Chapter 1

Context

Bordered by the Monterey Bay and summit of the Santa Cruz Mountains, Santa Cruz County is the third smallest of California's 58 counties with 445 square miles of land area. Santa Cruz County is 65 miles south of San Francisco, 35 miles north of Monterey, and 35 miles southwest of Silicon Valley. The California Department of Finance estimates the population of Santa Cruz County for 2024 at 262,572 and is estimated to increase to 281,399 by 2050.

The largest population (127,451) is in the unincorporated area of the county and the remainder in the four incorporated cities of Capitola (9,497), Scotts Valley (11,816), Watsonville (51,032) and Santa Cruz (62,776). About 80% of the population lives in approximately 20% of the area of the county. The population is clustered primarily within the City of Santa Cruz, Aptos, Watsonville, and Scotts Valley. Seniors aged 70 and over make up about 12% of the current population and will make up about 20% of the population by 2050.

Twenty-eight percent of Santa Cruz County residents – notably youth, the elderly and disabled, and low-income persons – do not drive a personal vehicle. A greater proportion of Santa Cruz County's lower income residents and people of color live in the south eastern part of the County in and around the City of Watsonville, with higher paid and service jobs more concentrated around the City of Santa Cruz.

POPULATION

Travel patterns within Santa Cruz County, discussed in Chapter 4, are impacted by the number of people who live, work, and visit the county. Figure 1.1 shows the historical population change in Santa Cruz County and forecasted population growth through 2050.

Population growth rates in the five jurisdictions in Santa Cruz County have varied over the last 25 years.

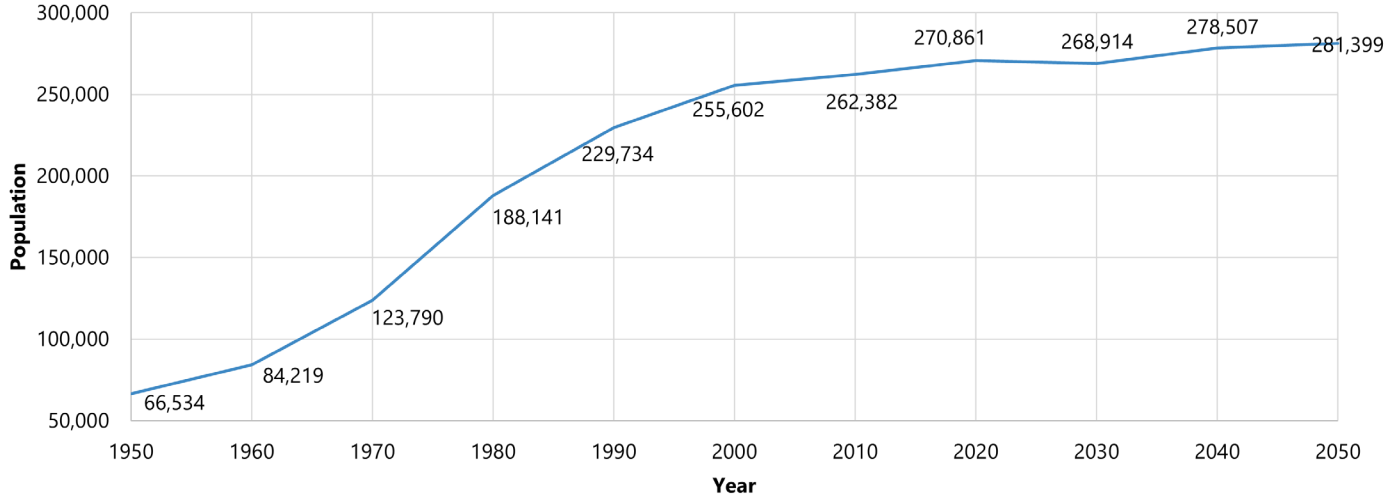

Figure 1.1 – Historical and Projected Santa Cruz County Population
Source: CA Department of Finance, U.S. Census Bureau, AMBAG 2026 Regional Growth Forecast

Jurisdiction	1990	2000	2010	2020	2025	% Change (1990-2020)	% Change (2010-2025)
Capitola	10,171	10,033	9,918	9,938	9,670	**-2.3%**	**-2.5%**
Santa Cruz	49,711	54,593	59,946	62,956	62,972	**26.6%**	**5.0%**
Scotts Valley	8,667	11,385	11,580	12,224	11,831	**41.0%**	**2.2%**
Watsonville	31,099	44,265	51,199	52,590	51,101	**69.1%**	**-0.2%**
Unincorporated	130,086	135,326	129,739	133,153	128,136	**2.4%**	**-1.2%**
Santa Cruz County Total	**229,734**	**255,602**	**262,382**	**270,861**	**263,710**	**17.9%**	**0.5%**

Figure 1.2 – Historical Santa Cruz County Population by Jurisdiction
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Department of Finance[1]

Figure 1.3 shows the location of where people live in Santa Cruz County, illustrating how the population is clustered most densely along the coast between Santa Cruz and Capitola and in Watsonville, with secondary population clusters in Aptos and Scotts Valley. A large percentage of people in Santa Cruz County live in urbanized areas, making it easier to promote shorter trips and active transportation options for reducing congestion and GHG emissions. Land use patterns are also described in Chapter 2.

