



County of Santa Cruz Board of Supervisors

Agenda Item Submittal

From: County Administrative Office

Subject: County Strategic Initiatives Update

Meeting Date: January 28, 2025

Formal Title: Consider update on County strategic initiatives, including the County Strategic Plan refresh, County Operational Plan, and performance management, and take related actions

Recommended Actions

1. Accept and file update on County strategic initiatives, including an update on the County Strategic Plan refresh, and the biannual progress report on the County Operational Plan and performance management; and
2. Direct the CAO to return on or before August 19, 2025, with the next update.

Executive Summary

The County of Santa Cruz strategic initiatives develop and align leaders to achieve results for County residents and communities. In 2025 the County will refresh its Strategic Plan to create a road map for the next six years. The County Administrative Office (CAO) will work with the Board and community to refresh the County vision, mission, values, focus areas, and goals.

Additional updates in this memo include a biannual progress report on the County Operational Plan and building a County community of practice around accountability to results and continuous improvement.

Discussion

The Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan for 2018-2024 was approved by the Board in June 2018. Continuous improvement was a pillar of the Strategic Plan, and the County developed three strategic initiatives to embed a Plan-Do-Study-Adjust learning cycle across the County:

- 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, create specific, measurable objectives, and align county resources and staff to achieve results. The Study and Adjust phases create data, spark curiosity, and provide tools to improve processes that serve the community. Since the adoption of the Strategic Plan in 2018, the County has also moved to embed equity principles across the entire cycle.

The County's online budget presentation integrates with the [Vision Santa Cruz County website](#), and better demonstrates the relationship between the Strategic Plan, funding, operational objectives, and performance measurement.

Plan – County Strategic Plan and Equity Framework

The Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan for 2018-2024 was approved by the Board in June 2018. The plan was the result of a year-long effort led by the County Administrative Office (CAO) and the Strategic Plan Steering Committee (SPSC). The SPSC engaged with thousands of County residents and staff to develop a vision, mission, values, focus areas and goals. Each of the Strategic Plan's six focus areas contains four goals, for a total of 24, which are presented online at www.sccvision.us.

On October 3, 2023, the Board adopted a County Equity Statement. Developed in collaboration with over 1,000 staff and community members, the statement commits the County to put equity into action to foster an environment where everyone can thrive and belong. The equity statement was a first step in creating a broader equity framework. The County continues to collaborate and learn as it strengthens its practice and accountability to equitable results.

The County developed an equity inventory to identify over 130 projects or programs working towards more equitable systems. The CAO categorized these into six pillars of work:

- Community Engagement
- Communications and Education
- Leadership, Operations, and Services
- Workplace and Workforce
- Plans, Policies, and Budgets
- County Facilities and Infrastructure

Through these pillars the County will establish standards and guardrails that encourage staff to be data-driven, act on disparities, and collaborate with others to align work in each pillar and hold accountability to the equity statement.



Do – Budget and Operational Plan

The budget is the County’s primary policy document, funding services and programs that work towards achieving the County’s vision, mission, values, and goals. The budget provides a complete picture of County departments, the broad range of services they provide, and how those services are funded. In Fiscal Year 2022-23, the County transitioned its primary budget presentation to a [website](#), which allows for greater detail, transparency, and accountability.

The Operational Plan provides a blueprint for how departments aim to provide better services and results with their budgeted resources. Each department develops at least three Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound, Inclusive and Equitable (SMARTIE) objectives, designed to be completed within two years, that work towards achieving the County’s goals, mission and vision. Each objective identifies key steps or critical activities necessary to achieve the stated target.

The Operational Plan is a living document, and County successes and challenges will be transparent. Through the [Vision Santa Cruz County website](#), the County tracks progress on each objective, as well as local, State, and national indicators that demonstrate progress towards achieving the County’s goals, mission and vision. The website is refreshed biannually in December and June.

Study/Adjust – Performance Management

Performance management aims to shift County culture and systems to achieve equitable community results. These shifts are driven by data, implemented by staff empowered to do the work, in collaboration with the community.

