

## United Way report shows local economy recovering, but not quickly



Dr. Barbara Palla, with the Santa Cruz Health Improvement... (Casey Valentine/Sentinel)

SANTA CRUZ -- The region's economy is showing signs of improvement after the worst downturn in decades, but county residents are still feeling the pinch.

Four of five say they're worse off than the year before. A record one in five is without health insurance. And more people than ever have had their home foreclosed on.

The bleak numbers were reported Monday in the 2010 Community Assessment Project, a United Way-sponsored survey that paints a mixed picture -- a county putting the Great Recession behind it but not without lingering hardship.

"We've already hit bottom and we're recovering, but it's slow," said Barbara Scherer, the chief financial officer of Plantronics who analyzed the new report's economic data. "There are things that are bad, but we do have good spots."

While many continue to struggle, county unemployment is on the mend and household incomes are growing, according to the report. Joblessness dropped to 11 percent this summer, which Scherer acknowledged as high but still down from last summer's "peak," and median family income rose this year to \$84,200 annually.

"These are signs we're moving up," Scherer said.

The combination of a national economic uptick and a commitment by local government leaders to support local business, she added, would hasten the county's rebound.

Caleb Baskin, a local attorney and businessman who has been tasked by the United Way to offer economic lessons the county might heed from the report, says he'd like to see more of the county's work force and capital stay local instead of going over the hill.

"If you increase the amount of money that gets spent here, there's no way you don't increase the number of jobs," he said.

But economic recovery, for many, is still a long way off as residents face the litany of problems detailed in the Community Assessment Project.

According to the report, the county recorded a record 1,643 foreclosures last year and that number, many say, isn't likely to drop this year.

A telephone survey that was part of the report found 79.9 percent of county residents felt worse off financially in 2009 than 2008.

And, the report notes, 19.6 percent of residents did not have health insurance last year, the highest number in at least a decade, while nearly 37 percent didn't have insurance that covered dental care.

Dr. Barbara Palla, a local pediatrician and health policy observer, said things likely would improve locally as federal legislation on the insurance industry takes effect.

"There is some good news. Health care reform is expected to increase the number of insured," Palla said, noting that more people, under the reform law, will become eligible for private plans as well as Medi-Cal.

In the meantime, the local Health Family insurance program and Medi-Cal have reached out and enrolled more people who lack access to health care.

The report highlighted other outreach efforts as well, such as the increasing number of meals served by Second Harvest Food Bank.

"In spite of the difficulties our county is experiencing, the community is still finding ways to help," said Mary Lou Goeke, president of the United Way of Santa Cruz County. "It just shows people with a can-do spirit can make this a good place to live."

Her organization sponsors the annual report, put together by Watsonville-based Applied Survey Research, to help gauge county progress on a range of quality-of-life issues.

Among other findings in the report:

- County residents are conserving more water, creating less waste and driving their cars less. Pesticide use and water contamination in local streams, though, are on the rise.

- Total crime increased last year, from 34.6 crimes per 1,000 residents in 2008 to 38.5 crimes per 1,000 residents. Property crimes such as auto theft and burglary saw the biggest jumps while violent crime was down.

■The majority of county schools have shown improvement in their Academic Performance Index score over the past decade.

Past CAP reports are available at <http://www.santacruzcountycap.org>.

## **Community Heros**

The United Way of Santa Cruz County recognized individuals for helping make progress this year in several areas.

Lifetime achievement

Dick Wilson

Economy

Michael Paul, Santa Cruz Goodwill Industries

Education

Cynthia Wells, Santa Cruz Community Counseling Center

Cork Cherk and Jeanne Carrier, WPENS Teachers

Kim Woodland and Nancy Samsel, Soquel PENS Teachers

Dara Thornton, Wendy Wyckoff and Maggie Klepp, Santa Cruz PENS Teachers

Health

Patti McFarland, Central California Alliance for Health

Dave McNutt

Paul Bellerjeau, Second Harvest Food Bank

Willy Elliot-McCrea, Second Harvest Food Bank

Public Safety

Deborah Elston, Santa Cruz Neighbors

Nancy Sherrod, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)

Javier G. Diaz, Community Restoration Project

Social Environment

Bob Katz and Leola Lapedes, Katz & Lapedes Law Office

Leticia Mendoza, YWCA Watsonville

Statish Chandra, Dominican Medical Foundation

Richard Crowe

Maria Rodriguez Castillo

Carol McMillen

Natural Environment

Kris Beall, Watsonville Wetlands Watch

Julie Barrett Heffington, Seymour Center at Long Marine Lab

Berri Michel, Bicycle Trip