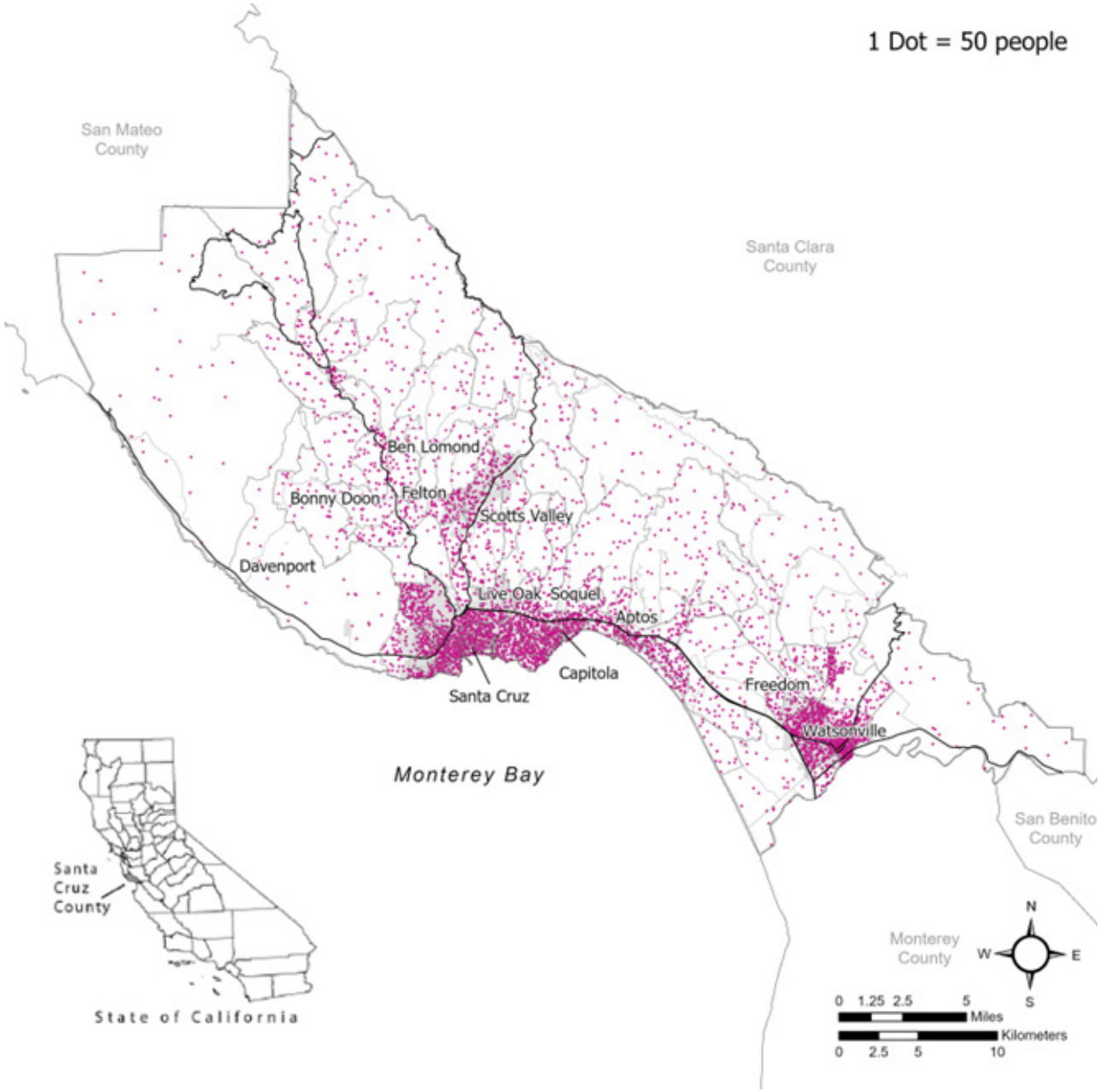

Figure 1.3 – 2020 Population Density
Source: U.S. Census Bureau

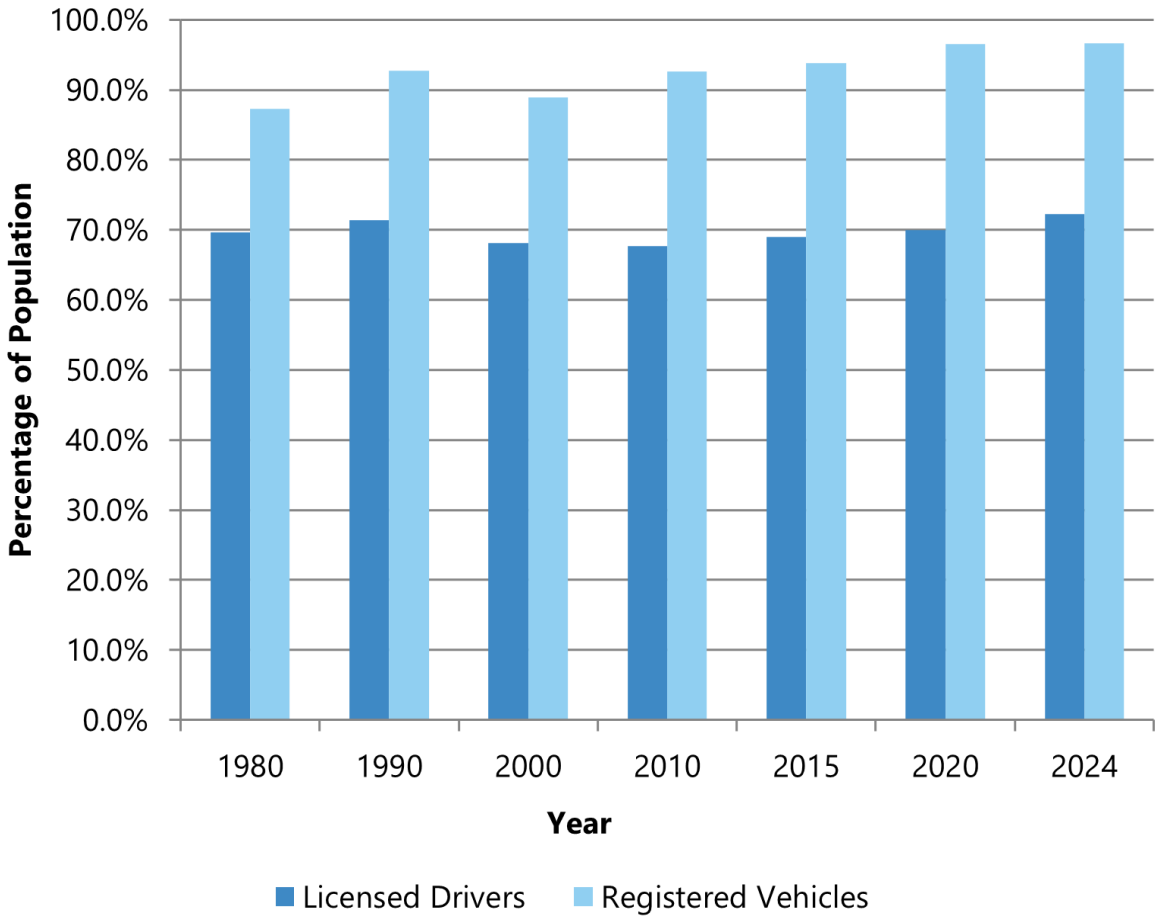

Figure 1.4 – Historical Trends in Licensed Drivers and Registered Vehicles in Santa Cruz County
Source: Department of Motor Vehicles, U.S. Census, California Department of Finance. Note: number of registered vehicles is total, regardless of how many each licensed driver may own.

Figure 1.4 shows the trend of the population that does not possess a driver's license. Twenty-eight percent of Santa Cruz County residents – notably youth, the elderly, people with a disability, and low-income persons – do not have a driver's license. For these groups, access to convenient transit service and safe routes to walk or ride a bike are a lifeline.

Variations in growth rates between age groups are distinct in Santa Cruz County. While the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments (AMBAG) currently projects a total population increase of 7% between 2024 and 2050, there is a pronounced change expected in the medium term wherein the number of people age 65 and older should grow by 14% through 2035 (Figure 1.5). This demographic shift will impact both the economy and the local transportation needs of our community.

