

# Solutions for Housing:

## Water Supply Challenges on the South Coast

*A report produced for Puente by the Emerging Leaders of the San Mateo County Leadership Council:*

Shayna Barnes, Armando Castillo, Jasmine Del Chiaro, Alex Golding,  
Andrew Knaack, Garrett Kuramoto, Federico Pacheco



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# Introduction

## About Puente

Puente de la Costa Sur (Puente) is a nonprofit organization that serves the south coast of San Mateo County. Their mission is to foster wellness and prosperity in the San Mateo County South Coast communities of Pescadero, La Honda, Loma Mar, and San Gregorio by promoting and advocating for equitable access to education, health, and economic security. Puente provides critical social services and policy advocacy for low-income families and immigrant farmworkers in unincorporated communities of Pescadero, La Honda, Loma Mar, and San Gregorio regardless of immigration status.

## About Leadership Council San Mateo County Emerging Leaders Program

Leadership Council San Mateo County is a nonprofit dedicated to inspiring, connecting, and educating leaders from the business, government, and nonprofit sectors to positively transform San Mateo County and find solutions for the biggest issues facing our County. The Emerging Leaders Program is a 10-month long leadership development program for rising stars from these sectors who demonstrate leadership potential and are committed to supporting inclusive environments in their organization and community. As part of the program, Emerging Leaders are put into Community Acceleration Project teams to assist an assigned nonprofit with a project of interest to the organization.

## About the Pescadero Community

Pescadero is an unincorporated town located on the southern coast of San Mateo County. The town is currently represented by the County Board of Supervisors District 3 Representative, Ray Mueller. At the 2020 Census, there was a population of 595 residents<sup>1</sup>. According to the 2021 American Community Survey, 46.4% of the population speaks a language other than English at home, with over 30.4% of the population being foreign born. Of those that are foreign born, 82.7% are not a citizen of the United States. The community is rural, with the primary industry being agriculture.

## The Project

One of Puente's strategic priorities is to advocate for economic security for the populations they serve. The way they are doing this is by disrupting systems that sustain poverty in their community and fighting inequitable practices that keep low-income families living in poverty. An essential aspect of economic security is having access to safe and affordable housing, and Puente is working to address their community's shortage of affordable housing, particularly for the farmworker population. However, resource scarcity, chiefly with regard to water availability,

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<sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau, 2020. <https://data.census.gov/profile?g=160XX00US0656756>

is a major barrier to affordable housing development in the Pescadero region. The Puente Community Acceleration Project team was tasked with creating a resource guide outlining the current challenges to water supply on the South Coast and possible or existing solutions to these challenges. We conducted research and held interviews with key stakeholders to summarize the problems the community faces in order to access water, document institutional knowledge on the water problem, including who has decision making authority at the community and government level, and explore how water relates to the ability to produce affordable housing in the community. We'll also make specific recommendations for next steps to address the water scarcity issue in Pescadero.

## Community Access to Clean Water

In 2012, California passed [AB 685, the "Human Right to Water" bill \(HR2W\)](#), declaring safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water for all its citizens. It was the first state to legally recognize the human right to water. Per Section 106.3 in the state Water Code, "every human being has the right to safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water adequate for human consumption, cooking, and sanitary purposes. The human right to water extends to all Californians, including disadvantaged individuals and groups and communities in rural and urban areas."

The California State Water Resources Control Board adopted a [resolution](#) in 2016 identifying the human right to water as a priority and core value. The resolution stated the Water Boards will work, "to preserve, enhance, and restore the quality of California's water resources and drinking water for the protection of the environment, public health, and all beneficial uses, and to ensure proper water resource allocation and efficient use, for the benefit of present and future generations."

In 2019, to advance the goals of the HR2W, California passed Senate Bill 200 (SB 200), which enabled the State Water Board to establish the [Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience \(SAFER\) Program](#). Among the tools created under SB 200 is the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund (Fund). The Fund provides up to \$130 million per year through 2030 to enable the State Water Board to develop and implement sustainable solutions for underperforming drinking water systems.

According to a [recent report by the California State Auditor from summer 2022](#), data shows we have a very long way to go. The report states that the water systems rated as failing serve nearly one million Californians. Further, the [2023 Drinking Water Needs Assessment](#), prepared by the California State Water Resources Control Board, shows the lack of access to safe drinking water is worse in low-income communities.

The image below is from the Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) Program Dashboard. [The Dashboard](#) displays summary statistics of the number of Failing and

