

FACES OF SUSTAINABILITY: SAN MATEO COUNTY

The Faces of Sustainability series highlights how Bay Area residents are making their communities better places to live, protecting their natural environment, and conducting business in ways that promote quality of life for subsequent generations.

San Mateo County is bordered by San Francisco Bay to the east and 54 miles of Pacific Ocean coastline to the west. While many residents have benefitted from the economic boom of nearby Silicon Valley, San Mateo county has its share of the consequences of that development which challenge its sustainability—rapid population growth, inflation of housing prices and shortages of affordable housing, long commutes and extreme traffic congestion with the resulting greenhouse gas emissions and other pollution. This case study highlights some sustainability solutions that San Mateo County has crafted in response to these challenges.

Indicators of Sustainability

In 1992, the nonprofit Sustainable San Mateo County (SSMC) was established to provide information and education on the principles of sustainability and to foster the “long-term health of the county’s economy, environment, and social equity.” The group’s core program is its annual Indicators Report, which provides fact-based information about local trends over time in each of the county’s 20

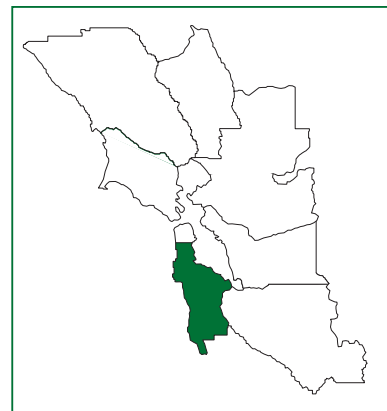
cities, the county government, and the San Mateo County Community College District. SSMC has identified approximately 30 indicators, ranging from air quality and energy use to education and affordable housing, that it considers critical for sustainability. The 2007 Indicators Report shows that the county’s jurisdictions consider sustainability a serious issue and are working to foster it. Not only do individual municipalities have their own programs for fostering sustainability, but San Mateo County also has taken a broader approach—planning on a subregional level.

Subregional Planning

As early as the 1960s San Mateo County recognized that the issues facing the county were not limited by municipal boundaries. Though the Regional Planning Committee created in 1964 was only advisory to the county’s Board of Supervisors, it is an early indication of the unique collaborative approach to sustainability planning that the county subsequently followed.

In 1990, C/CAG—the City/County Association of Governments of San Mateo County—

According to Sustainable San Mateo County board member Gladwyn d’Souza, San Mateo County’s early subregional approach to sustainability planning was unique in the state, and perhaps in the country.



BAY AREA COUNTIES

was established to address diverse issues that transcend political boundaries in the county. Like many countywide agencies created at that time, C/CAG's mission included congestion management and transportation planning. However, C/CAG's members agreed to take on other roles as well, including airport land use, integrated solid waste management, and hazardous waste management.

The county recently applied the subregional perspective to housing. The State of California requires all local land-use authorities to plan for enough housing to support projected growth, including a percentage of low- or very-low-income units. Traditionally, Bay Area housing needs have been allocated by the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) on a city-by-city basis. But in 2007, San Mateo County and its 20 cities formed the Housing Needs Allocation Subregion to collectively allocate future county housing by consensus. C/CAG would determine the specific local allocations for each city, and since all of the county's cities are members of C/CAG, all would participate in the determinations, making trades among themselves for better local fit. According to the San Mateo County Journal (December 18, 2007), "proponents say the unique method makes housing a stronger likelihood because jurisdictions limited by space or zoning can

trade allocations with other cities or the county [to meet the state-determined quota]." The subregional allocations were formally adopted by the county in February 2008, and the Regional Housing Needs Allocation, of which they are part, was approved by ABAG's Executive Board in May 2008. So far, San Mateo is the only California county to take this subregional approach to housing allocation.

The Grand Boulevard Initiative

One of the main regional planning projects, The Grand Boulevard Initiative, brings San Mateo County together with Santa Clara County, 19 cities within those two counties, and local and regional agencies to improve El Camino Real, the main north-south arterial from Daly City to San Jose. The effort also includes businesses located on El Camino; environmentalists; labor groups; and advocates for housing, transit, bicyclists, economic development, and smart growth.

