

Prepared by  
Silicon Valley Community Foundation  
February 2017



Photo by Lars Howlett

## SAN MATEO COUNTY'S FORGOTTEN SOUTH COAST RESIDENTS

## About This Report

SVCF commissioned independent journalist Julia Scott to write this report, based on her extensive background in covering regional and environmental issues in the South Coast area of San Mateo County. The information presented in this report is based on the author's interviews with South Coast residents, local and state government employees, topical experts at nonprofits, and research from relevant documents and reports dating back to the 1980s. All interviews and research were conducted between June and September 2016. Names have been changed for individuals who requested to remain anonymous in this report.

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## A Message from Silicon Valley Community Foundation

November 2016

Silicon Valley Community Foundation is committed to tackling the region's most challenging problems. As this report documents, the San Mateo County South Coast community has more than its fair share of issues rooted in its history, outdated laws and geographical isolation.

In September 2015, several members of our board went on a day-long site visit to better understand how South Coast residents contribute to our local economy and the conditions in which they work and live. Our board members were appalled by what they saw and learned. The conditions and quality of life that some South Coast residents experience would be intolerable in a developing country and are inexcusable in one of the wealthiest counties in the United States.

SVCF has been engaged with South Coast residents in multiple ways since our founding. We have supported work on disaster planning and preparedness, provided undocumented farmworkers with English as a Second Language (ESL) courses and job training opportunities and increased participation in the decennial Census count. We improved residents' access to high-quality early childhood education, as well as to extended learning opportunities for struggling students after school and during the summer.

But there is so much more to do. We hope this report furthers existing efforts and inspires new action to substantially improve the quality of life in this community.

The solutions will require short-term and long-term strategies, and SVCF is committed to working with government, business and nonprofit partners to develop those strategies. We hope you will join us, because the South Coast is a vital part of our region that needs our collective attention and support.

Sincerely,



Emmett D. Carson, Ph.D.  
CEO and President

## INTRODUCTION

The South Coast of San Mateo County is often described as idyllic. Outsiders love its natural beauty – its ocean views, rolling hills and farms bristling with fresh produce from just south of Half Moon Bay to the Santa Cruz County line. They know its restaurants, its redwood forests, its parks and beaches and its nature trails.

The view from the inside is more troubled. The South Coast is the most rural zone in the greater Bay Area, covering about 160 square miles, with 40 percent of the county's land mass. It is home to about 2,950 largely marginalized and isolated residents, mostly Latino farm and nursery workers and their families, as well as low-income Caucasian residents. The affluence of Silicon Valley – located just “over the hill,” as many residents say – has not touched them except by making their lives more expensive: fog rolls over from coast and cost rolls the other way. **Hundreds live in squalid, overcrowded trailers and barracks because there is no affordable housing available. Children sleep on couches or on the floor.** Parents send their kids to an under-resourced school district where two out of three schools have water too polluted to drink.



The isolation is acute. The four unincorporated towns of Pescadero, La Honda, San Gregorio and Loma Mar have no transportation between them. People tend to lump them in with Half Moon Bay, but their circumstances couldn't be more different. **Most of these communities have no childcare center, laundromat, library, emergency room, public park, Boys & Girls Club, affordable grocery store, sewage system or flood control system.**

This report pulls back the curtain on a number of systemic, structural and long-term challenges. Taken together, they represent a serious and ongoing barrier to success, equity, and self-determination for hundreds of individuals from the rural South Coast, as well as the dream of prosperity for its communities.



A family of five share this run-down one-bedroom trailer in South Coast for \$1,100 a month. There is no heating, and duct tape is used to keep the flooring in place.

This report introduces Juanita and Carlos, who work full-time and live with their three kids in a rotten, insect-infested trailer; Lorena Calvillo, who endured a four-hour bus commute to San Francisco State University because the only bus in town leaves at sunup; and Araceli, who came back to Pescadero specifically to teach students in her old school district, but can't afford to stay long-term.

These problems are complex and interrelated. San Mateo County farms are shrinking due to lack of labor: overall production value dropped \$20 million in 2015, the biggest loss on record. Without more workers, farms can't expand production. But without affordable housing, farmers can't attract workers. A chronic lack of infrastructure, combined with being in a flood zone, stands in the way of building more housing and makes it hard to justify better transportation, service improvements and an enriched education for local youth.

