

San Diego Newsline

Downtown San Diego news — the budget, public safety, business, and the civic life of America's Finest City

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County supervisors and the public heard early budget proposals Tuesday outlining how the County could potentially spend ongoing “discretionary” revenue next year — the portion of funding the Board of Supervisors can allocate at its discretion.

Departments presented proposed funding investments focused on sustaining core health, housing and social services; responding to increased medical costs in jails and detention facilities; and maintaining key infrastructure investments like stormwater projects and projects that protect parks, libraries and community places.

County Chief Administrative Officer Ebony Shelton told supervisors the upcoming budget process will be especially challenging and will require difficult decisions.

The County is working to build a balanced 2026-27 budget for supervisors to approve in June to succeed its current \$8.63 billion budget.

“As we’ve shared in prior updates,” Shelton said, “we are facing economic challenges, including slowed revenue growth, rising costs and uncertainty at the federal and state level — the source of nearly half the County’s revenue.

“Those constraints,” Shelton said, “require difficult decisions about how we allocate resources while maintaining core services and prioritizing resources aligned

with community needs.”

Shelton said County staff will use feedback from the Board and public to develop her recommended budget. To allow more time to incorporate that feedback, along with updated state and federal funding information, Shelton is extending the planned deadline to submit her recommended budget from May 1 to May 18.

After the recommended budget is released, the public hearing period begins June 1. Public input and “change letter” recommendations will be incorporated in a revised budget released June 12, with final budget adoption scheduled for June 23rd.

Online Survey and Priority Tool Now Open Through March 29

County officials emphasized that public input is vital to shaping the budget. To allow more time for participation, the County has extended the deadline — from March 22 to Sunday March 29 — for the public to use two online tools it created to help them take part in the budget process. Those are an online survey and a budget Priority tool on the County’s Engage San Diego County Budget page .

The survey asks residents what they want to know about County services and how they prefer to receive updates, whether by email, text or other means. The Priority tool lets people select and rank six County budget spending priorities

based on what matters most to them.

County officials have sought public input about the budget, saying it is critical to the County’s process. The Board of Supervisors held a budget process meeting on Jan. 27 and heard a financial update on the current budget at its March 3 meeting.

“The County’s work, at its core, is about people,” Shelton said. “Every program, service and investment we make is designed to support the people and communities that we serve. From health and human services, behavioral health support, public safety and environmental protection, to parks, libraries, roads and emergency response.”

The County of San Diego delivers programs and services that reach nearly all of the county’s 3.3 million residents across the unincorporated areas, the 18 incorporated cities and 18 federally recognized tribes.

In the unincorporated area, County government is responsible for the day-to-day services a city government typically offers, including law enforcement, roads, building permits, animal services, parks and libraries. Some cities also contract with the County for these services.

County government also works to deliver many services that support the entire region. These include emergency preparedness; criminal prosecution and

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DOWNTOWN, CITY & COUNTY

Courts · Transit · Public safety

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Supervisors Receive Early Look at Possible Spending Priorities for Next Year’s Budget

detention facilities; delivery of federal and state social service assistance within the region like access to food and financial support for vulnerable people; health programs including behavioral health services; food and restaurant inspections; elections and beach water monitoring.

For more information about the County budget process, go to the San Diego County budget website.

County of San Diego news release · Mar 25, 2026

COUNTY

County Launches Formal Review of Contracting Processes to Improve Oversight

San Diego County Chief Administrative Officer Ebony Shelton announced today that the County is formally reviewing its internal contracting processes to improve oversight, following the recent allegations involving a County contractor, the Harm Reduction Coalition of San Diego. The Coalition was responsible for distributing naloxone, an anti-overdose medication, and its former Chief Operating Officer has been accused by the District Attorney of embezzling funds from the Coalition.

The County has started work with an independent auditor to conduct a targeted review of contracting processes. The auditor is expected to deliver a report with findings and recommendations by the end of May.

Shelton has asked the County Auditor and Controller to lead efforts among departments to evaluate and improve processes in coordination with the independent auditor’s review.

Shelton emphasized the County’s commitment to transparency and constant improvement to ensure confidence about how public funds are managed.

