

**Ken on the Issues:
GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY AND TRANSPARENCY**

In my State of the County speech this past January, I talked about how heavily the economy is weighing on the minds of our residents. One way Santa Clara County works to improve the local economic outlook is the channeling of available state and federal dollars toward “shovel ready” projects that create new construction jobs. Wanting to do more, I asked, and the Board approved, strengthening our local preference ordinance.

When contracting for goods and services, the County goes with the lowest, qualified bid. This can put local companies at a competitive disadvantage because of Santa Clara County’s high cost of living. A local preference ordinance helps even the playing field by weighting the bids of hometown companies differently.

While it is important for the County to spend its money as frugally as possible, a vibrant economic climate creates other benefits. A sensibly crafted local preference ordinance can balance these two concepts. It should allow more local businesses to take advantage of the policy while still having minimal effects on the County’s bottom line. By keeping more tax dollars in the local economy, the County will be doing more to strengthen our local businesses.

With the state’s budget forecast looking bleak, I have been working to find ways for Santa Clara County to tighten its belt. Recently, I have been looking at the county’s Fleet and Facilities Department to see if we can save money by auditing employee vehicle use, examining a mileage reimbursement program rather than giving county cars to on-call employees, and purchasing vehicles and supplies from local companies.

During the 2006-2007 fiscal year, Santa Clara County spent more than \$16.6 million on vehicle costs. Some county employees are on call 24 hours a day and are given a county-owned vehicle so they can respond on site to job-related requests at any time.

The Fleet Services Division of the county’s Facilities and Fleet Department was last audited in 1981, and much has changed since then. The county’s fleet has grown to about 2,500 vehicles, and gas prices have soared to more than \$3 a gallon.

In addition to saving money, the audit can help the county reduce its carbon footprint and preserve the environment. By making our fleet more efficient, our county can do its part to conserve natural resources.

Already, 29 cars have been auctioned off with more soon to follow. Over the next year, County staff will draw up detailed plans to better measure vehicle needs and cut the fleet size even further. I believe we can substantially reduce the number of cars in our fleet.

Management is also creating new policies that will tighten controls over employee use of County vehicles and reduce out-of-county trips. In these tough economic times, when our residents are losing access to county services, we cannot afford to waste any of our resources. Every penny counts.

Respecting the public’s time and money also led me to bring forward changes with the County’s Code Enforcement process.

For years, residents have been unhappy with the pace and efficiency with which the County resolves code enforcement issues. I am pleased to announce that the County’s Department of Planning and Development is in the process of implementing a number of recommendations for improved service.

The objective of code enforcement is to correct violations on properties that threaten or endanger public health and safety or constitute a community nuisance. As part of the abatement process, the property owner is first given an opportunity to correct the violation voluntarily before penalties are issued. Unfortunately, the Code

Enforcement Program has been unable to resolve cases in a timely manner, and creative solutions are needed to resolve the problem.

A renewed vigor for customer service and a dedication of resources is the first step. One immediate change for improvement will be better training. All zoning and building staff involved will now attend new in-house training and education sessions to upgrade their skills.

A better tracking system is another solution that will be rolled out this month. Staff has created a database that will track property-based complaints from receipt to completion. In addition, one of the most promising changes will be the creation of a new Administrative Hearing Process. Currently, when code enforcement cases reach the fine and penalty phase, those cases move onto the court system. With the courts as overloaded as they are, cases can take months or even years to resolve. This leaves neighborhoods beset with ongoing health and safety issues. County staff is currently studying this issue to figure out how we can create the best program that is self-sustaining and judicious. Outlines for the plan will be presented to the Board later this fall.

To successfully administer all of the elements of County government, transparent decision-making by elected officials is important to maintain the public's trust. It may surprise people that until this year the Board meetings were not televised or webcast. I feel it is important that our meetings are at least webcast so they are as open and accessible as possible, which led me to introduce a policy last year to fund the necessary technology. I am proud that today anyone can observe the Board of Supervisors' meetings from any computer at any time.