The stated goal of the Grand Boulevard Initiative is "to produce a coordinated series of policy decisions that will . . . help El Camino Real to function and look better . . . El Camino Real will achieve its full potential as a place for residents to work, live, shop and play, creating links between communities that promote walking and transit and an improved and meaningful quality of life." The Initiative's guiding principles

include, among others:

- Target housing and job growth in strategic areas along the corridor
- Encourage compact mixed-use development and high-quality urban design and construction
- Create a pedestrian-oriented environment and improve streetscapes, ensuring full access to and between public areas and private developments
- Preserve and accentuate unique and desirable community character and the existing quality of life in adjacent neighborhoods
- Strengthen pedestrian and bicycle connections with the corridor
- Pursue environmentally sustainable and economically viable development patterns

In 2007 the Grand Boulevard Initiative recognized six projects from four jurisdictions that exemplify the changes it hopes to implement. One "Visionary" award winner was the Downtown Redwood City Precise Plan, intended to bring about a renaissance of that city's downtown. The Plan invites investment that will gradually replace the older commercial strip of El Camino with residential buildings mixed with compatible office and lodging uses.

One of the Precise Plan's guiding principles is transit integration, featuring a convenient transit station in the center of the city's downtown connecting it to Broadway, Courthouse Square, El Camino, and adjacent neighborhoods. It is intended to be "so well integrated into the activity patterns, viewsheds and pathways of the district that the train becomes the primary mode of transportation chosen by the daytime and evening community populations within walking distance of the station." In fact, such transit-oriented development is a goal not only of the Grand Boulevard Initiative but of San Mateo County generally.

Transit-Oriented Development

Throughout the San Francisco Peninsula, insufficient housing and its high cost have forced many people to travel long distances to their jobs, creating both environmental and economic problems. One major approach that San Mateo County has taken to deal with this issue is transit-oriented development (TOD), in which relatively dense new development is sited close to public transportation. The approach is most successful when it includes basic commercial and service outlets as well as housing.

In 1999, C/CAG created a TOD incentive program using transportation funds to spur construction of needed housing in the county. The first grant recipient was the mixed use retail/commercial and residential Franklin Street

project at the Redwood City CalTrain station. In 2005, the city of San Mateo approved its own Rail Corridor TOD policy plan for development within a half-mile radius of the Hillsdale and Hayward Park CalTrain station areas. One of the plan's goals is to encourage well-planned, compact development with a range of land uses, including housing, commercial, recreation, and open space, in proximity to train stations. Another goal is to improve pedestrian, bicycle, shuttle, and vehicular access by creating direct connections to the train stations and other transportation facilities and local destinations. Because of slowdowns in the housing market starting in 2007, development has been somewhat stalled. However, the Bay Meadows project, an 83-acre, mixed-use development on the east side of the Hillsdale

"What makes the TOD idea work, and gives it a true mixed-use character, is not individual projects but the aggregate of projects that grow into "transit villages" over time."

— Stephen Scott, principal planner, City of San Mateo Planning Division.



CONCEPTUAL RENDERING OF FUTURE DEPOT CIRCLE, PART OF THE REDWOOD CITY PRECISE PLAN. Courtesy of Redwood City Planning Division

CalTrain station, is one project that is moving forward.

South San Francisco is another city that has made strides in transit-oriented development. It has adopted TOD policies and guidelines to encourage high-density mixed-use development within ¼ mile of the South San Francisco and San Bruno BART stations and the South San Francisco Caltrain Station. At present, 460 high-density residential units are under construction adjacent to the South San Francisco BART station.

Though it is not technically TOD, two of the county's community colleges have taken an interesting approach to solving both housing and transportation problems. Cañada College in Redwood City and the College of San Mateo have converted some of their parking lots to develop housing for their faculty and staff, who are likely to have trouble affording market-rate housing in the area. Michele Beasley, of the Greenbelt Alliance, which endorsed the Cañada College project, reports that attendees at well-attended meetings on the project were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about not having to commute long distances to their jobs.

