids for effective management of CDRTs. The stated purpose of the Toolkit is to enable California's counties to apply best practices for each CDRT. It effectively establishes standards by which the performance of Sonoma County's CDRT may be assessed.

Among the best practices identified by the Toolkit are those pertaining to the following:

### **Leadership**

CDRTs benefit from the sustained commitment of a chairperson who not only understands the importance of the work of the team, but who builds relationships with other county agencies and the public. The Toolkit proposes that the CDRT designate a representative to present the team's work to the community, a "champion," whom both policymakers and the public recognize and respect.

The current "co-chairs" of the Sonoma County CDRT are the Department of Health Services and the District Attorney's Office. No single individual has been identified, and there is no one who acts as the team's "champion".

### **Protocols, Policies, and Procedures**

The Toolkit emphasizes that specific detailed operating protocols, policies, and procedures are essential to the performance of CDRT's role. The Grand Jury was unable to find any such documents, and CDRT team members who were interviewed were unaware of them. Although the CDRT meets quarterly to review cases, minutes of meetings are not kept. When team members see opportunities to improve child welfare, their recommendations are not recorded and tracked to ensure implementation.

### **Training**

The Toolkit notes that training of team members is essential and provides links to public and private resources. The Sonoma County CDRT offers no training of any kind for its members or those members' staffs.

## Funding

There is no state funding for county CDRTs, though other funding sources exist. In Sonoma County, the Board of Supervisors (BOS) indirectly funds the CDRT through its support of the Department of Health Services, which is a member and co-chair. However, the extent of such support is unclear, as there is evidence that one reason for the CDRT's failure to produce a report since 2014 is a lack of funds to support data collection. The Toolkit notes that direct funding of the CDRT will greatly enhance its work and identifies the BOS and the Human Services and Health Departments as appropriate sources for such funds.

## FINDINGS

F1. The 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.

## REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code § 933.05, the following responses are *required*:

Sonoma County Board of Supervisors: respond to F1-F6 and R1-R3 within 90 days of receipt of this report.

## 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.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

California Penal Code §11174.32 - [California Penal Code section 11174.32 \(2025\)](#)

Child Death Review Team 5-Year Report; A Review of Sonoma County Infant and Child Deaths 2008-2012 - [Child Death Review Team 5 Year Report](#)

California Child Death Review Team Toolkit – September 2023 - [CDRT Toolkit - Child and Family Policy Institute of California](#)

SDM Policy and Procedures Manual - [CA SDM PP Manual](#)

CA SDM/California SDM Policy and Procedures - [CA SDM Policy and Procedures Manual](#)

## ABBREVIATIONS

BOS - Board of Supervisors

CDRT - Child Death Review Team

CICRP - California Citizen Review Panel on Critical Incidents

EO – Evaluated Out

FY&C - Family Youth & Children

SDM - Structured Decision Making

## **GLOSSARY**

Evident Change - Formerly the National Council on Crime & Delinquency and Children’s Research Center is a nonprofit that uses data and research to improve our social systems.

NCCD - In 1973 the Children’s Research Center was created as part of the NCCD to encompass reform of the child welfare system, NCCD changed its name to Evident Change in December.

Structured Decision-Making Tool - SDM is a suite of instruments used to help guide the thinking of case workers when they are making determinations about the overall safety and well-being of children. The Children’s Research Center of NCCD (Evident Change) provides the SDM Policy and Procedures Manual and social workers are trained by the DCFS University.

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# Animal Services Revisited: A City Asleep at the Wheel

May 12, 2026

*To view the links contained in this report, please use the QR code at the end of the report.*

## SUMMARY

A citizen complaint prompted the 2025-2026 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) to revisit issues raised in the 2024-2025 Grand Jury Animal Services report (2024-2025 report) concerning sub-standard performance by North Bay Animal Services (NBAS); underfunding and lax oversight by the City of Petaluma (City) as contributing factors to NBAS's non-compliance with its Professional Services Agreement (contract); and 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. ([Download the 2024-2025 Grand Jury Animal Services report here](#)).

Of particular concern was newly acquired evidence that neither NBAS nor the City were adhering to bite incident protocols required by Petaluma Municipal Code (PMC) § 9.24 which regulates abatement of risks to public safety created by dangerous animals. ([View Title 9 Animal Regulations of the Petaluma Municipal Code here](#)).

The scope of the investigation narrowed on March 2, 2026, when the City of Petaluma terminated its contract with NBAS in response to the agency's highly publicized February 8<sup>th</sup> exit from management of the Clearlake shelter. This action threw Petaluma and other cities with NBAS contracts into crisis mode as they scrambled to identify alternative providers.

The Grand Jury acknowledges that the contract termination was a crisis response to community pressure but views it as a preventable situation had the City Manager's Office (CMO) provided effective NBAS oversight and required contract compliance.

The Grand Jury found that oversight and compliance issues existed for at least the past three years. During that time, the CMO neglected to formally demand compliance with reporting requirements or act on contract defaults by replacing the agency through a measured process.

The Grand Jury observed a similar disregard for orderly, legally compliant performance on the part of the CMO in its handling of the NBAS termination and replacement, and its failure to enforce Municipal Code § 9.24 for abatement of risks to the public by dangerous animals.

This report describes the Petaluma City Charter ([View the Petaluma City Charter here](#)) and Petaluma Municipal Code (PMC) ([View the Petaluma Municipal Code here](#)) which govern the City of Petaluma's actions or inactions. The report also explains where the City of Petaluma's actions and/or inactions departed from its legal mandates.

Whereas the City Charter requires the City Council to act by resolution or ordinance after a recorded majority vote of the members, the Grand Jury found that the CMO has been given almost limitless discretion to manage Petaluma Animal Services and commit public funds as it sees fit without a City Council ordinance or resolution.

The Grand Jury also determined that the CMO has failed its duty under the City Charter to enforce the City's laws contained in PMC § 9.24 to mitigate public risk from dangerous and potentially dangerous animals.

Based on its investigation, the Grand Jury concluded that inadequate CMO oversight of the NBAS contract resulted in significant negative outcomes for Petaluma animals and residents. Ignoring NBAS's non-compliance with PMC § 9.24 put public health and safety at risk and violated due process rights of animal owners and victims.

Observing the process for termination and replacement of NBAS, the Grand Jury concluded that the authority 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 voters. To a large extent, the voice of the ballot box has been silenced.

## **BACKGROUND**

Renewed citizen concerns prompted the Grand Jury to revisit issues raised in the 2024-2025 Grand Jury Animal Services report including:

- Non-compliance by North Bay Animal Services (NBAS) with its Petaluma contract ([View Professional Services Agreement \(Contract\) here](#));
- Underfunding and lax city oversight as contributing factors to persistent NBAS non-compliance;
- 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 were new allegations it received of NBAS's non-compliance with PMC § 9.24 which regulates abatement of risks posed to the public by dangerous dogs and establishes specific protocols for animal bite investigations and reporting.

### **Abruptly Changing Circumstances**

On January 30, 2026, the Grand Jury visited NBAS at the Petaluma Municipal Shelter and met with the NBAS Director. Jurors found shelter conditions significantly improved by the City's investment in long-deferred maintenance, including repair of the leaking roof and extensive upgrades to the failed HVAC system. The shelter was uncrowded and animals appeared to be receiving adequate food and care.

These improvements, however, did not extend to the organization's management structure or transparency. The Grand Jury received no response from NBAS to its request for documents. Nor did NBAS provide complete information on its management of bite incidents that the Grand Jury requested from the City of Petaluma through a Public Records Act request.

Financial reports and annual audits were not submitted to the City as required by the contract. Review of NBAS's audits and IRS 990 filings by the Grand Jury found the agency to be operating in the red and at risk of financial failure.

Issues of NBAS contract non-compliance became moot on March 2, 2026, when the Petaluma City Council directed the CMO to terminate the NBAS contract, effective March 31, 2026.

The impetus for the abrupt contract termination was public outrage fueled by media coverage of starved, maltreated animals left behind by NBAS at the Clearlake Shelter when its contract ended on February 8, 2026. However, based on issues identified in the 2024-2025 Grand Jury Report and NBAS's refusal to cooperate with a consultant hired by the City of Petaluma to address these issues, the CMO had already begun work on a Request for Proposals (RFP) for animal control and management of the municipal shelter to commence at the conclusion of the NBAS contract on July 31, 2026.

The precipitous termination of the NBAS contract threw Petaluma into crisis management mode. Instead of a systematic bidding process, the CMO was faced with negotiating services from an emergency position. Cloverdale, Windsor, and Sebastopol also contracted with NBAS for shelter services at the Petaluma shelter. Like Petaluma, they were left scrambling to secure alternatives. The most likely provider, Sonoma County Animal Services (SCAS), required prior approval by the Board of Supervisors before assuming new contracts, preventing them from being immediately available.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This investigation focused on the City of Petaluma's management of animal services. The Grand Jury visited NBAS at the Petaluma shelter, conducted multiple interviews, observed Petaluma City Council proceedings and reviewed available documents, including the Petaluma Municipal Charter and Municipal Code, the NBAS contract, preliminary bids and communications related to the termination of the NBAS contract, and the Professional Services Agreement with Marin Humane Society for transitional services through June 30, 2026.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Crisis or Consequence?**

While the Grand Jury recognized the political urgency driving the NBAS contract termination by the City of Petaluma, it was hard not to view the situation as the culmination of years of underfunding and dereliction of contract oversight responsibilities by all the cities that contracted with NBAS to shelter animals at the Petaluma Municipal Shelter. Each city is responsible for its own animal regulation, care and rabies control. There is no higher level of authority to intervene when problems arise. Likewise, there is no state or county regulation requiring inspection of shelters. The County and cities have discussed creating a body that would provide County-wide oversight and the Grand Jury encourages them to continue this pursuit of a cost-effective solution.

From the privileged perspective of hindsight, the Grand Jury viewed the current crisis as largely preventable had the CMO provided effective contract oversight. Instead of adequately monitoring NBAS's performance, addressing issues in a timely manner, and exercising the contract default clause when and if this became necessary, unacceptable performance had been allowed to exist and escalate for at least the past three years.

On August 1, 2018, the City entered into a contract with NBAS for animal services, which was amended to extend through July 31, 2026. The contract required NBAS to meet on a regular basis with the City's Animal Services Advisory Committee. On June 20, 2022, the City Council passed Resolution No. 2022-111 N.C.S. to disband the Petaluma Animal Services Advisory Committee ([View Resolution 2022-111 N.C.S. here](#)). The Resolution specifically directed the CMO to provide the City Council with bi-annual NBAS reports, the annual audit report, and responses to Public Records Act requests. The CMO failed to secure NBAS bi-annual reports and had no Annual Audits for 2023 and 2024 until they were completed in December 2025.

Section 21 (A) of the NBAS contract required it to "provide a written mid-year and an annual comprehensive report to the City Manager with all the information necessary for the City Council to determine the quantity and quality of all work and the quantity and effectiveness of the contractor's fundraising efforts in a form specified by the City Manager".

There were no specific metrics for performance reporting included in the NBAS contract. Such reports might be expected to include:

- Shelter statistics including average daily occupancy of shelter, length of stay, live release rate, adoption rate, and euthanasia rate.
- Evidence of systematic documentation of animal ownership, and medical records detailing veterinary care and timely sterilization, both routine and rabies vaccinations.
- Bite incident reports and licensing data to demonstrate NBAS compliance with the PMC Title 9 regulations for enforcement of dog licensing as part of state-mandated rabies control and PMC § 9.24 for management of dangerous and potentially dangerous animals.
- In the case of a non-governmental provider, sufficient organizational and financial information to ensure the integrity of financial management, and continued solvency of an agency to which the City delegates state mandated responsibilities for public health and safety and the humane care of animals within its jurisdiction.

Based on the Grand Jury's investigation, no reports pursuant to Section 21 (A) were directly provided to the CMO. NBAS did post comprehensive shelter statistics and financial reports for 2018 and 2019 on their website. However, subsequent reports were not posted for 2020 through 2025. The City had the authority under the contract to demand the required reports and to invoke the contract's default clause if the information was not forthcoming. The default clause enabled the City Council to terminate NBAS's services for cause on a specified date, or for convenience with 90-days-notice. To comply with the City Charter and past practices, either action would have required a resolution adopted by a recorded vote.

To the Grand Jury's knowledge, the City did not make a formal demand for the required reporting nor did the City invoke the default clause prior to March 2, 2026.

As a result of Resolution 2022-111 N.C.S., the CMO had an official mandate from the City Council to provide it with regular updates on NBAS and any Public Records Act requests. There was no evidence provided to the Grand Jury to indicate that any updates were provided.

## Foreseeable Consequences of Inadequate Oversight of NBAS

As the Grand Jury reported last year, the consequences of the failures of NBAS and the CMO to the animals were severe. Had the CMO enforced the provisions of the NBAS contract, the substandard shelter conditions and lack of veterinary care for foster and adoptive families, specifically timely sterilizations, could have been alleviated or possibly avoided. Public health and safety were compromised by NBAS's failure to provide timely rabies vaccinations, enforce state licensing laws to maintain that protection, and implement PMC protocols for management of bite incidents.

Among the greatest concerns for the 2025-2026 Grand Jury was NBAS's non-compliance with the State and Petaluma City Code requirements for the designated animal control officer to enforce dog licensing and comply with protocols for management of dangerous dogs.

Dog licensing is mandated by the State of California Health and Safety Code § 121690 (a) and (e) to ensure current rabies vaccinations ([View the State of California Health and Safety Code HSC § 121690 here.](#)) Owners are required to vaccinate and license dogs over four months of age and each government jurisdiction is required to enforce licensing. As reported in the 2024-2025 report and demonstrated by SCAS and the areas it serves, this can be readily accomplished by using an online license management program such as DocuPet.

Achieving high license rates reflects public protection from a fatal disease that is endemic in every California county. Licensing fees support related animal care such as low-cost vaccinations and spay/neuter programs for population control.

Petaluma Municipal Code § 9.24 details protocols for management of dangerous and potentially dangerous animals through standardized reporting of bite incidents and referral for administrative hearings to formally establish abatement conditions. These protocols are not recommendations. The laws that protect the property rights of dog owners, also should provide redress to bite victims, and protect public health and safety.

## Management of Dangerous and Potentially Dangerous Dogs

The 2024-2025 Grand Jury requested an explanation of how NBAS handled its estimated 350-370 annual dog bite calls. The only response was that many incidents do not rise to the level of requiring a report. No information was provided about the number and management of incidents in which a dog was determined to be *dangerous or potentially dangerous*, as defined by the PMC § 9.24.020.

In response to extensive documentation provided by a bite victim, the 2025-2026 Grand Jury reviewed PMC § 9.24 which addresses regulation of *dangerous and potentially dangerous dogs*. The Grand Jury confirmed the victim's allegations of non-compliant enforcement of the Code and identified ways the City might better protect its residents and their animals by:

- Enforcing existing reporting, abatement and administrative hearing procedures; and
- Amending the PMC: 1) to require an independent hearing officer, and 2) provide public notice of administrative hearings and opportunities for input by those who have standing as victims of a dangerous animal.

