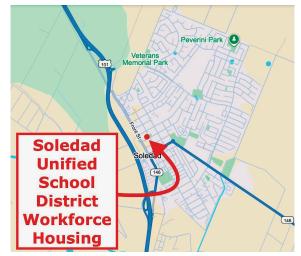
Salinas Valley CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

# BUSINESSJOURNAL

KSBW's Share Your Holiday Brings the Central Coast Together in the Spirit of Giving

A Season of Purpose: How Donating, Thrifting and Giving Time Can Redefine the Holidays page 26



Map of Soledad Unified School District Workforce Housing

### Workforce Housing Advances in Monterey County, Including at Soledad Unified School District

By Kevin Dayton, Government Affairs Liaison

undreds of people attended the three conferences/summits in November related to increasing the supply of housing in Monterey County that's affordable to ordinary individuals and households.

Participants at these gatherings occasionally cited current success stories of the two largest school districts in Monterey County in offering workforce housing to their certified staff (teachers) and classified staff (non-teaching

**HOUSING** see page 7

# **Regional Housing Summit in Salinas Tries to Push Beyond Talk into Action**

By Kevin Dayton, Government Affairs Liaison

our Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce was one of several organizations involved with the "2025 Regional Housing Summit" held on Wednesday, Nov. 5, in downtown Salinas. Hosted by the City of Salinas, the event was designed to attract "thought leaders, developers, policymakers, employers, and community practitioners" in housing.

Promotional material for the sold-out event declared the shortage of affordable housing as "one of the most urgent challenges facing our community." It was clear what the City of Salinas and its partners wanted to do through this summit: "spark innovative partnerships and advance actionable solutions that expand access to safe. affordable, and sustainable housing throughout Salinas and the surrounding region." More than "just talk," the summit was intended for



"catalyzing action toward a stronger, more inclusive future for all residents."

These purposes align with your Chamber's official vision of "a thriving, welcoming Salinas Valley where people, families and businesses succeed via economic growth and opportunity." Not surprisingly, numerous Chamber leaders and members were among the 155 attendees of the event.

Your Chamber also hosted the "Social Networking Hour" following the summit. It was meant as "an opportunity to connect, collaborate, and continue conversations about building a more affordable and sustainable housing future."

Salinas Mayor Dennis Donohue welcomed participants and asked them to use their diverse perspectives to

**SUMMIT** see page 5



# Thursday January 22, 2026 8:45 am - 2:45 pm





# 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Employment Law & Leadership Conference



### LITTLER'S EMPLOYMENT UPDATE

Presented by Marlene Muraco, Esq.

Keeping on the Path to Legal Compliance



### HR/LEGAL Q&A

Presented by Marlene Muraco & Melissa Irwin

Balancing Legal and Leadership Prospectives



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Presented by Michaelle Stanford

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### **Good News and Good Cheer from Monterey Regional Airport**

End-of-year Update: A Year of Transitions and Transformations

We're wrapping up another great year of transitions and transformations at Monterey Regional Airport (MRY). As we prepare to welcome the year-end holidays and say farewell to 2025, we want to recognize those who contribute to the airport's success, share recent air service and safety enhancements news, offer a giving opportunity for local troops, and provide travel tips for those flying through MRY.

### Community

We thank our community for continuing to choose MRY and letting us know where you want to go. Traveler feedback contributed to United Airlines recently announcing seasonal nonstop service to Chicago O'Hare International Airport (ORD) beginning in May 23, 2026. MRY is committed to bringing the world to our neighbors' doorsteps by delivering the nonstop destinations and airlines they want most.

### **Airport Tenants**

MRY partners that support commercial service and general aviation flights deliver a travel experience representative of our welcoming coastal vibe. We are grateful to our airlines, concessions, federal agencies, ground transportation providers, and fixed-base operators, who give their best every day so MRY passengers have a safe, secure, and efficient travel experience.

## Monterey Peninsula Airport District Board of Directors

The airport's board of directors have provided the vision and continue to guide the MRY Metamorphosis Safety Enhancement Program. Board members warmly welcomed some 150 community members during the MRY Metamorphosis



Monterey Regional Airport leadership, United Airlines staff, and tourism partners celebrate the announcement of new nonstop service to Chicago.

Open House on October 22, and proudly shared progress on the replacement passenger terminal complex and the new elevated travel experience when it opens in June 2027.

### **Airport Staff and Contracting Partners**

The MRY team and our contracting partners strive to deliver safety, security, and service excellence as we operate our busy airport while constructing a new passenger terminal and support facilities. The airport recently welcomed a state-of-the-art Aircraft Rescue and Fire Fighting truck, an important investment in protecting people and property during on-airport emergencies.

### **Treat our Troops**

MRY's annual Holiday Military Lounge, located on the terminal's second level, will be available to all active-duty military and their travel companions from December 17 through December 24, 2025. Troops traveling during holiday leave can enjoy complimentary meals, snacks and beverages—provided by Woody's at the Airport, other airport tenants, and community partners—in a

lounge space with comfortable seating and secure Wi-Fi. Meals are made possible through public donations. Learn how to contribute at montereyairport.com/holidaymilitarylounge.

### **Holiday Travel Tips**

Traveling to join loved ones for the holidays is made easier with planning and packing your patience. MRY reminds passengers to arrive at the airport early for an ontime departure. High passenger counts are expected between December 17, 2025, and January 4, 2026, and parking lots are expected to fill during peak travel days. We encourage those who live close to the airport to use ride share services or ask a friend to drop you off at MRY to keep parking spaces open for those who are traveling to the airport from farther distances.

Thank you for choosing MRY for your travel needs. We wish you and yours a happy holiday season and bright new year ahead.

### **Stay Informed During Construction**

As the MRY Metamorphosis continues, the airport team is committed to providing our customers with a convenient, hassle-free travel experience. Please visit montereyairport.com or follow @montereyairport on Facebook, Instagram, and X for travel advisories.

Learn more about MRY and the MRY Metamorphosis SEP at montereyairport.com/transform.





# 2025: A Transformative Year

By Leonard Batti, SVCC Board Chair

s I write my final column for the year, I look back with admiration and deep appreciation for the hard work of your Chamber staff and Board of Directors. We affectionately refer to Colleen, Gabe, Jasmine, and Cesar as the "small but MIGHTY staff," and

what they have accomplished this year is truly remarkable. A few highlights include the following:



This year's Annual Awards Luncheon drew more than 450 attendees to honor local businesses and individuals. We recently lost one of those individuals, friend and Salinas firefighter Josh Hostetter. We are profoundly grateful to have had the opportunity to honor Josh while he was still with us.

This year also marked the 15th Annual Legacy of Leadership Awards, which shifted its focus to philanthropy and community impact. The event once again sold out and brought together leaders from across the peninsula and the valley.

Your Chamber also produced two political events in 2025. The third annual Legislative Breakfast featured local, state, and national legislators. We also introduced Salinas Valley Speaks, a new event that brought together the mayors of each Valley city for a discussion on economic development. Moderated by County Supervisor Chris Lopez, the event sold out and will now be held annually.

#### **Economic Development**

Your Chamber has been deeply engaged in efforts to promote economic development in our community. We have cultivated partnerships with organizations, including SCCIA, See Monterey, the California Welcome Center, the Hartnell College Foundation, CSUMB, and the Parks



and Recreation Coalition.

We meet frequently with the Mayor, City Manager, and Assistant City Manager, and we have been invited to participate in the interview process for the City's new Economic Development Director. Your Chamber has also played an

active role in the City updates of the General Plan and Economic Development Element.

#### Housing

November was the City's "Housing Month," and your Chamber co-hosted the City of Salinas Regional Housing Summit as well as the Salinas Community Housing Action Plan event featuring speakers from Strong Towns and Incremental Development Alliance. In addition, we participated in the Regenerative California Workshops, contributing to important regional housing discussions.

### **SVCC Foundation**

This year, your Chamber placed renewed focus on the SVCC Foundation, reviewing and updating its bylaws and strengthening its Board of Directors. The Foundation appointed a dynamic committee to lead this year's Children's Shopping Tour, and preparations are underway for the launch of both the Junior Chamber and Career Pathways programs, which are designed to support the next generation of community leaders.

#### Membership

These efforts have contributed to an 80-percent increase in membership growth rate and close to 100 new members this year. Just as important, many existing members have increased their level of membership, which is an encouraging sign that your Chamber is delivering meaningful value.

### Retiring Board Members, Incoming Board Members, and Staff

I would also like to acknowledge the significant contributions of your Board of Directors this past year. Their thoughtful counsel has been invaluable to me and to Chamber staff

At the end of the year, we will say goodbye to Jennifer Williams, Tom Moran, and Amy Gibson, all of whom served on the Executive Board.

Amy, chair of the Events Committee, played a key role in elevating the professionalism of all of our signature events.

Tom, chair of the Finance Committee, brought clarity and integrity to our financial reporting and investment strategy.

Jennifer guided our Board through a time of transition and her leadership helped shape the Chamber's transformation. I personally appreciate her mentorship and friendship, and she will certainly remain on my speed dial!

One of Jennifer's most-lasting contributions was the hiring of Colleen Bailey, who has exceeded our hopes and expectations as our CEO. Colleen has immersed herself fully in all things Salinas Valley with an unwavering focus on member needs. She, along with Gabe, Jasmine, and Cesar, have worked tirelessly and always with a welcoming smile. I am deeply grateful for their dedication and positive energy.

As we look toward 2026, I am pleased to welcome our new board members: Juan Gonzalez, Hartnell College Dean of Career Technical Education and Workforce Development; Elizabeth Hall, Waste Management Public Sector Manager; and returning to the board, Chris Steinbruner, Steinbruner/Hill CPAs. Together with our returning board members and our exceptional team, the future looks bright for your Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Wishing you all a safe holiday season and a prosperous New Year, Leonard

### 2025 EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

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- Chair-Elect Aaron Johnson A Johnson Law Group
- Past Chair Jennifer Williams
  Natividad Foundation
- Vice Chair, GRC Amy Salmina Coast & Valley Properties
- Vice Chair, Membership Mark Kennedy Green Rubber Kennedy Ag
- Vice Chair, Events Amy Gibson Wescom Financial
- Vice Chair, Finance Tom Moran Retired

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### **CHAMBER PRIORITIES**

CREATING A STRONG LOCAL ECONOMY • PROMOTING THE COMMUNITY • PROVIDING NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES • POLITICAL ACTION • REPRESENTING THE INTERESTS OF BUSINESS WITH GOVERNMENT

### SUMMIT - from page 1

"establish a narrative" of innovation and regulatory reform for housing to move forward.

# Challenges, Opportunities Facing Cities in Addressing Housing Demand

California-based economist, demographer, and urban studies specialist Joel Kotkin was the keynote speaker. Using numerous slides, he explained data trends that revealed probable causes of the housing shortage for ordinary middle class households. Not surprisingly, reluctance of state and local leaders to promote supply that meets demand results in scarcity and high costs.

Middle class families realize the quality of life that they desire and expect is not attainable under the current social vision of California's leaders. This vision tends toward high density development and away from single-family housing with a yard and institutes numerous obstacles to building one. So people move elsewhere to get it. California is no longer a beacon of ambition for the American middle class.