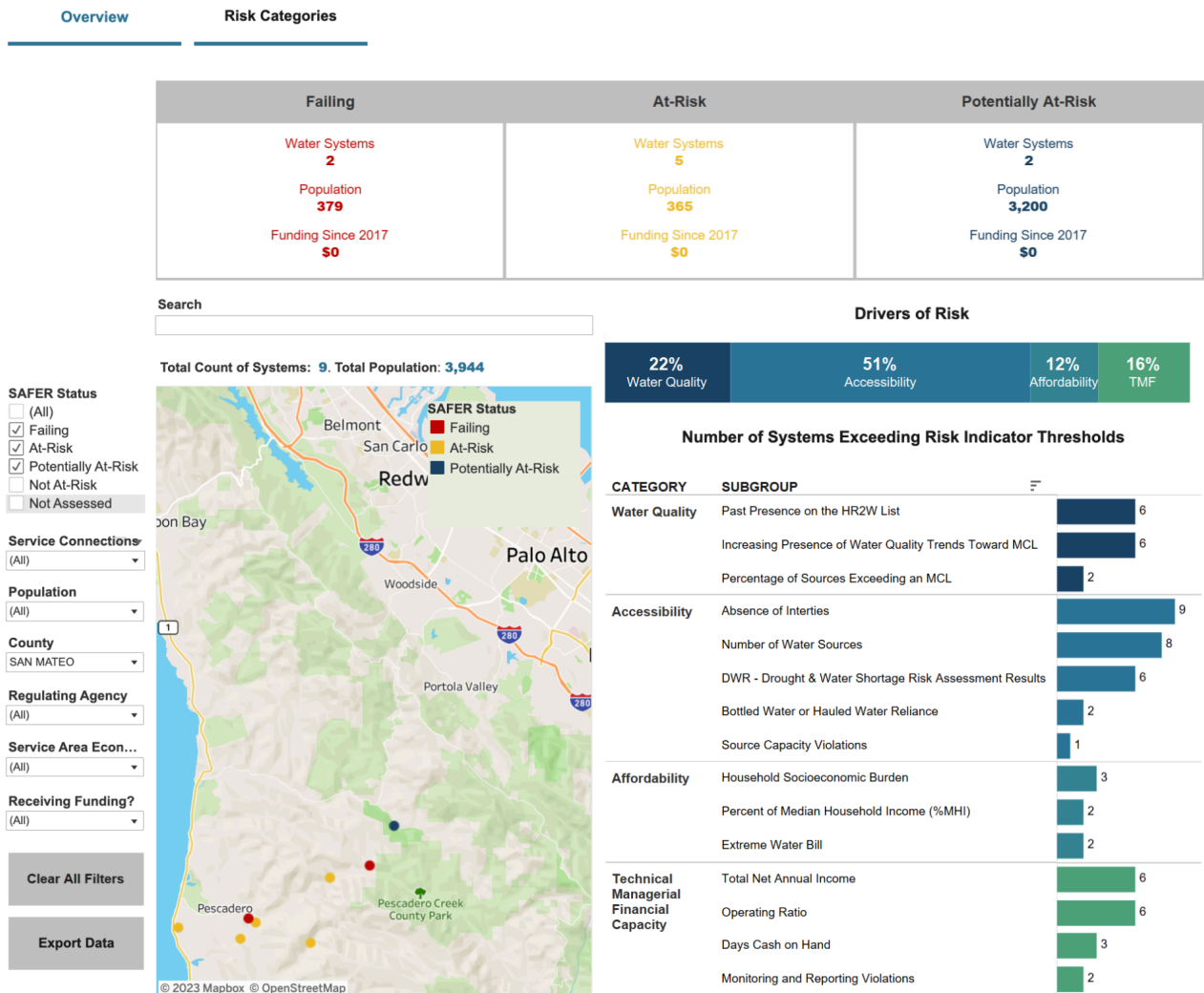


at-risk public water systems in different risk categories and shows users the locations of these systems.

For Pescadero, as of May 1, 2023, the water systems statuses are noted as failing, at-risk and potentially at risk.

## SAFER Dashboard

This dashboard contains data for the [2023 Drinking Water Needs Assessment](#). The Failing list of systems is updated daily using the State Water Board's [Failing criteria](#). The other SAFER statuses of water systems are based on the results of the [Risk Assessment](#), which is refreshed quarterly as new data becomes available. More information about the dashboard is available in the [user guide](#). Public feedback should be submitted to [DDW-SAFER-NAU@Waterboards.ca.gov](mailto:DDW-SAFER-NAU@Waterboards.ca.gov) and water systems may [submit a data change request](#) if information in the dashboard is inaccurate.



Fast forward to today, more than a decade later, when looking at the impact versus intent of HR2W in our own San Mateo County South Coast region, the focus needs to shift from identifying problems and prioritizing resources now for sustainable solutions.

## Impact on Daily Lives of Residents

Pescadero is a small town in San Mateo County where many people, particularly low-income individuals, lack access to water, a basic human right and necessity. To get an understanding of how the lack of access to clean water impacts residents, we conducted various interviews. Four individuals were interviewed, including three working adults and one high school student. Individuals interviewed represented households of 4 or more people and have lived in the Pescadero community for 20-30 years. Additionally, two of the three interviewed adults work in agriculture and two of three rent vs own.

### Quality of Life

With no major grocery stores in Pescadero, residents must be able and willing to travel long distances or pay high prices for bottled water in small convenient stores. The residents reported that they travel to either the Redwood City Costco or the Santa Cruz Costco to purchase water and groceries. We calculated the time, miles, and gas invested to make these trips.

For a trip to the Redwood City Costco, residents travel 75.4 miles in total. In a month, this amounts to 301.6 miles. Residents spend 112 minutes round trip which amounts to 7.46 hours per month. We calculated the financial toll these trips have on the residents by taking the miles traveled, the average miles per gallon used by a car in California (25.4), and the price of a gallon of gas at a local gas station in Pescadero at the time of writing the report. In total, a resident spends \$51.66 per month on gas traveling from Pescadero to Redwood City Costco to access affordable drinking water. In addition to this, residents reported that they spend an average of an additional \$50 on water each month.

Water Prices in Pescadero Up to \$2/Bottle



Water Prices in Half Moon Bay \$3.79/ 24 Bottles



Similarly, residents must travel long distances to use a laundromat. It was reported that they must travel to Santa Cruz (70 miles round trip) or Half Moon Bay (36 miles round trip) once a week to access a laundromat. To make these long travel distances worth their time, money and energy, residents must plan their entire weekend around a trip, ensuring that they make all of the necessary stops and complete the needed errands when traveling.

## Impact on Education

The lack of water also affects the school experience and education of students in Pescadero. It is well documented that water is one of the most important components of a child's diet and that dehydration can reduce energy levels and severely impact one's ability to concentrate. A recent study found that even mild dehydration, a body water loss of 1-2%, can impair cognitive performance.<sup>2</sup> In Pescadero schools, signs remind students that faucet water is not drinkable. Our student interviewee reported that schools in Pescadero do not offer running water except for bathroom operations. Instead, students are responsible for bringing refillable water bottles and schools aim to make jugs of water accessible throughout the day. This system poses many inconveniences and barriers to student hydration and thus, academic performance. Additionally, the lack of water can completely shut down academic opportunities. The California Department of Education lists various factors which local education agencies (LEA's) must consider when deciding to close a school.<sup>3</sup> One of the health and safety factors includes whether or not the school will have safe drinking water and functioning bathrooms. Our high school interviewee reported school closures when there's a shortage of adequate water. Unfortunately, insufficient safe drinking water has led to school closures in Pescadero as reported by our student interviewee.