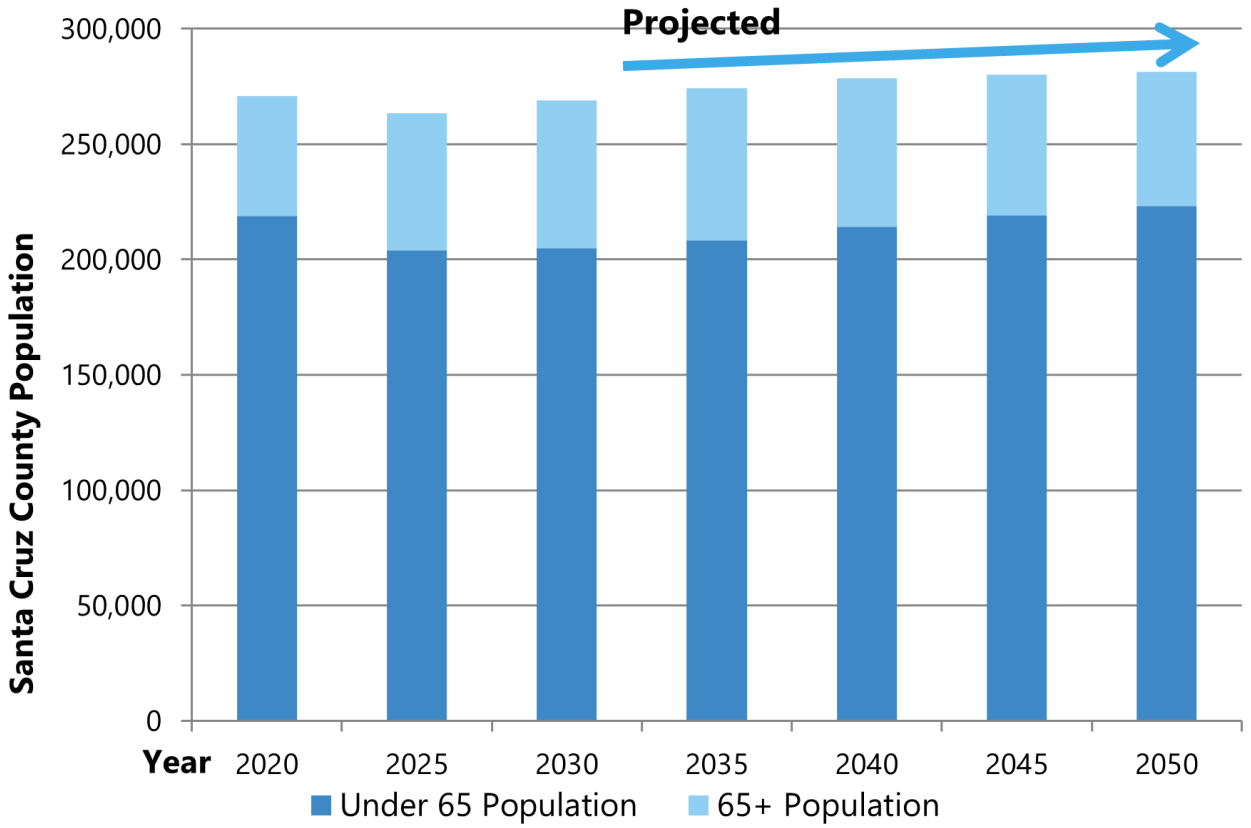

Figure 1.5 – Population Projections for Seniors Aged 65 and Over
Source: AMBAG.

As a result of this projected growth in the senior population through 2035, Santa Cruz County is facing a greater demand for mobility services for aging and disabled adults. While many older adults do not anticipate life without a car and expect to continue driving well into their later years, older adults no longer able to drive could face severe mobility deficiencies such as isolation, lack of access to social or medical needs, and increased risk of crashes. Furthermore, many older adults have historically retired in or migrated to low density suburban areas, characterized by single family homes, that are often poorly served by public transit or lack adequate pedestrian facilities. Survey results taken at five senior dining centers in Santa Cruz County indicate that many respondents (43%) drive themselves as their primary form of transportation.[2] Next to driving, the most common means of transportation is bus and paratransit use at 16 percent, followed by getting a ride with friends/family and walking. While the automobile was the most common means of transportation among respondents, approximately 41 percent of respondents reported using the bus at least once in the past month.

The projected increase in the senior population could increase the number of individuals with disabilities in Santa Cruz County. Providing for the needs of individuals that have faced greater transportation challenges, been underserved or disadvantaged due to age, income, race, disability or limited English proficiency is a crucial part of the RTP.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

One of the RTC's primary objectives is to foster broad public discussion about transportation issues in the community. This serves to deepen public understanding about the complexity of transportation issues and assists the public in providing informed input to the RTP. Public input is also important to ensure that the RTP accurately reflects the transportation issues that are of highest concern to the residents of Santa Cruz County. The RTC works to engage the public in an informed dialogue and to solicit input from a broad cross-section of the population with an interest in regional planning efforts, including community members whose voices have historically been underrepresented. The RTC is actively working to increase participation from low-income households, Latino, Black, Indigenous and other communities of color, persons with Limited English Proficiency (LEP), persons with disabilities, representatives from community and service organizations, tribal organizations, and other public agencies and has developed a toolkit for equity-focused

outreach and engagement. Public input is solicited at key stages of the plan development, including setting goals and policies, identification of transportation projects, needs, and priorities, environmental analysis of the RTP, and the draft plan. The RTC primarily engaged the community through surveys, email, news and social media, community events, the RTC website and RTC meetings and public hearings. Input was sought from RTC Advisory Committees throughout development of the RTP. Consistent with federal requirements (23 CFR 450.316 and 23 CFR 450.322) and the 2023 Public Participation Plan for the Monterey Bay region, input from the public and various state, federal and local entities is solicited. Figure 1.6 outlines the required procedures and methods for public participation based on state and federal laws. Refer to Appendix A for details on the public participation process including the timeline when input was solicited. See Appendix B for the roles and responsibilities of the Regional Transportation Commission and its partner agencies.

Public Participation Procedures

- Define Purpose & Identify Stakeholders
- Consultation & Coordination with other Agencies
- Consultation with Interested Parties (Policy Bodies and Advisory Committees)
- Public Notice, Public Hearings, Comment Periods (utilizes the Brown Act)
- Use of Media & Informational Materials, and Visualization Techniques
- Encourage Bilingual Participation

Figure 1.6 – Public Participation Procedures Based on State and Federal Laws
Source: AMBAG and SCCRTC 2023 Public Participation Plan[3]

WHY SUSTAINABILITY?

Throughout California, communities are working to balance the movement of people and goods with environmental and public health priorities. Greenhouse gas emissions have global environmental and public health impacts, and air pollutants can affect both the environment and health on a regional and local scale, with those living close to major arterials being exposed to more particulate matter, noise, and unwalkable streets. Santa Cruz County faces a growing frequency and intensity of storms, coastal flooding, fires, and extreme weather events that threaten the transportation system. These events damage roads and bridges, disrupt transit service, isolate communities, and delay emergency responses. The link between limited active transportation, such as biking and walking, and adult and childhood obesity is being strengthened as research and strategies for addressing this concern are being discussed at federal, state and local levels. A sustainable and resilient transportation system can play a vital role in the environmental and economic health of Santa Cruz County and the health of its residents.

A sustainable, resilient transportation system also requires improving everyday access and mobility while protecting communities and natural resources within fiscal constraints. The RTP emphasizes reducing vehicle miles traveled by expanding multimodal choices and improving proximity to everyday destinations so people can meet more of their needs without driving. The Plan focuses on closing gaps in bicycle, pedestrian, and transit networks, improving route quality and connectivity, and providing dedicated transit facilities and service that make transit a practical option for more residents and visitors. It supports land use that places new development near existing services and transit, especially where this benefits transportation-disadvantaged populations.