There are solutions, and they boil down to three elements: Buildable land. Money. Political and community will. **County, state and federal legislators and administrators can all play a role in bringing the recommendations contained in this report to fruition.** The community itself also has a strong role to play in developing a unified vision with clear priorities. The community deserves better, and people need to know these problems are not intractable. This report acts as their voice by presenting their lives in stark reality.

## ECONOMY

Juanita and Carlos live in a battered, rusty trailer on a dirt lot by the ocean in Pescadero with their children Isabel, Sara and Tyler. They live without heating. Their ceiling is warped and yellowed where the rain comes in. Sara and Isabel share a pullout bed in the "living room," while Tyler sleeps next to his parents. The flooring is cracked and duct-taped together. The bathroom sink leaks badly. The lights short out. Not everyone fits around the kitchen table, so some people eat standing up. Their rotten pasteboard siding breeds insects that infest their clothing and furniture.

Juanita and Carlos own their trailer, but must pay rent to the landowner whose property it sits on. In the past 17 years, **he has raised their rent from \$650 to \$1,100 a month – a 69 percent increase.** Their utilities, groceries and other bills are \$1,470. Which means that at the end of the month, they barely break even. Carlos and Juanita both work at a flower nursery in Half Moon Bay, where they earn less than \$11 an hour.

“We have no savings for college or anything else. We’re day by day. We can’t even fix the car,” says Juanita. Fifty percent of Juanita and Carlos’s combined income goes to their rent. Thirty percent is considered “sustainable.” Their lives are clearly not.

A policy change could radically improve their chances of survival. The most important would be a countywide rent stabilization plan. Several cities have put forward rent control measures for a vote, but the County of San Mateo could push forward on its own to cover residents in its unincorporated areas.

Agricultural employers are struggling too. **The value of San Mateo County’s farm crop production dropped \$20 million in 2015, the biggest loss in local history.** The main blow was to the indoor floral and nursery crops sector, which employs Juanita and Carlos.

Worst of all, there are no better options for Juanita and her family. Their earnings are stagnant while the cost of living has exploded. And they’re trapped in their deplorable trailer without any other affordable housing options.

“It’s hard making rent and the conditions are not good. We can only afford another \$100 or \$150 rent increase before we have to leave,” says Juanita. Go where? Los Angeles, she says. The local agriculture industry is poised to lose two more workers and the school district, three of its children.



After landing her dream job as a teacher in Pescadero, South Coast native Araceli and her family will likely need to leave the Bay Area to find affordable housing.

## HOUSING

Araceli and her husband always wanted to move back to Pescadero after college, where both their families were. She landed her dream job, a teaching position at Pescadero Elementary – the same school she went to. But when they looked for a place to live, they realized the town had changed. **Housing was so scarce that her parents had converted their living room into a bedroom to rent to other families. Some houses had four families squeezed together.** First, Araceli and her husband paid \$1,200 a month for a tiny studio before the building was sold and they had to move out. They moved in with her parents. Eventually, she heard about a barn that had been converted into a rough living space. “We were desperate,” she says.

By then, Araceli was pregnant. The barn had rats and mice that kept her up at night and defecated everywhere. They moved back in with her parents for three more years. Araceli is 27 now, and she and her husband have a 4-year-old son. They will never be able to afford to buy a home on the South Coast – two-bedroom homes start at \$700,000. They finally rented a clean apartment on the top floor of a duplex, but they can't afford it long-term. "The whole reason I came back here was for my son to grow up in this community. And that's why we're trying so hard to stay," she says. They're already talking about having to leave the Bay Area.

**Affordable housing has never been built in the South Coast.** That puts "middle-class" families like Araceli's in competition with farmworker families for the limited rental stock. Yesterday's and today's children cannot afford to stay. They have lost their footing, and their future, on the South Coast.

Much of the La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District is comprised of students like Araceli who will graduate from Pescadero High School with an impossible choice: live at home with their parents and work a local job for minimum wage, since there are few other options nearby. Or leave their hometown, probably forever. One option continues the cycle of poverty, the other ensures the decline of local schools, the lifeblood of any town.

Today, local workers and families live in notoriously old, shoddy and overcrowded trailers, barracks and apartments that date back to the 1950s. And they can't even afford them. The median household income for a farmworker family is \$26,000 – in a county with a median household income of \$110,000. **Yet only one-third of farm laborers are living in housing designated for them. The other two-thirds have to compete for the same market-rate housing.**

Housing is so scarce that tenants endure dangerous, unsanitary conditions without complaint. The county department that inspects farmworker housing knows these homes are beyond repair, but overlooks the worsening conditions from year to year because there's nowhere else for people to go.