“The Board of Supervisors has made clear that they want a full understanding of what occurred and how we can strengthen our oversight,” said Shelton. “We take stewardship of public funds seriously, and we want to understand where the checks and balances may have broken down and what improvements may be needed. We look forward to the independent auditor’s report.”

Once the independent audit is complete, the County will evaluate the findings and determine any additional steps needed to strengthen contracting practices and protect public resources.

The County encourages employees, contractors and the public to report concerns about waste, fraud or abuse. Reports can be made 24 hours a day, seven days a week through the County’s Ethics Hotline at 866-549-0004 and online and the District Attorney’s Office Public Integrity Unit .

The County continues to cooperate with the District Attorney’s investigation into fraud and embezzlement allegations related to the Harm Reduction Coalition and is also coordinating with Harm Reduction Coalition subcontractors that did not receive anticipated payments from the contractor to examine options for providing payment.

The County’s naloxone distribution efforts have continued without interruption to ensure people have access to life-saving resources. Since the Harm Reduction Coalition of San Diego contract termination, nearly 48,000 kits have been distributed through the County’s network.

County of San Diego news release · Mar 23, 2026

COUNTY

County Supervisors Approve \$14M Annual Plan as Housing Production Rises in Unincorporated Areas

The Board of Supervisors approved the 2026–27 Annual Plan , directing more than \$14 million toward affordable housing, community improvements and services for residents with the greatest needs. The action comes as the County also released its 2025 Housing Progress Report , which shows steady gains in homebuilding across the unincorporated area.

According to the report, the County is continuing to move toward the state-required 6,700 homes, with 932 new homes approved and permitted in 2025. Housing production has generally climbed since 2010, even as rising interest rates, construction costs, fire risk and litigation continue to challenge development. Planning & Development Director Vince Nicoletti said the County is seeing consistent activity through both discretionary projects and growing numbers of Accessory Dwelling Units.

Alongside this year’s plan, the County highlighted its long-term investments to expand affordable housing.

Since 2017, the County has committed more than \$334 million through County land contributions, the Innovative Housing Trust Fund, and state, federal and local sources — creating more than 3,445 homes, with another 2,610 in development.

The Annual Plan invests in four major federal housing programs — CDBG, HOME, ESG and HOPWA — which together helped more than 70,000 residents last year access safer homes, emergency shelter, rental assistance and other services that support housing stability.

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG): Funds affordable housing rehab and acquisition, ADA improvements, and programs that help people stay housed.

HOME Investment Partnerships (HOME): Supports affordable housing construction and helps first-time homebuyers.

Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG): Provides emergency shelter, rapid rehousing and services for people experiencing homelessness.

Housing Opportunities for Persons with HIV/AIDS (HOPWA): Offers rental assistance, supportive services and permanent or short-term housing for people living with HIV/AIDS.

These efforts are part of the County’s broader Housing for All strategy, which aims to help people build, find and keep a home by expanding affordable housing, improving permitting processes, strengthening community partnerships and investing in long-term solutions across the region.

More information about the County’s housing initiatives is available through the County’s Housing for All Hub .

County of San Diego news release · Mar 25, 2026

COUNTY

County Caring for Abandoned, Malnourished Dogs Found in Bonsall, Investigation Underway

County Animal Services is caring for seven severely malnourished dogs rescued Tuesday morning from a Bonsall property. The animals were impounded under exigent circumstances, allowing Animal Services to act immediately due to urgent concerns for the dogs’ health and safety. To ensure they received urgent medical care, all seven dogs were transported to the County’s Bonita Animal Shelter, where they are receiving veterinary treatment.

County Animal Services was first granted access to the property Monday night when San Diego Sheriff’s Deputies permitted entry. The responding animal services officer observed several underweight dogs, significant sanitation issues and no power on the property.

After assessing a variety of scenarios, Animal Services determined that, given the darkness and the dogs’ fearful behavior, it was safest to provide food and water and return early the next morning with a team and appropriate safety tools to help ensure the safest impoundment of the dogs.

Evidence collected at the scene is being processed as part of the ongoing investigation.

The condition of the dogs and the circumstances at the property remain under review. The case will be evaluated for potential legal action once the initial investigation is complete.

No additional details about the owner or the status of the property are available at this time.