Generally, California's efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in pursuit of slowing climate change has compromised the state's dominance in manufacturing and eliminated middle class jobs. Instead, the state's demographics tendencies are toward wealthy people and a lot of people with low wages who are assisted by the state's welfare system. This encourages luxury housing on one end and a focus on low-income housing and rent control on the other end. The middle is missing.

Kotkin contended that Salinas may have more potential for future middle class housing than other regions of California. The dominant economic activity of agriculture actually produces a tangible product, and technological advancements to keep that industry competitive can be developed locally with a trained local workforce. There is also a strong



Chamber CEO Colleen Bailey greets Gilbert Ramos, Senior Field Representative for California State Assemblymember Robert Rivas. Credit: S. Rome

sense of community not seen in the major metropolitan areas of coastal California. Downtown Salinas has noticeably improved and seems vibrant. Things are looking positive.

## Housing Landscape: State and Regional Tools for Local Action

Following Kotkin's presentation, four panelists provided a comprehensive overview of California's current housing landscape and obstacles to construction. Panelists identified land

costs, abuse of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and public policy preferences for density housing (in defiance of apparent market demand for

single-family detached houses) as reasons why housing for the middle class is not built in California. They also asserted that "people in their 30s and 40s see that California will never provide the opportunity" for owning a house, and therefore they leave the state.

One panelist emphasized that ordinary people need to build "a



Salinas Mayor Dennis Donohue made opening and closing remarks for the regional housing summit. Credit: S. Rome

movement" to petition their local elected officials to support construction of housing they can afford to buy. Currently, people who influence their local elected officials often have different or opposing priorities and interests related to housing.

Like Kotkin, these panelists observed the dominant agricultural industry as a strength and an anchor for new housing construction in Salinas that's affordable to ordinary people. The community needs to

make sure their local governments avoid adopting policies that undermine potential housing development.

### Building Housing in Salinas and

### **Tri-County Region**

In the first afternoon session, housing developers described their challenges in getting projects approved, financed, and built. On a positive note, the City of Salinas is getting close to seeing a significant increase of housing construction in the "Future Growth Area" with its West Area Specific Plan and Central

Area Specific Plan north of Boronda Road. It has taken more than 20 years to get from concept to the final government approval to build.

Obstacles have included the Great Recession of the late 2000s/early 2010s, new state regulations that forced changes to the project, and lawsuits from school districts claiming that environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) was deficient. (The school districts were using CEQA lawsuits as a tactic to pressure home builders to agree to pay "developer fees" to the school districts that would be higher than the amounts set by the state.)

Likewise, the Vista Lucia Project proposed in the City of Gonzales has been in the planning stage for 30 years. Even now, opponents are strategizing to use the government approval process to stop the project, as the Monterey County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) still needs to approve city annexation of the land from the county.

Basically, planning and building housing is a long, tedious, and expensive process, with numerous opportunities for opponents, competitors, and critics to delay or stop the process. All of this happens while the developer is not generating any revenue from the project.

### **Innovative & Workforce Housing**

The final panel discussion revolved around how the region can use creativity and innovation to supply housing that's affordable for ordinary people. Panelists tried to identify common elements that seem to result in successful projects.

Motivation of the owner to maintain a high-quality workforce appears to be an important factor in moving a housing project from conception to occupation. For example, the Salinas Union High School District bought 50 units of housing for its teachers and classified staff in 2023 based on the belief that the district-owned housing would be a "talent strategy" for the district to recruit and

It was clear what the City of

Salinas and its partners wanted

to do through this summit: 'spark

innovative partnerships and

advance actionable solutions that

expand access to safe, affordable,

and sustainable housing throughout

Salinas and the surrounding region.'



As chair of the Chamber board for 2025, Leonard Batti has maintained housing supply as a top government affairs priority for the Chamber. Credit: S. Rome

retain teachers and classified staff. In turn, this would theoretically provide students with a higher quality education. This school district also offers its workforce housing units at 70% of market value, with the intent of encouraging employee-tenants to save money for a period of up to five years so they have a downpayment for homeownership.

The same motivation is happening with major agricultural companies. Starting with Tanimura & Antle in 2016, several companies in the Salinas Valley have built housing for migrant and permanent farmworkers to help them be healthier and happier. Panelists contended that more major Monterey County employers need to become aware of how the lack of affordable housing is hindering their productivity and the effectiveness of their employees. Smaller businesses should be seeking opportunities to collaborate with other businesses to obtain and offer workforce housing. "We need to get

more companies to take ownership for the housing situation of their employees," one panelist said.

Setting up timelines for the permitting process is an important way to speed up approval of housing projects while reducing costs. From grant application to final approval, individual affordable housing projects should be proposed and arranged in a sequential series so government personnel can work on permitting at a consistent rate. Developers should avoid submitting multiple projects at the same time and also avoid long idle periods when no applications are submitted.

It was observed that if an applicant submits a series of projects that are generally the same, staff is able to approve the projects increasingly quickly, because through experience they've learned the answers to typical questions and concerns about that kind of project. (For this to happen, the government entity need to retain its own permitting department staff and avoid constant employee

turnover.) Pre-approved plans for Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) can greatly reduce planning time, although not every person wants a standardized design for their ADU.

Panelists believed that getting all involved parties together in a room to plan a timeline of actions toward project approval can speed up the approval process. This can be effective for employees of different departments at one local government or for employees of different local governments that have a role in the permit process.

That kind of cooperation and communication seems obvious, but some employees of local governments prefer to do their own thing. Even worse, some employees tend to regard a 30-day time limit for responding to an application as a directive to wait until the 30th day to respond. This is a problem related to internal culture.

One way to get around the frustrating delays in the permit process is to avoid "discretionary" approvals and instead obtain "ministerial" approvals when possible. This circumvents the seemingly endless public hearings that often do nothing to improve the project. People involved in these hearings sometimes are using the permitting process to stop the project rather than trying to make it better.

Land can be acquired by transferring municipal activities (such as corporation yards) from the center of a jurisdiction to the outskirts, with the newly available land becoming a site for housing. Community land trusts and bond measures also provide funding for land and construction.

### Did the Summit "Establish a Narrative" of Innovation and Regulatory Reform for Housing to Move Forward?

The summit provided an outstanding opportunity for networking among people familiar with the opportunities and challenges of housing policy and housing construction. This is how introductions are made that eventually lead to land availability, capital flow and financing, demand

assessment, design innovations, and policy reform. And for attendees who did not know much about housing, the summit provided a base of knowledge about the problems and the possible solutions.

However, the summit did not dwell on how housing advocates should address the influential factions in California that remain intent on stopping new housing construction, whether it is a neighborhood of single-family detached homes, a four-story building with density units, or an accessory dwelling unit in someone's backyard. Many Californians don't want more people living near them. California has plenty of laws they can exploit to delay unwanted proposed projects and increase costs until the projects are financial infeasible.

Even among attendees of the summit, there were fundamental differences. A contingent of attendees sincerely believed that housing reform must begin with government strictly limiting the ability of property owners to increase rents on their tenants. When the newly elected New York City mayor was mentioned during the conference, a scattering of applause and cheers was heard in the room. Meanwhile, a few panelists insisted that rent control/rent stabilization undermines efforts to increase housing supply and erodes efforts to increase the amount of well-paid jobs — a necessary component of increasing home ownership.

Finally, some people already very familiar with housing policy asked if the summit went beyond "just talk" into the arena of "catalyzing action toward a stronger, more inclusive future for all residents." The people who believe rent control is a key solution to housing affordability were effective in "catalyzing action" for people who already rent in the City of Salinas.

Whether or not the summit results in the construction of even one additional residential unit remains to be seen. More work needs to be done, with the active involvement and leadership of your Chamber.





Soledad Unified School District workforce housing under construction.

HOUSING - from page 1

support roles). Salinas Union High School District (15,813 students) began renting 50 units to its employees in May 2023. Monterey Peninsula Unified School District will begin renting 64 units to its employees in December 2025, and lottery results for applicants to rent these units were certified on Nov. 6, 2025.

Both of these school districts circumvented the challenges of project approval and construction by obtaining apartment complexes



already built by private companies under already-completed environmental review and already-awarded permits. In addition, the school districts solved their dilemma of financing by asking voters to pay for it by approving a bond measure—that is, authorization for the district to borrow money from investors and pay it back over time, with interest, through property tax assessments. The school boards unanimously supported the proposals, and the school districts avoided costly and time-consuming litigation and political controversy.

There's a third, smaller school district in Monterey County pursuing workforce housing. In the case of Soledad Unified School District (4,744 students), the district decided to build its workforce housing itself in cooperation with the City of Soledad. The Soledad Workforce Housing Project with 20 units will be located on infill property formerly owned by the City of Soledad, at 183 Soledad St.

In November 2020, 62.86% of voters in the Soledad Unified School District approved Measure N, a ballot measure authorizing the district to borrow \$13.75 million via bond sales for construction. The ballot measure included authorization for the district to use proceeds from its bond sales "to enhance Soledad's ability to attract and retain highly qualified employees by constructing local teacher-staff rental housing."

Ground-breaking occurred on May 9, 2025. Now, at the end of 2025, completion of the project is in sight. Framing for the first floor was completed in October, and the second-floor framing and roofing is underway, along with installation on the mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems. The school district is intent on having the project completed in August 2026 to provide teachers and classified staff an opportunity in the 2026-2027 school year to rent units at

below-market rates.

It has taken several years for the school district to get from concept to completion. The school board received a survey about workforce housing in July 2019 and a feasibility study in October 2019. Obstacles to starting this project after voters approved the 2020 bond measure

were outlined in the November 2024 Business Journal article "Partnerships in the City of Soledad Between the City and School District." Even

now, challenges remain.

When construction started, two tanks were unexpectedly discovered on the site and had to be removed. One was a 6,000-gallon gasoline underground storage tank and the other was a 100-gallon underground storage tank containing unknown material, likely diesel or used/waste oil. Soil around the tanks needed to be tested for contaminants.

This is an example of why "infill" development on previously used parcels in urban areas is not as easy as some people assume. If there had been opponents of the workforce housing, it's conceivable they would have been able to exploit the discovery of these tanks to try to delay or undermine the project.

Then there is the always-dominant matter of construction costs and who pays for them. On Aug. 6, 2025, the Soledad City Council discussed a request from the Soledad Unified School District to waive city-mandated development impact fees for the staff housing project.

While sympathetic to the fiscal challenges of the school district in building its workforce housing project, the city council acknowledged that the city itself was not in a financial position to waive the fees, which the city intends to use

to pay for its own costs related to the development. Instead, the city council agreed to work with the school district on figuring out ways to obtain a loan with favorable interest rates.