The housing shortage affects everybody, including farm employers. It is so acute that in a recent survey, **almost 90 percent of farmers who provide housing acknowledged that their housing is of inadequate quality.** They know expanding the supply of affordable housing would help attract more workers. But despite the urgent demand for affordable workforce housing, perspectives differ on what can, and ought to be, done.

Unlike the tech industry, the business of farming is cash-poor. Aside from a small handful of million-dollar enterprises, most of the farm community is barely making it themselves. The stakes are high, and if a farmer doesn't make a profit, he or she is out of business. Permit fees alone for major renovations to a house that's falling apart can amount to \$10,000. Some farmers don't own the land they farm; they merely lease it. A 2015 San Mateo County needs assessment found that farmers and landowners may be interested in allowing housing on their land, but were less interested in producing or managing it. And workers said they would like the chance to live in housing that is decoupled from their jobs, to allow them to take a better job without jeopardizing their housing security.

Outside funding for farmworker housing is scarce. The most an individual agricultural housing project can get from the U.S. Department of Agriculture is \$3 million, but most farmworker housing projects cost \$10 million to \$20 million to build. **California's oldest fund for housing construction and rehabilitation, the Joe Serna, Jr. Farmworker Housing Grant, hasn't been funded by the state legislature in at least 10 years** – in spite of a California Assembly report from 2000 that declared "affordable, safe, and sanitary housing is virtually nonexistent for the vast majority of California's farmworkers." Some government funding comes attached to immigration status requirements. The ultimate solution could be an alternative financing structure composed of foundation funding, socially directed investment funds, and public financing from the County of San Mateo.

The community is eager to create a workgroup to focus on housing. But it needs a professional project manager with experience in producing agricultural workforce housing – someone to assist

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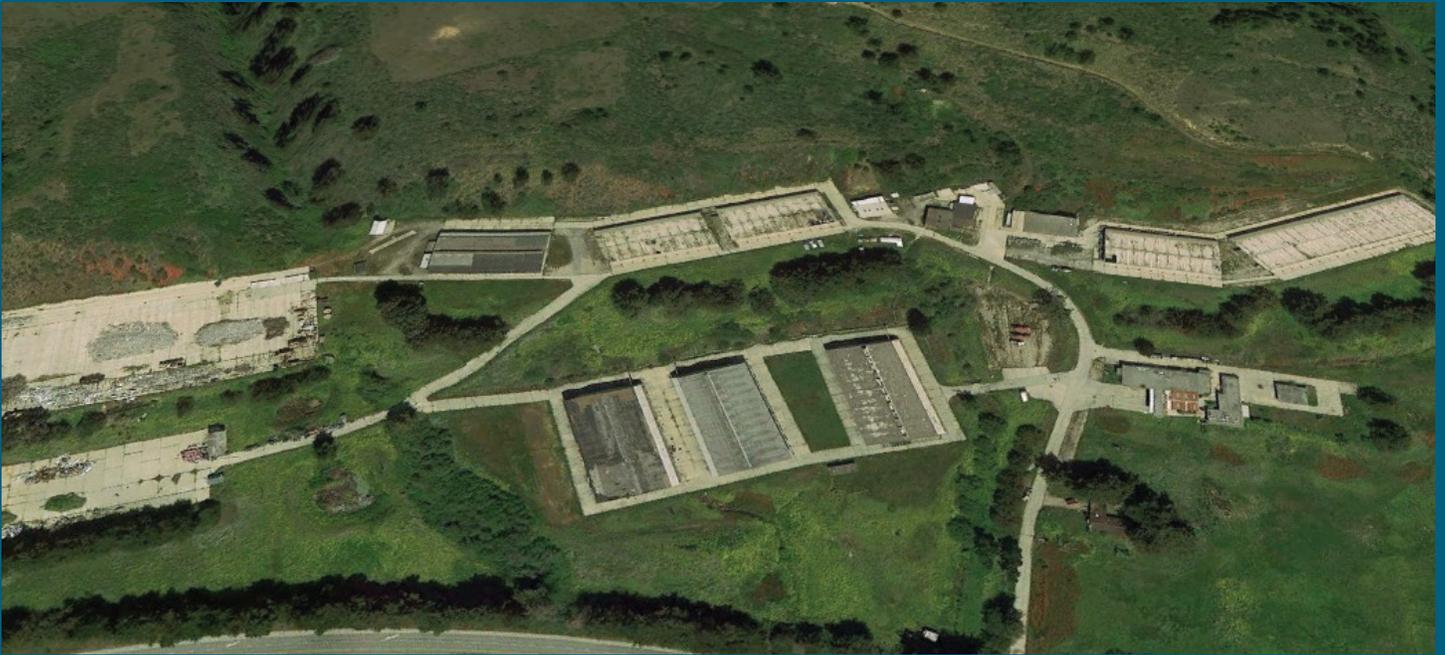
the community in identifying locations for potential new housing and to conduct a preliminary site feasibility analysis. In the short term, the county needs a project manager to work with farmers who want to take advantage of its Agricultural Housing Rehabilitation and Replacement Pilot Program, which replaces old trailers with new ones. In the long term, there may be opportunities for foundations to support a nonprofit that could take on the responsibility of both producing and managing agricultural workforce housing on the South Coast.

