Agenda Item #13.1
For Council Meeting of: August 19, 2025

CITY OF SANTA ROSA
CITY COUNCIL

TO: MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL
FROM: JASON NUTT, ASSISTANT CITY MANAGER
MEGAN BASINGER, DIRECTOR
HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SERVICES
GABE OSBURN, DIRECTOR
PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
SUBJECT: RESPONSES TO 2024-2025 GRAND JURY REPORTS

AGENDA ACTION: MOTION

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended by the City Manager, Housing and Community Services, and the Planning and Economic Development Department that the Council, by motion, authorize the Mayor to execute formal responses to three Sonoma County 2024-2025 Grand Jury Reports, “Local Fees, Local Subsidies: Fees and subsidies cause local pain,” “Animal Services in Sonoma County: Separate and Not Equal,” and “Who Can Afford to Live in Sonoma County? A Tale of Two Cities.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury released its 2024-2025 Reports, including reports on seven separate Grand Jury investigations. The City of Santa Rosa is required to respond to two of the reports and invited to respond to one.

On June 13, 2025, the City received an advance copy of three investigation reports, entitled “Local Fees, Local Subsidies: Fees and subsidies cause local pain,” “Animal Services in Sonoma County: Separate and Not Equal,” and “Who Can Afford to Live in Sonoma County? A Tale of Two Cities.” The Grand Jury has requested that the City of Santa Rosa respond to specific Findings and Recommendations contained in each report. The Grand Jury Reports were released to the public on June 17, 2025. Pursuant to state statute, the City’s responses are due on September 15, 2025.

City staff has reviewed the Grand Jury Reports and have prepared responses for Council’s review and approval. The final responses are to be signed by the Mayor and hard copies provided to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court with a copy to the Sonoma County Grand Jury.

BACKGROUND

Each year the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury investigates local government institutions and issues reports containing the results of these investigations. Each of the reports include formal Findings as well as Recommendations for improvement. The Grand Jury may request that governing bodies and department officials respond to the Findings and Recommendations. Pursuant to state law, these responses must be filed with the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court within ninety days of the issuance of the Grand Jury report.

PRIOR CITY COUNCIL REVIEW

Not applicable.

ANALYSIS

The City has received and prepared three responses to the 2024-2025 Final Report Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury.

1. **"Local Fees, Local Subsidies: Fees and subsidies cause local pain"**

   The Grand Jury described the purpose of its investigation as follows:

   "To investigate fee-setting practices in Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park, and Petaluma, the three largest cities in Sonoma County, and explore ways to prevent excessive increases from being approved without proper consideration and oversight."

   The City of Santa Rosa is required to respond to findings F1- F3 and recommendations R1 and R2:

   Findings:

   F1. Long intervals between fee studies can result in large fee increases that are unacceptable to the public.

   F2. Without some mechanism for fee increases to keep pace with inflation, governments are unable to recover increased costs and the public is confronted, periodically, with large increases.

   F3. Because the fee studies examined did not routinely discuss prior subsidies, Santa Rosa City Council Members were disadvantaged in recognizing excessively large changes.

Recommendations:

R1. By December 31, 2025, the City Councils of Petaluma, Rohnert Park, and Santa Rosa direct staff to include a section in all future fee proposals that identifies any fee changes that will exceed a council-specified threshold and any fees with past or proposed subsidies.

R2. By December 31, 2025, the City Councils of Rohnert Park and Santa Rosa will adopt a policy to avoid abrupt fee increases.

The City's Responses are included as Attachment 1 to this Staff Report.

2. "Animal Services in Sonoma County: Separate and Not Equal"

The Grand Jury described the purpose of its investigation as follows:

"A citizen complaint regarding North Bay Animal Shelter (NBAS) prompted this investigation to explore how Sonoma County and its nine city governments provide legally mandated animal control and care."

The City of Santa Rosa is required to respond to findings F1, F3 through F10 and recommendations R1, R2, R4, R5:

Findings:

F1. Failure by the county and its nine cities to adopt recommendations in the 2012 DHS Animal Services Report has left Sonoma County animal service agencies operating without shared standards, communication channels, data sharing or oversight.

F3. A lack of coordination between SCAS and NBAS is an obstacle to a fully coordinated implementation of the county-wide disaster response plan for animal evacuations.