The County uses two primary frameworks as resources for staff to make these shifts and work through difficult challenges:

- [Results Count](#) approach to leadership development through a partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- PRIMO! Santa Cruz, a lean six sigma process improvement approach.

The County has made significant investments in practicing these frameworks using tools that increase access and dignity within County programs and services. The County is expanding training, including deeper involvement of community partners. Training is only useful when put into practice, therefore the focus of performance management is to support as many staff and partners as possible to practice, to be accountable to each other, and deliver results that make the community better off.

Strategic Plan Refresh

The County of Santa Cruz continues to advance its strategic initiatives to align leadership, foster collaboration, and achieve measurable results for residents and communities. These initiatives ensure that County policies, programs, and resources align with community needs and aspirations. With the first County Strategic Plan completing its six-year cycle in 2024, efforts are now focused on refreshing the plan to guide the County's work from 2026 through 2032.

The Strategic Plan refresh will build on the existing foundation, ensuring that the County continues to focus on results that reduce disparities and increase opportunity. The CAO is committed to engaging the public, County boards, commissions and other advisory bodies, and the Board of Supervisors in shaping the next iteration of the Strategic Plan. Planning for public engagement will begin in early 2025, with the launch of a foundational review with internal staff and community listening sessions on the current plan. Additionally, in advance of public engagement, staff proposes embedding work on four new cornerstones:

- Transportation Prioritization and Capital Planning
- Behavioral Health Continuum of Care
- Land Use Planning and Housing Production
- Artificial Intelligence

Staff identified these cornerstones as a starting point to focus on areas where greater alignment is essential to achieve the results that we want. Additional guidance from the Board on the cornerstones and within the cornerstones is welcome. Work on each cornerstone will be brought to the Board individually, with the goal that each will provide additional context and tools for the Board and public to contribute to meaningful conversations and shared solutions.

Public engagement will be designed to gather diverse perspectives, building on the County's experience working on the County Equity Statement, and ensuring that the refreshed Strategic Plan reflects the needs and priorities of all County residents. The table below provides a high-level summary of the proposed timeline and key milestones for the Strategic Plan refresh.

Table 1: Strategic Plan Refresh Proposed Timeline

Quarter	Milestone
Winter 2025	Launch Board and internal staff listening sessions.
	Identify key achievements, challenges, and lessons learned.
Spring 2025	Finalize the synthesis report on the Strategic Plan's achievements, challenges, and lessons learned.
	Design outreach strategies and tools for the Strategic Plan refresh.
	Complete cornerstone work on Transportation Prioritization and Behavioral Health
Summer 2025	Plan for public engagement, focusing on inclusive and accessible methods.
	Develop framework for the Strategic Plan refresh based on the synthesis report.
	Complete cornerstone work on Planning and Artificial Intelligence
Fall 2025	Present framework to the Board of Supervisors and incorporate feedback.
	Launch community and staff engagement process to gather input for the Strategic Plan refresh.
Winter 2026	Begin drafting the refreshed Strategic Plan, incorporating community and staff input.
Spring 2026	Present proposed plan to the Board of Supervisors and incorporate feedback.
	Present final plan for Board approval and release to County staff, partners and the community.

Operational Plan Progress Update

The following analysis provides a brief summary of the County's performance on its [Operational Plan](#) as of December 31, 2024. Since the inception of the Operational Plan in 2019, the Board has approved 464 objectives, adding 134 in the last major two-year cycle update in June 2023.

- All-Time
 - 348 (74%) Completed
 - 259 (75%) Completed on time or within 6 months of original timeline
 - 54 (11%) In Progress
 - 33 (7%) Amended and In Progress
 - 34 (7%) Consolidated
- December 2024 Deadline
 - 9 Objectives were originally scheduled for completion
 - 6 (67%) Completed
 - 3 (33%) Amended and In Progress
 - 15 Objectives were amended to be completed by December 2024
 - 11 (73%) Completed
 - 3 (20%) Amended and In Progress
 - 1 (7%) Consolidated

Status of Existing Objectives

Since the last update in June 2024, 17 objectives have been completed including:

- *Objective 184: South County Services* – Auditor-Controller-Treasurer-Tax Collector served over 1,000 clients in the last six months at the South County Government Center, saving at least 2,000 trips to Santa Cruz, and increasing access to services for people in South County.
- *Objective 187: Agenda Management* – Clerk of the Board successfully completed a transition to a new agenda management software, reducing administrative load on departments, and increasing compliance with public meeting transparency requirements across all County boards and commissions.
- *Objective 376: Vote by Mail* – County Clerk Elections increased vote by mail ballots by 22% in the most recent election by building increased trust with the public and focused outreach to voters.
- *Objective 390: Procurement Diversity* – General Services increased vendor registrations from small and minority-owned businesses participating in County solicitations by over 134 vendors in the last 18 months.
- *Objective 457: Holistic Intakes* – Public Defender has achieved holistic intakes for clients on over 75% of their cases opened in 2024. Holistic intakes take a client-centered approach to keeping people connected to their families and communities while they are accused of a crime.
- *Objective 460: Jail Control System* – Sheriff-Coroner completed an update of its 30-year-old jail control and monitoring system, which will allow for continued safety and security of people working and living in jail.

A total of six objectives originally due to be completed by December 2024 have been further amended, primarily to provide additional time to departments to complete the work. Newly amended objectives include:

- *Objective 389: EV Charging Stations* – General Services is working to expand electric vehicle charging infrastructure in the County. A delay in grant funding for this project has pushed the implementation back. (*Amended to December 2025*)
- *Objective 418: Service Desk* - Information Services is implementing a new service desk system, and will begin working with a consultant in January 2025 to implement the project. (*Amended to June 2025*)
- *Objective 464: Tenant Support* - Human Services contracts with Tenant Sanctuary to provide eviction legal services. Currently about 87% of clients that receive services avoid formal eviction judgements on their records. Human Services requires additional time to validate the data reported from the program, and clients continue to be served through this contract. (*Amended to June 2025*)

One objective was consolidated in this cycle. Objective 205: *Safety Program* - General Services has been unable to retain a full-time safety officer to grow the role beyond

compliance with State and federal laws and expand it to training and measurable outcomes. When this position is filled, a revised objective will be written for Board consideration.

Development of New Objectives

The process to develop objectives for the 2025-27 Operational Plan is underway, emphasizing alignment with the County's strategic priorities and emerging issues. Staff are working collaboratively across departments and with community partners to ensure objectives are actionable, measurable, and reflective of our shared goals for the next two years.

Key priorities for the 2025-27 cycle include addressing the cornerstone areas, identified for the strategic plan refresh, that impact our community's well-being and the County's operational effectiveness:

- **Road Prioritization:** Recognizing the need for resilient infrastructure in the face of growing climate impacts, we are refining our road prioritization strategies to focus on equity, safety, and resiliency, ensuring that repairs and improvements benefit the most vulnerable and high-use areas.
- **Behavioral Health:** Expanding access to behavioral health services remains a top priority, with a focus on building a continuum of services within a dynamic and rapidly changing State and federal landscape, including significant changes to eligibility for services (like Proposition 43 which expands the definition of grave disability) and how those services are paid for.
- **Planning and Building Permit Improvements:** We are advancing efforts to streamline building permit processes by refining workflows, leveraging technology like the Camino platform for pre-clearance and submission, and addressing unique parcel conditions to make the permitting process more transparent and efficient for applicants.
- **Artificial Intelligence Integration:** Exploring the use of artificial intelligence to support County operations, from data analysis and customer service improvements to decision-making support and predictive modeling, with an emphasis on ethical implementation, data security, and transparency.

Additionally, in response to potential shifts in federal policies and funding under the new administration, the County is prioritizing flexibility and adaptive planning to navigate uncertainty. This includes proactive advocacy for local priorities and developing contingency plans to address possible funding changes or regulatory adjustments.

Proposed 2025-27 Operational Plan objectives will be presented with the FY 2025-26 Proposed Budget in April.