## Housing

All adults interviewed referenced a concern of the lack of affordable housing. The principles of economics apply as the shortage in supply increases demand and cost. Residents indicate paying as much as \$1,675 just for a piece of land to park their trailer. Another indicated paying anywhere between \$2,600 to \$3,600 per month. When asked about affordable housing in Pescadero, one resident said it "doesn't exist here." The same resident mentioned that "as soon as someone leaves, there are three people waiting to move in". Another resident indicated that rents are so high that "more than one family needs to live in a house to be able to afford it." Renters also mentioned the many limitations that are typically put in place by landlords, particularly as it relates to water use. Landlords track and limit the use of water. One resident reported having to depart with her garden due to watering limitations.

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<sup>2</sup> Riebl & Davy, 2013. The Hydration Equation: Update on Water Balance and Cognitive Performance. ACSMs Health Fit J. 17(6):21-28. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25346594>

<sup>3</sup> California Department of Education, 2023. School Closure Considerations. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ep/schoolclosurecons.asp>

## Impact on Health

It is a known fact that unpurified well water can lead to many negative health effects to the human body. Contaminants in well water such as bacteria and nitrates can cause different kinds of illnesses. According to the [Minnesota Department of Health](#), when too much nitrate is consumed, it can affect how the blood carries oxygen and can lead to a blood disorder known as methemoglobinemia

Nitrate contamination in Pescadero's water supply is a prevalent issue. In 2010, a San Mateo Times investigation revealed that residents of two farmworker camps had been drinking water contaminated with nitrate levels well above the level considered to be safe. This report revealed that the water was contaminated with nitrate levels over 29 times the limit.<sup>4</sup>

Although we could not determine that the residents we interviewed were directly affected by Nitrate in the water supply, they shared the following testimonies about how they believe the water has affected their well being.

One of the residents we interviewed reported an incident in her community that led to rashes on a community member's skin. There was initial speculation amongst community members that the cause of the rashes were due to contamination in the water supply but they had no proof. This speculation was later confirmed after county officials came in to inspect the water supply, it was determined that there were in fact irregularities in the water.

When we asked the high school student about any effects the water may have on his health, he responded by saying "Now that you mention it, I feel like I have problems with my skin and...now that I think of it, it could possibly be the water."

### Interview with Kassandra Talbot, Pescadero Municipal Advisory Council (PMAC)

Established in 1992, the [Pescadero Municipal Advisory Council \(PMAC\)](#) advises the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors on issues affecting residents of Pescadero, Loma Mar, and all South Coast communities. We caught up with Kassandra Talbot, Pescadero native, Social Studies and Spanish Teacher for the La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District, and Vice-Chair of PMAC, to gain further perspective into the impacts of local water scarcity and possible opportunities.

Ms. Talbot expressed that issues with the water supply, high concentrations of nitrate, began approximately 15-20 years ago when she was attending school in Pescadero. "The kids today have never known anything different, it's always been bottled water for them," said Talbot.

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<sup>4</sup> Scullion, Grace. "While Pescadero School Waits for Water, Nitrate Problem Worsens Nationwide." *Half Moon Bay Review*, 7 Sept. 2022, [www.hmbreview.com/news/while-pescadero-school-waits-for-water-nitrate-problem-worsens-nationwide/article\\_153b91ee-2eb7-11e4-d-8f50-ebc449bb90c0.html#:~:text=In%202010%2C%20a%20San%20Mateo,the%20EPA%2Ddeemed%20safe%20amount](http://www.hmbreview.com/news/while-pescadero-school-waits-for-water-nitrate-problem-worsens-nationwide/article_153b91ee-2eb7-11e4-d-8f50-ebc449bb90c0.html#:~:text=In%202010%2C%20a%20San%20Mateo,the%20EPA%2Ddeemed%20safe%20amount).

Talbot is a “generational PMAC”, as her father, Rob Talbot, was a long-time member before her. Talbot herself was compelled to join PMAC to learn more about the history of the area and what binds us, land acknowledgements, and violence and racism. This is her third year serving on the council.

“When you’re unincorporated and have a majority BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) population, there’s no legislative hold. If this population wasn’t majority Latinx, would we even be talking about this issue? Is it hard to get solutions here or is it because of who we are?”, asks Talbot.

PMAC has no jurisdictional authority. Rather, it is an advisory committee, advocating for residents, building coalition and fostering collaboration with County decision makers. “There’s just so much bureaucratic paperwork and red tape from the County,” stated Talbot. “It would be great to rebuild [Pescadero Country Store](#) (“Cindy’s”), which burned down in 2016, and get a laundromat, but there are so many FEMA problems with water lines, flood zoning, etc. that the County says it must be rebuilt to previous specs, which is dumb. As for getting water to the school, [extending CSA-11, that would mean moving the fire district](#), we’re watching that closely.” According to Hyun-mi Kim, Director of Community Engagement and Public Policy at Puente, Supervisor Ray Mueller told community members at a recent PMAC meeting in April that he committed to helping with the process of rebuilding the Pescadero Country Store.

## Documenting Institutional Knowledge

Another key to understanding the water situation in Pescadero is an awareness of the complexities of both the physical and environmental realities of the local water supply, and the political and regulatory challenges affecting solutions. What has led to the current issues limiting water availability? What work in this area has been tried or explored previously and why do problems persist? Which agencies and people hold the responsibility, and decision-making power to make changes leading to solutions? We spoke with several people who are involved in past and current local infrastructure projects and collected information from media sources to gain a better understanding of the current state and opportunities for the future.