## **Enforcing Established Reporting, Abatement and Administrative Hearing Procedures**

Consistent with California Food and Agricultural Code § 31683, PMC § 9.24.020 defines *dangerous and potentially dangerous dogs* according to observable behavior, injury caused, and the number of incidents involving aggressive behavior. ([View California Food and Agricultural Code § 31683 here.](#))

PMC § 9.24.030 dictates the investigation procedures that are to be followed when the animal control officer (ACO) investigates an assault and assesses the animal to be dangerous or potentially dangerous. These procedures require the ACO to:

- File a report, signed under penalty of perjury and to be permanently retained.
- Append statements of witnesses, victims, and the animal owner, signed under penalty of perjury.
- Provide the owner with a provisional abatement order requiring reasonable conditions pending an administrative hearing.
- Petition the hearing officer for an administrative hearing to be conducted following procedures of PMC § 9.24.040. Following the presentation of evidence, the hearing officer may find that the animal is dangerous or potentially dangerous and order the abatement of the nuisance created by the animal by imposing certain conditions (abatement conditions).

Based on incomplete responses to the Grand Jury's public records request for bite incident reports, and on interviews with the CMO, the City Attorney, and NBAS, the Grand Jury confirmed the complainants' allegations that abatement procedures required by the PMC have not been followed.

The Grand Jury also confirmed that despite evidence provided to the CMO by a bite victim documenting repeated attacks by the same dog, no action was taken by NBAS and the dog remained in the care of the owner.

The PMC also requires that reports of dog bite incidents be filed and permanently retained. However, it is silent on where and by whom these records are to be retained. The City Clerk responded to the Grand Jury's public records request stating that the City does not keep the requested records, but that they would be requested from NBAS. The City Clerk forwarded the partial response received from NBAS. It was limited to 2023 ACO field reports. The forwarded documents did not include signed statements by victims, witnesses, and dog owners, nor any documentation of administrative hearings. It is unclear whether additional records exist.

The Grand Jury received evidence that, rather than providing dog owners with a provisional abatement order pending an administrative hearing, NBAS had created a "Waiver of Administrative Hearing" to be signed by the animal owner with abatement conditions specified. However, no such waiver is referenced in the PMC and no examples of this unofficial waiver were among the documents received in response to the Public Records Act request.

The CMO, City Attorney, and NBAS confirmed that no administrative hearings had been held to establish abatement conditions, even when personal injury had occurred.

NBAS also confirmed that it has not tracked compliance with abatement conditions or kept records to ensure that conditions are being fulfilled for dogs that have been determined to be *dangerous or potentially dangerous* as defined by the PMC based on behavioral assessments. Had NBAS tracked and ensured compliance with risk abatement conditions, NBAS and the CMO may have been able to avoid multiple assaults by the same animal.

The City Attorney suggested that a bite victim could seek relief in court by filing a civil action against the dog owner or filing a complaint with the City. However, the CMO has no system to document, respond to and retain records of citizen complaints.

The Grand Jury concluded that lax and non-compliant enforcement of the PMC has undermined the objective of protecting public health and safety and has deprived both animal owners and victims of due process.

## **Contradictions and Omissions in the Petaluma Municipal Code**

The Grand Jury reviewed the animal-related codes of Sonoma County and cities in the NBAS service area. While these documents vary, as is permitted under the state law, the PMC appears to differ from most others in two important ways: 1) It fails to require appointment of an independent administrative hearing officer; and 2) it fails to require public access to hearings and establish standing for victims to testify.

### **1. Appointment of an Independent Hearing Officer**

PMC § 1.16.060 directs the City Manager to designate Administrative Hearing Officers who shall conduct any hearings on contests to administrative citations.

PMC § 9.24.020 (E) defines “Hearing Officer” as the manager of animal services or his/her designee. This definition appears to usurp the city manager’s authority to designate administrative hearing officers for abatement of risks posed by dangerous dogs. Moreover, when taken together with PMC § 9.24.030, this means that the animal control manager is both making the initial determination as to whether probable cause exists that a dog is dangerous or potentially dangerous and then reviewing that decision by acting as the hearing officer in the administrative hearing. By allowing the animal services manager to serve in both capacities, there is an inherent risk of bias and falls short of meeting due process requirements. Residents are entitled to independent review of their concerns. “[C]ombining the roles of advocate and adjudicator in a single person...violates due process under the Fourteenth Amendment and the California Constitution Article I, § 7.” (*California DUI Lawyers Assn. v. Department of Motor Vehicles* (2022) 77 Cal. App. 5th 517, 532.)

### **2. Providing the Public with Access and Victims Standing to Bear Witness**

When behavioral assessment by an animal control officer has determined that a dog is *dangerous or potentially dangerous*, victims, witnesses, and other members of the public have an interest in ensuring that effective abatement conditions are established and that they are monitored to ensure compliance.

Unlike the Sonoma County Code and those of some of the other cities, the PMC does not require public notice of risk abatement hearing for dangerous animals. Nor does it permit victims to request an

administrative hearing, proffer evidence, and/or appeal a decision that they believe falls short of mitigating future risks to the public. These omissions compromise the effectiveness of a process intended to protect public health and safety and the rights of all parties.

### **Change Happens but Process Matters**

On March 2, 2026, the Petaluma City Council reviewed the CMO's recommendation regarding animal services and directed that the contract with NBAS be terminated. Jurors observed the March 2<sup>nd</sup> council meeting and reviewed the CMO staff report and preliminary bids provided by the Humane Society of Sonoma County (HSSC) for shelter care and Sonoma County Animal Services (SCAS) for animal regulation. These bids appear to have been solicited without public notice.

Based on the February 20 date on the SCAS bid, it was evident that the CMO was preparing to respond to public pressure by terminating the NBAS contract. The Grand Jury watched the process with concern and bemusement over what appeared to include significant departures from procedures dictated by the Petaluma City Charter and state law for the reasons explained further below.

### **Petaluma City Governance**

California cities are governed either under general state law or by laws that have been codified and approved by the voters as a city charter. Voters adopted the first Petaluma City Charter on March 8, 1911. The current version was adopted on November 5, 1996.

The Charter, together with the PMC, set forth local laws applicable to the city's residents and governing bodies. The Ralph M. Brown Act stipulates requirements for transparency in how public entities, including the city council, school boards, and special districts conduct their business.

The Charter describes Petaluma's governing council as comprising the mayor and six councilmen who are elected by the voters for four-year terms. It establishes the council as the city's governing body and states that the council shall appoint a city attorney to provide legal services, as needed, and a city manager who "...shall be responsible to the council for the efficient administration of all affairs of the city".

While many duties of the city manager are like those of a corporate CEO, there is a primary difference. A corporate CEO reports to a board of directors whose primary objective is to maximize shareholder profits. The city manager reports to an elected council that is accountable to the voters and whose job is to provide services and manage the citizens through enforcement of the city's municipal code and other applicable laws. The buck stops with the City Council, not the CMO or the City Attorney.

Primary among the City Manager's responsibilities are to ensure enforcement of applicable laws and "to recommend to the council for adoption such measures and ordinances as he may deem necessary or expedient". The council has the authority to accept or reject such recommendations.

The Petaluma City Charter, Article VII § 40 and § 41 dictate that "the council shall act only by ordinance or resolution and that ...ayes and noes shall be recorded in a journal of the proceedings". Other sections specify the wording of resolutions and how they may be enacted, amended, or rescinded by subsequent resolutions. A monetary threshold is set for when an expenditure or commitment of public assets requires an ordinance.

## **Expediency Trumps Process**

On March 2, 2026, Council Members directed staff to terminate the contract with NBAS on less than 30-days-notice with no formal vote or resolution and no plan in place for transitional management beyond the preliminary bids received from SCAS and HSSC.

The combined SCAS and HSSC cost estimates for animal regulation and shelter management were more than double what had been previously budgeted for animal services, yet no ordinance was proposed to authorize the additional expenditure.

The SCAS bid was dated February 20, 2026. It carried an admonition that it was not to be released until all bids had been received and a contract signed, yet it was revealed at the March 2<sup>nd</sup> City Council meeting even as CMO staff spoke with Marin Humane Society about the possibility of receiving a competing bid.

While the City has guidelines for securing bids for goods and construction, there is no such direction for acquiring bids for professional services.

Justifications for the Petaluma contract termination included: 1) NBAS refusal to cooperate and provide documents to the City's Animal Welfare Consultant; 2) NBAS failure to provide required reports since 2022; and 3) NBAS failure to notify the City when it extended services to other jurisdictions.

NBAS had, in fact, notified the CMO of its services to other cities in its 2019 annual report. While serious, the reporting defaults were not new news. Under the default clause of the NBAS contract, the CMO could have exercised its authority to terminate the contract in a more measured manner at any time since reporting ceased, thus averting the current crisis.

The CMO staff report proposed three possible actions by the City Council:

- Option 1: Continue with NBAS and immediately release the RFP for a new animal services provider.
- Option 2: Terminate the contract on a specified date, close the shelter for 2-4 weeks, and identify a new animal services provider.
- Option 3: Permanently close the Municipal Shelter and identify other means to care for Petaluma animals.

After lengthy discussion among staff and council members, the mayor directed the CMO to proceed with Option 2 without a recorded vote. The direction to terminate NBAS was clear, but the termination would be made with no plan in place for a successor. The choice of a service provider was left to the CMO's discretion. No formal vote was taken. No resolution was proposed to terminate a contract that was entered into by resolution in 2018 and amended by a second resolution in 2020. Likewise, no ordinance was proposed to rescind the NBAS lease for use of the shelter.

## **Follow up**

Contrary to the Petaluma City Charter's seemingly explicit requirement of a resolution to rescind the NBAS contract and lease ordinance, the CMO terminated both agreements in a letter to NBAS dated March 4, 2026. In accordance with the default clause in the NBAS contract, the letter specified an end date of March 31, 2026.

On March 23, 2026, the CMO accepted a new bid from Marin Humane Society for animal shelter management and animal control. The limited scope of services covered a transition period from March 23 through April 27 to be billed on the basis of services provided. The Professional Services Agreement covered service from March 23 through June 30 at a cost not to exceed \$125,000.

When the Grand Jury questioned whether further discussion or action by the city council would be on an upcoming agenda, the CMO represented that it had been given direction and ...*had all the authority needed to proceed*. When the Grand Jury questioned the lack of resolutions or ordinances described in the Petaluma City Charter, it was advised that the Charter only applies to the city council.

## 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 violated the due process rights of animal owners and victims.

Observing the process for termination and replacement of NBAS, the Grand Jury concluded that the authority 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 the same level of accountability to voters. The voice of the ballot box has been largely 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.

R9. By September 7, 2026 the City Council shall direct the City Manager's Office to develop and implement a system no later than January 4, 2027 to document citizen complaints, assign responsibility for responding, and record actions taken. This documentation should be maintained in accordance with the records retention policy.

## **REQUIRED RESPONSES**

Pursuant to Penal Code § 933.05, the Civil Grand Jury requires responses as follows within 90 days:

The Petaluma City Council: respond to F1-F8 and R1-R7, R9.

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors: respond to F6 and R8.

**APPENDIX**

**Key Animal Services Activities Timeline**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Resolution or identifying #</b>
June 18, 2018	City Manager authorized to execute Professional Services Agreement with North Bay Animal Services; 8/1/2018 – 7/31/2020.	By adopting resolution <a href="#">2018-110 N.C.S.</a>
July 20, 2020	City Manager authorized to approve amendment to Professional Services Agreement with North Bay Animal Services; extended through 7/31/2026 + option to extend through 7/31/2029.	By adopting resolution <a href="#">2020-121 N.C.S.</a>
June 20, 2022	Animal Services Advisory Committee, established by Resolution 98-126 N.C.S. on June 22, 1998, was eliminated with an amendment for staff to bring the North Bay Animal Services Annual Report before the Council as a new business item.	By adopting resolution <a href="#">2022-111 N.C.S.</a>
June 13, 2025	2024-25 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury report “Animal Services in Sonoma County” published.	n/a
August 7, 2025	North Bay Animal Services contract with City of Clearlake terminated with 60-day notice given; actual termination date was February 8, 2026.	n/a
September 8, 2025	City Council authorizes City’s response to the 2024-2025 Grand Jury report.	By adopting resolution <a href="#">2025-133 N.C.S.</a>
September 11, 2025	City enters into Professional Services Agreement for consulting services to address compliance challenges at NBAS as detailed in the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Report.	No recorded vote No resolution proposed
March 2, 2026	City Council meeting to review CMO recommendations. Mayor directs CMO to terminate NBAS contract.	No recorded vote No resolution proposed
March 4, 2026	City Manager sends termination letter for services and lease agreement to North Bay Animal Services effective March 31, 2026.	No recorded vote, no resolution, no ordinance to terminate lease.
March 23, 2026	City Manager signs interim agreement with Marin Humane Society.	No recorded vote No resolution proposed No ordinance to expend public funds



Artist Patrick Amiot—Junk Art

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# Sonoma Local Agency Formation Commission: Opportunities Abound

May 12, 2026

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## SUMMARY

In October 2025, a discussion was held for the 2025-26 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) to learn more about Sonoma County's independent Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO). During the presentation, the Sonoma LAFCO Executive Officer (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 roles 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 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 prevalent among 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. Additionally, 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 for clarifying roles, ensuring legal compliance, and informing 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 lacked a strategic plan. The Grand Jury is also concerned with the lack of any succession planning, especially considering the EO's announced intention to retire.

## GLOSSARY

CALAFCO – California Association of Local Agency Formation Commissions

CKH – Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000

EO – Executive Officer

LAFCO – Local Agency Formation Commission

MSR – Municipal Service Review

SOI – Spheres of Influence

## BACKGROUND

### What are LAFCOs?

The following background information was condensed from the CALAFCO website for the purposes of brevity and focus of attention on areas of primary concern.

Local Agency Formation Commissions (LAFCOs) are local agencies formed by the California State legislature in 1963 to:

- Encourage the Orderly Formation of Local Governmental Agencies;
- Preserve Agricultural Land Resources; and
- Discourage Urban Sprawl.

### Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg (CKH) Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000

The CKH was adopted in response to recommendations contained in a report from Growth Within Bounds, the Commission on Local Governance for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The CKH represents the most comprehensive overhaul of LAFCO legislation since the original adoption of the Knox-Nisbet Act in 1963. The CKH established the requirement that LAFCOs prepare Municipal Service Reviews to inform updates of local government’s Spheres of Influence which are to be reviewed at least every five years. See below for more information regarding the Spheres of Influence. For more information, [view the Cortese Knox Hertzberg Act here.](#)

### LAFCO responsibilities:

- Coordinate logical and timely changes in local governmental boundaries;
- Conduct special studies that review ways to reorganize, simplify, and streamline governmental structure; and
- Prepare a Sphere of Influence for each city and special district within the county.

### LAFCOs have authority over:

- Boundary Changes

- Sphere of Influence Studies
- Municipal Service Reviews
- Initiation of Special District Consolidations
- Out of Agency Service Agreements
- Adoption of Local Policies

### **Spheres of Influence (SOI)**

The purpose of the Sphere of Influence study is to ensure the provision of efficient services while discouraging urban sprawl or the premature conversion of agricultural and open space lands. Defining the SOI of each government prevents overlapping jurisdictions and duplication of services. LAFCOs cannot tell agencies what their planning goals should be. Rather, on a regional level, LAFCOs coordinate the orderly development of a community through reconciling differences between agency plans so that the most efficient urban service arrangements are created for the benefit of area residents and property owners.