Affordable Housing

To cope with the high cost of housing in San Mateo county, 16 of the county's 21 jurisdictions have an "inclusionary" provision that mandates that a certain percentage of below-market units be built in any new residential

development. One of the sixteen is San Bruno, where the development Crossing is a nationally recognized model of inclusionary affordable housing combined with transit-oriented-development. The mixed-income project is built on a 20-acre former naval site on El Camino Real, adjacent to the newly renovated Shops at Tanforan and the San Bruno BART station. Along with luxury apartments and condominiums, 30 percent of the units are affordable at the low- and very low-income levels, including 228 units reserved for low-income seniors.

A 2007 Grand Boulevard award winner is Redwood City's Villa Montgomery Apartments. This multi-family rental project has 58 very low- and extremely low-income units and 1250 square feet of ground-floor commercial space. Constructed in infill property and close to transit, it is consistent with Redwood City's Precise Plan, and harmonizes architecturally with nearby properties. Its rooftop solar panel system and other green features make it the first LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified multi-family building in San Mateo County.

Other examples of affordable housing projects are found throughout the county. Colma requires that 20 percent of all new units be affordable to low-, very low-, and extremely low-income households. In addition, its inclusionary zoning policy avoids concentrating all affordable

housing in a few areas, enabling lower paid workers to find housing close to employment centers, recreation, and educational opportunities. East Palo Alto also has a 20 percent mandate and it limits increases in rent at many units. The city of Millbrae sponsors a Below Market Rate Housing Program that creates affordable ownership and rental housing units, and the city's Redevelopment Agency is preparing to work with a nonprofit organization to buy rental property to provide long-term housing to low-income residents.

Green Building

Green building principles are in effect in most of San Mateo County's communities, through either specific requirements or incentives. The county has developed a Sustainable Buildings Guide and gives annual Green Building Awards. Winner of the first award for commercial buildings, in 2002, was the Leslie Shao-ming Sun Field Station at Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve. Owned by Stanford University and located near the town of Woodside, the preserve is dedicated to contributing to "the understanding of the Earth's natural systems through research, education, and protection of the Preserve's resources." Appropriately, its new field station, built in 2002, not only used energy-efficient design to produce net zero carbon emissions and implemented novel water conservation measures, but was built

FACES OF SUSTAINABILITY: SAN MATEO COUNTY

almost entirely from salvaged and recycled materials. Some of these add an interesting local historical perspective to the station. For instance, the 120-year-old bricks that line the main and rear entrances were excavated from Jane Stanford's original residence that was damaged in the 1906 earthquake. These bricks initially came to California from Scotland in the 1880s as ship ballast.

Other winners of San Mateo County's Green Building Awards range from large corporate structures to small, innovative private projects. The Gap corporate headquarters in the city of San Mateo, completed in 1997, received PG&E's Savings by Design award in 2000 for being 30% more energy efficient than was required by California law at the time. The building's roof is topped by a layer of grass and plants on a six-inch layer of soil that acts as insulation and also absorbs rain and air pollution. At the opposite end of the building spectrum is the honorable mention winner for 2006—the Small Straw Bale Yoga Room, built by a group of volunteers in a backyard in Pacifica.

Educational and engaging for county residents of all ages was the Green Dollhouse Project, started by representatives from Sustainable San Mateo County, San Mateo County RecycleWorks Green Building Program, Coyote Point Museum, Sunset Magazine,

San Francisco Design Center and Jennifer Roberts (author of *Good Green Homes*). With the motto "Start Small. Think Big. Build Green," the Project established a competition in 2005 that invited design students and professionals to build dollhouses that would teach children and adults about one or more aspects of green home building, and inspire them to make their own homes a little greener. Dollhouses were submitted from around the country and as far away as Japan. A panel of 14 jurors, each paired with a young partner, selected the winning dollhouses. The winners traveled to Sacramento and New York in 2006; two dollhouses are now on permanent exhibit at the Coyote Pt. Museum. You can see photos of some of the dollhouses at www.greendollhouse.org/press_room.shtml



VOLUNTEERS PUT ONE OF THE FIRST BALES IN PLACE IN THE SMALL STRAW BALE YOGA ROOM, PACIFICA.
Courtesy of San Mateo County Recycle Works



WALKWAY MADE OF 120-YEAR-OLD SALVAGED BRICKS AT THE LESLIE SHAO-MING SUN FIELD STATION.
Courtesy of Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve

Energy

Many of San Mateo County's cities have joined with cities in Santa Clara County to become part of the Silicon Valley Joint Venture Climate Protection Task Force. The Task Force was formed in 2007 to "develop effective, collaborative solutions for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from public agency operations." A survey of the cities and counties in Silicon Valley showed that many are already taking action. For example, 25% have already set CO2 emission reduction goals; 79% have building retrofit programs to reduce energy use; 58% have purchased hybrid vehicles; and 45% have installed solar panels to generate electricity and another 30% have firm plans to invest in solar. And many of the cities have signed up with ICLEI (the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives) to conduct inventories of greenhouse gas emissions from municipal operations as a prelude to further action.