Community of Practice

Performance management at the County continues to focus on encouraging staff to practice new tools through small tests of change and leveraging results to scale and

accelerate their work Countywide. The County's framework for change remains informed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Results Count Leadership Program and lean performance improvement principles. Below is an update on recent achievements and upcoming opportunities.

Equity Expo

The inaugural Equity Expo was held in November 2024, with over 150 participants from County staff, community-based organizations, and local leaders. The event fostered new connections across organizations, geographies, and cultural backgrounds, demonstrating the County's commitment to building trust and alignment for equitable results.

To celebrate the success of this event and highlight the relationships and collaborations it created, we are hosting a **First Friday event on February 7, 2025**, inviting participants and community members to reflect on their shared contributions. The Expo's dynamic and interactive art piece, which continues to grow with contributions from staff and community members, will also be showcased at the event.

Annie E. Casey Foundation Partnership

In December 2024, 12 additional leaders (six County staff and six community partners) completed the Results Count Leadership Program, joining a growing community of practice that now includes over 60 members.

Thanks to an additional **\$100,000 grant** from the Casey Foundation, we are sustaining our work in 2025 through the following programs:

- **Four Results Count 101 two-day sessions:** Cross-department and multi-organizational teams working on major projects or emerging issues will be invited to participate in immersive leadership development sessions, resulting in project charters that will be supported by community of practice members through a six to nine-month implementation period.
- **Two continuous learning gatherings** for Results Count graduates to deepen connections and share progress.
- **Enhanced communication and storytelling efforts** to demonstrate the impact of Results Count in driving equitable results.

We look forward to continuing our partnership with the Casey Foundation to strengthen leadership, collaboration, and results throughout the County.

New Staff Resources

To support staff in their work, we have launched a new intranet site designed as a centralized resource for tools, training materials, and updates. Accompanying the site is a monthly newsletter that highlights success stories, upcoming training opportunities, and tips for incorporating results-based practices into daily work.

In addition, we've introduced virtual lunchtime sessions, held monthly, to help staff build new skills and create connections across departments. The first session will be held tomorrow, led by staff that have practical experience, and open to County staff as well as our nonprofit partner staff to support the County's commitment to fostering a collaborative work environment.

Performance Management

The PRIMO process improvement work continues to evolve as more staff are trained and best practices are identified. This year, cross training in process improvement has included staff in the Public Defender's Office, County Clerk, Health Services Agency, Personnel, Community Development and Infrastructure, and Auditor-Controller-Treasurer-Tax Collector. Staff from several departments have built upon PRIMO efforts and utilized their training by using various PRIMO tools to refine and standardize work.

Since the last Board report the PRIMO work has continued to be focused on contracting practices, CARE Act implementation, building permit processing, and the development of a building permit evaluation and pre-clearance web portal:

- *Contracting Practices*: Focused on standardizing contract processing and continuing agreements. Builds on Health Services' work with community-based non-profits, with recent emphasis on advanced payment analysis and best practices.
- *Community Assistance, Recovery and Empowerment (CARE) Act*: In collaboration with the Superior Court, County Counsel, Health Services and Public Defender staff have moved from theoretical to practical process flow maps, incorporating best practices from other counties. Standard practices and digital guides have been developed for Health Services and the Public Defender's teams, including all State-required reporting forms.
- *Building Permit Processing and Pre-Clearance Web Portal Development*: Developing standardized procedures for building permits, including pre-clearances from the environmental planning, zoning, and geology divisions. The Camino platform was upgraded to support building permit application pre-clearance and submission. The system can also alert applicants when discretionary permits are required. System testing has begun and the fee module and payment platform options are being evaluated by the Planning Division and ISD.

Financial Impact

County strategic initiatives are funded through the budget and are intended to be incorporated into departments' everyday work to realize better results for the community.

Strategic Initiatives

Equity Framework - Plans, Policies & Budgets
Operational Plan - Operational Excellence

Submitted By:
Carlos Palacios

Recommended By:

Carlos J. Palacios, County Administrative Officer

Artificial Intelligence Acknowledgment:

ChatGPT, 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.