So far, efforts toward building new housing have been unsuccessful. What has not yet been tried is to bring existing housing units under one umbrella. **The South Coast has a glut of unoccupied second homes and vacation cottages standing empty most of the year.** Puente, a nonprofit resource center serving residents of the South Coast, is proposing a spinoff organization that could manage vacant housing rentals for homeowners for a fee. It would handle leases and maintenance, removing the headaches that come with old buildings and dealing with tenants. Homeowners would receive a steadier stream of income than they do when their homes sit empty most of the year.

**More than 80 percent of South Coast farmworkers are a permanent, not seasonal, population.**

Two-thirds have lived in the community for more than 11 years. Furthermore, nearly half of the farmworker housing is occupied by families – parents, children and other family members. Yet they are living in buildings constructed for a workforce of seasonal male workers more than 50 years ago. **Their housing is governed by Title 25, a double-standard employee housing law that dates back to 1939. It requires 50 square feet of sleeping space – smaller than some jail cells.** County health officials apply these “employee housing” rules during inspections and do not consider overcrowding and the presence of family members.

Why? Because family members are not part of the State’s requirements for these inspections, only the farmworkers themselves are. Officials should drop these outdated inspection practices, which would require changes to Title 25 at the state level, and apply the same common-sense rental housing codes it uses for the rest of the county. Farm owners should also be required to offer their tenants a rental lease agreement, but fewer than half do. The lack of lease agreements stokes fears of eviction and creates housing insecurity.



Close observers agree that the South Coast won't survive as an agricultural center without 45-100 new affordable housing units. But where to build? A prospect has emerged on a 753-acre site whose owners want to offer housing specifically for low- to middle-income residents. However, many hurdles stand in the way of this coming to fruition.

Both parcels are zoned as a Planned Agricultural District, which allows for farm labor housing only. One parcel has a 110-acre former mushroom-growing facility that includes 300,000 square feet of steel-reinforced masonry buildings that could be converted into communal housing and recreation areas for all. However, early inspections of this building by county officials have found toxic residue and structural concerns, making it unlikely that it can pass building codes without significant work.

The owners have prescriptive rights to Gazos Creek, although they would prefer to drill wells for drinking water. Large pipes run from the creek to the buildings and to 10 fire hydrants. There is a gravity-fed 70,000-gallon tank for fire suppression, and a lake on the site of a former quarry as a backup water source. Existing power lines run to both parcels and all of the buildings. The roads are in good shape, though the location is remote and can only be accessed by car.

The owners would like to reopen the mushroom farm someday and house their own workers, too. They need continued collaboration with the County of San Mateo to figure out the next steps.

## HEALTHCARE

Concepción Escalona ignored the pain, the muscle aches, the exhaustion. Her daughter Susana pleaded with her to see a doctor, but she always made some excuse. In reality, she was afraid. "I knew something was wrong with me, but I didn't want to know what it was," she says. It wasn't until 2015, when Puente opened a medical clinic with support from the San Mateo County Health System within its offices, that she gave in. Her first check-up revealed diabetes and kidney problems, and in the urgent testing that followed, it became clear that she was at risk for further complications.



Concepción Escalona, pictured with her daughters, credits the medical clinic at Puente for catching and treating a potentially life-threatening medical condition.

"If the clinic had not been in Pescadero, I wouldn't have gone to the doctor. I couldn't take the time off from work," says Concepción, who cleans houses and lives in La Honda with her husband and three children. She's already feeling better: With help from her doctor, she's lost 25 pounds on a new diet, is taking medications and her glucose level is nearly under control.

Unfortunately, many patients on the South Coast have nursed chronic conditions in private. **For decades, South Coast residents have had no predictable access to affordable healthcare nearby. No nurses, dentists or doctors. No pediatric physicians, OB/GYN specialists or anywhere to obtain medications.** The nearest emergency room is 45 minutes away. A 911 call brings help from up to 30 minutes away.