To prepare for any additional complications, the school board voted on Nov. 12, 2025, to estab-

In the case of Soledad Unified

School District (4,744 students),

the district decided to build its

workforce housing itself

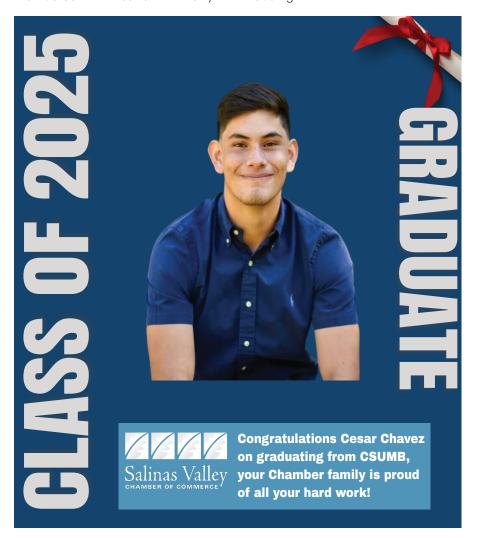
in cooperation with the

City of Soledad.

lish a Workforce
Housing Board
comprising
board members, district
employees, and
members of the
public. It will
provide advice
and reports

to the district on project development, operation, and management. Their responsibilities include communication with any third-party property management entities, providing regular updates to the school board, and ensuring the project is effective in its purpose of attracting and retaining qualified employees.

It's possible that the next Monterey County school district to acquire workforce housing will be the North Monterey County Unified School District. On March 13, 2025, the school board approved a feasibility study for workforce housing at the site of the deteriorating former Moss Landing Middle School, which closed in 2005. The board then approved a workforce housing committee in May. The board may propose a bond measure in 2026 to voters that would include authorization to use proceeds from bond sales for building workforce housing. #



# KSBW's Share Your Holiday Brings the Central Coast Together in the Spirit of Giving

By Cristal Hamer, KSBW 8

n Friday, Dec. 12, KSBW 8 will once again team up with The Salvation Army to make a meaningful impact across the Central Coast through the beloved community tradition, KSBW's 39th Annual Share Your Holiday.

This event has become a cornerstone of generosity in Monterey, Santa Cruz, and San Benito counties, reminding us all that the holidays are about caring for our neighbors and lifting one another up.

Throughout the day, KSBW will inspire viewers to open their hearts by donating non-perishable food, unwrapped toys, and financial gifts at one of the five drop-off locations on the Central Coast: Raymond Costa Family McDonald's at 1711 Airline Highway in Hollister; Graniterock at 1755 Del Monte Ave. in Seaside; Capitola Mall on 41st Avenue in Capitola; Elks Lodge at 121 Martinelli St. in Watsonville; and KSBW Studios at 238 John St.



in Salinas.

Donations of cash and checks will be accepted from noon to 8 p.m. Credit card contributions can be made by calling the toll-free number shared during KSBW's Share Your Holiday broadcasts or online by visiting ksbw.com/shareyourholiday.

### **Every Dollar Stays Local**

Every dollar and donated item



The Salvation Army Salinas Corps takes in donations at the KSBW 8 television studios parking lot.



KSBW Action News 8 Anchors Dan Green and Erin Clark host the live Share Your Holiday broadcast.

stays right here on the Central Coast, providing food, clothing, rent assistance, and toys for those in need. This sense of community connection is what makes Share Your Holiday so special.

"Share Your Holiday kind of kicks off the giving season for the Central Coast," shared Lt. Katherine Hernandez of The Salvation Army Salinas Corps. "It's

been something that's become a staple in our community for many, many years. It's huge, people come together from all over."

In 2024, more than \$220,000 was raised through donations, along with 4,000 toys and 2,800 pounds of food collected at dropoff sites. "It's lovely to see them drive through the various locations

and deliver the items that they've purchased and want to donate. It just really warms our heart to feel that love from the community, the giving, the generosity, it all comes together on that day," said Hernandez.

This event has become a cornerstone of generosity in Monterey, Santa Cruz, and San Benito counties, reminding us all that the holidays are about caring for our neighbors and lifting one another up.

# Community Partnership and Sponsors

Laura Williamson, KSBW 8 President & General Manager.

emphasized the importance of the station's continued partnership with The Salvation Army: "KSBW's collaboration with The Salvation Army provides essential support to people on the Central Coast during the holidays. We deeply appreciate our community's commitment

KSBW see page 13







### The og Companies Addresses Phased-out Closure of Braga Fresh /Spreckels

According to Tim Stejskal, CEO of The og Companies – comprised of recently acquired Braga Fresh, organicgirl LLC and Dole/Bud Antle — a unified management team has been working diligently to integrate capabilities in processing, manufacturing, logistics and operations while working toward a larger vision to achieve excellence in quality, consumer-focused enhancements, customer service and team empowerment.

As a result, he reports it has become necessary to gradually phase out the Braga facility in Spreckels. Volume from Braga Spreckels will be moved to other locations in the network in phases that began the week of Nov. 10, impacting approximately 21 employees, with another phase anticipated in mid-January 2026 impacting approximately 15 employees and additional phases with timing to be determined until a planned 2026 completion, impacting the estimated remaining 200 employees.

Employees have been informed and throughout the phase-out the company is committed to working closely with them in an environment of respect, fairness and support. To date, the company has already hosted a comprehensive Job Fair, provided information about available opportunities and the job application process and is coordinating resources with local municipal, government and related services.

For impacted customers, account services representatives are working on an individualized basis to ensure a seamless approach to transitioning volume throughout the broader network.



### **New Well Registration Program Aims to Protect Monterey County Groundwater**

The Monterey County Water Resources Agency (MCWRA) and the Salinas Valley Basin Groundwater Sustainability Agency (SVBGSA) launched a new well registration program to better understand and protect groundwater resources in the Salinas Valley. All well owners are asked to register their wells for free by Jan. 31, 2026. The program, approved by the Monterey County Board of Supervisors earlier this year, is part of a statewide requirement under California's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), which calls for all groundwater basins to be monitored to ensure long-term sustainability for all users. The new registration effort focuses on smaller residential wells, which are often the most vulnerable during periods of declining groundwater levels. However, all types of wells are encouraged to register. "Private well owners are among those most at risk when groundwater levels drop," said Ara Azhderian, MCWRA general manager. "By registering wells and understanding their characteristics, we can make sure local management decisions protect these wells and the people who depend on them." Residential wells are typically more shallow than agricultural or municipal wells, making them more susceptible to going dry when groundwater levels fall. Accurate data on where these wells are located helps local agencies better understand and manage groundwater resources, otherwise local agencies may be managing for the wrong conditions. "The more we know about our groundwater conditions, the better we can protect the shared resource," said Piret Harmon, SVBGSA general manager. "This program is not about imposing new burdens on groundwater users. It's about making sure local data supports local solutions." Under the legal requirements of SGMA, every groundwater basin in California must account for all groundwater users and uses. Well registration is a critical step in building that understanding. MCWRA and SVBGSA are partnering to improve the collection and storage of regional groundwater data through the Groundwater Monitoring Program (GMP). The GMP includes well registration, along with groundwater level, groundwater pumping and groundwater quality monitoring for seawater intrusion. This data will help refine groundwater models, improve monitoring accuracy, and inform the sustainable management plans that guide local decision-making.



### NHEH Honored at National Philanthropy Day

The Philanthropic Corporation of 2025 honor was presented to the law firm Noland, Hamerly, Etienne & Hoss at a luncheon at the Inn at Spanish Bay on Nov. 14. This annual awards event is a nationwide effort to recognize nonprofit organizations, individuals and companies who serve the charitable, educational, cultural and well-being needs of their communities. The event was presented by the Association of Fundraising Professionals, Monterey Bay Chapter. Attorney Danny Little accepted the award and spoke of NHEH's long history as a significant contributor to nonprofit community causes throughout Monterey County.

Left, Noland, Hamerly, Etienne & Hoss attorney Danny Little accepted the crystal award as the Philanthropic Corporation of 2025 at a luncheon Nov. 14.



### MONTEREY COUNTY GIVES! Monterey County Gives! Campaign Empowers Year-End Generosity

As the season of gratitude and giving unfolds, Monterey County residents have a powerful opportunity to make an important difference. The annual Monterey County Gives! (MC Gives!) year-end giving campaign, which opened Nov. 13, and goes through Dec. 31, 2025, offers individuals and businesses the chance to amplify their year-end contributions and support 213 local nonprofits working to strengthen our communities. Participating nonprofits span five key areas: Animals; Arts & Culture; Community & Social Services; Education & Youth; Environment & Sustainability and Health, Wellness & Food. Every gift made through the campaign receives a partial match — up to the first \$75,000 raised by each participating organization — thanks to a generous matching fund supported by local individuals, foundations and businesses. Gifts can be made securely online at MontereyCountyGives.com, including gifts of appreciated stock or IRA Qualified Charitable Distributions providing flexible and tax-wise ways to give to multiple nonprofits through a single contribution. The impact of MC Gives! continues to grow. In 2024, the campaign raised \$14.2 million from more than 8,000 generous donors. Since its inception in 2009, it has granted over \$82 million to hundreds of nonprofits across Monterey County. MC Gives! is a collaborative effort of the Community Foundation for Monterey County, the Monterey County Weekly, and the Monterey Peninsula Foundation. Donors to the matching fund provide vital support including: Taylor Farms, Neumeier Poma Investment Counsel, Post Ranch Inn, Colburn and Alana Jones Foundation of the CFMC, David & Lucile Packard Foundation, Cannery Row Company, Cort Companies, Harden Foundation, Montage Health and two anonymous donors.



### Salinas Valley Health Launches MyChart Across Medical Center

Salinas Valley Health has launched a new era of providing patients with coordinated, patient-centered care across its entire network of care with the launch of MyChart at Salinas Valley Health Medical Center. The expansion of MyChart connects hospital services with Salinas Valley Health's extensive network of primary and specialty clinics - giving patients total connection with every record in one place. MyChart provides patients secure, 24/7 access to their health information and care team. The platform simplifies the way patients manage their care by bringing together hospital and clinic records into one secure, easy-to-use portal.

Through MyChart, patients can:

- View test results, imaging reports, surgery notes and visit summaries.
- Request appointments and prescription refills.
- Complete forms and update information before visits.
- Manage your account by paying and viewing statements securely online.

"This launch represents a complete integration of technology that brings care together," said Allen Radner, MD, Salinas Valley Health President/CEO. "This effort is a best practice among high performing healthcare systems to support patients and provider communication. With MyChart, patient care is smarter, faster, and more connected than ever before." The new system enhances safety and quality by ensuring doctors, nurses, and specialists all have access to the same up-to-date medical information, no matter where patients receive care within the extensive Salinas Valley Health network. This connection helps reduce duplicate testing, improves communication, and supports care transitions between providers and services. "MyChart is more than a patient portal — it's smarter care through seamless connection," said Tim Albert, MD, Chief Clinical Officer at Salinas Valley Health. "Our physicians, nurses, and staff devoted months of preparation and training to ensure a smooth transition. Their commitment means our patients benefit from day one." Salinas Valley Health's expansion of MyChart system wide reflects an ongoing commitment to innovation and delivering quality care to everyone in the community. Current MyChart users will notice increased access to all of their important health information and gives non-users another reason to consider the many benefits of MyChart enrollment.