As part of the SOI update, the LAFCO must consider and prepare a written statement of its determinations which are summarized as follows:

1. The present and planned land uses in the area, including agricultural and open-space lands.
2. The present and probable need for public facilities and services in the area.
3. The present capacity of public facilities and adequacy of public services that the agency provides or is authorized to provide.
4. The existence of any social or economic communities of interest in the area if the LAFCO determines that they are relevant to the agency.
5. For a city or special district that provides public facilities or services related to sewers, municipal and industrial water, or structural fire protection, the present and probable need for those public facilities and services of any disadvantaged unincorporated communities within the existing Sphere of Influence.

### **Municipal Service Reviews (MSR)**

Municipal Service Reviews (MSR) were added to LAFCO mandates with the passage of the CKH Act in 2000. An MSR is a comprehensive study designed to better inform LAFCO, local agencies, and the community about the provision of municipal services. MSRs attempt to capture and analyze information about the governance structures and efficiencies of service providers, and to identify opportunities for greater coordination and cooperation between providers. MSRs are a prerequisite to a Sphere of Influence determination and may also lead a LAFCO to take other actions under its authority.

Per the CKH Act, the LAFCO prepares written statements of its determinations with respect to each of the following factors:

1. Growth and population projections for the affected area.

2. The location and characteristics of any disadvantaged unincorporated communities within or contiguous to the SOI.
3. Present and planned capacity of public facilities and adequacy of public services, including infrastructure needs or deficiencies.
4. Financial ability of agencies to provide services.
5. Status of, and opportunities for, shared facilities.
6. Accountability for community service needs, including governmental structure and operational efficiencies.
7. Any other matter related to effective or efficient service delivery, as required by commission policy.

### **LAFCO Composition**

The composition of LAFCOs varies from county to county. Sonoma's LAFCO is composed of seven regular and four alternate members. Each member serves a four-year term. The regular members are:

- Two members elected by the City Selection Committee of the Sonoma County Mayors and Councilmembers' Association from among the nine cities' mayors and council members;
- Two members appointed by the Chair of the County Board of Supervisors from among their membership;
- Two members elected by the independent special districts from among the members of the boards of directors of the districts; and
- One member appointed by the LAFCO from the public.

For each category of regular members (city, county, special district, and public) there is one alternate. Alternate members may attend and participate in LAFCO meetings but may vote only when a regular member from the category they represent is absent or chooses not to vote.

### **LAFCO Funding**

Each LAFCO adopts a budget annually after noticed public hearings. In counties where there is city and independent special district representation on the LAFCO, the county, cities, and independent special districts shall each provide a one-third share of the LAFCO's annual operational costs. Guidance for funding and apportioning fees is provided in CKH section 56381.

Sonoma LAFCO's budget includes revenue from the County of Sonoma and the cities and special districts within Sonoma County. Other funding includes fees for services, such as legal counsel fees, pre-application fees, and outside agency fees. The 2025-2026 budget is \$1,184,294. Staff is comprised of the EO, a Commission Analyst, and a Commission Clerk.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This report is based on interviews with individuals who have a deep knowledge of local and other LAFCO operations, regulations and objectives. Additionally, Sonoma County LAFCO performance

was analyzed based on available data. Internet research was performed, including comparison to a few other Northern California LAFCOs of similar complexity. Statutory LAFCO requirements were also reviewed.

The Grand Jury did not evaluate MSR and SOI content as part of this investigation.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Documents—Outdated and Missing**

Sonoma LAFCO’s MSR and SOI policies have not been updated in more than 12 years. Without regular review, updates and approval, these policies and procedures are likely to be outdated, incorrect, or incomplete.

Additionally, the Grand Jury found Sonoma LAFCO’s retention and organization of records to be lacking. After receiving a list of MSRs and SOIs from Sonoma LAFCO, the Grand Jury selected several samples for review. The Grand Jury was referred to the website, and in several cases, was unable to locate the documents. After a follow-up request, Sonoma LAFCO was unable to provide all the documents.

### **Website—Inaccurate, Outdated and Lacks Transparency**

Several areas of the Sonoma LAFCO website were found to be challenging to navigate, outdated, or contained errors or omissions. [View the Sonoma LAFCO Website here.](#)

Minutes from the Sonoma LAFCO meetings are not available on the website until the next meeting agenda is published, which can be a month or more after the meeting. The website does not currently provide a link for the public to participate in or view Sonoma LAFCO meetings online. Meeting recordings and transcripts are not made available to the public on the Sonoma LAFCO website.

Additionally, portions of the website are outdated. The Guide to Special Districts (Reports and Publications web page) is dated 2013. Pages 3 – 5 list the cities and special districts in Sonoma County. This list is outdated because of reorganizations or annexations which have occurred over the past decade. Further, the current budget published on the website did not correlate to the approved budget because of an omitted budget line item and amount.

Compared to similar LAFCO websites, Sonoma LAFCO’s website lacked critical information for LAFCO members and the community. For example, Sonoma LAFCO lacked annual work plans, strategic objectives, meeting recordings and minutes that were easily accessible on similar LAFCO websites. The Grand Jury also found it difficult to locate important records on the Sonoma LAFCO website, such as MSRs and SOI studies, due to ineffective organization.

### **SOI and MSR - Risk of Non-Compliance**

Sonoma LAFCO’s policy states “The Commission will review all spheres of influences every five years for each governmental agency providing municipal services.” Elsewhere the policy states, “Spheres of influence are required to be updated every five (5) years and are amended as conditions warrant.” This policy aligns with CKH section 56425(g) that states, “On or before January 1, 2008,

and every five years thereafter, the commission shall, as necessary, review and update each sphere of influence.”

The “as necessary” language of this code is interpreted by Sonoma LAFCO to justify performing SOIs and MSRs less frequently than every five years. The Grand Jury found that similar LAFCOs adhered to performing SOIs and MSRs at least every five years.

The Grand Jury was unable to verify Sonoma LAFCO’s compliance with SOI policy. After repeated requests for examples of SOI studies, Sonoma LAFCO produced form letters dated 2010-2017, which contained questions that did not meet the SOI criteria as defined by the CKH. Moreover, Sonoma LAFCO failed to provide the replies from Sonoma LAFCO members requesting changes, corrections or confirmation of their existing SOIs.

Furthermore, the Grand Jury is concerned that Sonoma LAFCO’s policy and practice for preparing required MSRs is not compliant with statute and is not beneficial to LAFCO membership and the community. CKH section 56430(e) states, “In order to prepare and to update spheres of influence in accordance with Section 56425, the commission shall conduct a service review of the municipal services”. Sonoma LAFCO includes this section in their policy but does not specify the frequency for updating MSRs.

In practice, the interval between MSR updates has frequently been well beyond five years. Based on information provided to the Grand Jury, at least 18 special district MSRs have not been updated in the last 20 years, and more than half of the city MSRs have not been updated in 19 years! In addition to potential statutory conflict, delayed MSR updates are a disservice to the community because MSRs help inform SOI and they provide information to the public on cities and special districts.

The Grand Jury requested but was not provided evidence to demonstrate that Sonoma County Counsel had reviewed and approved Sonoma LAFCO’s interpretation of the CKH for their policy. Furthermore, permission was not granted to allow the Grand Jury to contact Sonoma LAFCO’s counsel about this matter.

### **Comparison—Less Effective Than Other LAFCOs**

The Grand Jury found budget and staffing for Sonoma LAFCO are in line with other Northern California LAFCOs similar in complexity. Sonoma LAFCO’s budget exceeds some similar LAFCOs, but it has produced fewer MSRs. These similar LAFCOs routinely produce MSRs and SOIs every five years for applicable entities under their jurisdiction. Information on their website provides full transparency with easy navigation.

Sonoma LAFCO continues to rely on county services and supplies. Other LAFCOs have severed their county ties and benefit from their ability to source competitively priced services and supplies specialized for their purposes.

### **LAFCO Staffing—Who’s Doing What?**

The Executive Officer (EO) and staff are Sonoma County employees. Being an employee of Sonoma County can give the appearance of a conflict of interest for an organization that is an independent entity.

Until July 1, 2024, the EO reported to the County Administrator (CAO) and performance was evaluated by the CAO. A new professional services agreement was negotiated and signed effective July 1, 2024. The EO is still an employee of Sonoma County but now reports to the Commission and performance is now evaluated by the Commission. This reporting structure is more appropriate for independence.

While there is more independence with this approach, the County's employee overhead costs may be adding to the cost of Sonoma LAFCO operations. The Grand Jury found that similar LAFCOs have successfully transitioned away from reliance on county resources.

Sonoma LAFCO staff lack clear roles and responsibilities. When asked about job descriptions for staff positions, the Grand Jury was told that a job description is not maintained for the EO, and there are generic Sonoma County job descriptions for the other positions. The generic job descriptions lack defined responsibilities and expectations specific to Sonoma LAFCO which may cause an overlap or gap in assigned tasks. The Grand Jury learned, through interviews, that not all Sonoma LAFCO staff are fully trained for their roles. This can result in errors and inefficiencies.

### **Leadership & Communication—What Are They Doing & Where Are They Going?**

The responsibilities of LAFCO involve setting strategic goals, managing budgets, enacting policies, and acting as a liaison between commission members and the public. While the Grand Jury was able to review strategic plans, annual work plans, mission, vision and values for similar LAFCOs, comparable documents were unavailable for Sonoma LAFCO.

Although the EO has announced imminent plans to retire, Sonoma LAFCO does not have a succession plan in place. A succession plan is a best practice for managing the transition of leadership and providing growth opportunities for staff.

Prior to 2024, the EO reported to Sonoma County's CAO. With the renewed EO professional services agreement in 2024, the EO now reports to Sonoma LAFCO. The Grand Jury sees an opportunity for the Commissioners to take a stronger role in leading the organization. The changes recommended in this investigation will require the Commissioners to lead the way.

## **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**

Pursuant to Penal Code § 933.05, the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury requires responses as follows:

- 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 12/31/26.

- 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.

## **REQUIRED RESPONSES**

The following response is required, pursuant to Penal Code section § 933.05:

From the following elected county officials within 90 days:

- Sonoma LAFCO Commission Members (F1 – F10, R1 – R10)

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# Sonoma County Purchasing: Big Dollars with Low Operational Oversight

May 15, 2026

*To view the links contained in this report, please use the QR code at the end of the report.*

## SUMMARY

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 the processes use residents' tax dollars in an efficient and effective manner. Procurement of goods, services and contracts by Sonoma County (County) use taxpayers' funds to benefit County residents. The procurement process is vital to the financial health of the County. Therefore the 2025-26 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (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 situation, however, no steps have been planned to implement either recommended approach.
- There are inadequate procedures and limited training to support the important role that departments play in purchasing.
- With decentralized purchasing responsibility throughout 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 creates a potential conflict of interest situation, and the current placement is not highly visible to 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, the 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.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Financial Impact**

In the last fiscal year, Sonoma County spent more than \$1.2 billion on Services & Supplies, Capital Assets and Capital Expenditures. This amount is roughly 45% of the total Expenditure Budget. County spending is funded by taxpayer money including local, state and federal funds. These expenditures are governed by County Code, local ordinances, adopted policies and procedures, along with state and federal guidelines that set the boundaries for purchasing expenditures.

### **Scope**

The Grand Jury investigated the functional design of the County’s procurement program. This investigation reviewed Purchasing group oversight, management and its structure. It also included a review of operational controls related to purchasing functions and resources available for the procurement process.

The investigation did not include analysis of purchasing transactions, nor did it review financial controls related to the procurement process. Future Grand Jury scrutiny is recommended for these areas. Specific processes such as contract Requests for Proposals (RFP), contract management, CAL-Card and Blanket Purchase Orders were not included in the investigation since they were covered in one or more previous audits. Instead, the Grand Jury focused on the operational design and organizational structure of the Purchasing group, including its risks and impacts to County assets.

Generally, the term “procurement” is used to describe the strategic, end-to-end process of sourcing, negotiating, and acquiring goods or services, while “purchasing” refers to the transactional subset of procurement and is focused on ordering, receiving, and paying for items. While the Grand Jury’s investigation and report focus on the design of the procurement process, the term purchasing is used interchangeably within the report to reflect the name of the department that oversees the process and the terminology currently used within the County.

### **Purchasing Group Structure**

The Sonoma County BOS approved a generally decentralized approach to purchasing (Resolution 99-1550) on December 7, 1999. Over the last 27 years, the County budget, the population, and the complexity of County government have grown significantly. The County budget almost doubled in size in the last decade, but the staffing and tools have not seen material change during that time.

Prior to 2022, the Purchasing group was a part of General Services Department. In 2022, General Services and Transportation and Public Works departments were combined into Sonoma Public Infrastructure department. This reorganization included the Purchasing group, which became a division of Sonoma Public Infrastructure (SPI).

According to its webpage, SPI’s many responsibilities across Sonoma County’s 1,369 square miles include overseeing, repairing, and maintaining all County roads, building repairs and maintenance, infrastructure and capital projects, the airport, water systems, multiple waste disposal sites, transit, and internal administrative services.

**Purchasing Group Role and Resources**

The Purchasing group’s stated goal is to efficiently procure goods and services required for County operations in an ethical, cost effective and timely manner, in compliance with state and federal requirements. Its purpose is to provide a “checks and balances” system for expending public funds and facilitate acquisition of goods and services essential to the operation of Sonoma County government, while actively pursuing opportunities for cost savings, economies of scale, and broadening and diversifying its vendor base.

The Purchasing group oversees the generally decentralized process for purchasing and contracting within County departments, including goods, services, construction, and surplus property. The Purchasing group oversees program management related to purchasing, including policies, procedures, training and communications. The Purchasing group is responsible for blanket purchase orders, and it plays an essential role in authorizing some invoices for payment. When requested, the Purchasing group advises representatives of County departments and the BOS in matters related to purchasing.

The current staff consists of one Purchasing Agent (PA), two Assistant Purchasing Agents (APAs), and four Buyers. There has been significant turnover in Purchasing Agent leadership: During the 5-year period from 1/1/2020 to 12/31/2025, there were four different Purchasing Agents and 10 months without a full-time PA.

The current PA joined in January 2025 without previous experience in public contracting or knowledge of the Public Contracting Code and California Uniform Public Construction Cost Accounting Act (CUPCCA). As of February 2026, the PA did not hold certification from any association related to purchasing, even though the job description requires such certification within 1 year. Each APA has over 10 years of extensive public purchasing and Sonoma County experience, and they are professionally certified in public purchasing.

The Purchasing group is considered “fully staffed”, meaning there are no open, allocated positions at this time. The table below shows a 30% reduction in total Purchasing group staff in the last decade. The Purchasing group no longer has a Department Analyst or Office Assistant and has one less Buyer on staff.

