



COUNTY OF SAN BENITO

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March 22, 2022

Tom Brinkhuis

California Department of Housing & Community Development
Division of Housing Policy Development
2020 W. El Camino Avenue, Suite 500 | Sacramento, CA 95833

Re: San Benito County's Regional Housing Needs Determination

Dear Mr. Brinkhuis:

The Council of San Benito County Governments (COG) has received the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) Regional Housing Needs Determination (RHND). San Benito County's RHND for the Sixth (6th) Cycle is 5,005 units, increasing 128% over the County's allocation of 2,194 units in the current (Fifth, 5th) Housing Element cycle. COG sent a letter to HCD dated January 5, 2022, and in response HCD provided a response back to COG dated January 25, 2022. This letter is sent to convey San Benito County's concerns regarding the RHND allocation process and specifically its effect on rural Counties.

Our region continues to demonstrate its commitment to meeting its population's current and future housing needs and carrying its fair share of the region's housing needs; however, the 6th Cycle RHNA allocation is coupled with constraints. San Benito County Board of Supervisors, along with the COG Board of Directors, desires to express concerns with the San Benito region's RHNA allocation for the reasons set forth herein.

As the COG's letter conveyed, our County has constraints to increased housing due to infrastructure limitations. While the County understands that this will be addressed in the constraints discussion during the Housing Element update, ignoring these constraints provides a false expectation about the number of houses which should be, or can be, constructed in San Benito County. A discussion of the constraints was included in COG's letter and is summarized below:

- **Transportation Infrastructure and Greenhouse Gas Reduction Challenges** - In the County, a staggering half (49 percent) ¹ of San Benito County residents commute to jobs outside of the County. San Benito County provides housing at lower costs than surrounding

¹ Employment Development Department's Labor Market Information Division

communities to the north and the west and is a place where many residents travel long distances to access jobs. A lack of affordable home building in urbanized areas is one of the fundamental causes of California's housing crisis. Rural communities like San Benito County carry the burden of providing housing stock for surrounding thriving communities. Often times commuters leave much of their tax dollars in the coffers of other communities – resulting in the County's inability to address some of their most basic needs, including transportation. The spatial mismatch between jobs and affordable housing has caused growing numbers of workers to reside farther from their workplaces.

Daily traffic at the San Benito/Santa Clara County line has more than doubled since the mid-1990s due to rapid population growth and commute trips and is expected to double again by 2040. State highways located in San Benito County have reached capacity and are experiencing extreme congestion. Improvements to Highway 25, which provides direct access to jobs in Santa Clara County, will not be constructed for at least the next decade, further perpetuating driver frustration and increased motor vehicle accidents.

State housing law 65584 (a)(3) includes the following that addresses the statement mentioned above. The Legislature finds and declares that insufficient housing in job centers hinders the State's environmental quality and runs counter to the State's environmental goals. In particular, when Californians seeking affordable housing are forced to drive long distances to work, an increased amount of greenhouse gases and other pollutants is released and puts in jeopardy the achievement of the State's climate goals, as established under Section 38566 of the Health and Safety Code, and clean air goals.²

As such, the increased RHNA allocation impacts rural communities, negatively impacting the State's environmental goals of reducing GHG, improving water quality, fire safety, etc.

Furthermore, in 2018, the California Statewide Needs Assessment Project surveyed California's counties and 482 cities on the condition of local streets and roads infrastructure. It collected data on the amount and type of funding used to support the needs of pavement, essential component needs, and bridges. The condition of California's local streets and roads has continued to deteriorate significantly since the initial study. On a scale of zero (failed) to 100 (excellent), the statewide average Pavement Condition Index (PCI) is now 65 ("At Risk" category). Even more alarming, 53 of 58 counties are either at risk or have poor pavements. The San Benito region ranked one of eight counties in California to have an average pavement condition of less than 49, significantly worse than the statewide average.³ The countywide average pavement condition index in San Benito is 37, a significant drop from 46 in 2016. Increasing the RHNA housing allocation in San Benito County further contributes to the increase of vehicles miles traveled as commuters must travel longer distances to access higher-paying jobs –further impacting the region's poor condition index.

- **Impacts on Rural Regions** – San Benito County is a rural community, and it lacks the ability to build and maintain the infrastructure needed to support the RHNA allocation. The

²https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=GOV&division=1.&title=7.&part=&chapter=3.&article=10.6.

³ 2016 California Statewide Needs Assessment Project

result is that jurisdictions are overly burdened by accommodating high growth numbers without developing the necessary infrastructure to support such growth. The San Benito region also does not have the economy of scale to fund such infrastructure improvements.

- **Sewer Infrastructure Constraints** –The remaining undeveloped areas of unincorporated San Benito County do not have a sewer system. A new sewer system to serve the unincorporated area would be very expensive to install. There is a sewer plant within the jurisdiction of the City of Hollister, but this plant does not serve housing outside the City’s sphere of influence, except for approved connections to the Santana Ranch and San Juan Oaks subdivisions. As a result, the County would need to construct new sewer facilities to accommodate any growth that cannot be accommodated with septic systems, or which cannot be served by the City of Hollister. Recently, the County explored the idea of creating a new sewer facility. The study revealed that a facility capable of processing 100,000 gallons per day could accommodate 715 houses. The cost was over \$8,000,000, and it would be a minimum 5-year project requiring a complete environmental impact study.

As populations continue to expand beyond the reach of municipal sewer systems, more families are relying on individual onsite wastewater treatment systems and private water supplies. The close proximity of onsite water and wastewater systems in subdivisions and other developed areas, reliance on marginal or poor soils for onsite wastewater disposal, and a general lack of understanding by homeowners about proper septic tank system maintenance pose a significant threat to public health. Medium- and high-density housing cannot develop in rural areas without sewer because of poorly drained soils and other onsite wastewater treatment systems constraints.

- **Preservation of Prime Farmland** – Farmland in the San Benito region is a vital local, statewide, and national resource. With its unique climate and fertile soils and water supplies, agriculture is San Benito County's largest industry. In 2020, the gross value of agricultural production came to over \$338 million.⁴ Approximately 882,675 acres of all land in unincorporated San Benito County, about 747,400 acres are zoned for agriculture (85%).

Many communities, such as the San Benito region, have witnessed the significant loss of this finite resource, particularly to the sprawl of non-agricultural development into rural spaces, particularly on the edges of metropolitan areas. Recognizing the long-term economic, environmental, and social costs of this loss, many communities have taken steps to protect agricultural lands. Local governments have adopted many planning, regulatory, and programmatic strategies to preserve farmland and support the viability of their agricultural sectors. Approximately 559,270 acres in San Benito County are governed explicitly by Williamson Act contracts (63%).

- **Educational Facilities at Capacity** - local schools have reached capacity. Extreme growth will lead to failure in our local education system due to constraints in classroom space and available facilities. Larger classrooms lend themselves to a more disruptive

⁴ 2020 San Benito County Crop Report, Agricultural Commissioner

environment because there are more students to manage. A smaller, focused classroom provides a more positive learning environment for students.

In closing, the San Benito County Board of Supervisors urges HCD to reduce San Benito County's RHND because of the reasons mentioned above.

Respectfully,

Bea Gonzales
Chair of the Board of Supervisors
5th District

CC:
Council of San Benito County Governments
The Honorable Senator Anna Cabellero, 12th Senate District
The Honorable Senator John Laird, 17th District
The Honorable Assemblymember Robert Rivas, 30 Assembly District