All of the dogs have been medically evaluated and are now receiving treatment for parasites, dehydration and malnutrition, along with any other individual medical needs that arise. The County veterinary team will continue to monitor them closely to support their recovery and ensure they respond well to ongoing care.

County Animal Services promotes the humane and responsible care of pets by providing the unincorporated areas of San Diego County with 24-hour animal rescues; helping those who can no longer care for their pets; investigating and stopping animal cruelty or neglect; enforcing state and local laws related to animals as needed; and educating the public about responsible care which includes animal welfare, restraint, and licensing benefits.

County of San Diego news release · Mar 24, 2026

COUNTY

Two Wild Bats Found in Escondido Test Positive for Rabies

County public health officials are looking for people who may have come in contact with two bats found at separate locations in Escondido that later tested positive for rabies.

The first bat was around 4 p.m. on Saturday March 21, 2026, in a grass area near the White Oak Villas condo complex in Escondido. It was retrieved by the San Diego Humane Society.

The second wild bat was found the next morning, March 22, just after 10 a.m. on a rock wall outside of the Okavango Restaurant at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park. Officials emphasized that the bat was not part of a park exhibit. Visitors who did not touch the bat are not at risk.

The County Public Health Laboratory later confirmed both bats were infected with rabies.

If you or someone you know were in either of these areas at the White Oak Villas or the Safari Park and had direct contact with a bat, or you know of someone who may have touched a bat, you are urged to contact County Public Health Services as soon as possible at (619) 692-8499.

“Human rabies is almost always fatal without prompt post-exposure vaccination and treatment,” said Dr. Sayone Thihalilopavan, County Public Health Officer. “Rabies can be transmitted through a bite or when an infected bat’s saliva enters a cut, scrape, or the eyes, nose or mouth.”

This is the fourth and fifth rabid bat the County has detected this year.

Public health officials remind residents:

If you have direct contact with a bat, wash the exposed area with soap and seek medical advice.

Rabies symptoms can take weeks to months to appear, and once symptoms begin, the disease is almost always fatal. Prompt treatment is highly effective.

Rabies remains rare in humans due to prevention efforts. California’s most recent human rabies case occurred in 2024 in a Fresno County resident who was exposed to a bat in Merced County.

Find more information about bats and other animal testing for rabies visit the rabies dashboard for additional information rabies view the County’s website.

Bats play an important role in our local ecosystem. Many species of bats live in San Diego County, feeding on insects such as mosquitos. Other bat species feed on nectar from plants and pollinate them in the process. You may see bats occasionally around sunset when they are most active.

County of San Diego news release · Mar 25, 2026

DOWNTOWN, CITY & COUNTY (CONTINUED)

Courts · Transit · Public safety

COUNTY
County Seeks
Community Input to
Help Shape Regional
Behavioral Health
Services

The County is inviting community members to review and comment on the draft Behavioral Health Services Act Integrated Plan, a three-year roadmap for how state Behavioral Health Services Act (BHSA) funding may be used to support local behavioral health services.

Voters approved the BHSA, also known as Proposition 1, in March 2024. The measure updates how counties can use state funds to support mental health, substance use disorder treatment, housing and other critical services for people with significant behavioral health needs.

Under the law, every county must develop a three-year Integrated Plan that identifies local priorities and outlines how funding will be allocated.

The law also adds new statewide requirements, including housing intervention options, expanded substance

use disorder services and stronger tracking outcomes and improved access to care.

Community input is essential to developing the County’s plan. Since last year, the County has held listening sessions, focus groups and other outreach efforts to understand community needs and priorities.

Community members, providers and partners are now invited to review the draft plan and share feedback during the 30-day public comment period, open through April 15, 2026.

“A lot of significant changes are happening in behavioral health right now, and we want to make sure San Diego County’s approach reflects what matters most to our communities,” said Nadia Privara Brahms, director of County Behavioral Health Services. “We’re asking community members, providers, and partners to review the draft plan and share feedback so we can shape a plan that supports access to care and addresses community needs.”

Community member can share input in several ways:

By phone at 619-584-5063 (toll-free: 888-977-6763)

Through the BHSA Integrated Plan 30-Day Public Comment Form

A public hearing with the County’s Behavioral Health Advisory Board is scheduled for May 7, 2026.

Feedback received during the comment period will be incorporated into the final plan, which will be presented to the Board of Supervisors this summer for approval before submitting it to the state. Implementation of the approved plan begins July 1, 2026.