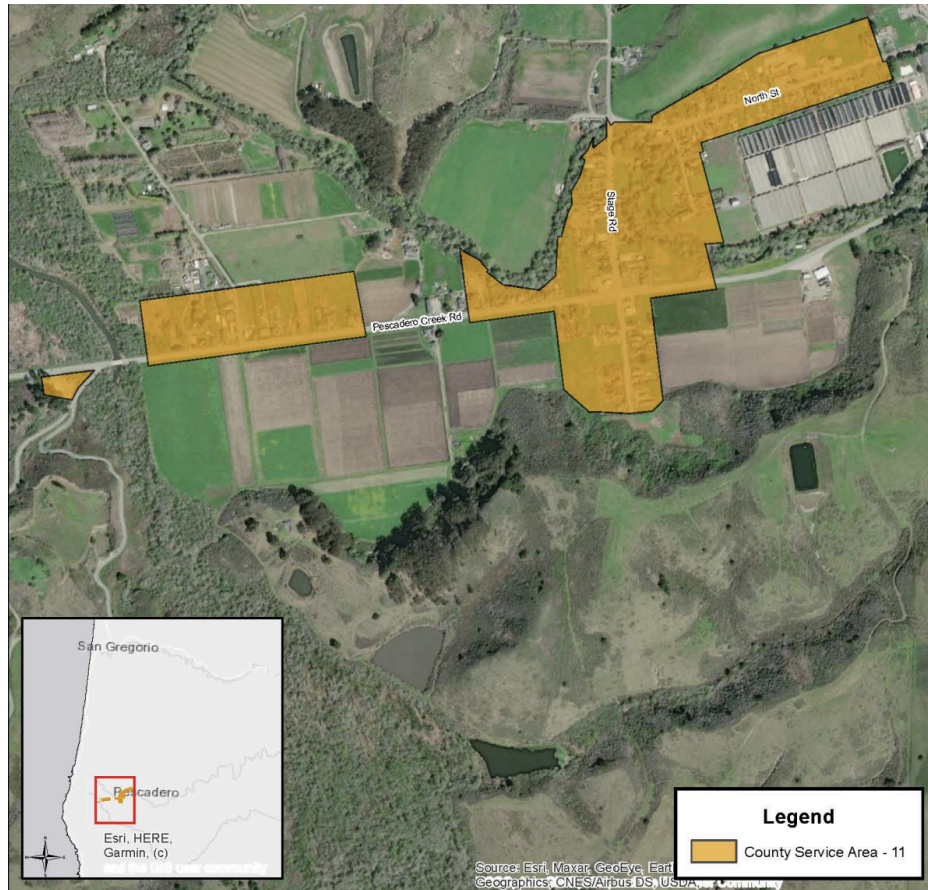
### Interview with LAFCo Executive Director Rob Bartoli, and Municipal Service Review for CSA-11

We conducted an interview with San Mateo County LAFCo Executive Director Rob Bartoli to help us understand LAFCo’s role in regard to water supply to the south coast. LAFCo, the Local Agency Formation Commission, is an independent commission with jurisdiction over the boundaries of the 20 cities, 22 independent special districts, and many of the 33 active



county-governed special districts serving San Mateo County.<sup>5</sup> LAFCo is involved when there are boundary changes or annexations to county governed districts. The commission also conducts Municipal Service Reviews (MSRs) and prepared one in May 2022 for CSA-11 (County Service Area-11), the entity that provides water service to the portion of Pescadero within the urban rural boundary.

The area currently served by CSA-11 is depicted below. This map was provided by LAFCo within their most recent MSR of CSA-11<sup>6</sup>.



CSA-11 currently gets its water supply from three wells (Well No. 1, Well No. 2 and Well No. 3). Well No.3 was drilled in 2018 and is the current main supply source for CSA-11. When conducting the MSR for CSA-11, LAFCo reported several key issues for the water source. These include:

1. Water levels at the CSA-11 well field are in decline. The future longevity of the well field and CSA-11 is dependent on how much growth is proposed in Pescadero, recharge of the aquifer and alternative domestic water sources. Currently the aquifer is in overdraft,

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.smcgov.org/lafco>

<sup>6</sup> LAFCo, 2022. Adoption of a Municipal Service Review for County Service Area 11 (Pescadero). <https://www.smcgov.org/media/141873/download?inline=>

meaning that it is not being replenished at the rate it is being drawn from. With the addition of Pescadero High School and the new fire station to the boundary of CSA-11, the current projection is that the water supply will last until 2094. If Local Coastal Program projections of growth hold true (the addition of 125 new dwelling units and 20 commercial units within the CSA-11 boundary), Well No.3 would be expected to run out by 2047.

2. Current water rates do not support year-to-year operation of the water system, and do not include costs associated with capital improvements.
3. There is continued interest in development from groups within Pescadero.
4. There are several constraints to development within Pescadero, including water supply, septic system requirements, water needed to combat potential fire, and flooding from Pescadero Creek. Current growth projections from the Local Coastal Program may be unrealistic and overstated.
5. Pescadero's remote, rural location and small population base make the cost of service for municipal water and solid waste collection high.

We asked Rob Bartoli several questions regarding CSA-11 and development in Pescadero. We explored whether connecting to an additional water source, like the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, would be feasible to extend the life of CSA-11 and support further development in the urban rural boundary. Bartoli informed us that the cost of doing so would be prohibitively expensive on CSA-11 customers, as water and wastewater infrastructure costs have to be paid for by residents receiving those services, and CSA-11 has a small ratepayer base. Bartoli also noted that wastewater is another deterrent to development in the community, as currently there is no sewer system and septic systems are utilized, which becomes problematic as Pescadero is also in a flood zone.

We asked if Rob Bartoli knew how other rural communities deal with water scarcity issues. He noted that the Central Valley may be a good example to look to, but that Pescadero has unique challenges, including its closeness to the ocean and that it is in a flood zone. Bartoli mentioned that the Central Valley may have more access to larger water sources.

While Bartoli initially stated that all costs (including infrastructure costs) to upgrade CSA-11 have to be paid by residents receiving water services from the district, he followed up and said that there has been some limited state funding to connect the Pescadero High School and new fire station to CSA-11. The most recent MSR for CSA-11 also states that "for large capital projects, CSA 11 is reliant on one-time funds in the form of State grants and County loans." Funding options seem to be limited to ratepayer funds and potential grants, which we recommend exploring more.

