Santa Maria General Plan
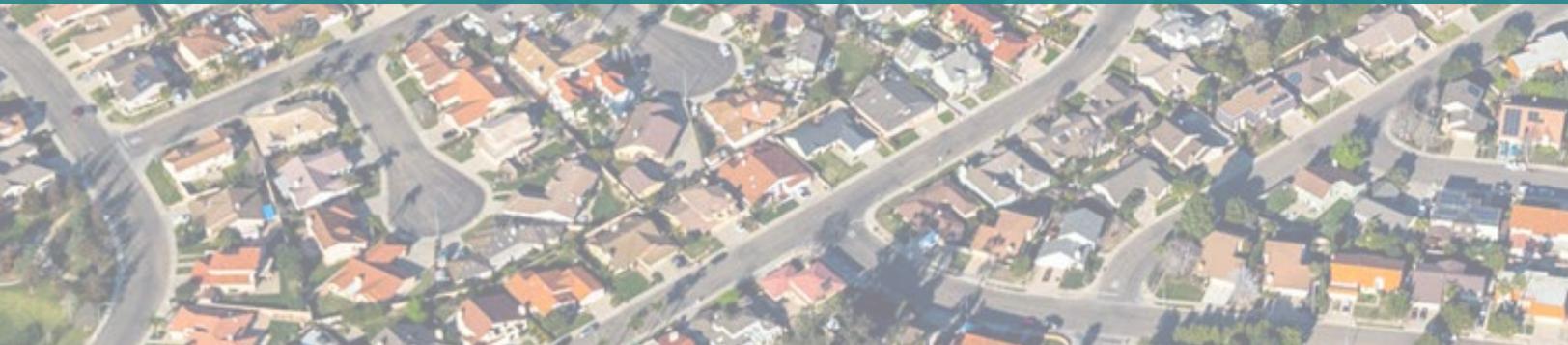
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SB 1000 Environmental Justice Community Café

Summary Report | March 2021

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Overview

This summary report presents themes identified during an Environmental Justice Community Café on February 16, 2021. The Café is one piece of an extensive community engagement effort for the City of Santa Maria's General Plan Update (GPU) process. Four total Cafés were held during February and March of 2021 on the following topics: Environmental Justice, Farmworker Community, Community Safety, and Housing.

Through existing conditions research in the first phase of the GPU process, several areas of Santa Maria were identified that do not fare as well as others. These areas, called "disadvantaged communities," are lower-income and may face disproportionate exposures to health hazards. As mandated by Senate Bill 1000 (SB 1000), the "Planning for Healthy Communities Act," the purpose of the Café was to gather feedback on environmental justice and health risks in the city overall and in the areas identified as disadvantaged communities.

The Café was designed to broadly engage in identification of health and environmental justice issues and priorities as well as to refine existing conditions findings to meet requirements of SB 1000: (1) Reducing unique or compounded health risks by means that include, but are not limited to, reducing pollution exposures and improving air quality and promoting public facilities, food access, safe and sanitary homes, and physical activity; (2) Promoting civic engagement in the public decision-making process; and (3) Prioritizing improvements and programs that address the needs of disadvantaged communities. The icons below represent SB 1000 health risk topics and are used throughout the report.

	Civic Engagement		Food Access
	Pollution Exposure		Physical Activity
	Public Facilities		Other Health Risks
	Safe and Sanitary Housing		Prioritizing Needs of Disadvantaged Communities

Participants and Format

There were 20 participants in the Café. Participants were community members and representatives from various organizations working on environmental justice and/or health issues in the City of Santa Maria and across the broader region. The following organizations were represented: NAACP, Santa Barbara County Action Network, UDW Homecare Providers Union, Family Service Agency, Los Padres ForestWatch, California Teachers Association, Community Environmental Council of Santa Barbara County, Central Coast Community Energy, Community Action Commission, Showing up for Racial Justice, Planned Parenthood of Santa Barbara County, and Santa Barbara Bicycle Coalition.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Café was held via Zoom in the format of an online focus group. The Café was led by staff from the GPU project team in coordination with Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE), a community organization working with residents and stakeholders from disadvantaged communities in Santa Maria. Participants were provided a brief

description of SB 1000, a map of census tracts identified as disadvantaged communities, and a list of key environmental justice and health risks in Santa Maria identified during the existing conditions research (**Figure 1**). The following questions were used as discussion prompts:

- What are ways that you would like to see the health of the community improved in Santa Maria?
- What are some examples of how environmental justice issues are impacting your lives today and/or in the future?
- When you look at this list of health risks (*slide*), what issue is most important to address in terms of environmental justice?
- Is there anything missing from the list, generally?