F4. Insufficient funding and staffing make it difficult for some agencies to provide effective training for staff and volunteers.

F5. Insufficient funding and staffing make it difficult for agencies to maintain websites and social media content required for effective public relations.

F6. Having multiple different fee structures for animal licenses and services is confusing to the public and complicates billing and collection of license fees and fines.

F7. Failure to achieve high levels of licensing in all government jurisdictions and provide access to shared information undermines mandated rabies

control, makes it more difficult to return lost pets, and results in a loss of revenue.

F8. Based on SCAS data, uniform adoption of online licensing management through DocuPet (or a comparable vendor) would increase county-wide licensing rates and enhance compliance with state law.

F9. Failure to promote the benefits and legal requirement to license dogs, and failing consistently to send license renewal reminders, contribute to low license compliance and loss of revenue.

F10. Making centralized training resources available could enhance performance of animal services employees and volunteers.

Recommendations:

R1. By November 1, 2025, the Board of Supervisors will direct DHS to establish an Animal Services Task Force comprising county, city, and shelter representatives to revisit the 2012 DHS Animal Services Report and recommend a governance structure for animal services that will: 1) provide county-wide oversight to ensure compliance with State Law; 2) standardize fees and engage a common licensing vendor to enhance public health and safety, licensing rates and revenue, and; 3) achieve economic efficiencies through shared resources. (F1, F3, F4-F6 and F9-F10)

R2. By January 1, 2026, each of Sonoma County's 9 cities will delegate one or more representatives to participate in the county-wide Animal Services Task Force convened by DHS. (F1)

R4. By May 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors will direct DHS to launch a county-wide public information campaign in cooperation with the cities to explain the legal imperative and benefits of licensing pets. The campaign will commence no later than July 1, 2026. (F7-F9)

R5. By November 1, 2025, each city contracting with North Bay Animal Services will inspect and evaluate the shelter condition, and evaluate the shelter operation and animal control services, to determine whether NBAS is complying with legal mandates and other terms of its contract. (F2, F11-F12)

The City's Responses are included as Attachment 2 to this Staff Report.

3. "Who Can Afford to Live in Sonoma County? A Tale of Two Cities."

The Grand Jury described the purpose of its investigation as follows:

"To shed light on the complexities of developing affordable housing and to showcase the strategies employed by two particular cities (Healdsburg and Rohnert Park) to promote such development."

The Grand Jury invited response by the City of Santa Rosa to Recommendation R2 below:

R2. By January 30, 2026, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors (BOS) and each of the nine city councils will agree to create an ongoing Affordable Housing Collaborative, which includes jurisdiction leaders, community members, grass roots organizations and housing advocates, who will share both positive and negative experiences and identify "best practices."

The City's Response is included as Attachment 3 to this Staff Report.

FISCAL IMPACT

Approval of this action does not have a fiscal impact on the General Fund.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

The City Council's action to authorize the Mayor to execute formal responses to the 2024–2025 Sonoma County Grand Jury Reports is not a project subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15378(b)(5). Section 15378(b)(5) defines "project" to exclude administrative or organizational activities of government that will not result in direct or reasonably foreseeable indirect physical changes in the environment. The preparation and submittal of written responses to Grand Jury reports are purely administrative activities required under California Penal Code Section 933(c) and do not entail any physical development or commitment to a course of action that would impact the environment.

Additionally, even if this action were considered a project, it would be exempt under CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3), the "common sense exemption," which applies when it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that the activity in question may have a significant effect on the environment.

Authorizing responses to Grand Jury reports is a ministerial and administrative function that does not authorize or commit the City to any physical changes or development. Therefore, this action qualifies for an exemption under CEQA, and no further environmental review is required.

BOARD/COMMISSION/COMMITTEE REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Not applicable.

NOTIFICATION

Not applicable.

ATTACHMENTS

- Attachment 1 – City's Response to "Local Fees, Local Subsidies: Fees and subsidies cause local pain"
- Attachment 2 – City's Response to "Animal Services in Sonoma County: Separate and Not Equal"
- Attachment 3 – City's Response to "Who Can Afford to Live in Sonoma County? A Tale of Two Cities"
- Attachment 4 – Letter to Presiding Judge

PRESENTERS

Jason Nutt, Assistant City Manager
Megan Basinger, Director of Housing & Community Services
Gabe Osburn, Director of Planning and Economic Development Department