

# **Sonoma County Purchasing – Big Dollars with Low Operational Oversight**

**May 2026**

## **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 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 has 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.

<b>Title</b>	<b>FY2015-2016</b>	<b>FY2018-2019</b>	<b>FY2020-2021</b>	<b>FY2025-2026</b>
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			
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>

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 into the Portal tool.	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 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.
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**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 Initiative 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 2024-25 Expenditure Budget for SPI was \$246.42 Million, which reflects 8.96% 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 Chief Executive Office to ensure that Department Heads comply with approved hiring practices related to minimum qualification requirements by 12/31/26.

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

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

## **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.

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify who have been interviewed during the investigation. 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.