After interviewing Rob Bartoli and reading the MSR for CSA-11, we concur with the following two recommendations described in the MSR:

- “In recognition of planning efforts made by the community and of the constraints in Pescadero regarding development, it is recommended that the County consider the preparation of an area or community plan for Pescadero. This plan would work to resolve local issues and unique physical and land use situations found in Pescadero. The development process of the plan would allow for the community and stakeholders to engage with County staff and understand the community’s thoughts on development, the regulatory framework that development occurs in, and the constraints and opportunities for long-term development in Pescadero,” “If a community plan is developed by the County for Pescadero, the plan should explore the improvements needed for the CSA 11 system to meet fire flow and evaluate the financial costs to implement the project.” “Topics that could be discussed include growth projections, water availability, specific systems limitations, exploration of the development of a wastewater system and the impacts of natural disasters such as wildfire, flooding and sea level rise.”
- County staff should prioritize reviewing the rates for water service to CSA-11 to ensure its long term financial sustainability. Staff should also identify future necessary capital projects to prolong the life of CSA-11 and its water sources and ways to fund these projects so that not all costs are borne on ratepayers.

Momentum for the Pescadero High School Project: featuring interviews with Sophie Mintier, San Mateo County, Assistant Community Development Director and Mark Chow, San Mateo County Public Works

There has been meaningful progress towards incorporating Pescadero High School into CSA-11 to provide reliable potable water access by building a new fire station next to the high school. Then, by extending CSA-11 to serve both this new construction and the adjacent high school This project weaves together three main priorities:

1. Extending CSA-11 to include the high school
2. Constructing a new fire station next to the high school
3. Demolishing the previous fire station

There are many permitting, approval, and review processes needed to make these projects happen, including:

- Engineering design of the water line extension
- Amendments to the Local Coastal Program (LCP) must first be approved by the County planning commission and Board of Supervisors and then certified by the California Coastal Commission
- A sphere of influence amendment process through LAFCO is needed to include school site
- Environmental review processes to examine the environmental impacts of the water line extension and new fire station construction, followed by building permits for both of these projects
- A demolition permit for the old fire station



- Then a land lease from the School District to build the Fire Station on district property

As of our interview with Sophie Mintier, San Mateo County, Assistant Community Development Director, on April 26, 2023, this is the current status of that project. The County has conducted a water budget analysis for CSA-11 to examine the strain on the water supply, including a detailed projection of the water needs of the high school and new fire station. The state water board has approved preliminary engineering on the pipework required. The planning commission has approved conceptual designs for the fire station. The Local Coastal Program has been consulted about the design, and changes have been made to match their feedback, including worries about septic runoff and loss of agricultural land. Sophie is optimistic that this will speed up the final approval. The County has approved the environmental review and LCP amendment, which now lie with the Coastal Commission.

The next major hurdles are awaiting the Coastal Commission's approval of the LCP amendments. This will enable County Public Works to move forward with engineering, to contract the Fire Station construction, secure the lease with the school district, and finalize CSA-11's annexation of the developed land through LAFCO. The design and building permit process is expected to take 9-12 months after the Coastal Commission approval before construction can begin.

## Local Media Coverage and Press Clippings Relating to Water Access in Pescadero

During our information collecting stage, our team compiled a list of local news articles and media coverage relating to water access in Pescadero and the coastside region. Below is the list, including brief excerpts of relevant information we learned:

In chronological order:

- **JUNE 2010 | Records show county failed to clean up water at Pescadero farm**
  - <https://www.mercurynews.com/2010/06/25/records-show-county-failed-to-clean-up-water-at-pescadero-farm/> (article only accessible to subscribers, see below)
  - Click [here](#) for article
- **AUGUST 2011 | Pescadero without water because of broken pump**
  - <https://www.mercurynews.com/2011/08/23/pescadero-without-water-because-of-broken-pump/>
- **OCTOBER 2011 | High school left high and dry Students have long avoided Pescadero water (Mark Noack, 2011 - Half Moon Bay Review)**
  - [https://www.hmbreview.com/news/high-school-left-high-and-dry/article\\_e17bf024-0028-11e1-abaf-001cc4c002e0.html](https://www.hmbreview.com/news/high-school-left-high-and-dry/article_e17bf024-0028-11e1-abaf-001cc4c002e0.html)
  - "Like many former Pescadero High School students, Caroline Pisani passed by the same drinking fountains on her way to class every day. She never once took a

sip. The school's drinking fountains have been shut off since at least 1999. Students, teachers and visitors instead drink bottled water provided by the district." (Noack, 2011) - Half Moon Bay Review

- "The high school is hardly alone on the South Coast when it comes to water troubles. Small domestic wells have traditionally provided water for all Pescadero, but studies from the 1980s concluded that these sources had high levels of toxic nitrates and other salts." (Noack, 2011) - Half Moon Bay Review
- "School sources contacted for this story say they aren't sure why the fountains were turned off in the 1990s. County health officials say they have no record of ordering any shutdown of the drinking fountains." - (Noack, 2011) - Half Moon Bay Review

- **JANUARY 2018 | The water at this San Mateo County school is unsafe to drink — and has been for years** (Angela Johnston, 2018 - NPR/KAWL News)

- <https://www.kalw.org/show/crosscurrents/2018-01-16/the-water-at-this-san-mateo-county-school-is-unsafe-to-drink-and-has-been-for-years>
- "Small water systems tend to struggle [to fund] the treatment needs to make their water safe to drink. They need to be careful about cooking with the water as well. It makes things expensive and difficult for them," says Laura Feinstein, a researcher at the Pacific Institute. Some community water systems are flagged because they test high for toxins for just a couple of months. Others have more persistent problems that they just can't afford to fix. Feinstein says nobody's really dealing with it." (Angela Johnston, 2018 - NPR/KAWL News)
- "Fixing the problem would mean drilling a new, deeper well, or convincing the nearby water utility to run pipes from miles away. A sign at Pescadero High urges students and staff not to drink the tap water. Yet that neighboring utility is hesitant to add the school to its system — it's worried their wells will run dry. These should be simple fixes, but for the small Pescadero school district, it's a big undertaking, and expensive." (Angela Johnston, 2018 - NPR/KAWL News)

- **JUNE 2020 | Clean water may be coming to Pescadero school**  
Funding secure for CSA No. 11 extension (click tweet below for article)



**Dave Pine** @SupDavePine · Jun 16, 2020

Clean **water** may be coming to **Pescadero** school |  
[hmbreview.com/news/clean-wat...](https://hmbreview.com/news/clean-wat...) | @CALFIRECZU @firechiefcox  
@Mresendiz4 @CA\_DWR @PuentePescadero @AsmMarcBerman  
@sanmateoco



[hmbreview.com](https://hmbreview.com)

Clean water may be coming to Pescadero school  
Pescadero's middle and high school campus has  
been without clean drinking water for nearly two ...