Title	FY2015-2016	FY2018-2019	FY2020-2021	FY2025-2026
Purchasing Agent	1	1	1	1
Asst Purchasing Agent	2	2	2	2
Buyer	5	5	5	4
Dept Analyst	1	1	1	
Office Asst	1			
Total	10	9	9	7

The tables below show that Purchasing group involvement in transactions is different for Goods, Services and Construction. It shows no required Purchasing group involvement in smaller purchasing transactions (up to \$75,000 for Construction, up to \$50,000 for Services and up to \$7,000 for Goods). For larger purchases, the Purchasing group reviews solicitations for completeness before entering them into the purchasing Portal tool, but they are not required to perform other reviews for compliance to purchasing policies and procedures before contracts are awarded or purchases are made. Purchasing group involvement after contract awards or purchases varies by type.

**Construction**

<b>Amount</b>	<b>Required Purchasing Group Role BEFORE Award</b>	<b>Required Purchasing Group Role AFTER Award but Before Payment</b>
\$0.01 to \$75,000.00	None	Review quotes, confirm required documentation, budget check done via the EFS invoicing tool, and issues Purchase Order (PO).
\$75,000.01 to \$220,000.00	Reviews solicitation for completeness before entering into the Portal tool.	Public Bid Opening, proposals are tabulated and reviewed for completeness by Purchasing team member, Project Manager is final reviewer before Notice of Award is issued. Budget is confirmed by Division Analyst; budget check is also done via EFS and is part of the approval workflow. Issues PO with approved supporting documentation.
\$220,000.01 or above	Reviews solicitation for completeness before entering into the Portal tool.	Public Bid Opening, proposals are tabulated and reviewed for completeness by Purchasing team member, Project Manager is final reviewer and recommends award before it is brought to the BOS. Budget is confirmed by Division Analyst; budget check is also done via EFS and is part of the approval workflow. Issues PO with approved supporting documentation.

**Services**

<b>Amount</b>	<b>Required Purchasing Group Role BEFORE Award</b>	<b>Required Purchasing Group Role AFTER Award but Before Payment</b>
\$0.01 to \$5,000.00	None	Encumbers funds and issue POs done within EFS and Purchasing is part of the workflow.
\$5,000.01 to \$50,000.00	None	Contract to encumber funds and issue POs done within EFS and Purchasing is part of the workflow.
\$50,000.01 to \$200,000.00	Reviews solicitation for completeness before entering	Review proposals for completeness before Evaluation team reviews and ranks. Budget is confirmed by Division Analyst; budget check is also done via EFS and is part of the approval workflow. Award of proposal, while approved by Purchasing is

	into the Portal tool.	issued by RFP issuing Department. Issues PO with approved supporting documentation.
\$200,000.01 or above	Review solicitation for completeness before entering into the Portal tool.	Review proposals for completeness before Evaluation team reviews and ranks. RFP issuing department recommends awardee for BOS to approve. Budget is confirmed by Department/Division Analyst, budget check is also done via EFS and is part of the approval workflow. Issues PO with approved supporting documentation.

**Goods**

<b>Amount</b>	<b>Required Purchasing Group Role BEFORE Award</b>	<b>Required Purchasing Group Role AFTER Award but Before Payment</b>
\$0.01 to \$7,000.00	None	None
\$7,000.01 and above	Reviews solicitation for completeness before entering into the Portal tool.	Review quotes, confirmed required documentation, budget check done via EFS, issues PO.

**Department Role in Purchasing**

Purchasing within Sonoma County is generally decentralized. Each department has their own staff assigned to manage purchases for their group. Department purchasing must be done within assigned limits and ensure that purchases comply with County purchasing policies and procedures. Departments must meet all related statutes, codes and, if applicable, grant requirements. Department heads are responsible for overseeing the purchasing done within their department and play a role in approving invoices.

Department staff who perform purchasing can hold a variety of positions and may do purchasing occasionally, part-time or full-time. Currently, there is no roster of departmental staff who perform purchasing functions. This means the Purchasing group does not know who within the departments are responsible for day-to-day purchasing, so they communicate with department heads when needed.

## METHODOLOGY

### Interviews

The Grand Jury interviewed leaders and staff at various levels who are involved in the purchasing process and individuals who support functions related to purchasing.

### Research

The Grand Jury reviewed Sonoma County purchasing policies and procedures in effect as of January 2026, related to the County's authorization process for goods, services and contracts. Communication tools were evaluated, including online resources and training materials. Of particular importance to the investigation were two audits of the County's purchasing function. One was completed by Sonoma County Internal Auditors and the other by the external consultant Civic Initiatives, LLC. Links to these documents can be found in the Appendix.

## DISCUSSION

### Audits and Consultant Reports

While other limited-scope reviews have been completed, the Sonoma County Internal Audit group ("Internal Audit") performed only one comprehensive evaluation of the County purchasing in the last decade. This audit was initiated in 2020, and a report was published in 2023 after a comprehensive review of Sonoma County's purchasing program. The stated goal was to "assist management in identifying opportunities for improvements in the procurement process that would yield the greatest benefit to the County."

The outcome of this audit cited eight findings, four of which were identified as Control Weakness and the other four were Significant Control Findings. This Internal Audit report gave 27 recommendations. More than 2 years later, more than half of the Internal Audit recommendations have had no action and/or the decision was made not to act on the recommendation.

In 2022, the BOS commissioned a comprehensive assessment of Sonoma County's current procurement practices. A consulting firm specializing in public procurement was selected and their analysis was presented to the BOS on October 17, 2023. The BOS created an ad hoc Procurement Committee to review the findings of the Civic Initiatives, LLC report. This report noted that the County's procurement system was significantly deficient in all 10 organizational management practices surveyed. The summary report had 13 areas of recommended action. No written response to this assessment was prepared by the Purchasing group and it does not appear that the recommendations were integrated into strategic or tactical planning. The Grand Jury recommends that these audit recommendations be revisited for opportunities for improving the purchasing process.

The Internal Audit and Civic Initiatives, LLC reports provided the Purchasing group, CEO and BOS with an understanding of concerns inherent in the current purchasing process. The Grand Jury strongly suggests that they seriously reconsider the recommendations outlined in these reports and reconsider report recommendations when planning actions to reduce the financial and operational risks that could impact County taxpayers.

### **Purchasing Process Oversight**

While financial controls appear to be in place, there are limited steps taken by the Purchasing group to confirm that approved purchasing policies and procedures are followed. Internal Auditors concurred, stating in their 2023 report summary that, “A significant number and dollar value of contracts were not procured competitively as required by the purchasing policy” and “Adequate controls are not in place to ensure that all services for \$50,000 or more are procured through a competitive process, unless the requirement is waived by the PA.”

There is no documentation of steps taken by departments to confirm their compliance with purchasing policies & procedures. More importantly, there are limited actions taken by the Purchasing group to oversee policy and procedure compliance and confirm that departments only follow established practices. Most actions taken by the Purchasing group to confirm compliance are conducted after contracts are awarded and purchases are made and not in time for noncompliant practices to be halted. While they are tasked with managing the County’s procurement process, the Purchasing group is not maintaining sufficient oversight to confirm that only approved practices are followed. This may have negative financial consequences.

### **Procedures and Training**

Departments have many purchasing and contract execution responsibilities which require knowledgeable staff to perform these functions. The purchasing procedures and training currently available to Sonoma County departments and agencies are insufficient to provide needed instructions and guidance.

There are limited purchasing procedures available for departments to follow. The available purchasing procedures provide little information about the conditions under which each process should be followed and who is responsible for performing the procedures. Some helpful reference documents exist, but overall, there is limited information to help departments know and appropriately follow purchasing policy and procedures.

Training for staff who perform purchasing for their department is not comprehensive and not consistently available. Limited procurement and contracting training have been offered in the past and available training could be described as basic. Purchasing and contract administration functions across departments would benefit from access to more robust, consistent, and targeted training. The Purchasing group indicated they are working to deliver additional training in the future.

### **Lack of Power**

County code gives the Purchasing group sufficient authority and the responsibility to perform oversight of County purchasing, yet the Purchasing group has minimal ability to affect positive change. Currently, the Purchasing group is ineffective in ensuring approved purchasing policies and procedures are followed.

Prior audits and Grand Jury reports identified multiple instances where purchasing policies were not followed. The Purchasing group has insufficient ability to influence this behavior because they do not have a way to create meaningful consequences when policies and procedures are not followed. The 2023 Internal Audit report calls out the need to address this issue in its finding, “The Purchasing function’s ability to exercise its authority and organizational placement needs review.”

The Purchasing group is not highly visible within the County's organizational structure. It is part of a large department, and it is several levels down from the CEO on the organizational chart. Additionally, it has limited reporting to the BOS. It would aid in visibility to leadership if the BOS and CEO were to change the reporting structure of the Purchasing group so that there are fewer organization layers between it and the CEO office. Improved visibility could increase County leadership focus on purchasing activities.

Internal and external auditors agree. As the report from Civic Initiatives, LLC recommended, the County should "Identify and implement an organizational model that supports transition of the Purchasing Division to a strategic procurement operation for the County". The internal audit report published in 2023 included the recommendation that the "PA have greater support from County upper management and executive leadership to enforce purchasing policies". The published Management Response to the Internal Audit recommendation explained that the Purchasing group's new home reporting under Sonoma Public Infrastructure should resolve this concern. Evidence was not found to support the success of this strategy.

Both the assessment from Civic Initiatives, LLC and the report from Sonoma County Internal Auditors identify the Purchasing group's lack of power. Both created related findings and offered different approaches to address the issue. Neither of these proposed approaches have been included in future plans. To implement either solution would require support from the CEO and the BOS.

### **Potential Conflict of Interest**

In addition to creating limited visibility to leadership, the current organizational structure creates a potential conflict of interest for Purchasing. The Purchasing group both reports to and oversees the purchasing done by Sonoma Public Infrastructure. Because of this structure, undue influence could occur when overseeing contracts and purchases done by or for Sonoma Public Infrastructure. For context, the 2025-26 Expenditure Budget for SPI was \$246.42 Million, which reflects 8.96 percent of all the total Sonoma County budget.

Again, Sonoma County Internal Auditors agree. In their 2023 report, the Internal Auditors recommended that "a strategy be developed to achieve the optimal positioning of the group...helping to ensure that there is no undue influence on the duties of Purchasing".

### **Purchasing Resources and Tools**

There is no end-to-end, full-cycle contract and procurement management system. If such a tool were implemented, the County could realize cost savings by analyzing and combining orders across departments and by making purchasing decisions based on information from all County departments and agencies.

Additional resources may be needed to implement changes and recommendations from the Grand Jury, Internal Audit, and Civic Initiative, LLC. The resource review should look at the tools and staffing of the Purchasing group.

### **Priority**

In closing, the Grand Jury has a series of Findings and Recommendations. Perhaps the most important of them is to revisit the assessments performed by Sonoma County Internal Audit and Civic Initiatives, LLC and plan actions to remediate the noted concerns.

## 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 large department, 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 County 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 County 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.

## REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code § 933.05 the Civil Grand Jury requires responses as follows:

- The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors (F1- F10, R1- R11) within 90 days of receipt of this report.

## APPENDIX

[View Sonoma County Code Chapter 2 Article V Division 1 here](#)

[View the Purchasing group public website here](#)

[View the Internal Audit report on the purchasing process dated 8/7/23 here](#)

[View the 10/17/23 report provided to the Board of Supervisors about the procurement process assessment performed by Civic Initiatives, LLC here under the link titled “report”.](#)

## DISCLAIMER

This report was issued by the Grand Jury with the exception of a juror who is a former employee of Sonoma County. This juror did not participate in any aspect of the investigation, including its initiation, interviews, research, and deliberations, or the writing or approval of this report.

*To view the links contained in this report, please use this QR code to access the online version of this report*



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

May 20, 2026

*To view the links contained in this report, please use the QR code at the end of the report.*

## 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 between a general *tax* and a special tax or *fee* is that a *fee* is for a specific service that benefits identifiable properties, whereas a general *tax* benefits the public. Another difference is that a fee may not exceed the reasonable costs of providing a 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 a rate study in 2019,

the rates set for 2019 through 2023 did not anticipate the impact of successful water conservation programs. Because the rates were based on consumption, in part, 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 for more than 20 years 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 overallocating 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.

## METHODOLOGY

The 2025-2026 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury:

- Conducted multiple interviews with City's staff and leaders, third party contractors and consultants, and service providers.
- Researched public records and information to gather documents, recordings of public meetings and interviews, contracts, etc. posted on the City's' website.

## GLOSSARY

- **Annual Comprehensive Financial Report (ACFR):** A detailed annual financial report prepared by state and local governments to present their financial position and operating results.
- **Best Practices:** These are the industry-wide practices described by experts as the preferred methods used by practitioners in their fields. The Grand Jury interviewed experts in rate setting, allocating costs and water system management.
- **Cost Allocation Plan (CAP):** A formal method used to distribute indirect costs among different departments in a fair and systematic way to ensure that shared or overhead costs are properly assigned to the areas that benefit from them.
- **Depreciation:** The accounting process of allocating the cost of a tangible asset over its useful life.
- **Enterprise Fund:** A type of municipal accounting fund used to account for government activities that are generally intended to be self-supporting through user charges rather than taxes.
- **General Fund:** The main pool of money used to pay for everyday government services.

- **Potable/Fire:** The drinking/cooking/bathing and gardening water that comes out of your tap is called potable water. This is also piped to hydrants for fire protection.
- **Ratepayers:** Individuals or businesses that pay local property taxes to a municipal or local government authority for a specific service.
- **Rate Study:** A financial analysis conducted to determine the appropriate rates for services provided, usually by a government utility or public enterprise, so that revenues are sufficient to cover costs.
- **Sanitary Sewer:** The gravity powered, non-pressurized system of pipes that collects the wastewater from toilets, showers, and sinks in homes and commercial establishments and pipes it to a sewage treatment facility.
- **Storm Sewer:** The storm sewer removes water from the streets, such as from rain or overwatering a lawn. It is water that runs in street gutters and goes underground into pipes (often called culverts) and from there, in the case of the City, to the Laguna de Santa Rosa (Laguna). It ultimately ends up in either the groundwater aquifer or streams, or ponds and rivers to the ocean. When flooding occurs, the culprit is generally a storm sewer system that cannot handle all the run-off at a given time.

## BACKGROUND

### Laws Governing Rate Setting

Proposition 218 – “The Right to Vote on Taxes Act” created a 1996 constitutional provision (California Constitution Article XIII C) that established new procedural requirements for levying assessments and imposing new, or increasing existing, property-related fees and charges. It also placed substantive limitations on the use of the revenues collected from assessments and property-related fees and charges, as well as on the amount of the assessment, fee, or charge that may be imposed on each parcel. Prop 218 was amended in 2010 by Proposition 26 (Prop 26), which is discussed below.

Constitutional Article XIII C defines two types of taxes: general and special taxes. By definition, general tax revenues must be placed into the general fund of a local agency and made available for any and all governmental purposes. Such general taxes must be approved by the electorate.