Public health, safety, and equity are a priority. The Plan advances human-centered street design and Vision Zero principles to eliminate serious injuries and fatalities, and it prioritizes sidewalks, lighting, and separated bikeways to make walking and biking safer and more attractive for people of all ages and abilities. The design of our communities influences the likelihood that people will use active transport for their daily travel.[4] Expanding active transportation and transit use also improves air quality and public health while reducing congestion and household transportation costs.

The 2050 Regional Transportation Plan considers current climate projections and includes upgrades to the transportation network that are needed to maintain critical access during extreme weather events, ensuring that key vulnerable corridors and facilities remain functional so people and goods can continue to move safely and reliably.

California's Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008 (SB 375) links regional transportation planning with land use to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from passenger vehicles. The RTP is coordinated with AMBAG's Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) and associated GHG targets established by the California Air Resources Board. Through strategies such as infill and transit-oriented development, multimodal

network expansion, increased transit service, complete streets, transportation demand management, and equity-focused access improvements, the Plan advances consistency with the SCS and helps meet per-capita GHG-reduction targets while supporting housing needs and preserving natural and agricultural lands. The RTC will continue to monitor performance, report on VMT and GHG outcomes, and collaborate with local jurisdictions to implement SB 375-consistent policies and projects.

Where there is housing density and mixed land use, people more often choose active forms of transportation which have the potential to lower obesity rates. The relationship between active transportation and obesity was examined in a study published in 2008 which showed that countries with the highest levels of active transportation had the lowest obesity rates.[5] In Santa Cruz County, 41% of 5th graders and 36% of 9th graders are considered overweight or obese, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. According to the Santa Cruz County Community Assessment Project, "Over the past ten years, there has been a steady increase year-over-year in the number of survey respondents who were obese and overweight based on BMI calculations (61.7% in 2019)." Currently, there are a number of efforts in the county that are working to reduce both adult and childhood obesity through promoting a healthy lifestyle that includes bicycling and walking to school, work or other daily needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed how quickly travel behavior and street use can change. Teleconferencing and remote work reduced peak travel for many jobs, and temporary measures such as slow streets and curbside dining demonstrated how reallocating street space can support health, local businesses, and safe outdoor activity. The RTP builds on these lessons by supporting policies and projects that sustain beneficial pandemic-era shifts where appropriate, expand telecommuting and trip-consolidation, and enable flexible street design.

Achieving this vision will require coordination among the RTC, local jurisdictions, transit operators, regional agencies, employers, community organizations, and residents. It will also depend on individual choices, including using transit, biking or walking, carpooling, shifting travel out of peak periods, teleconferencing, and selecting zero-emission vehicles. When combined with targeted public investments and prioritized resiliency upgrades, these efforts will be essential to building a transportation system in Santa Cruz County that is safe, equitable, and capable of withstanding the impacts of climate change.

What follows is an introduction to the key areas of need in Santa Cruz County, providing a background that helps explain the community's vision described in Chapter 3.

CLIMATE RESILIENCY

The transportation sector is both a contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and highly vulnerable to climate impacts such as increased flooding, landslides and mudslides, coastal and bluff erosion, and more frequent and intense heat waves and fires can buckle roadways, undermine embankments, damage bridges and culverts, and interrupt rail, transit, bicycle,

and pedestrian networks. Communities and people across the region must adapt current operations and infrastructure to maintain safe, reliable access as climate hazards intensify.

Storms

Recent climate science indicates heavier precipitation extremes and greater precipitation variability for the Central Coast, increasing the frequency of intense storm events and extreme runoff that drives landslides and debris flows (California Energy Commission, 2018; IPCC, 2021). The winter of 2016–2017 is an example: record rainfall produced numerous mudslides, washouts, and road failures that caused an estimated $130 million in damage to county roadways and bridges and created more than 200 new maintenance sites. That season also produced multiple washouts and embankment failures along the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line, with estimated repair costs of approximately $4.5 million. Future storm events are expected to produce more frequent high-intensity rainfall days, raising flood and slope-failure risk and increasing the need for larger drainage capacity, sediment management, and slope stabilization.

Sea-Level Rise

Updated sea-level rise science and state guidance show a range of possible outcomes that have been trending toward faster near-term increases and greater uncertainty in extremes. Current projections for coastal California include approximately 1 to 2 feet of mean sea-level rise by mid-century under higher emission pathways, with regional variations and plausible higher extremes for storm tide and wave runup. Local coastal cliffs are already eroding at rates ranging from approximately 0.17 to 2.1 feet or more per year. Combined sea-level rise, higher storm surge, and coastal erosion increase the likelihood of recurrent tidal and storm flooding, damage to coastal roads, low-lying transit facilities, and shoreline access, and in many places will require consideration of protection, accommodation, or managed retreat strategies.

Wildfires and Heat

California's wildfire regimes have shifted toward more frequent, larger, and more intense fires. The 2020 wildfire season and the CZU Lightning Complex Fire in the Santa Cruz Mountains demonstrated how fire can damage transportation infrastructure, including destroyed guardrails, damaged drainage systems, and compromised embankments, and produce widespread smoke that degrades air quality and affects transit and active-transportation use. Rising temperatures and more frequent heat waves also accelerate pavement deterioration and increase cooling-related public-health risks for outdoor travelers and transit riders.

Compound and Cascading Risks

Emerging evidence emphasizes compound hazards and cascading failures, such as when wildfire-damaged slopes are subsequently exposed to intense rain and produce debris flows, or when coastal flooding combines with high river flows to create inland inundation. Planning must address these interacting risks, not only single hazards, to avoid underestimating vulnerability and to design robust mitigation and response strategies.

Planning for Climate Change

Climate factors affect every phase of transportation decision-making including long-range planning and investment, project design and construction, operations and maintenance, and emergency response. To advance regional adaptation and resilience, multiple

projects and plans have been completed or are underway.

The RTC completed the Climate Adaptation Vulnerability Assessment and Transportation Priorities Report (CAVA) in 2025, assessing the unincorporated Santa Cruz County maintained roads and the entirety of the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line (SCBRL). CAVA inventories transportation assets, assesses exposure and sensitivity to climate hazards, ranks corridor-level vulnerabilities, and identifies early adaptation measures and programmatic priorities. CAVA establishes a countywide framework for identifying at-risk assets, prioritizing investments that protect evacuation routes and key interregional links, and targeting nature-based and engineered solutions that reduce both near-term risk and long-term costs.

The RTP also considers corridor-level resilience planning now underway, including study of how climate hazards may impact the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line. The study evaluates climate hazards such as flood, bluff, and slope-failure risks that may threaten the corridor and identifies climate resilient concepts for both a potential short-term use of the rail corridor as an interim trail and a longer term use of the corridor for passenger and freight rail in addition to a trail. Another planning effort to inform climate resilience is the San Vicente-Waddell Resilience Project, a multi-jurisdictional planning and design effort covering the existing Highway 1 bridge over Waddell Creek and the SCBRL corridor and Highway 1 bridge over San Vicente Creek; this Highway 1 bridge and rail trestle resilience planning effort is focused on coastal and low-lying corridor resilience through combined engineered and nature-based measures and operational strategies to maintain access during tidal and storm events.

