



County of Santa Cruz Board of Supervisors

Agenda Item Submittal

From: County Executive Office

Subject: Proposed Operational Plan for Fiscal Years 2025-27

Meeting Date: May 6, 2025

Formal Title: Consider the proposed Santa Cruz County Operational Plan for Fiscal Years 2025-27, and take related actions

Recommended Actions

1. Accept and file the proposed Santa Cruz County Operational Plan for Fiscal Years 2025–2027; and
2. Direct the County Executive Office to return on June 24, 2025, with the final plan for Board approval.

Executive Summary

The 2025–27 Operational Plan is a blueprint to achieve the County's vision and mission of a healthy, safe, and more affordable community. A total of 80 new, measurable objectives across 21 departments set the foundation for high action and high alignment over the next two years. County staff and partners contributed to the objectives, guided by Board and community priorities, with priority focus on behavioral health, housing, infrastructure, and data sharing and analysis. The County Executive Office (CEO) requests Board consideration and feedback on the 2025–27 Operational Plan objectives, including any missing priority areas, and direct staff to return in June with a finalized plan for Board adoption.

Discussion

The Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan for 2018–2024, approved by the Board in June 2018, established a continuous improvement model anchored in the following strategic initiatives:

- Plan – Strategic Plan
- Do – Budget and Operational Plan
- Study – Performance Measurement
- Adjust – PRIMO! Process Improvement

The Plan and Do phases articulate County focus areas and goals and create specific, measurable objectives that align staff and resources to achieve results. The Study and Adjust phases generate data and learning, supporting continuous improvement. Since the start of these initiatives, the County has increasingly embedded equity principles throughout this cycle.

Do – Budget and Operational Plan

The budget remains the County's primary policy and financial document, while the Operational Plan provides a blueprint for how departments aim to deliver better services and results with their budgeted resources. Each department develops objectives designed to be achieved within two years, using the SMARTIE framework (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound, Inclusive, Equitable).

Operational Plan elements are defined as:

- Department Objectives – SMARTIE actions tied to countywide strategies.
- Key Steps – Activities necessary to achieve each objective.

The Operational Plan is a living document. Through the Vision Santa Cruz County website, the County tracks progress on each objective, with updates biannually in December and June.

Previous plans included:

- 2019-21 Operational Plan: 180 objectives (86% completed)
- 2021-23 Operational Plan: 147 objectives (86% completed)
- 2023-25 Operational Plan: 142 objectives (47% completed)
- 2025-27 Operational Plan: 80 proposed objectives

High Action, High Alignment

To strengthen the 2025-27 Operational Plan, the County applied the High Action/High Alignment (HA/HA) framework to the development of department objectives. The HA/HA framework encourages leaders to simultaneously strengthen the action they are taking toward measurable results and the alignment of their efforts with others working toward the same goals.

In practice, this means that departments evaluated their objectives not only based on their immediate activities but also on how well those actions complemented, leveraged, and reinforced Countywide priorities. Departments assessed whether their objectives were timely, sufficient in scale to drive meaningful change, and strategically connected to collective efforts. Departments also identified barriers, competing commitments, and opportunities for stronger alignment to ensure objectives would contribute to shared County results.

Through workshops and peer consultation, County staff developed the practice of asking:

- Is this objective moving meaningful action forward at a sufficient scale?
- Is this objective aligned with broader County strategies and efforts?

By embedding this High Action/High Alignment mindset, the County sharpened its focus on operational objectives that are both powerful on their own and strengthened through collaboration.

High Action, High Alignment in Strategic Initiatives

The application of HA/HA thinking in Santa Cruz County extends beyond departmental objectives to how work aligns with major County plans. Departments were encouraged to think broadly about alignment—not only to the Strategic Plan focus areas and goals, but also to the frameworks that guide the County's broader vision for community well-being, resilience, and equity.

Those plans include, but are not limited to:

- The Climate Action and Adaptation Plan (CAAP), particularly around energy resilience, emissions reduction, and environmental stewardship.
- The Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP), by advancing health equity, behavioral health access, and community well-being.

- The Master Plan for Aging (MPA), by supporting services and infrastructure that foster inclusive, age-friendly communities.
- The Housing for a Healthy Santa Cruz Strategic Framework, by addressing homelessness, affordable housing production, and housing stability.

This approach ensures that the County's operational objectives work in concert to deliver results that no one department could achieve alone.

2025-27 Operational Plan Development

To ensure High Action/High Alignment objectives in the 2025-27 Operational Plan, the CEO introduced two primary process improvements:

- HA/HA Workshops: Departments evaluated and refined their objectives at three workshops to increase both measurable impact and alignment with the Strategic Plan, Board priorities, and major countywide initiatives.
- SMARTIE Objective Feedback and Consultation: Each objective was reviewed by at least two staff from the County's Data and Equity team, and peer consultation meetings were held with each department to ensure that each objective reflects meaningful change.