In contrast, a special tax is imposed for specific purposes. Article XIII C, section 2(a) provides that “special purpose districts or agencies, including school districts, shall have no power to levy general taxes.” “The revenues from any special tax shall be used only for the purpose or service for which [the tax] was imposed, and for no other purpose whatsoever”. (Cal. Gov’t Code § 53724(e).) If the special tax exceeds the reasonable cost of providing the service or product, then the tax must be approved by the electorate. In effect, if a special district’s property-related fees exceed the costs of providing the services for which the fees are imposed, those fees may be deemed to be a general tax and therefore must be approved by a two-thirds vote of the electorate.

California voters amended Article XIII C in November 2010 by adopting Prop 26. Section 1(e) was added, which defined the term “tax” and determined that, in relevant part, the “local government bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence that a levy, charge, or other exaction is not a tax, that the amount is no more than necessary to cover the reasonable costs of the governmental activity, and that the manner in which those costs are allocated to a payor bear a fair or reasonable relationship to the payor’s burdens on, or benefits received from, the governmental activity, and that

the manner in which those costs are allocated to a payor bear a fair or reasonable relationship to the payor's burdens on, or benefits received from, the governmental activity.”

Prop 218 requires that the rates applied must be proportional and Prop 26 requires that the special district has the burden to prove that the rates are reasonable. Moreover, Prop 218 is applicable to both independent special districts and dependent local government agencies directed by a county board of supervisors or a city council. (*Patz v. City of San Diego* (2025) 113 Cal.App.5th 225, 250)(Cal.Sup.Ct. denied review October 29, 2025).) Fees or charges for water service are fees imposed as an incident of property ownership and fall within Section 6(b)(3)'s purview. Accordingly, the City's Enterprise Funds are subject to the limitations of Prop 218.

The key question then is whether water and wastewater rates exceed the reasonable cost of providing the service or regulatory activity to parcels. If they do, they are taxes, not fees exempt from the requirement that the electorate approve it. (*County of Placer v. Corin* (1980) 113 Cal.App.3d 443, 449.) “Special assessments are not taxes and are not levied for general revenue purposes.” (*Id.* at 452.) “Moreover, to the extent that an assessment results in revenue above the cost of the improvement or is of general public benefit, it is no longer a special assessment but a tax.” (*Id.* at 451.) Accordingly, it is up to the City to prove that the rates charged are reasonable and proportional. (*Coziahr v Otoy Water District* (2024) 103 Cal. App. 5th 785.) For a water agency to “carry its burden, an agency must generally provide evidence identifying the data used, analyzing the cost of service, and demonstrating the proportionality of the rate . . .” (*Id.*, citing *KCSFV I, LLC v. Florin County Water Dist.* (2021) 64 Cal.App.5th 1015, 1030.)

### **Best Practices for Rate Setting and Allocating Costs**

To comply with laws governing water and wastewater rates, cities typically conduct two studies at three-to-five-year intervals. Rate studies evaluate the direct cost of providing the services and establish what ratepayers will be charged to cover these costs.

The City conducted rate studies and adjusted water and wastewater rates in 2005, 2012, 2019, and 2023, but the 2023 study revealed that past increases had been insufficient to produce sufficient revenue.

Cost allocation studies examine how much a city is spending on general administration and determine a Cost Allocation Plan (CAP) to allocate a proportional amount of these costs to each department or function. Prior to 2023, the last CAP had been done more than 9 years before. The Grand Jury estimated that during the past nine years, overallocation of indirect costs resulted in approximately \$5.5 million dollars being moved from the Enterprise Funds into the City's general fund. This overallocation unreasonably exceeded the Enterprise Funds' share of the City's indirect costs.

### **Fiscal Accountability and Transparency**

In reviewing the overall financial position of the City, the Grand Jury found the 2022-23 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report (ACFR) Letter of Transmittal (page vii) identified the following in the Future Challenges section:

- Requests for City services far exceed available resources.
- The City balanced FY 2023-2024 with the use of \$1,678,000 in reserves.
- The City will be challenged to adhere to Council-adopted fiscal sustainability policies.

- The City faces a financial deficit that will result in a complete depletion of all reserves by FY 2025-26 unless there are substantial changes that bring additional revenue into the City.
- On November 21, 2023, the City declared a fiscal emergency.

The City identified several fiscal sustainability goals and priorities that had financially significant impacts. The Grand Jury focused on the following two statements within the Letter of Transmittal:

- c. i. The City will conduct a water rate study to analyze the cost of service for the enterprise utilities to ensure an equitable distribution of utility costs across customer types.
- c. ii. The City's cost allocation plan has not been updated since 2000. The CAP guides the distribution of costs...between the General Fund and Enterprise Funds that use general government services.

## DISCUSSION

### **Non-Compliance with Proposition 218**

The citizen complaints alleged that the City did not comply with Prop 218 by overallocating indirect costs to the Enterprise Funds, thereby moving fee revenue into the general fund. The Grand Jury investigation supports this allegation.

As described in the Background section of this report, Prop 218 permits cities to allocate indirect costs to Enterprise Funds as long as the cost allocation is proportional and reasonable. The costs must bear a fair or reasonable relationship to the benefits and burdens of providing water and wastewater services to rate payers. It is up to the City to provide the evidence that a levy, charge or other exaction can be justified as necessary to cover reasonable costs.

Best practices recommend that cities update their CAP every three to five years, but the City did not do so for more than 20 years. In 2024, after two decades of increasing allocated costs for water and wastewater services, the City contracted with Clear Source Financial Consulting to update its CAP.

Clear Source recommended that the indirect cost allocations be revised significantly. For 2023-2024, the single year that Clear Source studied, it recommended that the City lower the annual indirect cost allocations attributed to the Enterprise Funds by approximately \$714,000.

Rate studies are the basis for water and wastewater fees charged to customers. The resulting revenue may only be used to provide the services for which it is charged. Without regular, accurate rate studies and appropriate adjustment of fees, a city risks serious financial, legal, and operational consequences.

The City's infrequent and inaccurate rate studies meant that the Enterprise Funds were generating insufficient revenues for their level of expenses. Best practices advise cities to update their Rate Studies at regular intervals and adjust rates to cover, without exceeding, the direct cost of services. The City conducted rate studies in 2005, 2012, 2019, and 2023, but increases were insufficient to keep pace with direct costs. The 2023 rate study revealed that rates established in 2019 did not anticipate a significant reduction in water consumption due to conservation efforts. Lower consumption resulted in less revenue. Based on the 2023 rate study, the City raised water and sewer rates by a shocking 37%.

**Fiscal Accountability and Transparency**

The Grand Jury noted that prior to fiscal year ending June 30, 2023:

- The Enterprise Funds operated at a net loss in three consecutive years (2020, 2021 and 2022).
- The Enterprise Funds continued to operate at a net loss for two more years (2023 and 2024) before showing net gain in 2025.
- However, shortfalls in the Enterprise Funds actually began in fiscal 2018, as shown in the following table of Enterprise Funds Business-type Activities.

<b>Business-type Activities:</b>				
	<b>Revenue</b>	<b>Expense</b>	<b>other</b>	<b>Net</b>
<b>2016</b>	5,320,925	4,556,861	(31,024)	733,040
<b>2017</b>	5,782,632	4,606,024	(31,023)	1,145,585
<b>2018</b>	5,298,554	4,984,637	1,705	315,622
<b>2019</b>	5,334,287	5,266,857	(370)	67,060
<b>2020</b>	5,190,769	5,956,440	76,237	(689,434)
<b>2021</b>	5,637,786	6,010,098	60,631	(311,681)
<b>2022</b>	5,573,214	6,417,735	(386,034)	(1,230,555)
<b>2023</b>	5,359,319	6,270,942	83,488	(828,135)
<b>2024</b>	5,304,163	7,192,644	28,702	(1,859,779)
<b>2025</b>	8,462,607	6,560,705	66,478	1,968,380

*2024-25 ACFR pages 138 – 141, Changes in Net Position Last Ten Fiscal Years*

The Grand Jury analyzed revenue and expense for the fiscal periods 2016 – 2025 and noted fluctuations in revenue that appeared inconsistent with expense fluctuations.

- Revenue in fiscal 2024 was less than revenue in fiscal 2016. Overall, revenue declined while expenses steadily increased.
- After fiscal 2017, Net Change in Position dropped significantly and didn’t recover until fiscal 2025.

When asked what might have caused the declines in revenue and net position, the City was unable to provide an explanation. The 2024-25 ACFR Changes in Net Position Last Ten Fiscal Years report shows the impact of two factors: 1) Indirect costs had been overallocated and credited to the general fund; and 2) Conservation of water resulted in less revenue.

The Grand Jury analyzed allocated costs for Water and Wastewater Business-Type Activities. The City’s 2024-25 ACFR, Management’s Discussion and Analysis, Economic Factors and Next Year’s Budgets and Rates section included the following statement: “There is \$714,000 less in funds transferred from the Water and Sewer funds for administrative costs due to a new allocation method determined in early 2024”. (ACFR, 2024-2025, p. 2)

The City’s allocated indirect costs are reported as Interfund charges for services on the Statement of Revenues, Expenses and Changes in Fund Net Position. The statements are found in the City’s ACFRs for each fiscal year, which can be seen below in the Appendix.

The chart below summarizes the Statements of Revenues, Expenses and Changes in Fund Net Position for fiscal 2017–2025. The Grand Jury noted Interfund charges for services (cost allocation) steadily increased each year even though revenues and personnel services expenses did not increase each year, until 2025. As a percentage of revenue, the Interfund charges to the Enterprise Funds for shared services (cost allocation) increased from 30% in 2017 to 52% in 2024 for Water and increased from 18% in 2017 to 36% in 2024 for Wastewater, as displayed in the table below.

Summarized Statements of Revenues, Expenses, and changes in Fund Net Position, Proprietary Funds									
For year ended:	6/30/2017	6/30/2018	6/30/2019	6/30/2020	6/30/2021	6/30/2022	6/30/2023	6/30/2024	6/30/2025
<b>WATER (W):</b>									
Total operating revenues	2,457,698	2,270,224	2,229,367	2,295,614	2,613,289	2,519,592	2,353,715	2,433,539	3,441,843
Personnel services	354,041	379,506	420,984	522,936	447,255	495,575	279,697	559,642	641,718
<b>Interfund charges for services</b>	<b>726,329</b>	<b>838,117</b>	<b>874,193</b>	<b>1,004,772</b>	<b>1,011,522</b>	<b>1,182,152</b>	<b>1,199,387</b>	<b>1,261,494</b>	<b>852,863</b>
Other opg services and supplies	608,626	631,111	590,350	794,074	913,897	869,842	984,153	1,045,753	918,221
Non-opg rev/exp/transf	(42,657)	(61,701)	(26,935)	(55,096)	(356,194)	(130,744)	(5,794)	(55,079)	(120,441)
Change in net position	726,045	359,789	316,905	(81,264)	(115,579)	(158,721)	(115,316)	(488,429)	908,600
For year ended:	6/30/2017	6/30/2018	6/30/2019	6/30/2020	6/30/2021	6/30/2022	6/30/2023	6/30/2024	6/30/2025
<b>WASTEWATER (WW):</b>									
Total operating revenues	3,324,934	3,028,330	3,104,920	2,895,155	3,024,497	3,053,622	3,005,604	2,870,624	5,020,764
Personnel services	266,375	283,978	249,689	364,322	307,020	457,548	242,407	494,737	549,012
<b>Interfund charges for services</b>	<b>589,885</b>	<b>680,710</b>	<b>724,321</b>	<b>830,851</b>	<b>831,627</b>	<b>981,322</b>	<b>990,306</b>	<b>1,041,462</b>	<b>908,934</b>
Treatment costs	1,518,743	1,594,680	1,674,414	1,620,981	1,650,401	1,650,401	1,737,404	1,952,842	2,118,436
Other opg services and supplies	489,958	506,788	662,332	725,130	701,991	754,471	766,376	746,933	486,723
Non-opg rev/exp/transf	(7,706)	(8,416)	32,598	22,353	(17,999)	(49,444)	18,070	(6,000)	102,121
Change in net position	452,267	(46,242)	(173,238)	(623,776)	(484,541)	(839,564)	(712,819)	(1,371,350)	1,059,780

	6/30/2017	6/30/2018	6/30/2019	6/30/2020	6/30/2021	6/30/2022	6/30/2023	6/30/2024	6/30/2025
<b>WATER:</b>									
<b>allocation as % of revenue</b>	30%	37%	39%	44%	39%	47%	51%	52%	25%
	6/30/2017	6/30/2018	6/30/2019	6/30/2020	6/30/2021	6/30/2022	6/30/2023	6/30/2024	6/30/2025
<b>WASTEWATER:</b>									
<b>allocation as % of revenue</b>	18%	22%	23%	29%	27%	32%	33%	36%	18%

In 2025, based on the 2024 Cost Allocation study, the Interfund charges for services were 25% and 18% of revenue for Water and Wastewater respectively. This is the result of the use of the updated CAP. The Grand Jury asked the City to explain what factors contributed to the significant change from the old CAP to the new CAP. The City provided no explanation.

The Grand Jury calculated what the impact to the Water and Wastewater Enterprise Funds might have been had the cost allocation been 25% and 18% respectively, as a percentage of revenue over the past nine years. The results can be found on the following Interfund charges for services (cost allocation) analysis table for both Water and Wastewater Enterprise Funds. The 25% column represents what the Interfund charges could have been under an updated CAP. The “Actual” column represents the actual Interfund charges allocated to Water and Wastewater Enterprise Funds in each year. The “Difference” column is the mathematical computation of the 25% column minus the Actual column.

Interfund charges for services (cost allocation) analysis showing the approximate overallocation of \$5.5 million:

<b>WATER</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>Actual</b>	<b>Difference</b>
6/30/2018	567,556	838,117	(270,561)
6/30/2019	557,342	874,193	(316,851)
6/30/2020	573,904	1,004,772	(430,869)
6/30/2021	653,322	1,011,522	(358,200)
6/30/2022	629,898	1,182,152	(552,254)
6/30/2023	588,429	1,199,387	(610,958)
6/30/2024	608,385	1,261,494	(653,109)
			<u>(3,192,802)</u>
<b>WASTEWATER</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>Actual</b>	<b>Difference</b>
6/30/2018	545,099	680,710	(135,611)
6/30/2019	558,886	724,321	(165,435)
6/30/2020	521,128	830,851	(309,723)
6/30/2021	544,409	831,627	(287,218)
6/30/2022	549,652	981,322	(431,670)
6/30/2023	541,009	990,306	(449,297)
6/30/2024	516,712	1,041,462	(524,750)
			<u>(2,303,704)</u>

Source: Summarized Statements of Revenue, Expenses, etc. as referenced above.

**Water and Wastewater Infrastructure**

The operation and maintenance of the City’s water and wastewater systems are funded by revenue from the fees charged to their customers. Financially, the water utility is operated as a self-supporting enterprise relying primarily on the revenues from water rates to fund the costs of providing services and maintaining the system.