Clinic staff at Puente are seeing patients like Concepción with untreated diabetes, blood pressure, heart conditions, and chronic repetitive stress injuries – 121 unique patients had these conditions between March 2015 and September 2016. Puente has also assisted 219 people with health care enrollments.

The Puente clinic, a satellite of the San Mateo Medical Center, is open Thursdays from 7-9 p.m. But one night a week is not enough. The clinic offers primary care, vaccines and blood tests, but there is still no OB/GYN or pediatric care anywhere on the South Coast. Farmworkers need specialty care for injuries and chronic orthopedic issues, but they're not getting it. **The South Coast needs a freestanding clinic, not a room inside one of Puente's office portables.** Such a clinic should offer primary and specialty care and take all forms of insurance, including private.

Puente is working to find a site for a clinic. But funding is a hurdle. Puente wants Kaiser Permanente to help fund the new clinic and offer family medical services in Pescadero. A large number of locals are Kaiser members, and they all have to travel to Redwood City for their care. Other significant health providers – Stanford Medical Center, Mills-Peninsula, Dignity Health Sequoia – could also contribute. The County of San Mateo plans to build a new fire station in Pescadero, and the co-location of a permanent medical clinic on the same site is currently being discussed.

Meanwhile, dozens of local workers lose their county-provided health coverage (ACE) for as much as six months a year. Why? The coverage is based on the 200 percent of federal poverty income level, which means that income for a single worker is capped at \$1,980 a month. If earnings temporarily exceed that amount when work is good, workers suddenly lose access to their doctors. Their medications are no longer covered. Unfortunately, as we have seen, it costs much more to survive in San Mateo County than in most other U.S. states, where the federal poverty level makes more sense. Even with higher earnings, workers here barely scrape by. The County of San Mateo chooses to use the federal policy income level; it is not required to. **ACE is exclusively funded by the county and does not use federal dollars. So the county could adjust the way it averages worker income to more accurately reflect the boom-and-bust nature of seasonal labor, and provide fair, consistent coverage for low wage farmworkers.**

## EDUCATION AND YOUTH

Sofia is 15, smart and ambitious. She wants to be a forensic investigator. To improve her chances for college, her immigrant farmworker parents took her out of Pescadero Middle School and enrolled her in a private school in Santa Cruz, 37 miles away. Every day, they drive her 90 minutes to school and back. It was a hard adjustment for them, and for Sofia.

“At the beginning it was difficult for all of us. We adapted,” says her mother, Dolores. “I want her to have a better future.”

Sofia grew up in the La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District, which comprises two preschools, two elementary schools and a combined middle/high school in Pescadero. The student body rarely surpasses 350 and some students live up to 30 minutes away. By the time they're seniors, students are practically family. It's a safe place to grow up. A tightly knit crew of devoted educators makes the most of limited resources. When Sofia was struggling with some of her subjects, teachers told her parents to put her in the after-school homework program, but she found there were many students who needed help and not enough

tutors to help them. Her grades were slipping, and the prospect of college seemed distant. The school had no college counselor to offer support.

So Sofia's parents made a decision. They found a new school and a scholarship to pay for it.

The La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District is working to improve third-grade reading levels in partnership with Puente through the Family Engagement Impact Initiative. This grant is designed to address students' struggles by promoting early literacy and bridging the learning gap between home and school. The district's newest major grant – from The Big Lift, a literacy effort co-led by the County of San Mateo, San Mateo County Office of Education and Silicon Valley Community Foundation – has extended preschool year-round and made it affordable to all.

However, **the school district has no single, consistent funding source that makes improvements possible over the long term.** Enrichment and intervention programming comes from outside funding that sunsets in 2017. The district has trouble attracting a competitive pool of applicants for teaching positions. Lack of affordable mixed housing is a major deterrent, as is the pay. The district's bond fund pays for capital improvements, but not basic teaching tools. More than two-thirds of the district's children rely on Puente for donated school supplies.

Pescadero High students have to dual-enroll in community college for Advanced Placement courses or other classes necessary to compete for a place in a good university. They need to figure out how to balance their own schedules and commute to those outside classes on their own. The school district struggles to cover regular costs for bussing students to their rural homes.