Figure 1. Key Findings from Health and Environmental Justice Existing Conditions Research

Environmental Justice Issues

Housing: overcrowding, cost burden, older housing stock, low supply of affordable housing

Public facilities: limited access to parks in some areas of the city, limited health care access, 65+ vulnerable population (ex. preventative care)

Pollution: pesticides as critical issue across city, hazardous, clean up, and solid waste sites near residential neighborhoods, concentration of oil and gas wells

Food: limited access to grocery stores in some areas, food insecurity

Physical activity: obesity, limited walkability

Health: low incomes, vulnerable population groups, uninsured, chronic disease + high death rates, mental health

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Key Themes

The following key themes emerged from discussion (specific comments are included in the Appendix: Detailed Notes from Discussion):

Civic Engagement

- **Promote community decision-making and inclusiveness.** Build trust through trauma-informed and culturally competent engagement that is directly connected to concrete solutions for issues that community members raise.
- **Develop more educational materials and approaches to engagement.** Doing so can help community members understand connections across topics, identify solutions, and more actively engage in the process.

- **Ensure people without internet access / technology can participate.** Do this by changing outreach practices and creating participation opportunities.
- **Increase awareness of long-term health impacts of pesticides and provide information on programs and solutions to address them.** Many participants expressed concerns about long-term health impacts, particularly for women's reproductive health and young children. The City can increase awareness of these impacts and address the concerns of community members through education on pesticide safety and existing programs and solutions to address unsafe exposures.

Pollution Exposure

- **Address concerns of incompatible land uses for sensitive populations.** Where commercial agricultural uses abut sensitive uses—like schools, parks, and residences—there may be health impacts that can be mitigated through the GPU.
- **Reduce greenhouse gases from fossil fuels.** Private and commercial vehicles alike contribute to greenhouse gases in the region and may impact air quality.
- **Plant more trees and increase the availability of parks and open space** to improve overall air quality, pre-empt any climate change impacts, and provide an overall better quality of environment to the community.
- **Reduce noise and light pollution.** Noise, particularly from traffic, was an issue raised in each of the questions asked to participants. Light pollution was mentioned a couple of times. These may be areas for the GPU to explore.
- **Assess existence and impacts of active and idle oil wells.** Several participants expressed concern about the impacts on soils and on community health.

Public Facilities

- **Promote active transportation and transit by improving sidewalks, streets, trails, and other amenities.** Youth are a large segment of the population and have many impediments to safely navigating the City to get to school and back home.
- **Ensure access to parks and nature for children to play and be active.** This can promote physical and mental health and is especially important during the pandemic, when people are staying at home more.
- **Improve safety for pedestrians.** Walking along major streets, especially when trying to cross from one side of Broadway to the other, can be very dangerous. Community members are concerned about injuries and fatalities as well as connectivity.
- **Develop a policy to maintain or replace street trees.** This can address multiple issues.

Safe and Sanitary Housing

- **Treat housing issues as intersecting with other community needs.** The lack of affordable housing is compounded by other issues, including overcrowding, high housing costs, and incompatible land use patterns. These issues are exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for overcrowded households.
- **Develop a coordinated strategy to incentivize construction and ensure the housing units that are built are affordable.** Many new developments have been approved or constructed recently, but there is concern in the community that the rents are unaffordable. Households with limited income or wealth have the least options.

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Food Access

- **Provide more access to supermarkets in areas that are currently food deserts**. Areas furthest from Broadway have the least access to a walkable, neighborhood grocery store or other amenities, unless they have a vehicle.
- **Ensure children have access to food even when schools are closed**. In times of emergencies and especially in prolonged emergencies like the pandemic, not all families can take time off to pick up school lunches every day.

Physical Activity

- **Design communities to promote health.** Focus on building communities that are walkable and friendly to cyclists; accessible to goods, services, trails, schools, and transit; safe and clean; and sensitive to neighboring land uses.
- **Provide safe spaces for children to ride bikes or walk.** Many parents do not feel their children are safe in their neighborhood streets and sidewalks.

Other Health Risks

- **Improve access to health and mental health care for children.** There is a general sense that issues of access and need have grown with COVID-19. Children and young adults, especially as they return to school-based learning, may have special needs. Generally, there may be barriers related to both the number of facilities and providers not being high enough as well as to transportation, cultural competency, gender, income, and other issues outside of the healthcare system.
- **Maintain the existing City Boundaries and promote infill development.** Many participants expressed concern with development patterns and proposed to focus on improving connectivity across the existing neighborhoods, building more amenities integrated with existing housing, and protecting agricultural land.
- **Address traditional and emerging public safety concerns.** Police and community relationships may be limited by language barriers and violence, related to gang activity, may be on the rise.