## IRS Announces 2026 Contribution Limits

By Ryan Hastie, Hastie Financial

he IRS recently announced its long-awaited 2026 contribution limits — delayed due to the government shutdown — for retirement plans and individual retirement accounts (IRAs).

For 2026, the annual contribution limit for employees participating in their employer's retirement plan (i.e., 401(k) and 403(b) plans) has been increased to \$24,500, up from \$23,500 in 2025. The catch-up contribution limit (which generally applies to employees age 50 and over) has been increased to \$8,000. up from \$7.500 for 2025, for a total of \$32,500. Under a change made in SECURE 2.0, a higher catchup contribution limit — known as a "super" catch-up — applies to employees age 60, 61, 62 and 63. For 2026, this "super" catch-up contribution limit remains \$11,250. making the total limit \$35,750 for those in the 60-63 age range.

The limit on annual contributions to an IRA has been increased to \$7,500, up from \$7,000 in 2025. The IRA catch-up contribution limit for individuals age 50 and over has been increased to \$1,100, up from \$1,000 for 2025, for a total of \$8,600.



Taxpayers can deduct contributions made to a traditional IRA if certain conditions are met. If, during the year, either the taxpayer or the taxpayer's spouse was covered by a retirement plan at work, the deduction may

be reduced, or phased out, until it is eliminated, depending on filing status and income. If neither the tax-payer nor their spouse is covered by an employer's retirement plan, the phase-outs of the deduction do not apply. The phaseout ranges for 2026 are as follows:

For single taxpayers covered by a workplace retirement plan, the phase-out range is increased to between \$81,000 and \$91,000, up from between \$79,000 and \$89,000 for 2025.

For married couples filing jointly, if the spouse making the IRA contribution is covered by a workplace retirement plan, the phase-out range is increased to between \$129,000 and \$149,000, up from between \$126,000 and \$146,000 for 2025. For an IRA contributor who is not covered by a workplace retirement plan, the phase-out range is increased to between \$242,000 and \$252,000, up from between \$236,000 and \$246,000 for 2025.



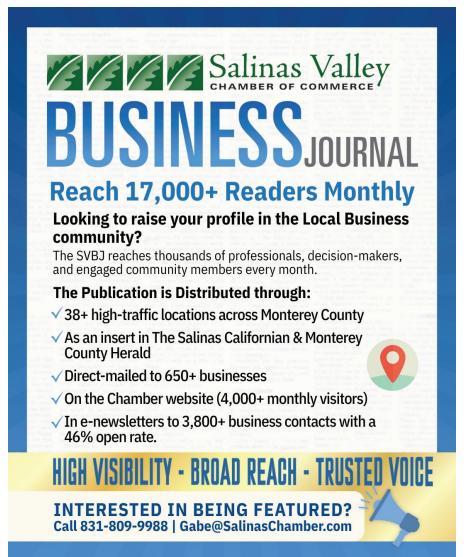
For a married individual filing a separate return, who is covered by a workplace retirement plan, the phase-out range is not subject to an annual cost-of-living adjustment and remains between \$0 and \$10,000.

The IRS places limits on the ability to contribute to a Roth IRA based on household income. The income phase-out range for taxpayers making contributions to a Roth IRA is increased to between \$153,000 and \$168,000 for single filers and heads of household, up from between \$150,000 and \$165,000 for 2025.

For married couples filing jointly, the income phase-out range is increased to between \$242,000 and \$252,000, up from between \$236,000 and \$246,000 for 2025. The phase-out range for married individuals filing a separate return who make contributions to a Roth IRA is not subject to an annual cost-of-living adjustment and remains between \$0 and \$10,000.

Ryan Hastie, CFP®, AIF®, CPFA®, is a Partner and

Investment Advisor with locally owned Hastie Financial Group and can be contacted at ryan. hastie@hastiefg.com.





#### Lunch and Learn with PG&E

PG&E hosted an informative session on Fleet Electrification and free EV Advisory Services, helping local businesses explore transitioning to electric vehicles. Attendees learned about site readiness, funding, charging infrastructure, and making cost-effective, low-risk decisions to meet clean transportation goals.



## UnitedAg Celebrates Salinas Membership Office & Wellness Clinic Grand Opening Event

UnitedAg celebrated the opening of its new Membership Office & Wellness Clinic in Salinas, bringing together community members and leaders for networking, food, and raffles. Guests met the regional team and learned about UnitedAg's commitment to keeping California's agricultural community healthy and strong.



### **Northridge Mall and Chamber Mixer**

Guests enjoyed an evening of networking while learning about exciting upcoming plans and improvements coming to the mall. Co-Chair of the Children's Shopping Tour, Manny Escarcega, also shared a powerful message on the importance of donating, volunteering, and giving back -and the meaningful impact it has on local youth. A heartfelt thank-you to all the businesses that generously donated silent auction items: Lenscrafters, Jamba Juice, Old Navy, Stuffies Claw Arcade, Bath & Body Works, Macy's, Zales, Five Below, Planet Fitness, Monterey Touring Vehicles, Baker's Bacon, and Monterey Bay FC.

### KSBW - from page 9

to assisting those in need and are grateful for their generosity."

The six sponsors of Share Your Holiday play vital roles in helping neighbors in need across the Central Coast: California Giant Berry Farms, Carmel Stone Imports, First Alarm, Graniterock, Raymond Costa Family McDonald's, and Scudder Roofing.

### Join the Celebration

Whether you give in person or online, your donation makes a lasting difference. Watch Friday, Dec. 12 at 12:00 p.m., 5:00 p.m., and 6:00 p.m. live on KSBW 8 or Central Coast ABC. You can also stream live on the free Very Local app, available on your mobile device or smart TV.



Volunteers will man the phone bank inside the KSBW 8 studios from noon - 8:00 p.m.



# GOVERNMENT NEWS

# What's Your Chamber's Government Relations Committee Talking About This Month?

# **DECEMBER 2025**

By Kevin Dayton, Government Affairs Liaison

our Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce Government Relations Committee had 19 members at its meeting on Wednesday, Nov. 12, as it continues to pursue your Chamber's official vision of "a thriving, welcoming Salinas Valley where people, families and businesses succeed via economic growth and opportunity." Here's what they discussed:

1 Salinas City Manager Rene
Mendez provided an update to
the committee about several city
priorities. These are listed below. Assistant City Manager Lisa
Murphy and Finance Director Selina
Andrews attended with the city
manager to provide supplemental
comments. Committee members
thanked these three city officials for
attending the meeting and answering tough questions.

2 In 2026, the City of Salinas will begin preparing biennial budgets instead of annual budgets. This means budgets will plan for a two-year period instead of a one-year period. A two-year budget will allow the city to plan its operations for a longer period and also reduce staff and council time spent on budget development.

Right now, the City of Salinas operates under a budget developed by staff and approved by the Salinas City Council for one year: Fiscal Year 2025-2026. Next year, the Salinas City Council will adopt a budget developed by staff for a

two-year period: Fiscal Years 2026-2027 and 2027-2028. The City of Salinas fiscal year begins on July 1 of each year and ends on June 30 of the following year.

3 The budget outlook for the City of Salinas appears to be stable, without any major immediate risk of city spending exceeding revenue and thus creating a budget deficit. In fact, there may be additional unexpected revenue available this year for additional street improvements under the five-year Capital Improvement Program (CIP) budget, which is a separate budget from the general budget.

However, if voters in the City of Salinas decide in 2026 (and/or 2028) not to authorize the city to continue collecting revenue now obtained through the existing but soon-to-expire Measure G sales tax, the city would lose a significant amount of revenue starting in 2030. In Fiscal Year 2025-2026, Measure G is expected to provide \$36.1 million for the city.

Voters approved Measure G in November 2014. It authorized the city to collect for 15 years a sales tax of 1 percent, or 1 cent per every dollar for a use or transaction in the city.

**5**Measure G established a citizens oversight committee for the sales tax. The City of Salinas will soon provide this committee with an annual independent audit report

on revenues and expenditures for 2024.

Measure G outlines "the scope of the committee's responsibilities, which at a minimum shall include reviewing the annual auditor's report regarding the receipt and use of revenue from the tax..." It also states that "By no later than March 31 of each year after the operative date, the City's independent auditors shall complete a report reviewing the collection, management and expenditure of revenue from the tax authorized by this Chapter." The auditors' report shall be provided to the committee and considered as a document available to the public.

After receiving the auditor's report, the committee by May 30 of each year "shall review the auditors' report, for each year in which the auditors prepare such a report, and issue a public report to the City Council regarding the use of revenue and such other matters as the City Council may assign."

6 In October 2025, the City of Salinas issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for "Ballot Measure Polling and Public Outreach Consulting Services" for the possible city council placement of Measure G renewal on the November 2026 ballot. As the RFP states, "The City is in the process of evaluating the feasibility of a November 2026 ballot measure proposing the extension of an existing sales tax. The City is seeking expertise in evaluating the



feasibility of such a ballot measure, advising on a measure that aligns with community priorities, and educating and informing the community throughout the process."

State law prohibits the City of Salinas from spending public funds on campaigning for Measure G renewal, but courts have allowed the expenditure of public funds for development of a tax measure and neutral educational outreach to voters about it. The Salinas City Council is expected to award the consulting contract in December 2025 or January 2026.

This is not the first recent poll to be conducted about Measure G. On April 9, 2024, the Salinas City Council awarded a contract for ballot measure polling to TeamCivX at an approximate cost of \$54,300. On June 25, 2024, after reviewing the poll results, the city council voted to wait until the November 2026 election to ask City of Salinas voters to renew the Measure G sales tax.

Your Chamber of Commerce is eager to compare the results of similar questions in the 2024 poll and the 2026 poll to identify trends in how voters perceive their city. Findings from one individual poll

# **GOVERNMENT NEWS**



can provide useful information, but findings of multiple polls can show trends and directions in opinions as well as opinions at a moment in time.

7 City of Salinas staff will seek input from the Measure G Oversight Committee about potential content of the proposed ballot measure in 2026 to renew it. The language can be "cleaned up" a bit from the 2014 version. Currently there are at least two vacancies on the seven-member committee, with rumors of upcoming additional resignations.

The Salinas Valley Chamber of OCommerce has indicated its interest over the past two years to be a leader in encouraging voters to renew the Measure G sales tax. It also wants to ensure the city provides its residents with its best possible accounting and justifications for Measure G expenditures. Voters will likely support a renewal of Measure G if they understand the importance of the sales tax to the city budget, recognize how the city uses the tax money to improve their quality of life, and have confidence that the city spends the money wisely, with public transparency and accountability.

**9** The City of Salinas is working with the Monterey One Water (M1W) regional wastewater treatment and recycling agency to replace the large Lake Street Lift Station, located on the corner of East Lake Street and East Rossi Street. This station receives and lifts wastewater flow from about 30 percent of the City of Salinas, including much of the proposed Future Growth Area (FGA) for the Central and East Area Specific Plan areas. It is deteriorating from age and also

lacks the capacity to handle current and projected wastewater flow.