At the City Council Meeting on October 24, 2024, the Public Works Superintendent presented an overview of the water infrastructure including these statistics:

- The City owns, operates and maintains approximately 36.7 miles of water mains and pipelines, three storage facilities, one booster pump station, one blending pump station, four active groundwater wells, and two arsenic treatment systems to produce, treat, and distribute water to the City’s water customers.
- The City provides potable water to approximately 2,975 water meter accounts as well as providing water through the City’s water G tower located at the City Corporation Yard. The City’s municipal water system produced approximately 289 million gallons of treated drinking water in 2023. [View the Dante Del Prete Presentation to Sebastopol City Council October 15, 2024 Here.](#)

**Overview of the Conditions of the Systems**

The water systems have elements that were installed over 100 years ago. The systems demonstrate the accumulated problems from deferred maintenance. The lack of capital investment in equipment

improvements puts the City at risk of water supply failure or flooding in the streets. Many of the pipes in the system are beyond their expected life, some are over 100 years old. Indeed, the City's financial records show that the critical components have been fully depreciated.

The condition and needs of the systems are very well documented. The recently completed Master Plan calls for repairing, replacing, and bringing the systems into good condition. While there has been an on-going program to replace the aging pipes, because of the underfunding of the water system budget, the program is not getting ahead of the aging mains – creating potential (and actual) failures, and requiring emergency repairs. GHD Sewer Master Plan presented to the City by GHD: [View the GHD Sewer Master Plan Final April 21, 2026 Here.](#)

Replacing mains and branch lines is expensive and disruptive. However, it is far less expensive and disruptive than leaks and emergency repairs that can leave households or businesses without services for extended periods. A loss of service to a potable water main also leaves a section of the city without water at pressure to fight a fire – that is only a risk unless it happens when there is a fire, then it is a disaster. Clearly failures in the sanitary sewer system can cause health and environmental disasters, besides the obvious impact to homes and businesses. Storm drain failures result in street flooding, with the attendant costs to homes and businesses in the flood zone, as has happened in the past. The City is currently experiencing water leakage into the sanitary sewer system, which causes the City to pay more for water treatment than if the system were properly sealed.

The City is completely dependent on wells for potable water. Fortunately, the aquifer is adequate to provide the needed water at current usage rates. Besides pumping, the water must be treated for contaminants, stored and then pumped through often old, to very old, pipes to the end users, hydrants, homes, businesses etc. It is critical that the wells and the pumping and treatment plants be kept in reliable, dependable condition. The master plan includes projects and programs to upgrade or repair the well and treatment sections of the potable water system.

In the City, water comes from several city owned wells. After treatment in one of several plants, it is pumped to the meters via a system of main and feeder lines. The City has a combined potable and fire water system, which is not uncommon. In this case, the same pipes, particularly the mains, feed the fire hydrants and the potable water distribution system.

The storm water system is critical to prevent flooding, particularly in the downtown area. Keeping standing water off the streets is an important safety measure. The City's storm water system has two sixty-inch pipes that discharge into the Laguna de Santa Rosa. These require regular maintenance, which primarily consists of debris removal to keep capacity up. This maintenance has not happened, leaving the pipes at about 50% capacity. This has created the potential for flooding in the downtown area, as has occurred in the past. Without the regular debris removal, the buildup is not only larger, but much more difficult and costly to remove.

The City uses the Santa Rosa Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) to treat its sanitary sewage. The City pays a fee to Santa Rosa based on the amount of sewage going through the pipe to the Santa Rosa STP. Leakages in the system cause two kinds of problems:

1. If sewage leaks out, there is public health and ground water problem.
2. If water leaks in, then the city is paying for ground water going to Santa Rosa. (This is primarily a gravity, non-pressurized system, so ground water can leak into the pipes.)

The recently completed Master Plan does a good job of documenting and estimating the repair/replacement costs to the systems. Sebastopol citizens and rate payers need to be aware of the condition, challenges and potential costs of failures of the systems. The list below is not a complete list of planned repair and capital projects, but a sampling of the types of projects and some of the costs and risks involved. Many of these should have been dealt with years ago.

1 – Pleasant Hill Loop (Estimate \$900,000 +): This is a critical safety element lacking in the water system. Redundancy is common to any well-engineered system, particularly for health or safety related systems. In good practice, fire/potable waters system main lines are loops so that an individual break or leak can be isolated and water is still available to users, fire hydrants etc. Currently there is a section of the water system that is not looped and a rupture in this line, be it a leak or a rupture caused by a seismic event, could leave more than half of the city without water pressure to fight a fire for as long as it takes to repair the rupture. This could be catastrophic. (For example, although the City’s 2005 Master Water Plan recommended that the Pleasant Hill looping project be completed, the City has yet to fund and complete the project.)

2 – Well 4 Replacement (Estimate \$3 million): Well 4 is the workhorse of the City’s water system. This is a multi-year, multi-faceted program which needs reliable, consistent funding to ensure the entire project is completed in a timely manner.

3 – There are significant water main and branch projects in the Master Plan. These are projects that need to be engaged and completed to avoid costly and disruptive water outages. It is much less expensive and inconvenient to replace mains as planned projects rather than on emergency basis.

4 – Clearing the 60-inch storm drains to the Laguna. Storm drains are part of the funded maintenance program for the City’s infrastructure system. Failure to permit, fund and execute the clearing of the outfall lines puts parts of the city, particularly the downtown, in jeopardy of flooding in the event of major rain events, such as atmospheric rivers.

### **Sebastopol Wasn’t the Only One Not Paying Attention**

This Grand Jury notes that Sonoma County’s independent Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) has an oversight role in the City’s water and wastewater enterprises. The current 2025-2026 Grand Jury report on LAFCO notes: “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 reports and Municipal Service Reviews for each city and special district within the county”. The last Sebastopol Municipal Service Review by LAFCO was in 2006.

## **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 overallocating 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 overallocation 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.

## REQUIRED REPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code section § 933.05, the following response is *required*:

The City of Sebastopol’s City Council: respond to F1-F4 and R1-R3 within 90 days of receipt of this report.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Timeline of Events at the City of Sebastopol

Date	Description of Study	Action
2000	Rate and Cost Allocation Study	Implemented
2005	Master Water Plan	Recommended implementing the Pleasant Hill 14” main loop.
2008	Master Water Plan	“Water and sewer fees show a small increase at this time due to the increases indicated in the yearly rate study.”
2012	Water and Sewer Rate Study	Rates roughly doubled (about \$10.79 a month to \$24.92 and the sewer charge would go from about \$25.67 to \$49.92)
2019	Willdan Water and Sewer Rate Study	Rates increased effective 1-1-2020
2024	Raftelis Water and Sewer Rate Study	Implemented in 2024, the City chose the lower rate option (current combined bill of \$114.24 increased to \$151.80)
2024	Clear Source Cost Allocation Study	Implemented in 2024
2026	GHD Water Master Plan	Accepted by the City Council

**Appendix 2: Statements of the City’s ACFRs for each fiscal year**

Fiscal year	Link	Page
<b>The City’s Documents Directory</b>	<a href="#">View the City's Document Directory Here</a>	
<b>2025</b>	<a href="#">View FY 2024-2025 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report Here</a>	45 (55 PDF)
<b>2024</b>	<a href="#">View FY 2023-2024 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report Here</a>	37 (51 PDF)
<b>2023</b>	<a href="#">View FY 2022-2023 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report Here</a>	39 (55 PDF)
<b>2022</b>	<a href="#">View FY 2021-2022 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report Here</a>	41 (57 PDF)
<b>2021</b>	<a href="#">View FY 2020-2021 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report Here</a>	39 (55 PDF)
<b>2020</b>	<a href="#">View FY 2019-2020 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report Here</a>	39 (55 PDF)
<b>2019</b>	<a href="#">View FY 2018-2019 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report Here</a>	39 (55 PDF)
<b>2018</b>	<a href="#">View FY 2017-2018 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report Here</a>	39 (55 PDF)
<b>2017</b>	CAFR for 2017 is not available online and had to be requested from City of Sebastopol.	39 (51 PDF)

*To view the links contained in this report, please use this QR code to access the online version of this report*



# **Behind the Headlines of Public Education:**

## **Understanding the Challenges to Consolidation and the Process of State Takeover**

May 20, 2026

*To view the links contained in this report, please use the QR code at the end of the report.*

### **SUMMARY**

The 2010-2011 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) recommended that the county determine the potential cost savings of consolidating some of its 40 school districts. While the county has not ignored the recommendation, meaningful progress has not been made. In the past fifteen years, the need for public school districts to look for cost savings has grown as the student population has decreased, while costs related to staff contracts, special education and safety have increased. At the same time, the path to consolidation has become so challenging that there are currently no plans for consolidation in the county.

This report outlines the main obstacles to district consolidation. The first obstacle is a multi-year legislative process that includes a study, voter approval, community reviews and the creation of a new district. The second is the resistance of communities, superintendents, and school boards to the loss of local control. School district governance at the state, county, and district level is a third obstacle to consolidation. The biggest obstacle, however, may be the funding formula that was introduced by the state in 2014. The formula, intended to give more control at the local level, also creates disincentives for districts to consolidate.

With fewer students, increased health and safety challenges, and no clear path to consolidation, several Sonoma County school districts are experiencing financial challenges. As these districts struggle to make cuts so that bills can be paid, there is a possibility that the state will take over the financial decision-making from some school boards. A state takeover is an event that has only occurred in nine California school districts since the 1980's. The long process of resolution is the second part of this report.

### **BACKGROUND**

News reports have covered contentious school board meetings where staff cuts, school closures and other cost saving measures are announced. The challenges stem from declining enrollment, increases in teacher and staff compensation and state mandates. In addition, school administrations and elected school boards have made unrealistic decisions in addressing these issues. This report will address the financial circumstances of Sonoma County schools and what options exist for improvement. Statistics as of May 2026:

- Number of School Districts in Sonoma County – 40
- Number of districts that consist of a single school – 8
- Number of students in Transitional Kindergarten (TK) through grade 12 in Sonoma County public schools – 64,800
- Projected decline in student enrollment over the next 10 years – 8%
- Number of schools generally needed for number of K-12 students in the Santa Rosa area – 38
- Number of schools currently in Santa Rosa - 52
- Number of schools closed or closing within the last three years - 9
- Percentage of average annual increase in teacher salaries over the last 5 years - 8%
- Average annual salary with benefits of School District Superintendent - \$230,009

School districts have attempted to mitigate budget shortfalls with internal solutions such as school closures, staff downsizing, and program elimination. Unification (the combining of elementary and high school districts) and Consolidation (combining two or more districts) are multi-district solutions that can be used to address the problems revealed by these statistics.

The 2010-2011 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury issued a report on Sonoma County Schools that focused on the need for school district consolidation and unification for school districts in the county. ([View the full 2010/2011 CGJ Report here](#)) It cited several reasons for the growing need, including declining enrollment, teacher and staff layoffs, school closures, and lack of state funding. The 2010-2011 Grand Jury found that the current school configuration of 40 school districts was not sustainable. To address this, the Grand Jury recommended that:

1. Every district request a CCSDO (County Committee on School District Organization) study on school reorganization options.
2. Sonoma County's County Superintendent of Schools sponsor meetings with district school boards at least two times a year.
3. The County Board of Education be reconfigured to reduce the number of members from seven to five to align with the County Board of Supervisors.
4. A study be conducted to determine the potential cost saving of consolidating some of the districts in Sonoma County.
5. Districts respond to a survey about whether or not they would approve the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) to conduct a study to look at options for reorganization of districts.

Recommendation No. 3 was readily implemented, reducing the number of County Board of Education Trustees from seven to five. For the remaining four recommendations, school district responses were mixed. The majority of districts stated that, although funding from the state had decreased, they were not in financial trouble and did not see the need for consolidation. Only 23 of the 40 districts responded that they would invite a study on school reorganization options. The Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) did commission three separate feasibility studies on the consolidation or unification of school districts. No action was taken in response to these studies.

In the fifteen years since the 2010-2011 Grand Jury report, most of these issues remain. District superintendents have changed, school board members have ended their terms, new members have

started and students who started that year have graduated. Focusing on and blaming individuals for the current situation in Sonoma County schools is to ignore what is happening in the county and in the state.

## METHODOLOGY

- The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury is composed of residents of Sonoma County, and as such, the Grand Jury is very aware of the media reports about the challenges the school systems in Sonoma County are encountering; primarily reporting on contentious meetings over school closures, staff cuts, etc. Most investigations by the Civil Grand Jury are initiated by a submitted Request for Investigation, or by issues brought up by media reports or experiences of members of the Civil Grand Jury. The Civil Grand Jury investigates the operations and structure of a county or city department or a special district, agency or other organization within the jurisdiction of the Civil Grand Jury. This report was originated in part by a Grand Jury meeting with the County Superintendent of Schools and her staff, and it was motivated by the Grand Jury's concern over the current state of our schools.

The Grand Jury investigation focused on two areas – why consolidation of school districts, despite being strongly recommended, has not happened, and the process and consequences of a failing financial basis within a school district. Our investigation did not consider academic performance or other non-financial factors. We focused on the financial situation and alternatives.

The goal of this report is to inform the Sonoma County general public concerning:

- The general financial situation of the Sonoma County school systems and some of the reasons many school districts are in trouble financially;
- The governance structure of the schools in Sonoma County;
- How the county and the state fund and support the schools;
- The financial requirements of the school districts and what steps are involved when a school fails to meet minimum financial requirements set by the state;
- Clarification of steps, such as unification, consolidation, school closure, and state takeover;
- Some of the many reports and recommendations over the years for improvement in the governance structure for the school systems in California.

The Grand Jury believes that most of the public, including some school system employees, do not understand the regulations and financial requirements of school district management. The goal of this report is to inform, educate, alert and perhaps shock the leadership and the public about the dire financial situation in nearly half of the 40 public school districts in Sonoma County.

## DISCUSSION

### How We Got Here

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

### 1) Too Many Schools

To identify why local school districts are in financial distress, it is helpful to start with some county and statewide trends. Birthrates have declined nationwide. According to an October 2025 report by California County News, birth rates in California are at historic lows. A report conducted by MGT (a social impact consulting company) for SCOE states that the population of students in the Santa Rosa City Schools district is projected to decline 8% over the next decade. In Sonoma County, there are additional reasons why the number of students is dropping. There is a lack of affordable housing which can cost as much as 50% of a family's income. The 2017 wildfires and COVID-19 pandemic still impact the number of students living in the county. As a result, Sonoma County has too many schools for both current and future student populations.

### 2) More Students Qualify for Special Education than the State Average

California law requires school districts to assess students with identifiable learning disabilities. The schools then work with parents to create an individualized education plan (IEP) if needed. An IEP defines educational goals and the services that the district will provide to support those goals. One student, for example, may be directed to speech therapy, while another student may be supported with an in-classroom aide.

Each district in Sonoma County budgets for these services, which average about an additional \$26,000 per identified student each year. Sonoma County school districts may be identifying students who don't meet the standards of special needs or Sonoma County may have a greater number of students who qualify than the state average. If we are over-identifying special needs students, there would be a negative financial impact on a district. In its report to the Santa Rosa City Schools School Board on January 28, 2026, the California Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) stated that an average of 14.25% of students statewide are receiving special education services. In Sonoma County, the average is 16.14%, and in the Santa Rosa City Schools district the percentages are even higher – nearly 18% of elementary students and more than 18% of high school students. [View FCMAT's full report here](#)

### 3) Cost of Teacher and Staff Contracts

Generally, 85-90% of district budgets are spent on salaries, benefits and training. Frequently, school districts respond to budget shortfalls by reducing staff. Reducing the number of employees in a school can result in less support in the classrooms, larger class sizes, increased risk of safety issues, and loss of learning opportunities. In Sonoma County, teachers and classified employees are represented by the California Teachers Association (CTA), California School Employees Association (CSEA), and Service Employees International Union (SEIU), all of which negotiate salaries and benefits for their members with each district. As districts look at ways to reduce costs, they recognize that reducing costs by eliminating positions has had the worst impact on schools.