- **JANUARY 2021 | San Mateo County's Untold Story of Water Justice: The Path to Clean Drinking Water in Pescadero Schools** (Kara Glenwright, 2021 - EJ @ Stanford)
  - <https://medium.com/ejstanford/san-mateo-countys-untold-story-of-water-justice-the-path-to-clean-drinking-water-in-pescadero-ab990e36e6cf>
  - "Pescadero is located in San Mateo County, one of the wealthiest counties in the United States. In a county with a median income of \$110,000, the median income for a South Coast farmworker family is \$26,000. The town consists of a population that is largely low-income white and Hispanic. Today, Pescadero schools are the only schools within San Mateo County that lack access to clean drinking water." (Glenwright, 2021 - EJ @ Stanford)
  - "In 2020, the county announced that it would extend water system infrastructure serving the town of Pescadero, CSA-11, to provide service to the schools. The project, bundled with the construction of a new fire station, would take at least three years to complete, but it represented a huge success for water justice advocates within Pescadero." (Glenwright, 2021 - EJ @ Stanford)
- **FEBRUARY 2021 // VIDEO // | The Story of Water in San Mateo County: Challenges to Equity and Sustainability** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4oGZSZoiLA>
- **APRIL 2021 | Thrive Alliance Presents "Water Gaps" in San Mateo County's South Coast; Challenges and Equitable Solutions**
  - <https://www.coastsidebuzz.com/thrive-alliance-presents-water-gaps-in-san-mateo-countys-south-coast-challenges-and-equitable-solutions/>

- **AUGUST 2022 | Pescadero HS begins another year of relying on bottled drinking water due to nitrates** (Len Ramirez, 2022 - CBS Broadcasting Inc.)
  - <https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/pescadero-high-school-bottled-drinking-water-nitrates/>
  - "At Pescadero High School, no one takes clean drinking water for granted. That's because the high school itself and the district office next door has had to rely on bottled water for drinking and cooking for years. 'The water fountain has never been used,' said English teacher Jennifer Freeman. Freeman pointed to the sinks in the classrooms which carry a warning not to drink from the tap. In fact, all the water for students and staff to drink must be trucked in and it's been that way since 2015." (Ramirez, 2022 - CBS Broadcasting Inc.)
  
- **SEPTEMBER 2022 | While Pescadero school waits for water, nitrate problem worsens nationwide - At least 2 years to address issue** (Grace Scullion, 2022 - Half Moon Bay Review)
  - [https://www.hmbreview.com/news/while-pescadero-school-waits-for-water-nitrate-problem-worsens-nationwide/article\\_153b91ee-2eb7-11ed-8f50-ebc449bb90c0.html](https://www.hmbreview.com/news/while-pescadero-school-waits-for-water-nitrate-problem-worsens-nationwide/article_153b91ee-2eb7-11ed-8f50-ebc449bb90c0.html)
  - "A project is in the works to connect Pescadero Middle and High School to clean water. As part of the Fire Station 59 relocation project, San Mateo County plans to extend County Service Area No. 11 to provide clean drinking water to the school. The county has been discussing the plan since 2020. Sophie Mintier, the county's interim assistant director of planning and building, said construction for the waterline extension is estimated to begin in 2024 and be completed in 2025." (Grace Scullion, 2022 - Half Moon Bay Review)
  - "At the moment, the county is pursuing amendments to its Local Coastal Program to allow the project to proceed, said Mintier. The amendments must be approved by the county's Planning Commission, the Board of Supervisors and finally the California Coastal Commission. Then, the county will need to secure Coastal Development Permits and building permits. In the meantime, Pescadero Middle and High School will continue to receive 76 five-gallon bottles of water biweekly for drinking and cooking, paid for by California's Drinking Water for Schools grant program. The schools have used bottled water for over two decades now. The CSA 11 project will not provide a clean water supply to Pescadero residents, however. Corina Rodriguez, the community development director for South Coast nonprofit Puente de la Costa Sur, said she estimates that 90 percent of the local community fills water jugs in Half Moon Bay or Santa Cruz on the weekends." (Grace Scullion, 2022 - Half Moon Bay Review)
  - Pescadero's nitrate contamination problem extends beyond even the schools' 25 years of bottled water. In 1974, tests revealed 41 percent of Pescadero water sources to have nitrate levels exceeding the state limit of 45 milligrams per liter

– which is 4 1/2 times today’s limit of 10 milligrams per liter. In 1980, San Mateo County surveyed the Pescadero area for a water source that could replace the many shallow wells residents were using, many of which were contaminated. Though the 42-year-old survey indicated that a municipal well in Pescadero Creek would satisfy the population’s needs, the report noted that ‘the water probably would deteriorate with time and might not be suitable for public supply for more than 20 or 30 years.’ In 1988, the many small domestic wells from which Pescaderans drank were replaced with CSA 11, which now serves 90 residences and commercial customers, and, perhaps soon, the schools.” (Grace Scullion, 2022 - Half Moon Bay Review)

## Water and Affordable Housing Production

As stated previously, one of Puente’s strategic priorities is to advocate for economic security for the populations they serve, and one of the ways they are doing this is working to address their community’s shortage of affordable housing, particularly for the farmworker population. A main barrier to constructing affordable housing in Pescadero, and development in general, is water scarcity and limited area to develop, along with regulations of the California Coastal Commission.

### Planning for Equity and the Workforce Housing Organization Housing Reports

There have been several community-led planning initiatives and reports produced for Pescadero that identify the community’s need and interest in affordable housing and additional services. We’ll discuss two of them here, Planning for Equity: Pescadero Town Planning Initiative and the Workforce Housing Organization Housing Report for the Pescadero Community Foundation.