The school district has laptops for students, but internet connectivity is almost nonexistent outside of school grounds, resulting in a catch-22: students may have a computer but they do not have access to the internet. **The community has no consistent internet access after school hours.** Most high school graduates go to community college, but few enroll in four-year universities. The high school needs a bilingual, full-time, licensed college counselor to help students make the best choices and find money for college.

Students are extremely isolated on the coast. Some youth have been to San Francisco just a handful of times. Puente's summer youth program is essentially their only option for summer employment. It's the only way students can earn money for college. And while employment is essential, there are few opportunities to develop specific skills or receive job training in careers that interest them, apart from Puente's internship programs.

### **Puente has no dedicated source of funding for its youth jobs program.**

The South Coast has nothing like a Boys & Girls Club. Other than sports, students have limited options for after-school activities. The community needs sustainable funding for youth programs, not funding that ceases after a year.

The district's property tax base is not keeping up with costs, nor is it increasing at the same rate as San Mateo County's. As a Basic Aid district, funding is directly tied to basic valuation of district properties. However, **the biggest property owner in the district, the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST), does not pay property taxes on much of its lands due to a nonprofit welfare exemption.** Welfare exemptions are an important source of good, but the school district should not have to bear the full brunt of cost for the benefits.

## PRESCHOOL AND CHILDCARE

Irma Flores loves kids, and loves being a childcare provider. Every day, local farmworkers entrust her with their young children, since there is no accredited day care center in town for children under 3. But she wishes she had a place to raise them in lieu of her darkened apartment block, where children have little room to crawl or play. Sometimes it's not safe to play outside, so the children stay indoors all day.

Flores would like to offer her charges more freedom and enrichment, but until recently she didn't even have books or toys to give them. She also has no formal license or accreditation.

Flores is one of 26 informal home childcare providers on the South Coast who are helping raise the next generation of infants bound for preschool.

### **Farmworker families pay these unlicensed caretakers \$15 a day to mind their children in sometimes claustrophobic homes and trailers.**

By the time they get to preschool, some students are already hobbled by a literacy deficit that can take years to overcome. More than 40 percent of students in the La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District are not reading at grade level by the third grade.

Puente offers ongoing classes and workshops on early childhood development, with funding courtesy of the Heising-Simons Foundation. They also offer books, toys and one-on-one support for childcare providers who are learning about healthy play and positive discipline. But these are stopgap measures. **Puente and the local school district want children to benefit from a formalized early education center, staffed by professionals who are trained to notice learning deficits and speech delays.**

Thanks to The Big Lift, the school district has made preschool affordable for all families and extended it year-round. A separate program, Raising A Reader, sends children home with new books each week from preschool through second grade. But the act of reading, itself, is not something children do together. **There is no library on the South Coast, just a county Bookmobile two hours a week. Puente tries to fill the gap by hosting Story Time on Wheels, a program that brings reading and a toy loan program to area ranches and farms.**

Nor is there a community park where children can play and their parents or nannies can interact. Watching other people's children is instructive from a behavioral and developmental point of view, but parents have no scope for comparison since they typically live isolated lives.

One solution is to build a freestanding day care/preschool center in Pescadero. Staff would consist of accredited caregivers with child development credentials, including some local residents like Flores. Major funding is required, and possibly some zoning changes and other political muscle. The children of the South Coast deserve a safe space to grow, with people who know how to help them play and learn.

Lorena Calvillo endured a four-hour commute each way to attend classes at San Francisco State University. Lack of access to transportation prevents most South Coast residents from attending local universities.



## TRANSPORTATION

Here's a reason more South Coast students don't go to local four-year universities. Lorena Calvillo discovered it when she enrolled in San Francisco State University. Without a car, Calvillo turned to the bus. In Pescadero, there is only one bus out in the morning, at 6 a.m., and one back at night, at 6 p.m. So she woke up before dawn and started a grueling daily commute that took her to S.F. State's campus: two different buses, a Caltrans ride and a MUNI ride – four hours to get to school. She did it five days a week for more than two years, until she finally got a scholarship via Puente to live on campus.

"My life was just commuting. I was tired all the time. I never talked to anyone. A lot of times, I was just sleeping on couches around campus," Lorena says.

She couldn't attend early morning classes because of the length of her trip to school. As a result, she'll graduate later than some of her peers.

The whole family had to sacrifice to get Lorena her college education. On his days off from work in a restaurant, her father would drop her off at Hillsdale Mall in San Mateo and sleep in his car all day until she needed him to pick her up.