Implementation and Monitoring

To implement the RTP's resilience objectives, the RTC will maintain and update the countywide vulnerability inventory and project prioritization building on CAVA, continue coordination with Caltrans, local jurisdictions, resource agencies, and tribes on corridor resilience studies including ZEPRT and San Vicente-Waddell, pursue programmatic mitigation and advance-mitigation tools such as RCIS, mitigation credit agreements, and mitigation banking, and seek state and federal funding for prioritized adaptation projects. The RTP targets call for the agency to track metrics such as number of RTC led or funded projects that include climate resilience design elements and number of corridor improvements implemented.

Supporting State and Federal Guidance and Tools

The RTP will align with ongoing state and federal guidance and tools, such as the California Sea-Level Rise Guidance, the State's Safeguarding California adaptation recommendations, Caltrans district adaptation priorities and vulnerability assessments,

and FEMA's hazard mapping and mitigation planning resources. The RTC will use scenario-based planning, updated design storms and sea-level projections, and where appropriate incorporate EMFAC/transportation emissions assumptions that reflect climate mitigation policies to ensure resilience investments are compatible with long-term decarbonization goals.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

The three primary approaches for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from transportation are through:

1. Improvements in vehicle technology creating greater fuel efficiencies such as zero-emission (ZEV) and partial zero-emission vehicles (PZEV)
2. Improvements in low-carbon fuels
3. Reduction in the number of vehicle miles traveled (VMT)

None of these approaches alone will result in meeting the GHG emission reduction targets. Like other regions, pursuit of all three in combination will be necessary. Zero emission and partial zero emission vehicles have been developed to meet California's strict air quality standards, and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from new passenger vehicles. The Low Carbon Fuel Standard (LCFS) establishes performance standards for reductions in carbon in transportation fuels that fuel producers and importers must meet each year. These measures are anticipated to result in the greatest reductions statewide.

The third approach, reducing VMT, requires changes to how much we drive. Reducing passenger vehicle use is supported through the requirements of the California Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008 (SB 375). The emphasis of this bill is to promote compact, mixed-use commercial and residential infill development and the transportation infrastructure to support it to improve people's ability to meet many of their daily needs through walking, biking and taking transit thereby reducing the per capita number of vehicle miles traveled. The law requires that the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments (AMBAG) as the metropolitan planning organization for the region develop the Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) as part of the Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP). This strategy coordinates land use and transportation planning to strive to reach the GHG reduction target established for the region by the California Air Resources Board. SB 375 streamlines the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for housing and mixed-use projects that are consistent with the SCS and meet specified criteria, such as proximity to public transportation. The 2050 Regional Transportation Plan has been developed to be consistent with the SCS planning effort of AMBAG.

Equity and Protecting Communities

Lower income, rural, communities of color, and people with disabilities have too often been exposed to greater climate risks, including flooding, extreme heat, and fires in Santa Cruz County. It is important to prioritize resilience investments that protect low-income, transit-dependent, elderly, youth and other vulnerable populations, and by ensuring that severe weather events and adaptation actions do not disproportionately shift risk or costs onto historically disadvantaged/equity

priority communities. Community engagement will guide site-specific resilience choices and help identify acceptable adaptation pathways.

By integrating the latest climate science, CAVA findings, and ongoing corridor resilience studies, applying climate-ready design and nature-based approaches, addressing compound risks, and centering equity and adaptive decision-making, the 2050 RTP strengthens Santa Cruz County's ability to maintain safe, equitable, and reliable transportation as climate impacts increase.

SYSTEM PRESERVATION

A well-maintained multimodal transportation system of local roads, highways, bridges, buses, bicycle facilities, pedestrian infrastructure and other transportation components is critical to providing a reliable, seamless, interconnected system. Such a system supports the traveling public and the local economy, reduces wear-and-tear on vehicles, and operates efficiently. Unfortunately, much of the local transportation system is aging and in need of major repair. Due to increased demands on the transportation network and unreliable funding, transportation agencies, cities, counties, Caltrans, and transit providers were not able to keep up with the increasing backlog of maintenance in the 2010s. In November 2016, Santa Cruz County voters approved Measure D, and in 2017, the State Legislature approved Senate Bill 1 (SB 1) – the Road Repair and Accountability Act of 2017; these two programs have begun to enable cities and counties, Caltrans, and transit agencies to make significant progress in addressing deferred maintenance, rehabilitation, and safety needs.

Santa Cruz County Local Road Maintenance

- Miles of local roads: 863
- Average Pavement Condition: PCI 55 (out of 100)
- 16th worst PCI rating out of 58 counties in the state
- $702 million backlog for the next 10 years

On a scale of zero (failed) to 100 (excellent), the average pavement condition index (PCI) of local streets in county's five jurisdictions has been between 54 and 55, in the "at risk" category, between 2018 and 2022, and is the sixteenth worst PCI in the state out of 58 counties.[6] Maintenance of rural and often mountainous roadways can be particularly challenging due to their remote location and susceptibility to storm damage and can have a lower priority due to low traffic volumes relative to more urban roadways. The winter storms of 2016/2017 and 2022/2023 caused severe damage to numerous roadways in the Santa Cruz Mountains, which kept the overall county score low despite the critical money coming from Measure D and SB1. Insufficient gasoline tax funding to cities and counties, as well as past low-density development in the Santa Cruz Mountains, has contributed to a backlog of local road maintenance needs in Santa Cruz County that exceeds $61 million

annually. Figure 1.7 shows there is still a disparity between available funds and funds needed for local road pavement maintenance given the backlog of maintenance that has been accumulating.

Transportation funding in Santa Cruz County comes from a combination of local, regional, state and federal sources. These include sales taxes, taxes and fees collected at the gasoline pump, vehicle registration fees, and bus rider fares, as described in Chapter 5 and Appendix D.