Prioritizing Needs of Disadvantaged Communities

- **Ensure Santa Maria is climate resilient.** As climate changes across the world, Santa Maria can plan now to ensure that infrastructure and response plans are inclusive of disadvantaged communities and vulnerable populations in the city.
- **Integrate and address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in decision-making.** Doing so can support prioritizing needs of those who are often left out of decisions.
- **Develop strategies to include youth and children in decision-making.** They are the least empowered and most impacted.

Appendix: Detailed Notes from Discussion

The following list provides detailed notes from the discussion and is organized by question and by themes within each question.

What are ways that you would like to see the health of the community improved in Santa Maria?

- Outreach being done to people that don't have access to internet/technology
- Community being able to speak up to the people in power
- Integrating more trauma informed approaches

- Reductions in noise, including traffic noise
- Clean air and clean water for everyone
- Pollution free environment
- Preservation of prime agricultural land
- Reliance on automobiles makes environment less healthy and makes streets less safe It is also costly
- Less fossil fuel burning vehicles in the city

- Access to public lands, public spaces, natural spaces, and water
- Master plan for trails, protected and enhanced urban forest More parks and open spaces,

- Supply of quality affordable housing, meeting needs of those with low wealth
- Poor housing + ensuring shelter for all families

- Food insecurity
- Lack of access to grocery stores
- Exacerbated with COVID
- School sites are not enough
- Food desert

- Livable, walkable communities
- Safe streets
- Access to affordable and healthier transportation options

- Environmental justice intersects with reproductive justice, everyone deserves the right to parent children who are healthy
- Better access—including facilities and transportation—to affordable healthcare in general (even if the City doesn't have a lot of control over it)
- Keeping the existing City boundaries
- Mental health issues exacerbated with COVID
- Reducing violence in the community

- Addressing the needs of those most impacted by climate change
- Integrating and addressing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)
- Discrimination

What are some examples of how environmental justice issues are impacting your lives today and/or in the future?

- Need to take a culturally competent approach, like Public Health looking at this for Latinx, Indigenous, and African American communities
- Need for establishing trust and breaking down miscommunications
- Understanding the cultures to get community members the services they need
- New ways (e.g., education, outreach) to connect community and environment impacts

- Big agricultural town and air quality is a forever concern.
- Noise (sirens and people going crazy on the roads with really loud vehicles, including trucks)

- **Mobility and Transportation**
  - Kids in 23.06 have to get all the way across 22.11 to get to school. Need easier transportation solution for kids.
  - Entire 101 corridor needs coordinated transit strategy for all communities in this region (e.g., student commutes to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo). Economic justice issues (cost of travel).
  - Sidewalks should be kept in good repair
  - Where are the safest routes for walking?
  - Consider aging in place, people who don't want to drive
  - Safe trails
  - Not all people can afford a vehicle
  - Not just walkable, also drivable. Pedestrians are at risk. Frequent crashes (left turn lanes, illegal turns). In general, Broadway and Miller as an issue area.
  - Between one side and the other side of Broadway it's really bad (north more than south). People live on both sides of Broadway and want to cross over to see friends - almost impossible. Not enough crosswalks, even painted doesn't matter because people get killed in those all the time.
  - Safe streets
- **Trees and Streetscape:** Trees get cut down, no plan to take away one tree and replace it, or something to that effect

- **Food Deserts**
  - East of 101, Also area west of Broadway (23.04)
  - Nowhere to buy food on that entire side (of 22.10 and 22.11) 23.03. 23.05 on the map. Crowded. Lots of people live there. Nowhere to shop or get groceries very easily.
  - Northeast part of the city

- **Climate Change**
  - Expecting less rain, drier climate, and heavier rain when it does come.
  - Ensuring communities have infrastructure they need.
- **Urban Design**
  - Development patterns: large neighborhoods isolated by big wide streets, separation between residential and commercial, nobody lives close to where

they work, not designed with pedestrians in mind, Hard to get from place to place unless you have a vehicle
- o Depot and Railroad. Difficult place to navigate roads if you're trying to get to a park, school, grocery store, especially if you're pushing a stroller with kids in tow. Just housing here. No high school on this side
- o Enos Ranch as an example of bad development
- o Good examples: Merrill Gardens (easy to walk, can walk almost a mile around the neighborhood, near senior assisted living center that is pretty big)

When you look at this list of health risks (slide), what issue is most important to address in terms of environmental justice?