Lorena is not alone in her struggle. **Many families lack access to a car for basic transportation, grocery purchases in Half Moon Bay or medical appointments in Redwood City and elsewhere. There is no regular bus route serving the South Coast apart from the one that runs once in the early morning and once in the early evening.**

The County of San Mateo subsidizes an on-demand bus service that can be dispatched by appointment to pick passengers up from home or work. The service is a lifeline for the isolated, rural South Coast community. It's also not enough.

Pickups need to be booked far in advance. It is available regularly but not when a daily need arises. And new bus drivers sometimes have trouble finding the isolated ranches where people live. It's not a practical option for someone who needs to commute to the Bayside. There is no service at all to Santa Cruz, an essential destination for locals. Nor are there any local shuttle lines that run within the South Coast. Puente uses its operating budget to pay the bus company to transport participants to and from classes and other activities.

**Locals need access to county-funded, reliable, regular, affordable bus service that facilitates their lives.**

## INFRASTRUCTURE

There are two central obstacles to growth on the South Coast: political will and infrastructure. Catherine Peery came up against both in the years she served as a member of the Pescadero Municipal Advisory Committee and pushed for solutions to complex local problems – including creeks that flood local roads, the complete lack of a sewer system, and inadequate water for drinking and fire suppression.

Ultimately, these are economic constraints. They make it almost impossible to install affordable housing, let alone something as practical as a laundromat. **In spite of the vast amount of land, it can feel as though there is nowhere to grow, nowhere to expand or to plan for future residents.**

Peery has worked to find a site to develop much-needed housing, and to explore sewer treatment for Pescadero, and she has come up short. “If we can’t modify some of these regulations, we won’t have the infrastructure we need to build the housing that’s required,” she says.

**Without a sewer system to absorb wastewater or enough water pressure to suppress fires in an emergency, Pescadero cannot build commercial spaces or services downtown.**

There are at least 12 vacant lots zoned for housing. But because new housing triggers a requirement that new leach fields be created, and because there’s insufficient space available for new leach fields according to existing regulations, people are effectively prevented from adding more housing. In addition, local leach fields become saturated during flood events, raising the likelihood of public health risks.

**Nitrates and coliform, byproducts of agriculture and leaky septic tanks, have tainted groundwater in areas of the South Coast.**

In 2010, the county evicted 50 people, farmworker families, when tests showed they were drinking dangerously polluted drinking water. The drinking water at both La Honda Elementary and Pescadero Middle/High School is contaminated. “We have to use bottled water to wash our dishes. It’s a nightmare, and the biggest problem is we don’t have the infrastructure to manage it,” says Amy Wooliever, Superintendent of the La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District.

**Emergency preparedness is a pressing concern.** Downtown Pescadero – essentially 250 residents – is one of only two small portions of the South Coast that receive county water services. And even they don’t have an alternative source of water if something should disrupt the conveyance or quality of the town’s well. The same area lies within a floodplain between Pescadero and Butano Creeks. **During a rainy winter, the creeks dump 15 times the normal amount of sediment from the Santa Cruz Mountains into the Pescadero Marsh.** The main road into Pescadero is often impassable after a major rainstorm, cutting off fire trucks and ambulances and causing school disruptions. The high school is the town’s only emergency shelter, but it lies in the floodplain too; storms have sometimes turned it into a water-bound island that was all but inaccessible.

The South Coast has no drainage ditches. Historic logging practices eroded the land, increasing sediment flow. Farmers have straightened the stream banks, causing creek water to flow faster and the banks to collapse.

The county is dredging ditches where it can, and the Resource Conservation District is leading an effort to identify flood control projects that will protect public safety and benefit wildlife. But a long-term fix is still years away. County officials are attempting to find a location to build a new fire station, but have encountered the same infrastructure and zoning issues as other would-be developers have.

**Walkability and accessibility are major issues in and around the downtown Pescadero corridor.**

This small town has long attracted large numbers of tourists, but infrastructure has not kept up. A recent traffic study on a sunny Saturday in June found 4,285 vehicles snaking through town on Pescadero Creek Road – an increase of 28 percent compared with average daily traffic on a weekday. Stage Road, Pescadero’s “Main Street,” saw 2,336 cars – an increase of 33 percent. There is very little sidewalk, and the overwhelming crush of cars makes it hard (and dangerous) for local families to move around. Development on the coast is governed by the California Coastal Commission and the Local Coastal Plan, which was drafted in the 1980s. The document projects a much bigger downtown Pescadero corridor than the present reality.

At buildout, the downtown area alone could accommodate a population of 875 – at least on paper. That’s reminiscent of what Pescadero looked like in the 1880’s, when it consisted mostly of boarding houses.