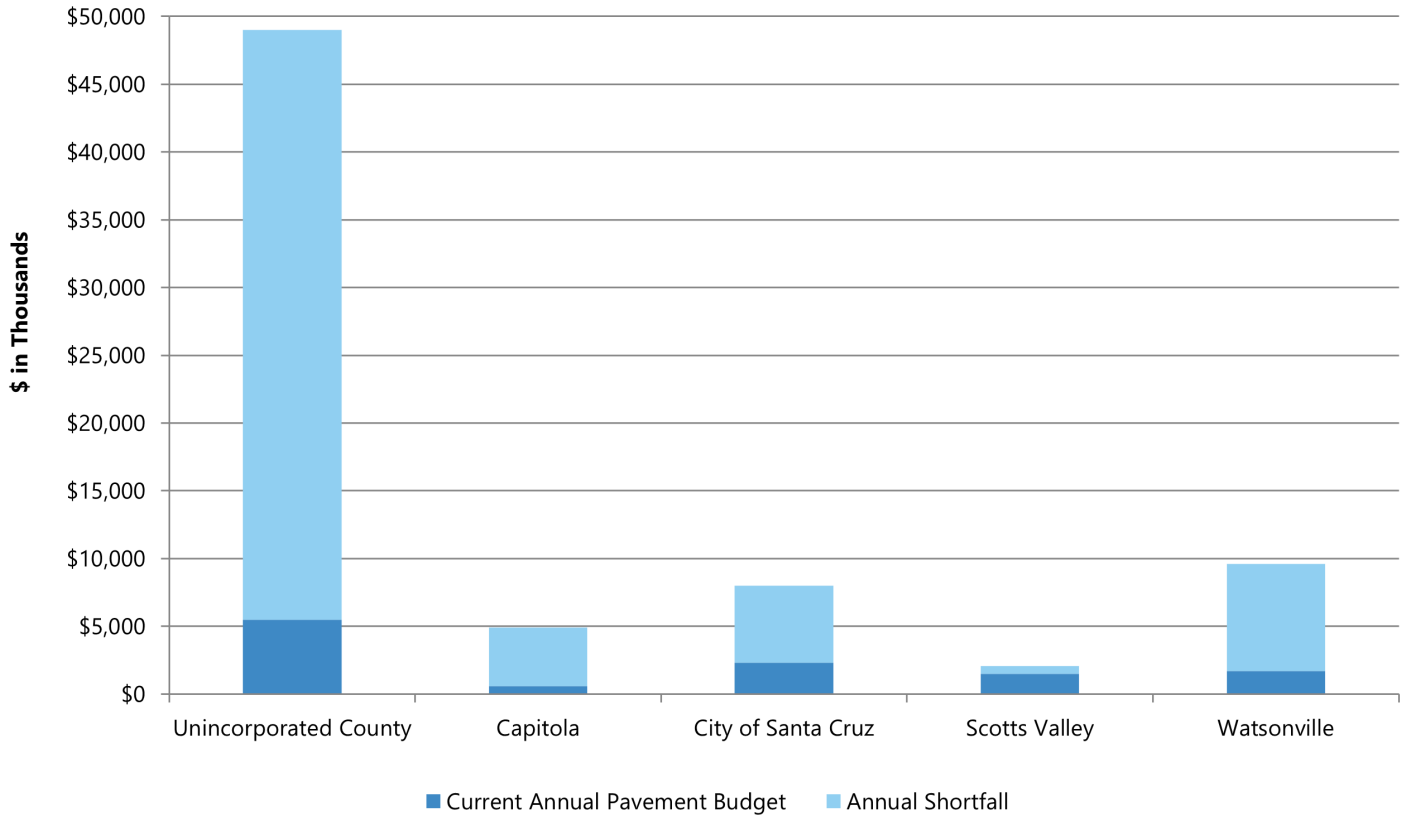

Figure 1.7 – Local Jurisdiction Annual Pavement Maintenance Budget vs. Annual Need
Source: California Statewide Local Streets and Roads Needs Assessment (2024) and public works departments

The 2017 passage of Senate Bill 1 provided more stable funding for transportation for the first time in nearly 25 years; it returned the state gas tax's purchasing power to 1994 levels and adjusted it annually for inflation starting in 2020. Prior to SB1, state gasoline tax receipts had been declining over the last many years. The federal gas tax has not increased since 1993 and has lost 45% of its buying power.[7] This has made it impossible for the federal highway trust fund to keep up with the demands placed on it to maintain and improve the current transportation system.

Approximately 35% of all SB1 revenues are dedicated to maintenance of state highways, but state highways make up a small portion of the roads in Santa Cruz County. Measure D, approved by Santa Cruz County voters in 2016, currently provides over $28 million in revenues per year from sales taxes that are dedicated for use on the transportation categories approved by voters and cannot be taken away by the state.

Maintenance of the transit system is critical to keep existing transit vehicles running and to ensure bus service is reliable. Buses and paratransit vehicles need to be replaced on a regular basis, transit centers require regular upkeep and rehabilitation, bus stops need to be maintained, and operations facilities need to be maintained and upgraded. The Federal Transit Administration defines the useful life of buses as 12 years and 500,000 miles. The Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District (METRO) aging bus fleet is discussed in Chapter 4.

SAFETY

Safety is a significant concern in operating the transportation network. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 (IIJA) identifies safety as a national goal area and requires each state to set Safety Performance Management Targets (SPMTs) to achieve significant reductions in motorized and non-motorized traffic fatalities and serious injuries on all public roads. The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), in cooperation with the Office of Traffic Safety (OTS), sets SPMTS for all public roads in the State of California by August 31 of each year for the following performance measures: number of fatalities, rate of fatalities (per 100M VMT), number of serious injuries, rate of serious injuries (per 100M VMT), and the number of non-motorized fatalities and non-motorized severe injuries.

2024 Collision Facts*

California

3,671 Total Fatalities
- 2,436 In Motor Vehicles
- 1,046 Pedestrians Involved
- 162 Bicyclists Involved

16,324 Total Severe Injuries

18% of injury and fatal crashes involved pedestrians

7% of injury and fatal crashes involved bicycles

Santa Cruz County

16 Total Fatalities
- 10 In Motor Vehicles
- 5 Pedestrians Involved
- 1 Bicyclist Involved

136 Total Severe Injury

16% of injury and fatal crashes involved pedestrians

17% of injury and fatal crashes involved bicycles

*Source: Statewide Integrated Traffic Records System (SWITRS), California Highway Patrol available through the Transportation Injury Mapping System (TIMS), Safe Transportation Research and Education Center, University of California, Berkeley. At the time of this RTP update, 2024 data was the most recent. 2024 is provisional and subject to change. Further safety analysis is done in Chapter 4.

The Strategic Highway Safety Plan (SHSP) is a statewide, coordinated traffic safety plan that focuses on state highways but also provides the framework for reducing roadway fatalities and serious injuries on California's public roads and is a collaborative approach between representatives from the 5Es to improve traffic safety where the 5Es represent education, enforcement, engineering, emergency response, and emerging technologies. The 2020-2024 SHSP identifies actions that state and local agencies can perform to reduce collisions including road repair and safety improvement projects on the state highway system funded through the State Highway Operation and Protection Program (SHOPP), added CHP enforcement – especially of vehicle speeds — and local education programs led by a coalition of police departments, health service agencies, and public works departments.

The safety of those traveling via non-motorized or active transportation needs to be emphasized. As reported in the 2014-2023 Crash Report, the trend in Santa Cruz County of traffic deaths and serious injuries is increasing rather than decreasing. This is partially explained by the disproportionately high numbers of injuries bicyclists and pedestrians are subject to in this county as compared to the rest of the state. Alcohol and speed-related crashes are also far higher in this county than the statewide average. Santa Cruz County has a higher percentage of trips by bicycling and walking than the California state average.[8]

Without a better understanding of how many miles people are biking and walking, it is difficult to assess whether the collision rankings for Santa Cruz County are high relative to other regions based on use. Regardless

of the rankings, reducing the number of fatalities and injuries for the most vulnerable users of the transportation system is critically important, given the multiple benefits of active transportation including public health, environmental sustainability, reduced congestion, and reduced wear and tear on roadways.

Locally, the Community Traffic Safety Coalition (CTSC) is working to address the traffic safety issues in Santa Cruz County by promoting a "Vision Zero" target for traffic fatalities and serious injuries. Vision Zero is an internationally successful approach to eliminating deaths and serious injuries by making significant investments in road safety re-engineering and enforcement of dangerous driver behaviors. Since the previous RTP, two additional jurisdictions in Santa Cruz County have adopted a Vision Zero policy, and are currently developing action plans. The 2050 RTP has included a "Vision Zero" target to eliminate traffic fatalities and serious injuries by 2050 for all modes. Data on serious injuries is provided in Chapter 4.

