

PUBLIC SERVICES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Many Kern County communities lack access to basic public services such as clean, safe, and affordable municipal water and sewer systems. Small, rural communities are least equipped to pay for the high capital costs to construct much-needed infrastructure because they lack the economies of scale necessary to spread the costs of multi-million dollar sewer and drinking water treatment plants across many residents. Until state and county representatives develop policies to address this inherent structural barrier, existing infrastructure will continue to crumble, and the most basic of services and amenities will remain beyond the financial reach for those in need. Current municipal, regional and state-wide policies further disadvantage low-income, rural communities through programs, funding formulas and eligibility criteria that favor larger, wealthier regions. In order for Kern County to provide adequate public services to all its residents, it must adopt policies to proactively identify and address inequities in access to basic public services and infrastructure, and seek various funding and investment opportunities to ensure that its low-income communities and communities of color are not left behind.

Policy Solutions

Provide Adequate and Reasonably-Priced Municipal Services

- Establish fund to assist with offsetting capital costs for water and sewer systems while avoiding expensive rate increases for areas with small ratepayer bases.
- Adopt a services bill of rights for all communities to establish minimum requirements for providing adequate public services.
- Identify any public infrastructure deficiencies including corroding pipelines, septic systems, needed water treatment facilities, and missing curbs and gutters, and establish short, medium and long-term plans to address and fund needed infrastructure improvements.
- Target federal, state and local funds for investments that benefit overburdened communities as identified by CalEnviroScreen.
- Adopt and implement policies and guidelines to encourage and speed-up the connection of under-served areas to existing infrastructure.

Provide Better Transit Alternatives and Solutions

- Provide public transportation between and within communities, with access for the elderly and disabled.
- Improve road and sidewalk quality and safety, including increasing the frequency of road maintenance, increasing the number of crosswalks, and re-lining road markings.
- Plan safer and more efficient highway connections and routes to common destinations.

Provide Public Amenities to Strengthen Community Livability

- Analyze and address any inequities in parks and open spaces between higher and lower income census tracks.
- Plan for and invest in more parks, recreation centers, farmer's markets and open spaces.
- Include plans for plazas in city centers and downtowns in any revitalization efforts.

Ensure Kern Residents' Access to Clean Technology

- Establish cost-effective funding mechanisms to provide rooftop solar to low-income households and renters.
- Establish adequate infrastructure and cost-effective funding mechanisms to provide Kern County residents access to electric vehicles.

JOBS & THE ECONOMY

Kern County is experiencing an economic crisis due to plummeting oil prices and an epic drought. The unemployment rate remains above 10 percent, well above the state average.⁹ Yet, Kern County has made little movement toward a more diversified economy. Kern County relies heavily on a few extractive commodities, making the economy vulnerable to unpredictable factors such as variations in harvests and price slumps. A recent analysis of metropolitan areas' ability to cope with change ranks the entire San Joaquin Valley very low on the resilience capacity index.¹⁰ Resilience capacity is assessed in relation to economic capacity (income inequality, diversification, regional affordability, business environment), socio-demographic capacity (educational attainment, without disability, out of poverty, health insured), and civic connectivity capacity (voter engagement, civic infrastructure, homeownership, metropolitan stability). The Valley needs to diversify its economy, prepare its workforce for emerging trends, retain skilled workers, and increase wages and standard of living. In doing so, Kern must include poor people and people of color in any emerging economic opportunities. Residents identified the need to improve retention of college-bound Valley residents, increase local education and training programs, and adopt programs to spur green businesses and a more diversified job market.

Policy Solutions

Increase Local Opportunities for Kern County Students and Young Adults

- Provide stipends or scholarships to college-bound students who commit to returning to the region for at least two years after graduation.
- Restore funding for vocational training in local high schools.
- Invest in job training programs and higher education opportunities in the Central Valley.

Provide Support for Small Businesses and Cooperatives

- Adopt policies to assist community cooperatives and community gardens to sell produce to schools and at farmer's markets.
- Provide assistance to new small businesses, especially minority or women owned, in the form of grants, guidance, and trainings.
- Promote job opportunities and training in new sustainable sectors, such as rooftop solar and energy efficiency. Specifically target resources for retraining workers from industries with sizable job losses such as the oil industry.