More information about BHSA, the draft plan and ways to participate is available on the County of San Diego Behavioral Health Services website.

County of San Diego news release · Mar 20, 2026

COUNTY
Creative Programs
Showcase Teen Talent
in Music and Fashion

County Probation and community partners highlighted youth creativity through two special events celebrating the

influence of African American music and fashion. The showcases took place at the East Mesa Juvenile Detention Facility and the Youth Transition Campus.

“We are so proud of the incredible work that these young leaders put on display with support from our community partners,” said Chief Probation Officer Tamika Nelson. “Collaboration with community-based organizations is essential to our department’s mission to help our clients restore their lives, families, and communities.”

The events used art, music and fashion as part of Black History Month to help young people explore their talents and envision new opportunities.

At East Mesa, youth presented projects highlighting African American contributions to American music. Teens created display boards featuring Black artists, producers and songwriters they admire.

Brandon Steppe, founder of David’s Harp Foundation , spoke about how music can empower youth and shared a

new music video created in the facility’s music program .

At the Youth Transition Campus, the focus shifted to fashion. Teens staged a runway show featuring styles from the 1920s through the 1990s and shares how Black designers have shaped their own perspectives. Participants also displayed original dress sketches and mannequins developed with mentorship from Combat Arts San Diego .

Probation staff say the programs reflect a broader commitment to creativity, mentorship and hands-on experiences.

The department continues to expand programs and community partnerships that help youth build confidence, discover new skills and plan for life after detention.

County Probation works to help justice-involved youth grow, heal and build better futures, and that starts with safety, fairness, and trust for everyone involved.

County of San Diego news release · Mar 19, 2026

BUSINESS

San Diego commerce & the regional economy

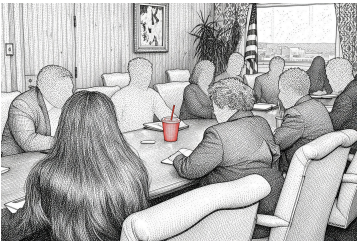


Illustration from a photo by Department of Housing and Urban Development. Office of the Chief Human Capital O - Wikimedia Commons, Public domain

BUSINESS
Chamber Joins State
Coalitions

The Chamber has joined two state coalition letters on two important bills affecting our regional economy. We have joined the opposition to Assembly Bill 1777 (Garcia) and have joined the support effort for AB 2552 (Avila Farias).

AB 1777 (Garcia) would give the California Air Resources Board (CARB) broad authority to regulate indirect source emissions. This means that warehouses would be punished for the emissions of vehicles visiting them. They would be required to make

significant and costly upgrades in order to come into compliance with new regulations. The air regulator for the Los Angeles and Inland Empire, the South Coast Air Quality Management District, passed a similar rule, which has already led to less economic investment in the transportation and logistics industry in the LA basin and Inland Empire. We joined this coalition to oppose the bill and its costly new regulations.

AB 2552 (Avila Farias) would provide needed cleanup to legislation last year that created a VMT Mitigation Banking system for housing development across California. This would impose onerous new fees on development projects, making already expensive housing even more unaffordable. We are supporting this cleanup bill to not allow this and as part of our continued advocacy for lower housing costs.

San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce news release · Mar 20, 2026

BUSINESS
Chamber Joins State
Coalitions

Chamber VP of International and Public Affairs, Kenia Zamarripa, and International and Policy Advisor, Myriam Mendoza, met with the Tecate Chamber of Commerce for Services and Tourism (CANACO SERVYTUR) to discuss opportunities for collaboration. The meeting builds on last year’s visit to Tecate as part of a series of engagements across the CaliBaja region, where staff met with local business leaders and elected officials, including Tecate Mayor Roman Cota. This latest conversation provided an opportunity to reconnect with the Tecate business community, meet CANACO SERVYTUR’s new leadership, and hear about upcoming initiatives in the region.

The city of Tecate is also preparing for its annual celebration of the region’s vibrant gastronomy scene, COCINARTE , which will take place on September 5 th .

San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce news release · Mar 20, 2026

BUSINESS
Women in Leadership
Forum

The Chamber, in partnership with the Consulate of Mexico in San Diego and COPARMEX Tijuana, hosted a Cross-Border Network of Businesswomen in recognition of International Women’s Month.

