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Report highlights factors of San Mateo County's sustainability

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What gets measured, gets managed. That's the philosophy that inspired Sustainable San Mateo County to begin its indicators report, said Executive Director Adrienne Etherton to a group of government and nonprofit workers Tuesday.

This week, SSMC launched its 2013 report, which offers a comprehensive look at factors that affect the county and individual cities. The indicators are a range of statistics on aspects from land usage and health insurance to carbon emissions and employment.

When the indicators report began 17 years ago, volunteers had to explain to the community what sustainability meant, said longtime SSMC Board Member Beth Bhatnagar. And now everyone thinks they know exactly what sustainability means, she said.

"Most people think of sustainability in terms of the environment and that's it," she said.

But community sustainability is much broader. It is also dependent upon the economy and social equity, she said.

The indicators report allows for the public to easily access information on items such as water usage and average commuter distances. Government officials and Realtors use these figures to know the ins and outs of their communities.

"Something will come up about transportation, about child care, and they can refer to it," said Bhatnagar.

The report is focused on "three E's": environment, equity and economy — which are deeply intertwined.

Bhatnagar described a dentist in Half Moon Bay who recently won an SSMC sustainability award. His dental work for low-income kids is an integral part of creating a sustainable community, she said.

"It helps kids get a good education," she said. "How are you going to get a good job if you are missing your front teeth?"

This year's report highlighted income inequality in the county.

Income inequality impacts health, education, corruption, social mobility and other issues, said lead researcher Tanja Srebotnjak, Ph.D., with the Ecologic Institute.

"It's not just about the money, it's about creating fair chances and lasting prosperity," she said.

About 95 percent of the data in the report is aggregated by volunteers who compile census, state, county and city data. The volunteers, who are high school students and adults, are each assigned a specific indicator such as pesticides, said Srebotnjak. The volunteer is then assigned to do the research on pesticide use in the county and then tell a story about what the real implications of pesticide use are for the community.

Some county statistics are already accessible online, but what SSMC's report does is make comparisons across cities on issues like education funding.

This year's report reveals the gaping difference in per-pupil school funding among cities: ranging from \$7,299 in the Millbrae Elementary School District to \$17,962 in the Woodside Elementary School District.

"It really is about closing the achievement gap ... so that race and zip code do not determine destiny," said

Gary Wadell, deputy superintendent in the San Mateo County Office of Education.

Sustainability indicators in the report also inform nonprofits working to provide basic needs. The Samaritan House uses SSMC's indicators for fundraising and educating the public, said Executive Director Kitty Lopez.

There is a disconnect between the federal poverty level and San Mateo County's level, she said. Many people think they are doing OK because they are making \$50,000 annually.

By looking at the Federal Poverty Level, that would seem to be true. For a family of three, the poverty level is an annual income of \$18,530.

Most clients of Samaritan House are well below this poverty level. But the SSMC report shows a different measure that takes into account the fact that San Mateo County has one of the highest costs of living in the country.

The report's "self-sufficiency standard" for a family of three in San Mateo County is a far cry from the federal standard: \$72,893.

"Most of our staff members would fit below that self-sufficiency standard," said Lopez.

Unlike the poor populations in San Francisco, San Mateo County's impoverished are not as visible. But Lopez said these people are in every community and struggle to find affordable housing.

She described a woman who recently lost her husband to lung cancer. She is now considering moving in with her daughter who lives in Washington state.

Another woman who is divorced was laid off from her real estate job. She was using her unemployment check to barely pay her \$1,500 a month rent.

"People are literally renting a couch for \$300 a month just to have a place to stay," she said.

"Right now the outlook is pretty bleak," said Joshua Hugg, program manager for the Housing Leadership Council.

The people who really make the county run can't afford to live here, he said.

Teachers and nonprofit, restaurant and retail workers find it challenging to pay the \$2,000 per month for a one-bedroom apartment on the Peninsula, he said.

The housing, employment and transportation figures in the indicators report reflect the county's options for providing affordable housing going forward. Simply waiting for housing prices to go down is not an option, said Hugg. Service workers can't compete with high-tech employees for housing.

"Natural affordability in this county is a thing of the past," said Hugg.

The county has exhausted all expansive development options and must intentionally create available housing for lower income levels, he said.

He proposed "infill" housing development projects in downtown and public transit areas.

Board members of Sustainable San Mateo County hope the resources in the report lead to better community management practices.

"It's not enough to just point out what these issues are," said Bill Schulte, board chair.

SSMC intends to follow up with cities and continue to spread the word, said Schulte.

Funding from cities, businesses and individuals has made the report possible, and volunteering by community members is vital to the continuation of the report, he said.

“We can only do this with your support and involvement,” he said.

To see data summaries or download a PDF of the entire “2013 Indicators for a Sustainable San Mateo” report, go to sustainablesanmateo.org.