CONGESTION

Traffic congestion has become considerably more difficult to avoid. Congestion nationwide has increased two to threefold over the last 30 years.[9] In Santa Cruz County, segments of Highway 1 and a number of our local roads are notorious for being congested particularly at peak commute hours. Congestion on highways and arterials can encourage cut-through auto traffic on neighborhood streets which can further degrade the local road system and discourage walking and biking.

According to the Texas Transportation Institute Urban Mobility report, in 2024 the Santa Cruz Urban Area ranks nationally:

- 4th worst for Travel Time Index (The ratio of the travel time during the peak period to the time required to make the same trip at free-flow speeds).
- 9th worst for Commuter Stress Index (Same as the Travel Time Index except it is based only on the peak direction of travel).
- 9th worst for average commuter wasted 87 hours in traffic.

Santa Cruz County residents have suggested many strategies to respond to congestion and reduce how long it takes to get places, but with declining gas tax revenues, an aging system that is already difficult to maintain, and requirements for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, it is no longer expected that the community can completely eliminate congestion. The region must find ways to operate and utilize our existing highway and transit networks more efficiently and sustainably over the long term.

TRANSPORTATION EQUITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Transportation planning decisions can have significant equity impacts. To ensure that impacts, both benefits and costs do not negatively impact one community over another due to demographic characteristics, it is important to consider past underinvestment and how we are investing future funds. The quality of available transportation affects people's economic and social opportunities, health and safety. Title VI of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 11135 of the California Government Code, and Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice require planning agencies to consider how all residents, particularly equity priority communities (disadvantaged communities), may be impacted by possible transportation changes identified in the RTP. The various "costs" associated with transportation include congestion delay, risk of injury, pollution, and undesirable land use impacts. The 2050 RTP considers the transportation needs of the entire community and attempts to ensure that no one community enjoys more of the benefits or bears more of the burdens of transportation investments than any other.

Identifying Equity Priority Communities

A key element of the RTC's Transportation Equity Action Plan was to update the regional definition of "Disadvantaged Communities" or "transportation disadvantaged" that is used to identify communities and individuals that have faced greater barriers, been overburdened or underserved due to historic or systemic inequities or racism. These communities too often experience more crashes, face longer commutes to jobs and school, have fewer choices for how to get where they need to go, and have higher health risks than others due to demographic characteristics. Recognizing and mapping these communities helps agencies address disparities through more targeted transportation planning, outreach, and investments.

WHAT IS TRANSPORTATION EQUITY?

Transportation equity ensures everyone has fair access to transportation options—regardless of income, race, ethnicity, ability, or background—so they can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. Ultimately, it is not just about moving people from point A to point B, but about building a transportation system that ensures everyone can fully engage in social, economic, and civic life.

Based on extensive input from the RTC's Transportation Equity Workgroup, which included discussions on dozens of possible metrics, review of readily available data, and taking into consideration input from the RTC's advisory committees and members of the community, the RTC has identified **"Transportation Equity Priority Communities"** in Santa Cruz County. These include geographic areas where more than 40% of residents are low income, 50% or more are Latino or people of color, and/or there are certain other concentrations of seniors, youth, or people with disabilities as described below.

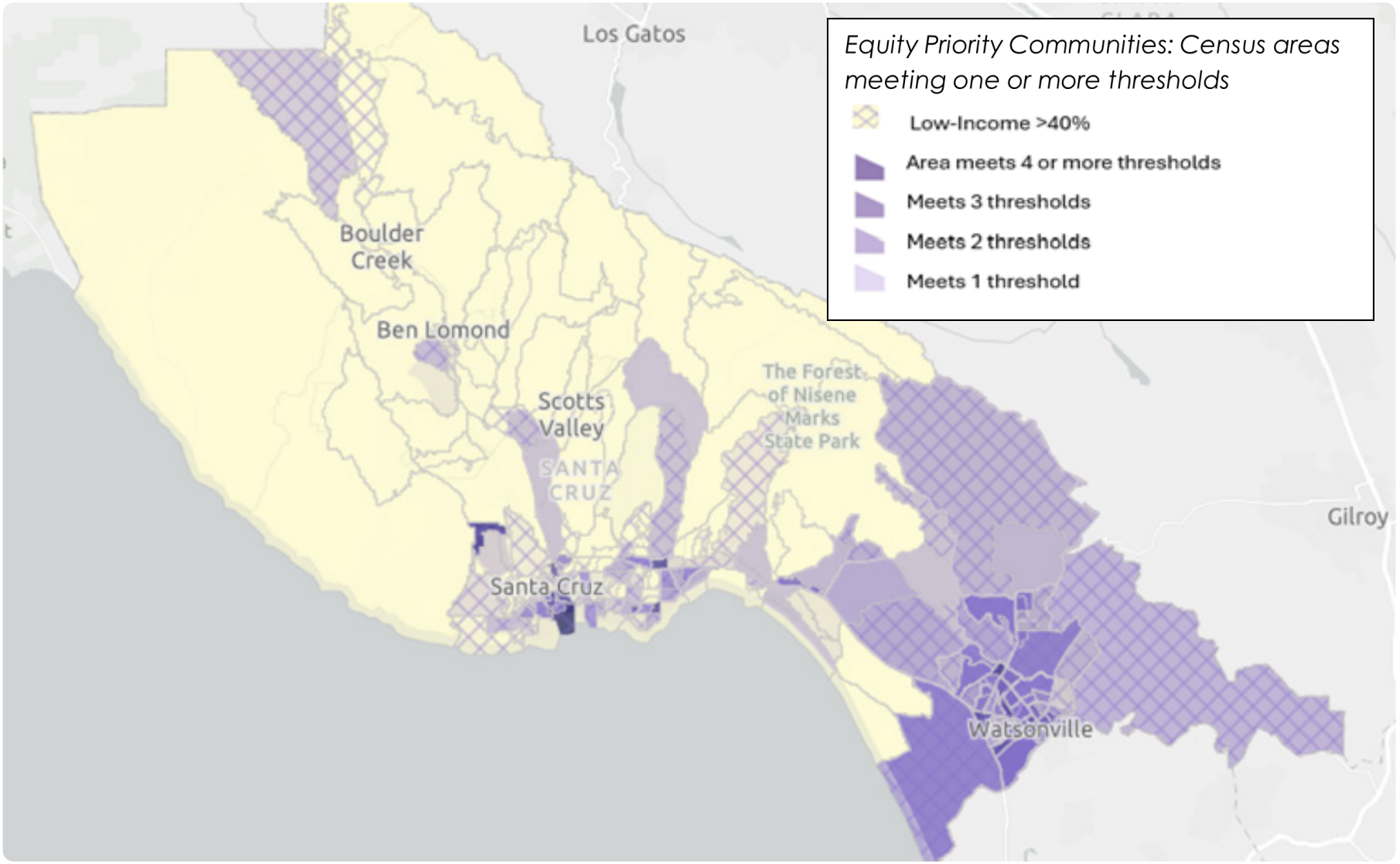

Figure 1.8 - Transportation Equity Priority Communities, 2025.
Source: SCCRTC. In the map above, areas that meet several thresholds are darker in color, as compared to other areas in Santa Cruz County or California. Areas that meet the low-income threshold are shown with hatch marks. Geographic area sizes vary based on available data. Census blocks are the smallest geographic unit in the census (sometimes covering just a single city block), however most census data is only available for larger areas. A census tract is a geographic area that contains multiple block groups, and a block group is made up of multiple census blocks.