Over 100 County staff participated across these outreach sessions. This deeper work on action, alignment, and equity marks a significant evolution in the County's operational planning maturity and resulted in a more focused set of proposed objectives based on key priorities.

Proposed Objectives and Final Plan

A total of 80 proposed objectives (Attachment A) were developed and released with the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025-26 Proposed Budget. This plan elevates focus on four key priority areas: behavioral health, housing, infrastructure, and data sharing and analysis.

Behavioral Health

Operational Plan objectives strengthen the County's behavioral health system of care, focusing on improving mandated services, supporting integration, and building system resiliency:

- Public Health (Objective 68): Expand youth programs and community engagement to prevent substance misuse.
- District Attorney (Objective 83): Evaluate efficacy of mental health courts with the goal of reducing recidivism by 10 percent.
- Human Services (Objective 75): Assist 100 percent of people in jail with determining Medi-Cal eligibility and enrollment.
- Behavioral Health (Objective 89): Increase access to behavioral health care services.

Housing

Operational Plan objectives build on emerging Board direction and focus on expanding affordable housing opportunities and supportive services:

- Community Development and Infrastructure (Objective 2): Increase the supply of housing across all affordability levels by supporting policies, funding, and developments that produce new units.

- Community Development and Infrastructure (Objective 3): Launch a new Fee Estimator tool to improve transparency, predictability, and trust in the development process.
- Housing for Health (Objective 78): Leverage local, State, and federal funding to preserve and increase the supply of affordable housing units.
- County Executive Office (Objective 87): Complete Permit Process Workplan for faster permitting and better customer experience.

Infrastructure

Operational Plan objectives prioritize the modernization and climate resilience of County infrastructure, including critical facilities and transportation networks:

- General Services (Objective 7): Reduce greenhouse gas emissions across facilities and fleet through low-cost investments aligned with the CAAP.
- Parks (Objective 13): Open a new park in South County to improve access to the outdoors.
- Agricultural Commissioner (Objective 21): Register and inspect 100 percent of EV charging stations for accuracy.
- Office of Response, Recovery, and Resilience (Objective 29): Launch public-facing mitigation program with a goal of enrolling 300 households.
- Community Development and Infrastructure (Objective 37): Repair/replace 1800 linear feet of culverts in flood-prone or geologically active areas.
- Community Development and Infrastructure (Objective 38): Complete restoration of roads and bridges damaged in 2017 storm.

Data Sharing and Analysis

Operational Plan objectives recognize the critical role of data in advancing equity, access, and public transparency, as well as the need to address and integrate artificial intelligence into County systems:

- Auditor (Objective 1): Launch updated human resources and payroll system to provide real-time data on the County workforce.
- Personnel (Objective 11): Improve internal collaboration to reduce recruitment timelines and strengthen service delivery.
- Public Defender (Objective 19): Implement new case management system that can better meet the holistic needs of clients.
- Information Services (Objective 30): Establish strategy for responsible adoption of artificial intelligence technologies.
- Human Services (Objective 76): Facilitate cross-departmental services, with client consent, through shared data on individuals with complex needs such as those experiencing housing instability, mental and behavioral health challenges, and the justice-involved.

Board Feedback and Final Plan

Today's agenda item presents the proposed 2025-27 Operational Plan for the Board to consider, accept and file. The CEO requests that the Board provide feedback on the proposed plan and any objectives that it would like to add or modify. Staff will then work on incorporating this feedback, in consultation with County departments, and return with the final plan for Board approval on June 24, 2025.

Bridging to the Strategic Plan Refresh

The 2025-27 Operational Plan also plays an important bridging role between the County's existing Strategic Plan (2018-2024) and the next Strategic Plan, which is currently under development.

By June 2026, the Board will consider a refreshed County Strategic Plan, based on extensive foundational review, community engagement, and alignment with updated community indicators. This refreshed Strategic Plan will outline new focus areas and goals to guide County operations into the next decade.

Following Board approval of the refreshed Strategic Plan, the County will use FY 2026-27 to transition and develop a new set of department objectives aligned with the updated focus areas, community indicators, and long-term goals.

This approach ensures continuity of operational focus and accountability during the Strategic Plan refresh period, while positioning the County to fully implement the new strategic priorities beginning with the 2027-29 Operational Plan cycle.

Financial Impact

There is no financial impact from the recommended actions. The FY 2025-26 Proposed Budget includes the proposed objectives, including any resources to implement them.

Strategic Initiatives

Equity Framework - Plans, Policies & Budgets

Operational Plan - Operational Excellence

Submitted By:

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Recommended By:

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Artificial Intelligence Acknowledgment:

ChatGPT 4o, an Artificial Intelligence (AI) large language model tool, significantly contributed to the development of this agenda item, including Staff Report, in compliance with the County of Santa Cruz AI Appropriate Use Policy.