

Santa Clara County bond brings thousands of affordable homes



by Joyce Chu July 10, 2024



An all-affordable housing development opened near downtown Sunnyvale, with 82 apartments and seven townhomes targeted toward families with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Photo by B. Sakura Cannestra.

Eight years ago, Santa Clara County had less than 300 affordable apartments that served homeless individuals with disabilities. Thousands of homes have been built since then due to an affordable housing bond measure.

The county is set to exceed its affordable housing goals with 4,777 deeply affordable apartments constructed or in the pipeline across 10 cities from Gilroy to Palo Alto. These apartments are targeted for people who are homeless, at risk of homelessness or have very low income. Some of these developments also provide supportive

services for disabled homeless individuals and families. All are the result of [Measure A](#), a \$950 million affordable housing bond approved by voters in 2016.

This housing bond was the first of its kind in Santa Clara County that prioritized deeply affordable and supportive housing, according to Ray Bramson, chief operating officer of Destination: Home and [columnist](#) for San José Spotlight. It's an impact that will be felt for decades.

"It's been a tremendously successful affordable housing bond," Bramson told San José Spotlight. "We're seeing production for the most vulnerable residents like we've never seen before."

Measure A was spearheaded by Santa Clara County Supervisor [Cindy Chavez](#) and then-Supervisor Dave Cortese. They created a housing task force after a cost study showed failing to address homelessness was costing the county more than [half a billion dollars a year](#). One of the recommendations that came out of the task force was to create more permanent affordable housing.

And Measure A was born.

"We recognized that cities — even though they're primarily responsible for this body of work around housing and homelessness — if we didn't jump in to help, the problem was only going to get worse," Chavez told San José Spotlight.

The county set a goal to build [4,800 deeply affordable homes](#) over 10 years for extremely low-income families who make less than 30% of the area median income, and very low-income households between 30% and 50% of the area median income. In Santa Clara County, an individual making [\\$38,750 or less](#) is considered extremely low income, and those making \$64,550 or less are considered very low income. For a family of four, making less than \$55,300 is considered extremely low income, and \$92,150 is considered very low income.

Over the last eight years, the county has built 2,201 apartments for its most vulnerable residents, including 1,335 apartments that serve homeless individuals with disabilities. About 2,570 are under construction or have been pre-approved. Other housing developments in the pipeline include the Winchester Boulevard Apartments in San Jose, which will create more affordable apartments, Consuelo Hernandez, director of the county's Office of Supportive Housing, said. That would put the county's count of deeply affordable apartments in excess of its 4,800 goal.

"The program that we developed... we have delivered on," Hernandez told San José Spotlight. "The significance of that is to show the community that they can trust in

government. That having an oversight committee has been beneficial because you have those checks and balances in place.”

“That’s a lot of human beings that are not living on the street and won’t be living on the street because of this measure,” Chavez told San José Spotlight.

Despite the county’s ongoing efforts, for every person housed [nearly two become homeless](#) because an increasing number are struggling to catch up with the [rising costs of living](#). Santa Clara County has 9,903 homeless individuals based on a 2023 biennial survey, though that number is often considered [an undercount](#). In 2022, there were [10,028 homeless](#) people and in 2017, nearly 7,400 people lived on the streets or in their cars.

Another effect of Measure A is that it’s incentivized developers to jump in on affordable housing, Chavez said. The county has 12,000 apartments in the pipeline that need [more funding](#) in order to be realized.

“Measure A has created this robust pipeline of homes that are ready to go and ready to be built,” Chavez said.

Next steps

While Measure A funding has been exhausted, the county is eyeing another potential source of funding — a [Bay Area regional housing bond](#) that voters will weigh in on this November.

If the measure passes, the county will see [\\$2.4 billion](#) in funding toward affordable housing construction — more than double that of Measure A — and San Jose will receive another \$2.1 billion.

In lieu of this money, Chavez said she’s asked the county to look for public-private partnerships to complete funding for the apartments still waiting in the wings. She’s also pushing for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to make more Section 8 vouchers available for the county.

[Proposition 1](#), a statewide measure passed by voters in March, puts some dollars into permanent supportive housing and treatment centers that the county can also utilize, though it’s not nearly as much as what Measure A offered.

Susan Ellenberg, president of the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, said the county must increase its focus on [homelessness prevention](#) in order to stop the

inflow of new families becoming homeless.

“We have to be looking more at underlying causes to prevent people continuing to lose their housing, and we have to intervene before people fall off that cliff,” Ellenberg told San José Spotlight.

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