In 2005, the City of Millbrae, in partnership with Chevron Energy Solutions, started construction of facilities to upgrade Millbrae's Water Pollution Control Plant. The new system will use restaurant kitchen grease and other organic matter to generate on-site electricity, increasing the amount of "green power" generated by the facility's cogeneration plant by 40 percent. As a result, the city will not have to purchase

about 1.5 million kilowatt-hours from the local utility each year. This lower demand translates to 1,178,000 fewer pounds of carbon dioxide emissions annually. The upgraded system is also economically advantageous: it will produce about \$264,000 in combined energy savings and revenues from its grease-receiving facility each year. This will effectively pay for the \$5.5 million facility improvements— as well as maintenance— at no new cost to the city's ratepayers.

Environmental Stewardship

One of the most striking examples of environmental restoration in the county is the Cargill South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project. The project frees up 16,100 acres originally used for commercial salt production for use by local, state and federal wildlife agencies. It increases Bay tidal wetlands by nearly 50 percent, and preserves 25 square miles of open space. It also improves water quality and flood control and provides crucial habitat for endangered species. At the same time, Cargill's investment in technology and productivity shrinks their industrial footprint by over 60% but preserves nearly 400 permanent, living-wage jobs. In addition to receiving the 2005 Sustainable San Mateo County Sustainability Award, the project won the 2004 Outstanding Environmental Engineering Project award given by the American Society of Civil Engineers, San Fran-

cisco Section (ASCE, SF). "This project has such importance and long-lasting value that we created the Environmental Engineering Award just to honor Cargill's outstanding effort," said Tony Akel of the ASCE, SF.

"Our new facility upgrades at the Millbrae Water Pollution Control Plant (WPCP) provide a novel solution to reduce the burden on landfills, support our own energy needs, and simultaneously recoup costs."

— Dick York, former WPCP superintendent

FACES OF SUSTAINABILITY: SAN MATEO COUNTY

Conclusion

The county of San Mateo's public and private entities are implementing innovative sustainability solutions that are improving the overall quality of life for those who live and work in the county.

Whether it is a unique collaborative planning approach for housing and transportation, which leverages limited resources and creates a platform for integrated action, or promotion of green building, San Mateo county is a

leader in sustainability practices.

Faces of Sustainability, San Mateo

Author: Susan Weisberg

Editors: Allison Quaid and

Ceil Scandone

Sustainability Resources in San Mateo County

Refer to the following selected resources for more information about sustainability in San Mateo County

Association of Bay Area Governments: www.abag.ca.gov/

City/County Association of Governments of San Mateo County (C/CAG): www.ccag.ca.gov

City of San Mateo official website: www.ci.sanmateo.ca.us/

Grand Boulevard Task Force: www.grandboulevard.net

Greenbelt Alliance: www.greenbelt.org/regions/southbay/index.shtml

Millbrae Water Pollution Control Plant: <http://www.ci.millbrae.ca.us/publicworks.html>

RecycleWorks: www.recycleworks.org

Redwood City Precise Plan: www.ci.redwood-city.ca.us/cds/planning/precise/preciseplan.html

Regional Housing Needs Allocation: www.abag.ca.gov/planning/housingneeds/

San Mateo County official website: www.co.sanmateo.ca.us/portal/site/SMC

Silicon Valley Joint Venture Climate Protection Task Force:
www.jointventure.org/programs-initiatives/climateprotection/climateprotection.html

South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project: www.southbayrestoration.org/Project_Description.html

Sustainable San Mateo: www.sustainablesanmateo.org



Bay Area Alliance for Sustainable Communities
www.bayareaalliance.org