Planning for Equity: Pescadero Town Planning Initiative<sup>7</sup> was launched in August 2018 and its report was published in August 2019. This initiative was a robust, inclusive, planning process that focused on listening to the community’s wants and needs for social services and infrastructure in Pescadero. The initiative found, “the most ‘voted-for’ items for infrastructure were trails, housing, a community center, solutions to the septic/water problems in town, and a public pool. The most voted for items for services and businesses were a health care clinic, laundromat and a playground.” One of the medium term recommendations that came out of this planning initiative was to create a Pescadero town plan, which is also a recommendation noted earlier in this report from LAFCo’s CSA-11 Municipal Service Review. We recommend that the County Department of Planning and Building initiate this plan and partner with local community groups, like Puente, to ensure that the process is equitable and inclusive at its core. We believe

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<sup>7</sup> Puente, 2019. Planning for Equity: Pescadero Town Planning Initiative.  
[https://mypuente.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/planning\\_for\\_equity\\_pescadero\\_report\\_final-2.pdf](https://mypuente.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/planning_for_equity_pescadero_report_final-2.pdf)

that County Planning's involvement is necessary to understand the regulatory framework in which development has to happen within the community.

The Workforce Housing Organization Housing Report for the Pescadero Community Foundation<sup>8</sup> was published in 2022 and also outlines a vision for a community plan for Pescadero. In the report they describe a "truly integrated planning process that brings the community together," with the "County government... as a funder and planning gatekeeper." In the report they say there is "one main avenue to increase affordable housing options in the near term: adding legal market rate rentals within already built areas," and that "the two ways to do this are to encourage apartments over businesses, and to encourage and support the financing and building of Tiny Homes as ADUs wherever possible." This seems like a thoughtful approach to development in Pescadero, but it is still not certain whether this type of development would be able to be supported by the CSA-11 water source that services the community within the urban rural boundary. The writers of this report advocate for the County to hire a planning firm to create a special district plan for Pescadero with a goal "to provide professional outreach support to elicit community participation, review the requests from the community and assess opportunities for joint grants and projects where needs and stakeholders overlap." We advocate for a County funded plan with an inclusive and comprehensive stakeholder feedback process and meaningful implementation of that feedback.

### Public Works and Community Development Perspective

Mark Chow and Sophie Mintier of San Mateo County Public Works and Community Development are both pessimistic about the outlook on large-scale new affordable housing projects. As the development process is described above for the Pescadero High School project, many years and a lot of political will have been expended, changing any of the zoning and water rights for the new construction, let alone the previously existing High School. Further development is constrained by the Local Coastal Program, and amendments to LCP are lengthy and time-consuming processes. The small room for opportunity noted is redeveloping the land for their already zoned use to maximize their water usage, such as creating more density on already residentially zoned areas with water access or making more use of the commercial space for water use such as converting retail into a laundry mat.

### CSA-11 Challenges and Limitations

As previously discussed in this report, long-term availability of water in CSA-11 is not assured, and financially feasible paths to expand water supply are not clear. Unless resolved, this will be an obstacle to efforts to expand affordable housing in the area.

The water levels in the current well field are in decline and overdrafted, with supply anticipated to last until 2094 factoring in the high school and fire station expansion. Based on current

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<sup>8</sup> Pescadero Community Foundation, 2022, The Workforce Housing Organization Housing Report. <https://indd.adobe.com/view/6df8c652-861c-47ad-9803-68b1444ba22f>

projected growth levels under the Local Coastal Program, the main water supply source, Well No. 3, will run out by 2047. Additional housing development beyond current projections would likely exhaust available resources sooner.

Regarding options to connect to other water sources, under current regulations, those costs are required to be borne by the customers served. High infrastructure costs, divided by a relatively small number of service connections, seem to make costs to current and potential residents prohibitively high. Increasing the number of service connections by expanding outside the boundaries of CSA-11 may not be possible under regulations of the Local Coastal Plan.

A combination of creative, cost-effective measures to address high infrastructure costs, coupled with cooperation across jurisdictions and agencies to mitigate the regulatory barriers affecting CSA-11, appears to be needed in order to address the long-term water supply needs for any future housing expansion.

## The Path Forward

### Challenges we Faced

Throughout the completion of this project, our team and the coastside community at large faced numerous challenges that impacted our work, including barriers around communication and accessing information, significant flooding disasters, and most tragically, extreme acts of community violence, all of which disproportionately affected those that Puente serves.

- Accessibility of Information:
  - Based on our research, there does not appear to be a centralized information hub for all things relating to water access, and as such, relevant reports, documents, regulations, and policies were challenging to find. Documents and county contracts are also written using technical language and abbreviations that can make the information difficult to follow and understand, especially for those where English is a second language or monolingual Spanish speakers (a large portion of the southern coastside population).
- Communication Challenges:
  - Based on our team's initial meetings with Puente leadership, we identified multiple individuals that we would reach out to and interview to gain a better understanding of the water access issues affecting these coastside communities. Our list included those among San Mateo County Supervisors, the Public Works Department and Department of Housing, Pescadero Municipal Advisory Council (PMAC) and Pescadero Community Foundation members, as well as local residents and families living and going to school or work in

Pescadero. We were successful in interviewing only a quarter of those who were on our list. Despite numerous and repeated contact attempts, introductions, and referrals, many of the individuals who we reached out to simply did not respond to our inquiries. This was challenging, but might be explained for a few reasons: the coastsides were ravaged by natural disasters and tragic incidents that needed to be prioritized over water accessibility; those who we contacted may have been reluctant to engage due to lack of capacity or they may have been preoccupied or traveling out of town; or they may have dismissed our inquiries as unimportant (hopefully this is not the case).

- Flooding Disasters:
  - Beginning in January 2023 and continuing on and off over the next few months, a series of atmospheric rivers and periods of heavy rainfall lasting days on end ravaged the coastsides, flooding entire streets, neighborhoods, and towns. Across the region, intense winds (as high as 60-70 mph) also toppled many trees and cut off power to thousands of residents, some of whom were without power for as long as a week. In March 2023, CA Governor Newsom declared a state of emergency. As a result of these storms, Puente, Pescadero, and the Peninsula coastsides at large, were severely impacted. For a time, collecting information for our report fell out of focus as all sides were occupied with supporting the disproportionately affected farmworker and coastsides populations.
- Mass Shooting Incident:
  - On January 23, 2023 a mass shooting occurred at two nearby farms in Half Moon Bay. Seven lives were sadly lost, and an eighth individual was critically injured. These horrible acts of violence rocked the Coastsides communities to their core. Fortunately, Puente was among those organizations that helped lead efforts to support and empower the victims and those affected, dedicating considerable resources, time and energy to support those in need. As noted previously, a significant portion of Pescadero's population are agricultural farmworkers and were disproportionately impacted by this tragic incident. Aftershocks of these unfortunate traumas can still be felt today.