On April 15, 2022, equipment failure caused the lift station pumps to fail, which resulted in an unauthorized discharge of 108,600 gallons of untreated sewage from two manholes for almost three hours. While the city recovered 55,425 gallons of that sewage, the remaining 53,175 gallons went into Natividad Creek and then into Carr Lake.

The Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board fined the city \$193,879. The fine could have been as high as \$531,750. As the city was complying with required maintenance and daily inspections of the lift station, the Central Coast Water Board concluded the incident was accidental and non-negligent.

Nevertheless, the city must take comprehensive action to repair or replace the lift station and components. At its Nov. 4, 2025 meeting. the Salinas City Council Finance Committee was informed that the cost of modernizing this lift station could be between \$15 and \$20 million or possibly more depending on where a new lift station would be located. The recent sewer rate increase will pay for this project. Consistent with its "dig-once" policy, the city will contract for street improvements in conjunction with this lift station project.

10 The City of Salinas will be convening interested parties, including Caltrans (the California Department of Transportation) to discuss street and highway improvements that would mitigate traffic congestion and greenhouse gas emissions resulting from vehicles traveling to and from the Amazon distribution facility. Construction of this facility is scheduled for completion in 2026.

11 Three Monterey County housing summits were held in November, all with the general purpose of bringing together people from various backgrounds to discuss strategies and opportunities for supplying more housing that's affordable for ordinary people. The Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce sponsored two of these summits: the "City of Salinas 2025 Regional Housing Summit" on Nov. 5 and the "Salinas Community's Action Plan — A Results-Oriented Solution to Housing Production" conference on Nov. 20.

12Speakers and panelists at the City of Salinas 2025 Regional Housing Summit provided the 155 attendees with a broad introduction to the reasons for the housing shortage and the increased cost of housing. A professional demographer used data to support an argument that shifts in the California population have been a major contributor to current housing challenges. In the meantime, constant changes in state policies related to zoning and building codes have imposed significant time and cost burdens on municipal staff, who must adopt these changes for new housing applications.

As expected, speakers and panelists identified state laws, many enacted decades ago based on a sincere concern for environmental protection, as powerful weapons in the present day for people and organizations to discourage, delay, undermine, and stop new housing proposals. The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) was cited.

13 The Chamber's Government Affairs Liaison reported on his experience at the Regenerative California "Monterey Attainable

Housing Forum," held at Asilomar in Pacific Grove on Nov. 6-7. At this conference, invited participants engaged in 23 hours of intense discussion and networking to address three obstacles to housing: land availability, obtaining capital, and identifying employer demand.

Although public policy was deliberately omitted as a topic for deep discussion, it inevitably crept into the discourse, with one breakout group in the final round ending up focusing on permit streamlining at Monterey County local governments. Your Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce has significant expertise and experience with permitting and will be able to provide accurate and important background on it.

14 To follow-up on his report about the Regenerative California summit and its focus group on municipal permit streamlining, the Chamber's Government Affairs Liaison reported that Salinas Councilmember Andrew Sandoval has asked for Chamber support of his initiative to establish an official city "Permitting Oversight and Improvement Committee." Sandoval says that his constituents continue to report difficulties in getting permits. He sees benefit in having the city council appoint "a public advisory group tasked with reviewing the City's permitting systems and making actionable recommendations to streamline and modernize" the permit process.

Some Chamber members report positive experiences with the Permit Center, even on highly complex proposals, while other Chamber members have reported unnecessary and frustrating difficulties in getting permits. The City of Salinas Community Development Department has provided annual reports to the city council with data



# GOVERNMENT NEWS-

showing measurable improvement in the permitting process over the past few years. An article in the March 2025 Business Journal titled "The City of Salinas Permit Center Is Here to Say Yes" received praise from some parties for its accurate presentation of the overall data, but it also received criticism from other parties for not focusing on individual, costly failures.

The Chamber's Government
Affairs Liaison warned about the
pitfalls of making conclusions about
an individual permit controversy
without obtaining all perspectives
and reviewing all written documentation. He asserted that sometimes
permit disputes seem based on a
clash of personalities rather than
flawed policy implementation.
These cases don't need a Chamber
lobbying campaign; they need
Chamber involvement through mediation and dispute resolution.

Committee members discussed the history of the dormant City of Salinas Business Development Committee and the Chamber's involvement with it over 20 years. There are benefits and drawbacks to having an official city Permitting Oversight and Improvement Committee versus having a Chamber-led Business Development Committee.

Finally, some people may argue that the City of Salinas fully complies with its permitting responsibilities and does it as efficiently as possible. There is no indication that convening a Permitting Oversight and Improvement Committee would lead to any new revelations about the Permit Center or any meaningful changes in how to run it. Review from an outside committee whose members may not know the process would ironically distract from the department's purpose to process permits efficiently.

# Be Cautious About Asking Your Local Governments to Spend More Money

By Kevin Dayton, Government Affairs Liaison

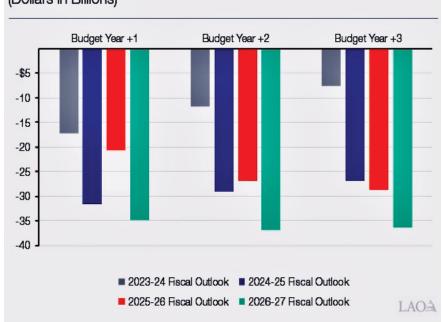
n the late fall of each year, the California Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) produces a report that reviews possible directions for the state's economy in the following year. This resource is meant to provide the California State Legislature with insight on preparing the state budget for the next fiscal year.

While nothing is completely free from bias, the LAO is independent, non-partisan, and tends to depict the harsh financial and economic realities that politicians may not want to tell voters and interest groups. On Nov. 19, 2025, the LAO published The 2026-27 Budget: California's Fiscal Outlook. Leadership for local governments, businesses, and non-profit organizations would be wise to take heed of the warnings in this report.

California's tax structure depends heavily on net taxable income (gross income minus exclusions and deductions). This means it depends heavily on capital gains taxes collected from stock market and real estate investment earnings.

In 2023 (the last year for which data is available), the top 1 percent of state income taxpayers (who now earn a little more than \$1 million in annual income) paid 36.6 percent of personal income tax revenue. This number fluctuates based on economic conditions. It has been as high as 50.5

Budget Problems Now Moving in the Wrong Direction (Dollars in Billions)



percent in 2012 and was at 49.9 percent in 2021.

Tax payments from the top 1 percent could shrink in 2026. Investment in artificial intelligence (Al) has been a recent driver of tax revenue for the state, but a bust is eventually likely. The long-ascending stock market is probably due for a correction. Trade exports to other countries are a significant part of the state's economy, but high tariffs—applied unpredictably and inconsistently as a negotiating tactic—do not help businesses that export and import products. Relatively high interest rates mean higher costs for businesses that want to consider borrowing money for expansion.

After analyzing these possibilities, the LAO has concluded there may be an \$18 billion state budget deficit in Fiscal Year (FY) 2026-2027. Some people might claim this estimate is not meaningful and there's nothing to worry about. After all, the legislature and governor have managed to use various "temporary fixes" to balance the budget for the past three fiscal years, despite projected deficits of \$27 billion in FY 2023-24, \$55 billion in FY 2025-26.

Expecting this argument, the

BUDGET see page 31



### **Raven Drum Foundation**

Raven Drum Foundation, founded in 2001 by Rick Allen, drummer of Def Leppard and Healing Arts Educator, Lauren Monroe, brings musicians, health educators, and the philanthropic community together to support the healing of first responders and veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress. The foundation



provides mind, body, and drumming integrated workshops incorporating evidence-based techniques such as guided visualization, breathwork, and heart-brain coherence education to support wellness, and regulation of the human nervous system. When music, intention, and healing wisdom all meet on the paths of neurobiology and psychology, we harmonize our inner mental and emotional states to effect positive change. ravendrumfoundation.org, Mary@ravendrumfoundation.org

### **United Ag**

UnitedAg was founded in 1980 with a mission to support the sustainability and success of its members and the agricultural sector through tailored health benefits, leadership development, and legislative advocacy. Their vision is to be the partner of choice for the agricultural community, delivering innovative healthcare solutions and resources that keep our industry thriving. unitedag.org, mochoa@unitedag.org



### Meals on Wheels of the Monterey Peninsula



Nourishing bodies, minds, and spirits since 1972.

Through home-delivered meals, community dining, safety programs, and wellness activities, Meals on Wheels helps seniors and disabled adults stay healthy, independent, and connected. Every meal served is a step toward ending hunger and isolation in our community. *mowmp.org, info@mowmp.org* 

### **Nikssarian Insurance Services**

Nikssarian Insurance Services, Inc. offers group health insurance expertise cultivated by individuals experienced in serving California businesses since



1980. Since the independent company's humble beginning in 2003, they have grown to become an accomplished brokerage firm in the Central Coast area. Their specialty lies in group health plans, where they work with employers to find the most cost-effective plans and services for their employees, utilizing their reputable carrier network. <code>isaacn@nikins.com</code>, <code>nikins.com</code>

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Get Involved



# Rene Mendez: Leading Salinas into a Promising Future

By Colleen Bailey, SVCC CEO/President

t's hard to say how long someone must hold a position before they're no longer considered "new," but Rene Mendez, Salinas' City Manager since May 2024, has certainly crossed that threshold.

I first attempted to interview him earlier in his tenure, but anyone familiar with Rene's work ethic knows securing time with him is no small feat. The wait, however, proved worthwhile — it allowed me to reflect not only on his vision for Salinas but also on his accomplishments thus far.

Perhaps you share my skepticism when I meet any new hire at the City of Salinas who expresses a long-term commitment to the community, only to leave just a few years later. But there is something truly special about Rene Mendez.

First, he comes from a family of agricultural workers, giving him a personal connection to our largest industry and the families at the heart of it. His work ethic resulted from this heritage, and he has a sincere respect for the Salinas community that shares his personal values.

He also had the opportunity for an extraordinary education, earning his master's degree from Duke University, which opened the door to remarkable possibilities. For Mendez, his education provided him with the tools to return to the region from which he came, to make an extraordinary difference.

Watching Rene engage with students from the Salinas Union High School District, our community's largest school district, I noticed that he connects personally with



Salinas City Manager Rene Mendez

the next generation of students like him: smart, ambitious, and filled with dreams. He draws personal satisfaction from setting the stage for our community's future and for that next generation of students with infinite potential.

### **Building a Strong Team**

Looking at the City's recent track record, attracting and retaining top talent has been a challenge. Rene has successfully changed that pattern by hiring regionally or advancing from within and providing staff with a career pathway that allows talented, hard-working employees to see opportunities for growth and advancement in the city.

This technique has proven highly effective. Over the last year, Mendez has successfully filled several key roles: Assistant City Manager, Chief of Police, and Finance Director (an internal promotion), empowering them to proactively make changes to their departments with a focus on community responsiveness, nimbleness, and innovation.

Rene believes deeply in the power of relationships and has led by example in making himself available to the entire community, including those who don't agree with his perspective. He says, "If we disagree about something today, we can agree to work on something else together tomorrow." He encourages his leadership to "look up!" and "Don't be afraid to look in the mirror and be honest about what you need to improve." Together, his team is transforming the culture of the city and starting to see remarkable results.