### 4) Safety

Traditionally, schools have been safe places for students where they can focus on child issues instead of the overwhelming issues of adult life. Modern media influences a child's ability to make the best decisions. Drugs are increasingly available on and near school campuses. The COVID-19 pandemic

and widespread coverage of school shootings brought real fear into schools. Students who don't feel safe are more likely to struggle with retaining what they learn.

In the last few years, there have been violent incidents on school campuses and, at the same time, the loss of school resource officers. School resource officers are employees of the local police or sheriff's departments whose main assignment is to be a positive presence on a school campus. Both Petaluma and Santa Rosa City Schools dropped the position in 2020, and Rohnert Park schools just this year. Teachers, unlike the officers, are not trained to handle situations that escalate to violence. There was an attempt to bring school resource officers back to the Santa Rosa City Schools district in 2023, but support for the funding fell short.

Funding for safety-related measures is necessary but comes at the expense of other programs. Schools have had to figure out how to pay for safety related items such as security cameras, perimeter fencing, and school lockdown training.

A bigger loss to districts is the student absences and student withdrawals, some of which could be associated with safety concerns. Santa Rosa City Schools has seen a jump in inter-district transfer requests and as many as 600 students have transferred out of the district. The district is currently restricting approvals of student requests to transfer out.

#### 5) Impact of COVID-19

The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund of 2020-2021 provided significant funding to address the impact of the pandemic. These federal funds were intended to be used for learning loss mitigation, facility improvements, personnel and operations, technology, and mental health services. This resulted in the schools having additional personnel and facility expenses. However, in many cases, these expenditures continued after the funding ended.

### **Challenges to Consolidating School Districts**

In 2026, the number of school districts in Sonoma County remains at 40, the same number that prompted the 2010-2011 Civil Grand Jury to recommend consolidation of districts. However, the number of students has changed. Currently, the total student population of 64,500 students is about 5,500 students fewer than 15 years ago. As the student population continues to decrease and costs rise, combining school districts is still a logical solution for reducing costs and focusing back on academics. Unfortunately, there are significant obstacles to consolidating school districts. These obstacles are too complex to overcome without changes at all levels of state educational governance.

#### 1) The Legal Process

The first step of any change in school district boundaries is an evaluation of options for district consolidation. In 2024, SCOE commissioned a study which identified the challenges of bringing together the nine Santa Rosa elementary school districts and the Santa Rosa City High School district. The study showed that consolidation would result in cost savings over time due to the need for only one superintendent, economies of scale in purchasing, and savings in other areas. However, consolidation is subject to the specific requirements set forth in the California Department of Education (CDE) School District Reorganization Handbook. These requirements take extensive time and effort. ([View the CDE School Organization Handbook here](#))

Under current rules, the process of consolidation does not begin at the county level. Neither SCOE nor the County Committee on School District Organization can initiate the process. Rather, proposals for reorganization are initiated only in one the following ways:

- A 25 percent petition from voters or a governing board resolution approved by a majority of each affected district's board of trustees.
- A 10 percent petition or a resolution from certain local agencies (such as the Board of Supervisors).
- County committee plans and recommendations.

Each of these events has a complex path to approval and requires multiple time periods for public review and comments. At best, consolidation is a two-year plus process. Approval through one of these paths is only the first step to consolidation. After approval, all the districts involved must be closed out, the individual district school boards cease to exist, and all union contracts are decertified. A new district is then established.

The newly created district must hire a superintendent and hold school board elections. This district will determine which positions are redundant (including both teachers and classified staff) and then notify employees of any layoffs. After that, a new budget is created and approved so that new union contracts can be negotiated and curriculum decisions made. During this transition, the district continues to operate the schools and ensure the education of students continues.

It is also important to note that consolidation will not solve the problem of having too many schools. School closures, as noted in this report, are addressed separately from consolidation.

## 2) Community

The advantages of consolidation may not overcome a district's reluctance to consolidate. Any community losing its district is likely to oppose consolidation. Teachers, parents, and current students will feel the shift from their neighborhood schools to being part of a bigger entity with new rules, new schedules and new budget priorities.

## 3) Governance

There is little doubt that California has a commitment to its schools. About 50% of the state's budgeted general fund goes to education, including TK through college. In the current academic year, grades K-12 account for approximately 35% of that budget. The large number of stakeholders makes management of this budget extremely difficult.

There are three levels of education management in California: state, county office of education, and local. All three levels operate with a commitment to ensure that:

- Educational resources are allocated in a fair and equitable way across the system.
- There is accountability for budgets, planning and spending.
- The public has an opportunity to review decisions and comment.
- There is local say in how, when, and where students are educated.

In short, education is intended to be a democratic process where all citizens can participate.

At the state level, there are currently two elected governing entities overseeing schools, with some direction and funding from the federal government. One is a State Superintendent of Public Instruction who is the executive officer for the California Department of Education. This department provides direction, assistance and resources to K-12 public schools. This office establishes standards for academic performance. The other entity is the State Board of Education. It consists of eleven members appointed by the governor. This board establishes standards, approves K-8 textbook options, and adopts policies and regulations required by state and federal laws.

In the December 2025 Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) Report, it was noted that the State Superintendent of Instruction and the governor-selected State Board of Education could have opposing views. [Link to the December 2025 PACE Report here](#). This makes changes at the state level even more difficult and politically fraught. As of this writing, Governor Newsom has proposed changes to the structure of state education leadership, which would shift the role of the State Superintendent of Instruction to report to the State Board of Education.

At the county level, all 58 California counties have a county office of education headed by a county superintendent of schools. In Sonoma County, the local Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) provides education resources, educator training, and county-wide student events such as an annual science fair. SCOE also provides special services, including special education, adult education and alternative schools. SCOE supports each school district, monitors student success, and approves each district's Local Control Accountability Plan. Although SCOE ensures that districts are accountable for sound school and fiscal practices, it does not have authority over individual districts unless problems are identified.

California has always had a strong commitment to the local governance of schools. The idea of neighborhood public schools goes back to the early years of the United States. It was believed that each community knows best how to prepare its youth for adult life. Even now, as students are connected to the world through a screen, the idea of local schools persists.

In California, even though the public school system is under the policy direction of the state, more responsibility is granted to school districts and county education officials than to any other government entity or official (*California Education Code* sec. 35160).

Despite the vast amount of state legislation guiding school districts in California, decision-making is often pushed down to the district level. Each district has a superintendent, though in the smaller districts the roles of superintendent and principal may be the same person. Each district has a board of trustees, who are community members elected for 4-year terms. Trustees are not required to have any specific skills beyond the ability to campaign. School boards typically have three to five members.

The major governing responsibilities include:

- 1) Setting the direction for schools in the community
- 2) Establishing an efficient and effective structure
- 3) Providing support
- 4) Ensuring accountability to the public
- 5) Demonstrating community leadership

In addition to hiring the district superintendent and the school principal, the board sets district policies, oversees the school budget and planning process, and manages the maintenance of school facilities. Almost all districts now have a chief budget officer to manage the district's finances.

Trustees are offered training once they have been elected. The California School Boards Association provides a one-day training on the foundations of governance and a two-day training called

Foundations of Effective Governance: Setting Direction. These training courses are offered to all school board trustees but are not mandatory. As of October 2025, every school board member in office on January 1, 2027, (except those in their last year of office) are required to receive training in K–12 public education governance laws. The curriculum for this training is to be developed by FCMAT before October 2026. It will address public school finance laws and accountability laws.

Members of the community who serve on school boards provide a level of oversight that the California School Boards Association describes as “the cornerstone of democracy”. Board members take this commitment seriously.

As the Grand Jury members prepared this report, we were told that most decisions for individual school districts are pushed back down to the local district’s board of trustees. The Jury found that far-reaching community decisions are being made by elected board members with very little training and four-year elected terms. Their commitment is to their own districts which means, in the case of consolidations, they are being put in the difficult position of making decisions that have a broader impact outside of the district they serve. How can they vote for district consolidations that may negatively impact their district, but may work towards solving financial issues for combined districts?

#### 4) How Schools are Funded

In 2014, California introduced the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), the first major shift in 40 years in how schools are funded. The LCFF was designed to provide a more equitable distribution and transparency of state funding for schools. It also gives each district more authority for decision making. With the LCFF, state resources are allocated based on performance measures that each district provides. This new way of determining funding is seen as less effective than envisioned, but in general there is support for LCFF with recognition that it is a significant improvement over prior methods of school funding. The components of the Local Control Funding Formula include:

- A base grant calculated on Average Daily Attendance (ADA).
- Supplement grant: 20% of the adjusted base grant multiplied by ADA to help students in need.
- Concentration grant: 65% of the base grant multiplied by the ADA for schools with student populations including more than 55% of students with higher needs.
- Add-ons for such things as transportation, art, and music education.
- Cost of Living Adjustment.

For every district, the base grant is the most important source of funding. The amount of funding a school receives is based on the number of students enrolled in the school. This number is determined by the school’s reporting of the average daily attendance (ADA), which is the number of days a student attended divided by the number of total school days. For example, a student attending every day would equal one ADA. This is a factor where districts have the most local control by tracking student attendance and encouraging families to get their children to school. There is also an incentive for schools to maintain lower class sizes in grades K–3, and a grade span adjustment for other grades. This includes high school (to be used for career technical education).

The LCFF also recognizes that districts spend more when there are students with additional learning needs. The formula provides a supplemental grant of 20% for each student who is identified as low income, an English language learner, or as a foster/homeless youth. When at least 55% of a district’s student population has one of these additional learning needs, the district receives funds in the form of a concentration grant. Although students may be recognized in more than one of the additional needs

categories, funding for these students is based on counting each student only once under the LCFF. This is called the Unduplicated Pupil Count (UPC). It is important to note that this concentration grant is a formula to provide more funding to the district, not to individual students. It recognizes that additional funds are needed to increase and improve services for disadvantaged students. The transition to using LCFF means that school districts have more decision-making power in how state funding is 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.

There are also add-on grants to provide funding for transitional kindergarten, school transportation, and music and art.

In May of each year, the state determines whether there is need for a cost-of-living adjustment, tied to the National Price Index.

Two additional sources of funding for school districts are school bonds and money raised by private fundraising. Bond funds are restricted to capital projects. This spending can reduce the district's facility operating costs, which helps the district general budget. A district can also do private fundraising and use such funds within regulations. In both cases, these additional funding sources tend to benefit the wealthier districts and lead to inequalities.

School districts base their budgets on the LCFF funds, which are paid monthly. Locally, districts receive the amount of property taxes allotted to schools, which is received two times a year. One additional source of revenue is funding from the Education Protection Account, a special tax created by Proposition 30 in 2012 and extended by Proposition 55 in 2016. This funding supplements state aid.

A small percentage of school districts in the state receive enough money from local property taxes that the amount determined by the LCFF is covered. In this case, these districts (called Basic Aid or Community Funded) do not receive state income tax money. In Sonoma County, there are 17 school districts in this category. (See appendix) There are some advantages for Basic Aid districts. First, property taxes tend to be more stable than state income taxes, allowing for better budget forecasting. Second, they are allowed to keep any property tax funding above the amount determined by the LCFF. This could mean more money per pupil, higher teacher salaries, and additional classroom support. For Basic Aid districts, declining enrollment translates to more funds per pupil as the districts benefit from a higher level of property tax revenue. Average Daily Attendance requirements do not apply since the district does not get the state funding. As a result, these districts do not have incentives to consolidate with other districts.

Since 2000, no California school districts have been consolidated, mostly because of the Local Control Funding Formula. The current state funding system will reduce the total funds received for a newly consolidated district. As an example, the 2024 feasibility study by Christy White, Inc., shows that consolidating the nine elementary districts with the Santa Rosa City 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 student population would no longer qualify for additional need and concentration grant funds. Here are some more general examples:

- 1) A district that is receiving supplemental funding based on a high UPC (students who are identified as low income, English language learners, or foster/homeless youth) will see those funds go to the new, larger consolidated district. The funds should continue to benefit the students with need, but the control of those funds will be by the new district.
- 2) Districts that currently qualify for concentration funds (given when disadvantaged students represent more than 55% of the overall student population) have even more to lose. Consolidation will likely drop the new district demographics below this threshold, so the new district does not qualify for the funds at all.
- 3) School districts that are Basic Aid and not currently receiving LFCC might no longer qualify as Basic Aid if consolidated.
- 4) In Sonoma County, there are 53 charter schools, most of which are connected to one of the 40 school districts. Currently, these charter schools receive additional state funding for each student who is attending from outside the district. In the event of districts consolidating, those additional funds would no longer be available for the students who would now be considered in-district.

As noted, there are cost savings when districts are consolidated, but the loss of eligibility for these additional state funding sources means that it will be years before the cost savings would be realized.

Sonoma County, along with other counties in the state, is seeing the worst effects of declining enrollments and barriers to district consolidation. The truth is, if consolidation of districts had happened several years ago, a consolidated district could be seeing some benefit from reduction of costs. However, the issue of too many schools overall is still leading to financial problems. As this report is being written, there are daily reports of school cutbacks, closures and staff layoffs. It is difficult to measure the emotional impact on students, parents and staff and the loss to the community.

Part of the financial problems can be traced to the past assumptions that have been made about a district's potential revenues. For each school year, district management and school board trustees make assumptions about the number of students who will be enrolled, the average daily attendance of the students, the number of students who will need special education services, the cost of facility maintenance, and the cost of teacher and staff salaries after union contracts have been negotiated. It takes a strong, trained, diversified team to make accurate assumptions of how these multiple variables will behave. Failure to do so leads to inaccurate assumptions and inadequate budgeting.

When spending exceeds actual revenues, the district faces tough decisions on how to get the budget back in compliance. In the case of many districts, the answer is to reduce staff. In some districts, the answer has also been to close schools.

### **State Takeover**

Currently, there are school districts in Sonoma County that may not be able to meet their current and future financial obligations. If this happens, the State of California has an established takeover process for imposing oversight of school district budgets and operations. The state can also provide emergency state loans to keep a district solvent. This process was adopted in 1991 and altered by subsequent legislation in 2018. It continues today. The state's formal oversight process is named after its initiating legislation—Chapter 1213 of 1991 (AB 1200). Under the AB 1200 process, all districts are subject to ongoing fiscal monitoring and districts experiencing fiscal distress are offered escalating tiers of assistance and intervention. [View a pdf of AB1200 here.](#)

## Oversight of District Budgets and the County Office of Education

Prior to 1991, the state had no formal process for overseeing district budgets so many school districts went years without resolving budget imbalances. Some ultimately faced major fiscal crises. Between 1979 and 1991, a total of 26 districts requested and received emergency state loans. One large district (Richmond Unified) declared bankruptcy. The Richmond bankruptcy spurred legal challenges and, in *Butt v. California*, the California Supreme Court ruled that the state is obligated to assist districts in fiscal distress.