## Recommendations

- As noted earlier in the report, there are several barriers to development in Pescadero, including the limited water supply from CSA-11 and limitations to development outside of the urban rural boundary due to the Coastal Commission regulations. However, there is continued interest from the community in expanding housing availability, other infrastructure, and social services. Through our research we have come across a common theme to several reports and interviews. The Municipal Service Review by LAFCO for CSA-11, Planning for Equity: Pescadero Town Planning Initiative, and The Workforce Housing Organization Housing Report all advocate for a community plan initiated by the County of San Mateo. A specific plan for Pescadero should be initiated by



County Planning and Building staff and should consult key community stakeholders and have a robust and inclusive community feedback process. The County must play a key role as both a funder and the entity that can lay out the regulatory framework within which development has to occur in Pescadero.

- The CSA-11 aquifer is in overdraft. CSA-11 current rates also do not cover all current operational costs. County staff should prioritize reviewing the rates for water service to CSA-11 to ensure its long term financial sustainability. Staff should also identify future necessary capital projects to prolong the life of CSA-11 and its water sources and ways to fund these projects (like state and federal grant funding opportunities) so that not all costs are borne on ratepayers, and so current levels of water access to the community can be maintained.
- Through our research and interview process, options to expand housing in Pescadero are extremely limited. Some options to explore include creating more density on already residentially zoned areas with water access (within the urban rural boundary), and potentially exploring other residences with private well access.
- The unique environment of Pescadero (proximity to the ocean, flood risk, distance from centers of infrastructure, etc.) may mean traditional solutions seen in other rural or farming communities may not be feasible here. Out-of-the-box thinking and new/experimental technologies may be key in cracking the code to a novel, unique solution. Efforts should be made to increase awareness and advocacy of these issues widely across the Bay Area and California, tapping into the innovative and technological resources of the region and beyond. As local funding may not be adequate for the required solutions, advocacy should also lay the groundwork for public/private partnerships, with the viewpoint that government and industry can come together to solve a critical issue of basic human needs and equity in our community.

## Contacts for Follow up and Additional Information

Based on our research, we recommend following up with the below individuals and/or organizations for additional information:

- Nic Erridge, Pescadero Municipal Advisory Council member
- Dante Silvestri, Pescadero resident and public advocate
- Anthony Parenti, SMC Department of Housing
- Gretchen Kelly, SMC Public Works
- Don Horsley, former County Supervisor
- Kellyx Nelson, Resource Conservation District Executive Director
- Amy Wooliever, Superintendent, La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District

# Appendix & Reference Guide

## Commissions and Advisory Councils:

- **LAFCo:** [Local Agency Formation Commission](#)
  - The San Mateo Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo) is a State-mandated, independent agency with countywide jurisdiction over changes in organization and boundaries of cities and special districts including annexations, detachments, incorporations and formations.
  - **Relevant Publications:**
    - [County Service Area No. 11 \(Pescadero\) - 10-2-2011](#)
    - [County Service Area No. 11 \(Pescadero\) - 5-18-2022](#)
- **PMAC:** [Pescadero Municipal Advisory Council](#)
  - Established in 1992, the Pescadero Municipal Advisory Council (PMAC) advises the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors on issues affecting residents of Pescadero, Loma Mar, and all South Coast communities. In addition to regular public monthly meetings on the second Wednesday of each month, PMAC works through a structure of standing and ad hoc committees made up of council members and interested residents.
  - Website: <http://www.pescaderocouncil.org>

## Reports, Assessments, and Important Documents:

- **[CSA-11 Landing Page](#):** County Service Area-11 (SMC Public Works))
  - County Service Area No. 11 (CSA 11) was established in 1988 to finance the development of this new water source and serve as the water provider for the Community. Click [here](#) to view a map of CSA 11 boundaries. The water system consists of two wells, one 135,000-gallon distribution tank and a distribution system. The water pumped from the wells meets all Federal and State water quality standards and does not require treatment. Water flows from the distribution tank through the distribution system mains by gravity. No distribution pumps are required. CSA 11 has approximately 90 residential and commercial customers.
  - **Relevant Publications:**
    - [Assessment of Source Water for the Pescadero Water System CSA 11 Report \(March 2002\)](#)
    - [CSA 11 Drinking Water Source Assessment, November 2002](#)
    - [Pescadero Water System Capacity \(June 12, 2019\)](#)

- [Municipal Service Review \(MSR\) and Sphere of Influence \(SOI\) Report for CSA-11: March 2022](#)
- **CA State Water Resources Control Board:**
  - [2023 Drinking Water Needs Assessment](#)
  - [Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience \(SAFER\) Dashboard](#)

## Legislation and Resolutions:

- **AB-685:** [AB 685, the “Human Right to Water” bill \(HR2W\)](#)
- **SB-200:** Enabled the State Water Board to establish the [Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience \(SAFER\) Program](#).

## Sources:

- [https://www.hmbreview.com/news/pescadero-community-gathers-after-floods/article\\_93358db4-973c-11ed-b06d-1b5c531b1f99.html](https://www.hmbreview.com/news/pescadero-community-gathers-after-floods/article_93358db4-973c-11ed-b06d-1b5c531b1f99.html)
- <https://www.rwcpulse.com/redwood-city-news/newsom-declares-state-of-emergency-san-mateo-county-urges-residents-to-prepare-for-storm-6670759>
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- <https://www.kqed.org/news/11939214/half-moon-bay-mass-shooting-whos-helping-community-members-and-how-to-support-these-efforts>
- MSR for CSA-11: [https://www.smcgov.org/media/141873/download?inline=](https://www.smcgov.org/media/141873/download?inline=1)
- <https://www.smcgov.org/lafco>