The South Coast is blessed with extraordinary natural riches, diverse wildlife habitat, and a spectacular view corridor. Robust laws and policies protect these essential resources from overdevelopment. Ironically, some of those protections – put in place after a history of logging and intensive farming and ranching in the area degraded the natural resources – are now making it harder for residents and their advocates to make the changes the region needs to continue to thrive. Policymakers and funders will need to be willing to invest the capital to make these changes possible.

- Pescadero cannot grow without sewage treatment. The County of San Mateo funded a feasibility study for a new sewer treatment solution in 2008 that residents thought was too complicated and costly. Efforts are underway to explore solutions that are less costly but additional feasibility work will be needed as well as support from the community.
- The Resource Conservation District has done an excellent job of charting solutions to the flooding problems, but it’s time for next steps. More scientific data is needed for some management actions, but others can be implemented. A number of county, state and federal agencies (including National Oceanic Atmospheric Association, California State Parks, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, San Mateo County Public Works, Pescadero Municipal Advisory Council and San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board) are now poised to work together in implementing solutions. These agencies will need to be responsive and timely on issuing permits so that this critical infrastructure work can move forward.
- No true change can happen without the community driving that change. Pescadero residents should develop a clear vision for growth and a set of priorities for the county to engage in. To begin this work, the community has raised \$11,000 for the first phase of the project. The Healthy Communities South Coast Project (Healthy South Coast), led by the Pescadero Foundation, will develop a county specific plan for improving walkability, safety and public spaces in Pescadero.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The South Coast’s persistent systemic challenges can be traced back to the area’s lack of infrastructure, and the lack of coordinated and persistent community and political will to overcome it. There’s little doubt that without the capacity to grow, the South Coast’s agricultural economy will stagnate, and its schools, the lifeblood of any community, will suffer. Not only is it urgent that the county forge a roadmap toward affordable housing, it is imperative that Pescadero residents and county officials work together to bring sewer treatment, fire suppression and long-term flood control to Pescadero. Only then will it be possible to contemplate the other amenities locals need: a freestanding childcare center, a library, a medical clinic, a laundry facility and more housing.

Observers have noted that the South Coast suffers from a boom-and-bust cycle of focused attention and neglect. In order to enact long-term changes, policy makers will need to take a consistent approach to a region where progress is often, understandably, slow. We’ve been here before: Over the past 15 years, the South Coast has benefited from the sustained advocacy of committed locals representing a variety of stakeholders, including the Pescadero Municipal Advisory Committee and the Pescadero Foundation.

In 2016, there has been a renewed push to address chronic housing and infrastructure problems at the county level. The region's environmental advocates have serious interest in protecting open space, and they have made valuable progress in taking land permanently out of development. Open space agencies use agriculture easements as a crucial tool in protecting the Coastside's way of life. Now these stakeholders are starting to realize that without housing for farmworkers, you can't have farming, and there may be room for some amendments. With a sustained commitment to this region and its people, it is possible to make lasting change.

There is an opportunity for grantmakers to invest in a future where dozens of marginalized individuals and families can have dignified, affordable housing and more public transit options. Such opportunities include supporting the hire of a project manager to facilitate conversations between farmers and County of San Mateo planners and help make the permitting process as seamless as possible for farmers who choose to build. The County of San Mateo also requires financial support to determine the feasibility of infrastructure projects that could really move the needle, such as a package sewage treatment system for downtown Pescadero, and a process by which the community can plan for sea level rise.

State legislators can make a difference by approving funding for the Joe Serna Jr. Farmworker Housing Grant. They can pass a bill giving farmworkers the right to overtime pay. And local representatives can carve out state monies to cover the chronic funding shortfall at the La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District, which, as a Basic Aid district, will never be able to take advantage of state tax revenue earmarked for public schools.

The Board of Supervisors could pass a rent control ordinance that protects the poorest and most vulnerable residents. It could alter the ACE health program's income requirements to recognize the boom-and-bust nature of agricultural work. County staff, particularly Supervisor Don Horsley's office, has made important progress in assessing the scope of farmworker housing, including through the Agricultural Housing Rehabilitation and Replacement Pilot Program. This program has the potential to have a greater impact as it expands.

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## About

### Julia Scott

This report was written by Julia Scott, an independent San Francisco-based journalist and radio producer who contributes to the New York Times Magazine, among other publications. A former reporter for Bay Area News Group, she covered rural San Mateo County and its communities, including its regional environment and natural resources.

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