Currently, all districts receive ongoing fiscal monitoring by county offices of education (COEs). Before the start of each fiscal year, all districts are required to submit their projected budgets to their COE for review. COEs are tasked with approving, disapproving, or conditionally approving these budgets. To do this, COEs examine several indicators of district fiscal health, such as district reserve levels and salary and benefit costs. Districts with disapproved budgets must revise and resubmit their budgets until they are approved by their COE. In rare circumstances, districts can appeal to an outside authority to resolve budget disputes with their COE. During the fiscal year, all districts are required to submit two budget updates to their COE - one in the fall and the other in the spring. For each of these budget updates, COEs assign a certification; either positive, qualified, or negative.

## When a School is in Danger of Takeover

County Offices of Education are required to assist districts struggling to balance their budgets.

First-Level Intervention for Qualified and Negative Districts:

- Review a third budget report, submitted by the district at the end of the school year.
- Review and comment on proposed district collective bargaining agreements.
- Approve issuance of certain types of district debt.
- COEs must do at least one of the following:
  1. Assign a fiscal expert to the district;
  2. Conduct a study of the district's financial condition;
  3. Require a report on the district's financial projections;
  4. Require an update of the district's cash flow and expenditure estimates;
  5. Require that the district submit a proposal to address its fiscal health;
  6. Assign FCMAT to review the district's management of its teacher workforce;
  7. Withhold compensation from the district superintendent or governing board members if they do not provide all requested information.

Second-Level Intervention for Negative Districts. COEs must do at least one of the following:

1. Assign a fiscal advisor to the district;
2. Develop and impose district budget revisions in consultation with the state Superintendent of Public Instruction and local governing board;
3. Overturn local governing board action;
4. Assist in developing a district budget or financial recovery plan;

Districts in exceptional distress may request an emergency state loan. In some cases, districts lack the cash necessary to pay their bills. Prior to requesting a state loan, a district's local governing board must invite FCMAT to make a presentation on associated trade-offs, including the loss of local control that accompanies a state loan. The board must then adopt a formal request for state assistance. The state legislature and governor will then consider whether to approve the loan with authorization given through a state appropriations bill.

### **The Role of the Financial Crisis & Management Assistance Team (FCMAT)**

The primary mission of FCMAT is to help California's local public schools, including grades TK through Junior College. FCMAT can identify, prevent and resolve financial, operational and data management challenges. They do this by providing management assistance and professional training opportunities. Training is important in the promotion of sound financial practices, the development of chief business officials and helping to create efficient organizational operations. When working with a district, a FCMAT team investigates the issues and provides a written report with findings and recommendations. These recommendations help identify and resolve the issues, overcome challenges, and plan for the future.

### **State Administration**

When a district receives an emergency loan, the state Superintendent of Public Instruction appoints and oversees an administrator who has full control over the district's budgets and policies. At the same time, the district superintendent is removed and the school board loses all decision-making authority and any compensation. A district receiving a particularly small state loan is exempted from these takeover conditions.

The authorized loan amount is intended to provide the district with sufficient funds to pay its regular bills and meet these special loan-related obligations. Unfortunately, there are significant costs to a district that receives a state emergency loan. Some of these costs include:

- Payback of principal and interest, typically over a 20-year period.
- Payment of salaries to fiscal experts, auditors, and others hired to provide assistance.
- Insurance and interest costs.

The local COE continues to provide oversight even after a district receives state loans. The district will submit projected budgets and budget updates to its COE for review. Retaining this review step ensures COEs remain aware of all fiscal developments within their districts.

To return to local control, districts need to show good management. After the district receives a state loan, FCMAT sets performance standards for that district in five key areas:

- (1) financial management
- (2) student achievement
- (3) personnel management
- (4) facilities management

(5) community relations

Once they have shown good management, control is given back to the local governing board. After the board regains control in all five areas and the administrator determines the district is likely to comply with its recovery plan, the administrator leaves. This process of regaining local control typically takes several years.

After the administrator leaves, the state Superintendent of Public Instruction appoints a trustee to oversee the district. The trustee serves until the district has repaid its loan in full. During this period, the trustee has the power to overturn local governing board decisions that jeopardize the district's fiscal health. The power of the trustee, however, is weaker than that of a state administrator, as a trustee cannot make decisions proactively on the district's behalf.

For schools to keep their doors open, school districts must maintain good fiscal health. Local school boards are tasked with keeping their districts in good fiscal health. These boards are to balance their district budgets each year, even when - especially when - doing so requires difficult trade-offs and decisions. The state's historical process for overseeing district budgets - giving local boards early warning signs of fiscal problems and having COEs help local boards make fiscal corrections - has worked to date to keep most districts on positive fiscal footing.

The primary purpose of this Grand Jury report is to present to the Sonoma County public an overview of how school districts are managed. In addition, this report intends to provide a background understanding of conditions, options, and consequences of school district financial problems. We are forced to recognize that given current state laws, only the school boards themselves can reform how their individual school district is financially governed. The Grand Jury strongly recommends that each school district participate in FCMAT's newly created school governance accountability training. The intent of the training is to create better-informed and more effective advocates for sound financial management of limited resources. This outreach may also encourage and prepare future school board candidates.

Additionally, the Sonoma County Office of Education could do more to educate the public regarding school district budget management and encourage the public to be involved with their local school district. For more information on school policy changes at the state level, read the Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) Report.

## **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.

## COMMENDATIONS

The Grand Jury commends the leadership and staff of the County Superintendent of Schools and recommends the general public visit the Sonoma County Office of Education website for current information about school districts.

Similarly, the Grand Jury thanks and commends the leadership and staff of FCMAT for the highly informative, insightful and objective information regarding the financial situation for many of the Sonoma County school districts. Again, we encourage the general public to visit the FCMAT website to inform themselves and to urge their local school board trustees to take advantage of FCMAT training opportunities and counsel.

## REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code Section 933.05, the following response is required:

The Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools to respond to R1 and F1 within 60 days of receipt of this report.

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## GLOSSARY

**ADA:** Average daily attendance (calculated by dividing the number of student days of attendance by the total number of actual school days).

**CCSDO:** County Commission on School District Organization.

**CBOE:** County Board of Education.

**Charter Schools:** Primary or secondary schools that are established and operated under a charter for a fixed period of time and that receive public money (also, like other schools, may receive private donations), but are not subject to some of the rules, regulations, and statutes that apply to other public schools in exchange for some type of accountability for producing certain results, which are set forth in each school’s charter. Student attendance in charter schools is based on parental choice.

**Community-funded (Basic Aid) district:** Any district that receives more funding from property taxes than it would receive from the local control funding formula. These schools are still responsible for completing an LCAP but operate separately from state aid.

**Consolidation:** An “action to reorganize districts,” which could consist of either:

(a) an action to form a new school district, which is accomplished through any combination of the following:

1. dissolving two or more existing school districts of the same kind and forming one or more new school districts of that same kind from the entire territory of the original districts.

2. forming one or more new school districts of the same kind from all or parts of one or more existing school districts of that same kind.
3. unifying school districts, including the consolidation of all or part of one or more high school districts with all or part of one or more component school districts into one or more new unified school districts.
4. de-unifying a school district, including the conversion of all or part of a unified school district into one or more new high school districts, each with two or more new component districts.

(b) an action to transfer territory, including the transfer of all or part of an existing school district to another existing school district. (Cal. Education Code section 35511)

**Dependent Charter Schools:** Referred to as schools that are established, or remain as, a legal arm of the school district or the county office of education that granted their charter.

**Financial Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT):** A state organization that provides fiscal management services to school districts and intervenes when a district is not able to meet its near future financial obligations.

**IEP:** Individualized education plan.

**Independent Charter Schools:** Referred to as schools that function as independent legal entities and are usually governed by or as public benefit (“not-for-profit”) corporations. acceptance of students is at the discretion of the school’s administration.

**Local Control Funding Formula:** The method by which school districts receive the majority of their funding from the state based on average daily attendance and the number of students who are identified as higher needs.

**Local Control Accountability Plan:** A set of measures submitted by each school district to the state to show accountability and progress.

**PACE:** Policy Analysis for California Education - A consortium of colleges with academic programs for educators.

**SCOE:** Sonoma County Office of Education.

**State Takeover:** The process of the state providing a loan to a district in order to meet current financial obligations. The district is then managed by the state until the loans are repaid.

**Unduplicated Pupil Count:** The number of students in a district who are identified as higher needs because they qualify as low income, English language learner, or foster/homeless. For funding purposes, a student is only counted once, even though they may qualify for more than one of the needs.

**Unified School Districts:** School districts that include both elementary and secondary (middle and high schools) educational levels.

**APPENDIX**

**Sonoma County School Districts -2025**

<b>District Name</b>	<b>Current Enrollment</b>	<b>Basic Aid District</b>	<b>School Closures</b>
<b>Districts with both elementary and high school students</b>			
Cloverdale Unified	1,248		
Geyserville Unified	181	Yes	
Cotati Rohnert Park Unified	6,857		
Healdsburg Unified	1,227	Yes	
Santa Rosa City Schools	12,050		Santa Rosa Middle, Slater Middle, Comstock Middle, Steele Lane Elementary
Shoreline Unified (serves parts of Marin and Sonoma)	418		
Sonoma Valley Unified	3,425	Yes	Adele Harrison Middle, Prestwood and Dunbar Elementary
Windsor Unified	4,985		
<b>High School Districts</b>			
Petaluma Joint Union High	4,961		
West Sonoma County Union High	1,554		El Molino High
<b>Elementary School Districts (K-8/K-6)</b>			
Alexander Valley Union	116	Yes	
Bellevue Union	1,668		
Bennett Valley Union	871		
Cinnabar	159	Yes	
Dunham	178	Yes	
Forestville Union	222	Yes	
Fort Ross	15	Yes	
Gravenstein Union	829		
Guerneville	405	Yes	
Harmony Union	589	Yes	
Horicon	59	Yes	

District Name	Current Enrollment	Basic Aid District	School Closures
Kashia	6		
Kenwood	129	Yes	
Liberty	2,020		
Mark West Union	1,417		
Monte Rio Union	58	Yes	
Montgomery	40	Yes	
Oak Grove Union	1,213	Yes	
Old Adobe Union	1,903	Yes	
Petaluma City (elementary)	2,570		
Piner-Olivet Union	1,298		
Rincon Valley Union	3,143		Douglas Whited Elementary
Roseland	2,826		
Santa Rosa Elementary	4,826		
Sebastopol Union	782		
Twin Hill Union	1029		
Two Rock Union	149		
Waugh	788		
West Side Union	128	Yes	
Wilmar	266		
Wright	1,107		

Source: *California Department of Education School Directory* ([View School Directory Database here](#))

*To view the links contained in this report, please use this QR code to access the online version of this report*



# **RESPONSES TO SONOMA COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY REPORTS**

**2018-2019 THROUGH 2023-2024 and 2024-2025:**

**Providing Continuity by Following Through on Previous Investigations**

April 30, 2026

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 in 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 the 2018-2023 Sonoma County Grand Jury Reports: Providing Continuity by Following Through on Prior Investigations**



**Responses to the 2024-2025 Sonoma County Grand Jury Reports: Providing Continuity by Following Through on Prior Investigations**



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

May 12, 2026

*To view the links contained in this report, please use the QR code at the end of the report.*

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", include the following items:

- Article 3. Training, Personnel, and Management
- Article 4. Records and Public Information
- Article 5. Classification and Separation
- Article 6. Programs and Services
- Article 7. Discipline
- Article 8. Minors in Jails
- Article 9. Minors in Temporary Custody in a Law Enforcement Facility
- Article 10. Minors in Court Holding Facilities
- Article 11. Medical/Mental Health Services
- Article 12. Food
- Article 13. Clothing and Personal Hygiene
- Article 14. Bedding and Linens
- Article 15. Facility Sanitation and Safety

## **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. There were several reasons for the vacancies, but a large number 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, the facility operates an accredited high school program on site through Five Keys High School. This program allows eligible incarcerated individuals to earn high school credits and work 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 Reconciliation 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

**Class Enrollments at the MADF**

<b>Class</b>	<b>Enrollees</b>
Anger Management	17
Five Keys High School	84
GEO-MRT	60
GEO-Maintaining My Recovery	44
GEO-CBISA 1	37
GEO CBISA 2	6
Job Skills	17
SRJC-Communications	5
Parenting	11
Relapse Prevention	15

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, there is a lack of 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**

<b>MADF</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
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

**COMMENDATION**

The Civil Grand Jury commends the MADF staff for their dedication and work ethic in what is not an easy job.

**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 a group of detainees throughout the day. The facility can house 120 detainees. At the 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. The 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 the 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.

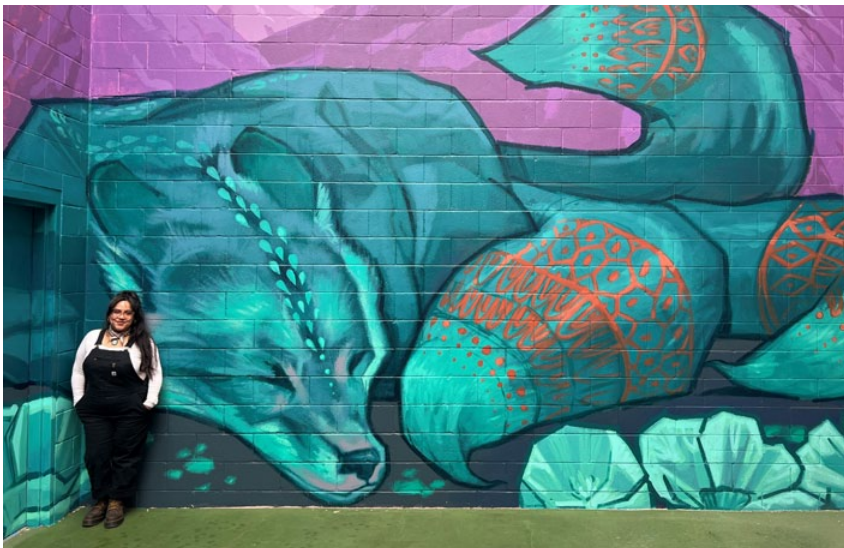
The overall goal of Juvenile Hall is to return youth to the community with skills and experiences that help them be better prepared for the many challenges they will face.

## **COMMENDATION**

Like the jail staff, Juvenile Hall staff and volunteers are recognized for their dedication and work ethic in providing supervision and guidance for the troubled youth of our communities.

*To view the links contained in this report, please use this QR code to access the online version of this report*





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.



**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

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## You Can Make a Difference in Sonoma County

The Superior Court of Sonoma County invites Sonoma County citizens over the age of 18 to apply to serve on the Civil Grand Jury. Each year, nineteen jurors are selected to serve a one-year term. The annual application period is from February to early June.

**Learn more about the Civil Grand Jury at:**



The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury encourages county residents to submit requests for the Civil Grand Jury to investigate matters of concern involving governance of the county, a city, or a special district.

**A form for this purpose is available at:**