#### **Fiscal Excellence and Innovation**

Under new leadership in the finance department, the city has successfully put its fiscal house in order. It is back on track with its audits and more transparent with Measure E and G reporting, in response to community feedback. With a much better understanding of the finances and community needs, the newly adopted budget is significantly more strategic, providing additional staffing for permits and code enforcement, and providing additional capacity for the police as they plan to better serve the future Salinas.

The city is also intentionally investing in technology in ways that will improve efficiency and access and has adopted new Artificial Intelligence (AI) policies to guide application of AI across

departments. The permit department, which has been a focus of community criticism, is exploring how to apply AI to initial application review to dramatically shorten turnaround time. The city is also evaluating using AI for translation services as accuracy has significantly improved. Finally, it is updating its website and will shortly embark on the use of AI to serve residents 4 hours a day. The use of Al is in the discovery phase, but the community can expect the city to make smart, informed decisions about how to apply the new technology to deliver high quality service to the community.

### **Planning for Tomorrow**

The Community Services Department is updating the General Plan and Zoning Plan, which will have a 30-year impact on the community. Rene and his staff have regularly engaged with the business community, including with leaders who developed the award-winning Economic Development Element that included input from an inclusive segment of the community that became part of the last General Plan. His perspective is that the policies ultimately submitted to the state should be more flexible and allow for less government intrusion. Two examples he offered as needing updating were that the existing codes restrict the dates that pumpkin patches and Christmas tree lots can operate in the City. Rene believes that the city should not be regulating these kinds of activities, which take staff time away from focusing on more important priorities. The City Manager has committed

that the community will have ample opportunity to provide feedback on these plans before they are ultimately submitted to the City Council for approval and ultimately the state.

## Accelerating Economic Development

The community has expressed its frustration because they haven't seen important drivers of economic development moving forward quickly enough, and in some cases, they have lost trust in the willingness of staff to say yes because it is easier and safer to default to no. That is changing dramatically. The City leadership is applying greater urgency to large projects including Amazon and housing projects that are moving forward in record time. Hugh Walker, VP at Stonebridge Development, who is building a new housing development in Salinas, attested to the cultural shift he has experienced personally at the recent City Housing Summit. As one of the panelists on the regional development panel, Hugh remarked that the Planning Department had been proactive in its approach and an excellent partner to him in getting the long-awaited housing project built. And Rene promises that the community will see that in 2026-27 "dirt will be turned." While the city can't predict the market, it is committed to leaning in and to do its part.

### **Building Critical Infrastructure**

Key to the future growth of Salinas is infrastructure. Mendez and Mayor Donohue have taken an honest and realistic approach to this critical challenge and how they address it. While it hasn't been popular, they have made necessary decisions to increase sewer rates. While nobody appreciates the increase of costs, Mendez believes that most taxpayers in the city appreciate the need to respond to the infrastructure needs so that the city can support housing and economic

development. In the past month, Rene has supported his Assistant City Manager, Lisa Murphy, in the search for a new Economic Development Director, a role that has been vacant for several years

but will play a critical role in the community's success. Rene and Lisa have invited the Chamber among others like CCA, SPARV, and the Salinas Soccer Complex, which represent broad perspectives, to

be involved in the process, understanding that collaboration between these trusted community partners and the Economic Development Director will be essential to the community's success.

Investing in Our Future: Youth and Leadership Development

I have heard nearly every elected official in Monterey County express their concern that we export our greatest talent: our youth, and they want to reverse that trend through more affordable housing and by attracting good-paying jobs to our community and training our students for those jobs. As one of the largest regional employers. Rene understands his vital role in shifting this trend. Not only has he hired key positions regionally, he is establishing a leadership development program that the City Council has approved resources toward. He wants the most talented and hardworking current staff members to see advancement opportunities within the city and ultimately be prepared to take the role of City Manager. One specific example of someone he has recently promoted within is Jose Arreola, who was originally hired by the Police

Chief to run the CASP program and is now the Assistant to the City Manager. In this role, Jose has taken the leadership role in the Sister City Relationship and the Housing Summit.

The City

including fire,

Manager has Rene believes deeply in the also been inpower of relationships and has tentional about investing in led by example in making himself youth. The City available to the entire community, has launched including those who don't agree a new Youth with his perspective: 'If we Council and created interndisagree about something today, ship opportuniwe can agree to work on something ties across all else together tomorrow.' departments.

the cadet program at the police department, and all-year internships at the Public Works Department. He has invested time in developing relationships with the new superintendent of Salinas Union High

School District. UC Santa Cruz, CSUMB, and Hartnell College, and has participated in the Chamber's new Career Pathways Program.

### A Bright Future Ahead

Cultural change is not easy and trust needs to be built, which takes time. I see areas for continued improvement, particularly in communication about what is happening in the city. But my experience with Rene Mendez and his new team has given me great confidence that we have a particularly well-matched person in this vital role within the city leadership. He is honest, straightforward, courageous, and unquestionably on the side of Salinas and all of its residents.

With Rene Mendez at the helm, Salinas is poised for a transformative future—one that honors its agricultural heritage while embracing innovation and opportunity for all.





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## **Monterey County's Top Crops**

By Norm Groot, Executive Director, Monterey County Farm Bureau

Production value increased

14.7% in 2024, almost \$5 billion,

keeping Monterey County as the

fourth-highest production county

in the country!

ack in July, the Monterey County Agricultural Commissioner released the annual Crop Report, a summary of crop values produced during the 2024 calendar year. This was a year of recovery from the devastating 2023 flood events, and production value increased 14.7% in 2024. This comes to almost \$5 billion in local production

value, keeping Monterey County as the fourth-highest production county in the country!

These values reflect gross

values of agricultural commodities produced in our county, and certainly do not reflect the costs of production: labor, field work and planting, irrigation, harvesting and packaging, distribution, pest management, marketing, equipment, regulatory costs and assessments, and crop losses due to pests and diseases. Important to note is that regulatory compliance costs alone have increased over 63% since 2017.

Monterey County is fortunate to have a diversity of crops that

balance out the economic equation of local crop values. In 2024, there was a reduction in value of our winegrape crop due to changing market influences and consumer preferences, showing a 21% decline in value. Other crops showed significant increases; strawberries increased 15% year-over-year, as our highest value crop again this year. Vegetable

crops as a category produced almost \$3.5 billion in crop value (which includes all leafy greens).

Overall, the gross pro-

duction value is significant as the largest production value for Monterey County yet — but costs of production and poor market pricing impacted the bottom line of many of these crops. Labor costs continue to increase due to state-mandated wage rates and workplace rules, and inputs such as fertilizers continue to remain amongst the highest costs for farming operations.

Here is a rundown of the categories of crops as listed in the annual Crop Report:



Vegetable crops \$3.454 Billion
Fruit & nut crops \$1.265 Billion
Nursery Crops \$119.7 Million
Livestock & poultry \$114.1 Million
Field crops \$34.6 Million
Seed crops & apiary \$3.9 Million

For individual crops, here are the Top 10 produced in 2024:
Strawberries \$1.039 Billion

\$933.9 Million Head lettuce \$596.6 Million Broccoli \$578.8 Million Cauliflower \$228.1 Million \$191.8 Million Celerv Spinach \$154.3 Million Wine grapes \$152.2 Million Nursery crops & flowers \$119.7 Million

Livestock & poultry \$114.1 Million

While this shows a wide diversity of crops and animal production. the intense pressures of market fluctuations and trade imbalances place many of these crops at risk for financial viability. For instance, it is now too costly to produce asparagus in Monterey County due to increased costs of production, so this crop is now produced primarily in other countries (south of the U.S.) where the costs of labor and inputs are less. What was once a very profitable crop for farming operations in Monterey County has now been forced to seek production in locations where costs can remain below the market value of the crop.

Increasing pest and disease pressures are causing more crop losses year-over-year. 2023 and 2024 are both horrible years for the diamond back moth infestation, and INSV continues to plague leafy green crops. Strawberries are impacted by multiple soil diseases and pests, and aphids continue to damage many crops, including those in greenhouses. There is a lack of tools to control these pests and diseases — sadly, the bugs are winning!

As we look to 2025 production values in next year's annual Crop Report, there will be more reflections of increased costs of production and fluctuating marketplace challenges. Farmers and ranchers remain resilient locally, but overwhelming factors such as regulatory compliance costs and increasing labor costs will impact the types of crops that are produced.



# California's Land Equity Task Force Wants to Redistribute Farmland

By Norm Groot, Executive Director, Monterey County Farm Bureau

ormed in the California
Budget Act of 2022 (AB 179),
the California Agricultural
Land Equity Task Force
(CALETF) is an independent
agency charged with developing
recommendations to equitably increase access to agricultural land
for food production and traditional
tribal agricultural uses.

Last summer, CALETF released a draft document reporting that 82% of private farmland in our state is owned by white producer families and blames this ownership paradigm on "inequities in resource distribution." This draft plan includes reparation-style recommendations to disrupt the status quo, restoring "stolen wealth" to the CALETF's list of preferred groups.

Over the years of 1984-2018, California lost 1.6 million acres of farming and grazing lands; this is more than 47,000 acres each year or one square mile every five days. To address this crisis, CALETF suggests removing prime farmland from the market altogether: "In order to protect California's Prime Farmland and Farmland of Statewide importance. the Legislature should move to safeguard them in the public domain," per the CALETF report. Translated. that leans into public ownership of prime agricultural producing lands in California.

This would mean prohibiting current landowners from their right to freely sell or transfer farmland through generational succession. CALETF envisions a state agency that would buy up available farmland and redistribute to "priority producers or land stewards" that are defined as socially disadvantaged or historically excluded farmers and ranchers.

With sustainable groundwater



management being implemented all around the state, there is a potential for fallowing up to a 1 million acres or more in the coming years. The CALETF report states this fallowed land could be repurposed and redistributed to select groups through this reparations-style program, for publicly owned farming production. How this will change the water supply

'California has prided itself on being the largest producer of food products for our nation; changing to a public ownership strategy would eliminate a knowledge base of crop production practices and working land stewardship built up over multiple generations of farming families.'

problem remains to be delineated.

This policy also contrasts with recent legislative efforts to convert these potentially fallow lands to alternative energy generation facilities, such as solar and wind. Those projects would be privately funded and operated, not publicly owned.

How funding the purchase and

moving extensive prime farmland into the public domain has yet to be determined, but in an annual budgetary cycle where the state is projecting funding shortfalls, dedicating funds to public land acquisitions is a budgetary line item that California cannot sustain.

California has prided itself on being the largest producer of food products for our nation; changing to a public ownership strategy would eliminate a knowledge base of crop production practices and working land stewardship built up over multiple generations of farming families. California cannot afford to make this type of equity policy work on many levels, including private property rights.

For the last two years, CALETF has worked to develop this set of policy recommendations, reimagining agricultural land access along equity groups and social structures. By the end of 2025, CALEFT will present their final recommendations to the Governor and Legislature for action.

Farm Bureau has submitted comprehensive responses to these policy recommendations and will watch for any action by the Legislature to implement the redistribution of our prime agricultural lands.