The event featured a panel discussion with Ambassador Alicia Kerber Palma, Consul General of Mexico in San Diego; Elisa Ibañez, President of COPARMEX Tijuana, and Kenia Zamarripa, Vice President of International and Public Affairs for the Chamber, who spoke on empowering cross-border

women entrepreneurs. The conversation explored the personal journeys, mentorship, and educational experiences that have shaped their careers in traditionally male-dominated industries. Panelists reflected on structural changes needed to expand access to leadership opportunities for women and how they incorporate a gender perspective.

This conversation builds on the collaborative efforts formalized through the Chamber’s Memorandum of Understanding with the Consulate of Mexico in San Diego and with COPARMEX. We look forward to expanding these partnerships and continuing the dialogue through future initiatives, including a second Voices in Leadership event later this year.

San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce news release · Mar 20, 2026

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Same old bottomless priorities

THE NEWSLINE CARTOON

COMMENTARY

Opinion — the views of the writers named, not news reporting

ABOUT THIS PAPER San Diego Newsline covers downtown San Diego first —	City Hall, the Gaslamp Quarter, East Village, Little Italy, Barrio Logan and the	waterfront — and the county around it. Every item names its source; read the originals	and our standards at sandiegonewsline.com.	
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MORE NEWS

Downtown, City & County

COUNTY

Dog Therapy Program Benefits Probation Youth and Staff

County Probation is putting therapy and facility dogs to work in a “pawsitive” way at its youth facilities in Kearny Mesa and Otay Mesa. The program is so successful and benefits are so substantial that the Probation Behavioral Health Services Unit added its own facility canine, and her name is Coco Brulé.

Coco is a 3-year-old English Labrador retriever, fully trained and certified by Pawsitive Teams , a local non-profit that specializes in training service, facility, and therapy canines to help with canine-assisted, goal-oriented interventions. Each therapy dog receives about two years of training before it can come to work in a facility. Just like Coco, her two

handlers are also trained and certified every year.

Known for her expressive eyes, the yellow Labrador makes frequent rounds at the Youth Transition Campus and the East Mesa Youth Detention Facility, eliciting smiles and outstretched hands from young people and adults alike. She offers comfort, helps with emotional regulation, and creates a calming atmosphere for youth in custody. Coco is also a valued highlight of Probation’s employee wellness program.

Handlers say Coco is especially effective during tense moments with teens. They describe her as an extension of their team during difficult conversations with youth who may be withdrawn or overwhelmed.

“She really is amazing and is changing lives, including

ours,” said Araceli Ramos, Coco’s primary handler and Probation’s Behavioral Health Program manager. “I feel like she can actually look into people’s souls.”

Ramos, who is also a licensed clinical social worker, recalled an incident when Coco was requested for a teen having a panic attack. Coco approached, lifted herself onto the bench, tucked her head under the teen’s chin, and held on. The teen calmed down and formed a strong connection with her during his stay.

Probation staff also note Coco’s keen perception skills. In one instance, she stopped in a hallway to sit beside a staff member who later shared they were having a difficult day.

The department is considering adding a second facility dog to support both youth

facilities.

“She was absolutely born for this job and this facility,” said Randy Valderrama, an alcohol and drug program specialist, who is also Coco’s secondary handler.

Pawsitive Teams also partners with Probation on a six-week canine-assisted program for youth who have experienced trauma, family disruptions, or low self-esteem. The program teaches trust, communication, body-language awareness, managing distractions, and building self-confidence — skills that support rehabilitation and emotional growth.

The program launched in October 2024. More than 50 young people have participated so far. Each six-week session ends with a small graduation, where participants share reflections, run an obstacle course with their

dogs, and receive certificates and a keepsake photo keychain.

Youth say the program helps them manage their emotions, communicate more clearly, and build confidence. Staff also say the Therapy dogs support teamwork and wellness in an environment where stress can run high.

By shifting the role of dogs in correctional settings from detection to emotional support, the program offers a more compassionate, evidence-based approach to rehabilitation. Early results show that therapy and facility dogs like Coco can play a meaningful role in transforming juvenile justice environments.

County of San Diego news release · Mar 20, 2026