- A lot of overcrowding and little communication between families in each bedroom sometimes. No room for children to do homework. May have chrome books or internet, but no space to do their work.
- Hard to argue that housing isn't the highest
- Income. Helps to resolve some of the housing issues. The map (DACs) tells the income story
- All of these are important. Housing. Pollution. Food. That order

Is there anything missing from the list, generally?

- Education about environmental justice issues and environment generally (especially for those under 18)
- Need better information to communities about the health impacts of EJ issues, especially effects over decades.
- Identifying concrete things community can do to address different types of pollution (e.g., pesticides). Not enough to just educate.
- Light pollution and dark skies. Benefits, but also safety concerns of walking on dimly lit city streets
- Used to run in the fields and would see the choppers spraying pesticides, it didn't bother me for a long time. Didn't know for a long time the significance of that. Once you educate and people learn about that, people won't do that anymore
- Pesticides. Concern with agricultural fields next to schools (ex. Pioneer HS) and housing next to agricultural fields.
- Moved from LA and noticed air is cleaner. Then saw published report that Santa Maria has some of the cleanest air. But have seen notable difference in ten years.
- Difference between clean air and pesticide data that impacts air?
- **Oil Wells**
  - o Oil wells and pipeline (Claremont/Enos/Thornburg) in neighborhoods and behind residential buildings, need to be sensitive to what's underground

- o Oil wells should be plugged properly – General Plan should address this
- o Pollutants from idle wells is a big issue - if there's pollution from pesticide, impacts growing food for people,
- o Abandoned wells are sitting there for no reason.
- Toxic waste dump in the Casmalia/Los Alamos area. Is this something we should be concerned about?
- Do not see references to landfills/(toxic) waste dumps/e-waste and recycling in the report.

- Beautiful trails, more trees, urban forest design
- Protect the trees
- Green Belt around the City can have multiple benefits
- Especially important for kids: Safe and calming street design. Trees filtering the air, producing oxygen, and providing shade,
- Students that do not live near Pioneer Valley have to take 2-3 routes to get to school
- Neighborhood parks within walking distance.

- Not just low supply of affordable housing. City provides incentives to promote development, but cost of apartments is outrageous (e.g., 1-, 2-, and 3-bedroom apartments, like over by Costco. $2500, $2700 is outrageous for this area).
- Agriculture next to housing and not having sprawl continue out into the agricultural areas,
- Infill in the city – ADUs. Potential opportunity for low-income housing. City could look at this instead of huge, horrible tract areas that are not well planned

- Opportunities to interact with the environment and outdoors. Used to live near Battles school - used to stay flooded and had frogs. It was interesting for kids.
- Access to outdoors, recreation and fresh air important to mental health, especially during COVID.
- Access to nature and natural spaces, trees, grass, fresh air, important for mental health, especially for children.
- A lot of people isolate + shut indoors during COVID - critical need in COVID
- Safe spaces to play or ride bikes. Parents don't feel their streets are safe to let kids ride around.

- **Emergencies and Disaster Preparedness**
  - o Santa Maria sits on several fault lines
  - o Limited resources
  - o First responders don't reflect the community. Language barriers.
  - o Vulnerable populations in high density housing.
  - o Climate change
  - o Concern with what that could lead to (e.g., natural disasters)
  - o Saltwater intrusion being so close to the ocean.
- **Children's Mental Health at Home and in Schools**
  - o Increase in mental health needs as we re-integrate children and young people back into social and emotional environment.
  - o A lot of referrals for mental health issues for kids - could see uptick in self harm.
  - o Already seeing parents calling to request support and agencies and nonprofits at capacity. Just the tip of the iceberg as we move forward past the pandemic.
  - o Referrals for child abuse are down; referrals for out of home placement are up.
  - o Children will have a hard time reintegrating post-COVID

- **Healthcare**
  - Know it's a school district thing, not a city thing, but mental health and health care will be a thing with students.
  - Also, not enough nurse to student ratio. Reflects broader community issue.
  - Transportation to get to medical care is an issue
- Children and young adults (under 18): Not empowered to make decisions or vote; Don't have opportunities to speak for themselves and make decisions
- What kind of solutions? Community led?
- Opportunities to look into the census tracts in more detail – red covers like 80% of the city. Would like to see more nuance.

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Other Comments

- What is the name of the street between Stowell and Cook? Not noted on the map.
- Opportunities to explore the Green New Deal? Opportunities to take pieces of that and adapt to our community
- Tract 22.11 has a small area of Marian and some nicer houses. Wouldn't think that it would be.