### **Support our Chamber Members**

Thank you, to our December renewing Members. Please help keep the Salinas Valley strong by doing business with companies that support the Chamber.

Member Name Membe	r Since	Member Name Memb	er Since
Ottone & Leach LLP	1944	A.G. Davi, LTD	2008
Swenson & Silacci Flowers Inc	1953	Cardinale Moving & Storage Inc	2008
Bianchi Kasavan & Pope LLP	1959	Bank of America - S Main Branch	2011
Moss Adams x Baker Tilly	1961	Active Seniors Inc	2015
Credit Consulting Services Inc	1964	Reyes Coca Cola Bottling Co	2018
Polar Service Company, Inc. *60 Years*	1965	Catholic Charities, Diocese of Monterey	2019
Coldwell Banker Gay Dales Inc REALTORS	1966	Women's Business Center *5 Years*	2020
Central Coast Visiting Nurse Association &	1977	Cagwin & Dorward	2021
Hospice (VNA)		First Tee - Monterey County	2021
Discovery Luxury Motorcoach Charter	1987	EL REY THEATER	2022
Clinica De Salud Del Valle De Salinas -		H Jackson Events	2023
CSVS Community Care	1988	Nadrich & Cohen Accident Injury	2023
D'Arrigo Bros Co of California	1989	Lawyers	
El Camino Machine & Welding	1989	Rosita's Armory Cafe & Bar	2023
Ivy Park at Salinas	1989	Salinas Valley Speech Pathology	2023
Palm Court Apartments	1999	Blackthorne Pools & Spas	2024
Plumbers & Steamfitters Local Union #062	1999	Central Coast Cooling LLC	2024
Go Kids, Inc. *20 Years*	2005	Hospice of Santa Cruz County	2024
Residence Inn by Marriott - Salinas	2007	Learnologyworld	2024

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the





















## We Believe

# VACCINATIONS SAVE LIVES.



Salinas Valley Health providers, staff and members of the Board of Directors

Some childhood vaccines don't just protect your children, they can also help keep grandparents, older adults, and family members who are sick from getting very ill. Vaccinating children is one of the best ways to protect the whole family.





Questions about vaccines? Talk with your doctor or healthcare provider, or scan the QR code.

# A Season of Purpose: How Donating, Thrifting and Giving Time Can Redefine the Holidays

By Goodwill Central Coast Staff

s the Central Coast slips into the colder months, and neighborhood lights begin to glow after dark, another familiar rhythm of the season emerges — the rush. Shopping lists grow, inboxes fill with "last chance" sales, and the pressure to buy — and buy more — can feel endless.

But tucked inside this swirl of consumerism is a quieter movement, one rooted not in retail frenzy but in reflection. More residents across the Central Coast are choosing to celebrate differently — embracing simplicity, sustainability and community.

And increasingly, that shift is leading them to Goodwill Central Coast. This time of year, Goodwill may be best known as a place to drop off donations or hunt for a festive sweater before a holiday party, but its impact runs far deeper. Every coat cleaned out of a hall closet, every set of lightly used dishes passed along, and every vintage treasure discovered on its shelves helps fuel job training, employment services, and second chances for others.

At a moment when many people are craving connection and meaning, this mission resonates.

### **Decluttering with purpose**

Year-end decluttering has become a kind of ritual — a way to reset, breathe, and prepare for the blank calendar of January. But for those who donate to Goodwill Central Coast, clearing out a garage or updating a wardrobe becomes something more: a contribution to economic mobility.

Every donated item has a second life. Sweaters become résumé workshops. Lamps become job coaching hours. A dining chair



Getty Images

might help fund forklift training. The path isn't always visible, but the impact is measurable — thousands of individuals each year begin or rebuild their professional journey because someone else chose to give.

"Donations are more than just household items," said GCC vice president of retail and marketing Alan Martinson. "When you donate, what you're really giving are possibilities."

### Salinas welcomes new GCC store

Those possibilities have expanded in 2025 as Goodwill Central Coast opened its first new store since 2013. GCC has big plans for the modern new building in Salinas

(1425 N. Davis Road) — beyond just a store. One day soon it will also include a new and strategic Career Training Center that will provide pathways to opportunity for individuals and families.

The store's grand opening on Friday, Nov. 21, shined a light on the future, creating a better shopping experience for customers, a

safer and more efficient workplace for employees, and expanding the nonprofit's ability to create jobs and training programs.

This opening, along with renovations underway at locations in

Soledad and Alisal, GCC has now refreshed all its stores and outlets across Monterey, Santa Cruz and San Luis Obispo counties.

## Think connection — not consumption

If we take time to pause and reflect, it's easy to feel the spirit of this season shifting. Many families are rediscovering the quiet pleasures that once defined the holidays: shared meals, modest gatherings, board games at the kitchen table. The experiences that endure rarely come in shopping bags.

Goodwill Central Coast reflects this belief in its work — that generosity doesn't require extravagance. It invites the community to embrace a slower, more intentional approach: giving time, giving presence, and giving thoughtfulness.

For many shoppers, that means turning toward secondhand gifting. At a time when mass-produced merchandise dominates store shelves, thrifted finds offer character and story. Vintage books, handcrafted pottery, quilted throws, classic jewelry, children's toys in excellent condition — each one is a gift with history, not just a barcode.

Thrifting also stretches the

meaning of "local shopping," because every purchase stays in the community, directly supporting job creation and training programs for neighbors facing barriers to employment.

### The joy of finding the unexpected

Year-end decluttering has

become a kind of ritual —

a way to reset, breathe,

and prepare for the blank

calendar of January.

There is a special delight that comes from treasure-hunting — from not knowing exactly what

you'll find, only that something surprising may be waiting. The aisles of Goodwill stores this time of year are filled with possibilities: ornate candlesticks perfect for a holiday table, gently used blazers for a seasonal office celebration, or hand-thrown mugs that become instant keepsakes once filled with hot cocoa.

Choosing secondhand décor also allows families to celebrate sustainably. Rather than purchasing disposable or trend-driven décor, shoppers are learning to build their holiday aesthetic through timeless pieces — selecting quality over quantity, intention over impulse.

The appeal isn't only nostalgic

 it's deeply practical. A single Goodwill purchase can stretch a tight holiday budget while still delivering style and meaning.

### Giving back in small, lasting ways

One of the quiet truths of the holidays is that not every act of generosity is financial. Many people give simply through attention — by checking on an elderly neighbor, cooking for a friend, or spending unhurried time with a child. These gestures reflect the heart of the season more than any shipping tracker.

Goodwill encourages this broader view of giving. Donation is just one doorway; community care is

the wider room. The organization champions ways of participating in the season that leave people with more connection, not more debt or stress:

- Mindful decorating instead of overspending
- Crafting handmade gifts using thrifted supplies
- Simplified entertaining without the pressure of extravagance
- Moments of quiet presence instead of constant multitasking

### Starting the New Year right

For some, the busiest time for charitable giving is late December — when the tradition of "year-end cleanup" dovetails with renewed purpose. Closets open. Garages

are re-evaluated. Storage spaces become more about lightness than accumulation.

This is where Goodwill Central Coast plays a meaningful role: it transforms what is no longer needed into hope for someone else. What many donors don't realize is that every bag, box or furniture piece does three things simultaneously:

- Funds local workforce programs
- Supports sustainability by keeping goods out of landfills
- Connects neighbors to life-changing jobs and services

In this way, the holiday spirit becomes active — something lived, not just wished.



### **Gateway Center – Monterey County**

Dec. 4, 5:00 - 7:00 p.m., 850 Congress Ave., Pacific Grove

Please join Gateway Center on Thursday, Dec. 4 for a reception to introduce their new Executive Director, Mike Gonzalez! The reception will be at Gateway Center of Monterey County, 850 Congress Ave. in Pacific Grove. This reception is an opportunity for residents, families, neighbors, community leaders, and supporters to come together in camaraderie, enjoy light bites and entertainment, and get to know Mike and learn about the current and future Gateway Center.

### **Country Christmas – California Rodeo**

**Dec. 11, 5:00 – 7:00 p.m., 1034 N. Main St., Salinas, Salinas Sports Complex**Join in for the Third Annual Country Christmas, hosted by the California Rodeo Salinas, on Thursday, Dec. 11 at the Salinas Sports Complex (1034 N. Main St.) from 5 to 7 p.m. This festive celebration, presented by MYCARS.com, is free for all to attend — no admission fees! More details are coming soon —including event schedule, activities, and entertainment.

## KSBW 39th Annual Share your Holiday — Donations

Dec. 12, 12:00 – 5:00 p.m., Locations through Central Coast

KSBW is once again joining forces with The Salvation Army to make a meaningful difference for those in need here on the Central Coast. Every donation you make stays right in your community, directly helping your neighbors who are in need. Thank you for sharing your holiday with those who need it most. Credit card contributions can be made by calling the toll-free number shared during KSBW's Share Your Holiday broadcasts or online by visiting ksbw.com/shareyourholiday.

## Women Cancer Support Group — Salinas Valley Health

Dec. 12, 1:00 – 2:00 p.m., 501 E. Romie Lane, Suite. C, Salinas-Susan Bacon Cancer Resource Center

This support group is looking for women diagnosed with cancer who are looking for a safe space to receive support, share information and connect with other women going through the same experience. Participating in a cancer support group can help you increase your awareness; your experience and emotions associated with your cancer diagnosed and offer coping skills.

## **Carmel Art Walk** — **Arts Council for Monterey County**

Dec. 13, 2025, 4:00 – 7:00 p.m., downtown Carmel-by-the-Sea

Founded and run by local artists, the Carmel Art Walk is a free and family-friendly event. Support local artists and keep the HEART of Carmel beating strong! Carmel Art Walk is the second Saturday of the month from 4-7 p.m. and is open to the public. Tour artist-owned galleries and meet the artists who carry on the Carmel-by-the-Sea artist colony legacy. Follow the blue lanterns at each gallery. Go to carmelcalifornia.com for more details and a map.

# \_\_\_ BE SURE TO VISIT THE CHAMBER WEBSITE FOR UP-TO-DATE LISTINGS



### Lunch & Learn with American Energy Partners

Tuesday, Dec. 2, 12:00– 1:00 p.m. 119, E. Alisal., Salinas

Join us for a Lunch & Learn with American Energy Partners, a California-based energy efficiency firm helping local businesses reduce operating costs through PG&E's On-Bill Financing Program, which allows projects to be completed with no upfront costs. Come learn how local businesses can take advantage of these energy-saving opportunities. The session will cover who American Energy Partners is, the types of upgrades available (lighting, HVAC, refrigeration, etc.), and real examples of how they've helped businesses lower their utility bills. Attendees will have the opportunity to schedule a free energy audit for their facility.

### Member Orientation

Thursday, Dec. 4, 12:00– 1:00 p.m. 119 E. Alisal St., Salinas

Join us for an informational orientation with the Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce's Membership Director, Gabriel Lopez. We welcome new and prospective members to learn more about member benefits and how the Chamber can help you meet and surpass your marketing goals! Lunch will be provided. If you have any questions, please contact Gabriel Lopez at Gabe@salinaschamber.com or call (831) 751-7725. Join us in-person at the Chamber Office or via Zoom.

### Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce Foundation's 74th Children's Shopping Tour

Saturday, Dec. 13, 7:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. 796 Northridge Mall, Salinas

The Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce Foundation invites you to be part of a heartwarming event that brings joy, smiles, and warmth to the holiday season. There are plenty of ways to get involved and support the event! You can volunteer at various stations, such as:

- Shopping chaperone
- Set-up & check-in
- Table station
- Take-down

Experience the happiness and excitement of children as they select their clothing, create lasting memories, and make a meaningful impact! To ensure the children's safety, anyone age 18 or older must undergo our background check process and be fingerprinted before participating in the event. Sign up at www.salinaschamber.com or contact: athena@tmdcreative.com or call (831) 261-1983. Not able to volunteer? You can still help by making a tax-deductible donation to the Children's Shopping Tour.

RSVP at salinaschamber.com



# AMBASSADOR SPOTLIGHT OSCAR AVALOS

I've spent the past 16 years in commercial banking and finance, helping local businesses access the funding, tools, and partnerships they need to grow. As Vice President and Relationship Manager at West Coast Community Bank, my focus is on connecting clients across Monterey County with tailored financial solutions and community resources that drive long-term success. Beyond my professional work, I'm deeply involved in public service and volunteer leadership. I currently serve as a Councilman for the City of King City, Vice President of the Salinas Valley Fair,

and Chair of the Advisory Council for the Southern Monterey County Foundation, an affiliate of the Community Foundation for Monterey County. In 2023, I was honored as King City's Friend of the Community for my commitment to supporting local organizations that make a difference. At the heart of everything I do is the belief that strong businesses create strong communities. Whether I'm working with business owners, nonprofits, or local leaders, my goal is to be more than a banker. I strive to be a connector, a resource, and a partner in helping our region thrive.



Help protect and restore the lands we love from Ferrini Ranch to Ensen Park in Salinas, and throughout Monterey County—for all of us to enjoy.





## **New California Employment Laws for 2026**

By Sharilyn Payne, Attorney, Noland, Hamerly, Etienne & Hoss

alifornia employers face the challenge of complying with the state's employment laws. Each year, multiple new laws go into effect that impact

employers, and 2026 is no different. Following is a summary of some of the significant new laws.

## WAGE AND HOUR California Minimum Wage:

Effective Jan. 1, 2026, the minimum wage is increasing to \$16.90 per hour. As a result, employees who fall under the executive, administrative, or professional exemption must receive a threshold annual salary of no less than \$70,304.

## Unpaid Labor Commissioner Judgments (SB No. 261):

Although employees can file a lawsuit in court when they feel they have not been paid all wages owed, they can also file a complaint with the California Labor Commissioner. If the Labor Commissioner's office awards an employee an amount for unpaid wages, the employer can either pay the amount or appeal the decision within ten (10) days. If the employer does not timely pay the amount or file an appeal, the Labor Commissioner's office files with the court a judgment in the amount awarded to the employee.

Under this new law, if the final judgment remains unsatisfied after a period of 180 days after the time to appeal has expired and no appeal is pending, the employer will be subject to the following:

 a civil penalty not to exceed three times the outstanding judgment amount (half of which goes to the employee, and half to the Division of Labor Standards Enforcement to enforce labor laws);

- post-judgment interest;
- all reasonable attorneys' fees and costs incurred by the employee in enforcing the judgment.

## Pay Data Reporting (SB No. 464):

A private employer with 100 or more employees must submit an annual pay data report to the Civil Rights Department (CRD) on or before the second Wednesday of May of each year. Previously, if the CRD did not receive the report, it could seek an order requiring the employer to comply with the requirements. Effective Jan. 1, 2026, upon request by the CRD, a court can impose a civil penalty not to exceed \$100 per employee, with that penalty going up to \$200 per employee for a subsequent failure to file the report.

### Pay Scale (SB No. 642):

Employers with 15 or more employees must include the pay scale for a position in any job posting. Effective Jan. 1, 2026, "pay scale" is defined as a "good faith estimate of the salary or hourly wage range that the employer reasonably expects to pay for the position upon hire." The civil penalty for violation of this provision ranges from \$100 to \$10,000 per violation. For a first violation, there is no penalty if the employer can show that all job postings for open positions have been updated to include the pay scale.

This new law also prohibits an employer from paying its employees at wage rates less than those paid to employees of another sex (instead of the opposite sex) and extends the statute of limitations to file a civil action to recover wages based on an unequal pay claim to

three years. It also amends the law to allow the employee to obtain relief for up to six years.

#### NOTICES

## New Notice to Employees (SB No. 294):

This new law requires that on or before Feb. 1, 2026, and annually thereafter, employers provide a stand-alone written notice to each current employee setting forth the following:

- the employees' right to workers' compensation benefits, including disability pay and medical care for work-related injuries or illness; employee rights during immigration inspections;
- protections against unfair immigration-related practices against a person exercising protected rights;
- the right to organize a union or engage in concerted activity in the workplace:
- constitutional rights when interacting with law enforcement in the workplace including the right to be free from unreasonable searches and seizures and the right to due process and against self-incrimination;
- a description of new legal developments pertaining to laws enforced by the Labor and Workforce Development Agency;
- a list of the enforcement agencies that may enforce the rights in the notice.

Employers must also provide this notice to new hires at the time of hire. The notice can be provided by email, text message, or personal delivery.

The notice must be provided to employees in the language it normally uses to communicate

employment-related information. The Labor Commissioner's Office is required to develop a template notice and post it on their website on or before Jan. 1, 2026. Employers should check the Labor Commissioner's website to see if the template notice has been posted by going to the following link: https://www.dir.ca.gov/dlse/.

Furthermore, if an employee has notified their employer that they would like the employer to notify their designated emergency contact in the event the employee is arrested or detained, the employer shall notify the emergency contact if the employee is arrested or detained on the employer's worksite.

An employer that violates this statute may be subject to a penalty of up to \$500 per employee for each violation.

Employers should mark Feb. 1, 2026, on their calendars and start planning the method they will use to provide the notice and how they will track that it was received by employees.

### WARN Notices (SB No. 617):

The California Worker Adjustment and Retraining Act ("WARN") requires written notice to employees, the Employment Development Department, and other local agencies in the event of a mass layoff, relocation, or termination of employees. Effective Jan. 1, 2026, the WARN Notice must include information on whether the employer plans to coordinate services through the local workforce development board or another entity, and information regarding the statewide food assistance program known as CalFresh.

## PERSONNEL RECORDS Record Requests (SB No. 513):

Within 30 days of an employee's

written request, an employee has the right to inspect and receive a copy of records in their personnel file related to their job performance or related to any grievance concerning the employee. Effective Jan. 1, 2026, an employer that maintains education or training records for its employees must also allow the employee to inspect and receive copies of those records as well, and must ensure those records include the employee's name, the name of the training provider, the duration and date of the training, the core competencies of a training, and the resulting certification or qualification. An employer that does not comply with this statute may be

subject to a penalty of \$750.

#### CONTRACTS

## Employment Contracts (AB No. 692):

Beginning Jan. 1, 2026, it will be unlawful for an employment contract to include a term that requires the employee to pay an employer for a debt if the employee's employment ends. This law does not apply to contracts related to the repayment of the cost of tuition or related to loan repayment assistance programs if those are separate agreements from the employment contract and meet certain conditions.

### LEAVES OF ABSENCE Paid Family Leave (SB No. 590):

Effective July 1, 2028, benefits under the California state paid family leave program will be expanded to include individuals who take time off work to care for a seriously ill "designated person." A "designated person" is defined as "any care recipient related by blood or whose association with the individual is the equivalent of a family relationship." The employee will be required to identify the designated person and attest under penalty of perjury regarding how they are related by blood to the designated person, or

how their association with the designated person is the equivalent of a family relationship.

Since almost all of these new laws take effect Jan. 1, 2026, employers should review which require action and put into place all necessary steps to ensure compliance with California law on the first day of the new year.

This article is intended to address topics of general interest and should not be construed as legal advice. ©2025 Noland, Hamerly, Etienne & Hoss

Sharilyn Payne is a shareholder at NHEH, and has been practicing in the area of employment law for over 20 years. Her practice focuses on counseling employers in the intricacies of California law to avoid litigation, and on defending employers in lawsuits in state and federal court and before administrative agencies.

### **BUDGET** - from page 16

LAO notes the following in its report: (1) the projected budget deficit for Fiscal Year 2026-2027 is larger than originally anticipated, despite increased tax revenue; (2) the projected \$18 billion deficit assumes an economic slowdown but not an outright recession; (3) the state used most of its available budgeting tricks to eliminate the deficits of the previous three fiscal years: and (4) the four straight years of projected budget deficits have occurred while revenue has been increasing—spending has been the problem.

The LAO report recommends that while the stock market continues to rise, the state put any unexpected earnings in reserve in preparation for a downturn. Businesses and non-profits in Monterey County may want to do the same. In fact, your Chamber itself has been able to grow its reserve in 2025 as a result of membership growth, successful events, and fiscal responsibility in expenditures.

Monterey County local governments should actively plan in 2026 for a continued reduction in federal and state financial assistance for projects and programs. And while our local governments have avoided outside designation as high-risk entities for municipal bankruptcy, it may be useful to examine local governments elsewhere that are already deemed at risk, in order to identify what they've done wrong, review recommendations given to them for reform, and evaluate the results.

The City of Oakland and the Oakland Unified School District are local governments that have been compelled to address a looming threat of bankruptcy. Also, in its annual Local High-Risk Program report issued in October 2025, the Office of the California State Auditor identifies the cities of Calexico, Compton, and Richmond as other local governments in fiscal danger because of their financial instability and administrative deficiencies.

Residents and the business community in Monterey County should urge their local elected and appointed officials to review their fiscal situation and keep the public informed about it. Recession may be coming. Government accountability and transparency for finances are critical at this potential transition time for the economy.



## **Member Referral Program**

## Know a business, nonprofit, or entrepreneur that would benefit from being part of the Chamber?

When you refer a business, you both benefit. The more you refer, the more visibility, perks, and recognition your business receives **How It Works:** 

- ✓ Identify a Referral Think of a business that could gain from Chamber membership.
- ✓ Send Us Their Info Email their contact details to our Membership Director.
- ✓ We'll Make the Connection Our team will reach out, mentioning your business as the referring member.
- √ They Join Once they've joined and paid their first-year dues, your rewards begin!

### **Referral Rewards:**

Referrals Joined	Your Reward
1 Referral	Complimentary admission to a Signature Event (Gala/ Legislative Breakfast / or Awards Luncheon)
2 Referral	Opportunity to run two Member Message Advertisements (\$300 value)
3 Referral	\$50 membership Renewal Credit, 1 Member Message Ad and a social media spotlight
4 Referral	Full page ad or advertorial in the Salinas Valley Business Journal publication (\$926 value)

### **READY TO REFER?**

Contact Gabe Lopez 831-809-9988 | Gabe@SalinasChamber.com