The eight thresholds used to determine priority communities for the RTP include:

1. **Low-Income:** 40% or more of residents earn less than 80% of the statewide median income or are at or below the most recent county limit set by the California Housing and Community Development (HCD) or are at or below 200% of the federal poverty level.

   1b. Poverty-Level: Even if an area does not meet the Low-Income threshold above, an area would still be considered an equity priority community if greater than 20% of residents earn less than the federal poverty level.

2. **People of Color:** 50% or more of the residents in an area are non-white, mixed-race, or Hispanic, Latino, Latinx or Latine ("minority areas")

3. **Limited English Proficiency/Linguistic Isolation (purple):** 10% or more of households in an area where English is not spoken "very well."

4. **People with a Disability:** 15% or more of residents in an area have a disability

5. **Seniors:** 10% or more of residents are over age 75

6. **Youth:** 20% or more of residents are under age 18

7. **Renters:** 50% or more of occupants are renters.

Figure 1.9 shows the areas in Santa Cruz County with the greatest concentrations of people of color and low-income residents.

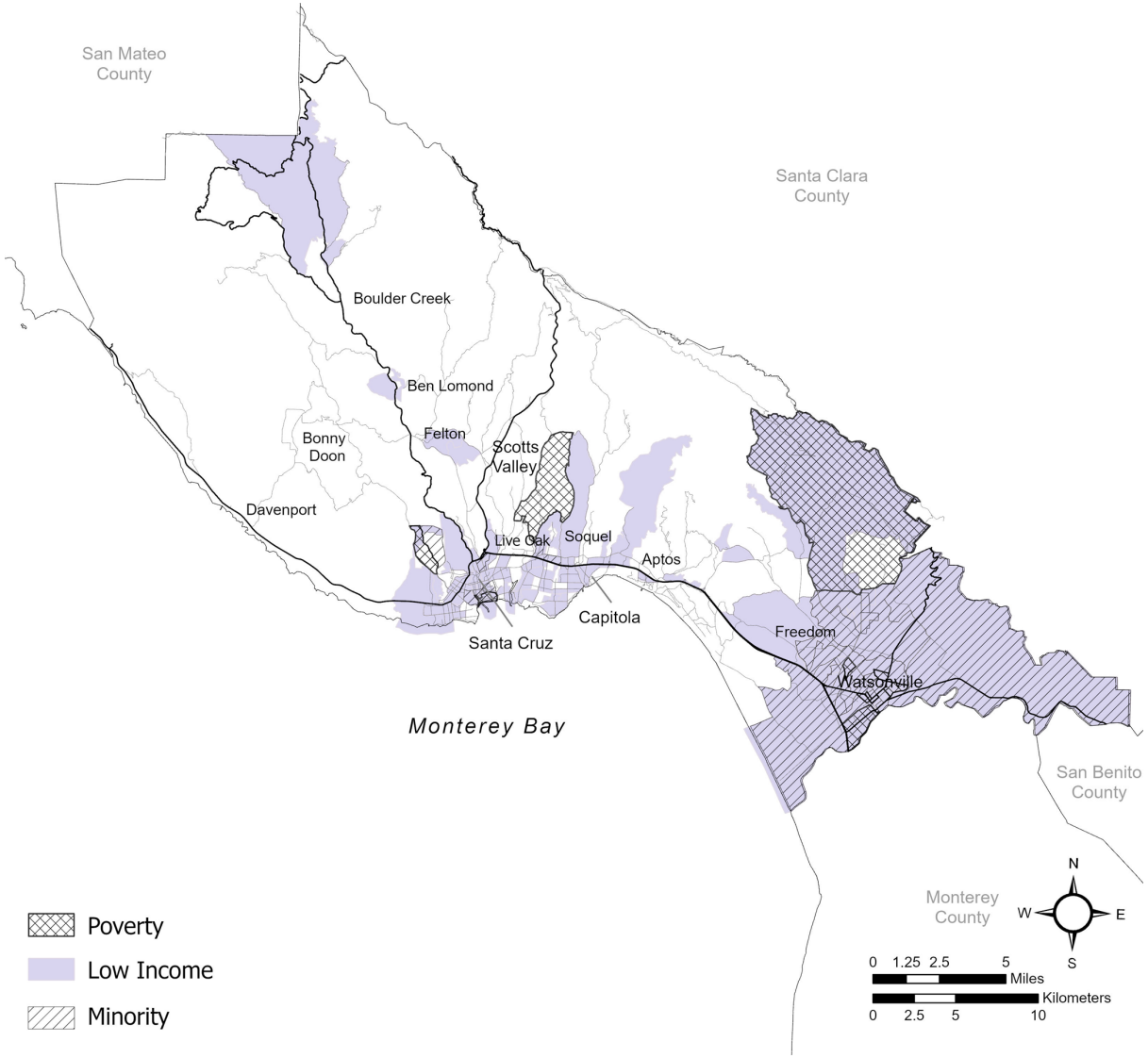

Figure 1.9 – Minority, Low Income and Poverty Areas in Santa Cruz County
Note: "Minority" areas shown above are census tracts where greater than 50% of the total population is Black, Indigenous, Latinx, non-white. Low-income areas are defined as census tracts where greater than 40% of households earn less than 80% of the statewide median income or are at or below the most recent county limit set by the California Housing and Community Development (HCD) or are at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. Poverty areas shown above are census tracts where greater than 20% of households earned less than the federal poverty level.

Notes for Chapter 1

1 State of California, Department of Finance, "E-1 City/County Population Estimates with Annual Percent Change January 1, 2020 and 2021," Sacramento, California (May 2021), http://www.dof.ca.gov/Forecasting/Demographics/Estimates/E-1/.

2 Pushnik, Karena, and David Pape. "A Bus Use Survey of Aging and Disabled Adults Living in Santa Cruz County." Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, January 2013.

3 Association for Monterey Bay Area Governments, Council of San Benito Governments, Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, Transportation Agency of Monterey County, "The 2019 Public Participation Plan," (October 2019), https://sccrtc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Final_2019_PPP_with_Appendices.pdf

4 Barbara A. McCann and Reid Ewing, "Measuring the Health Effects of Sprawl: A National Analysis of Physical Activity, Obesity and Chronic Disease," Smart Growth America, Surface Transportation Policy Project (2003).

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7 "CPI Inflation Calculator," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed September 2021, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm

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9 David Schrank, Luke Albert, Bill Eisele, and Tim Lomax "Texas A&M Transportation Institute's 2021 Urban Mobility Report," Texas A&M Transportation Institute (June 2021), https://static.tti.tamu.edu/tti.tamu.edu/documents/mobility-report--2021.pdf