

# Report says county residents' financial lot improving

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The local economy is booming, unemployment has plummeted and community residents say they are financially better off than they were last year.

These are just some of the findings in the Santa Cruz County Community Assessment Project's 1998 report, which local officials and community leaders presented Wednesday to

packed room of Cabrillo College's Sesnon House.

And the report has plenty of other upbeat statistics. For example, the total crop value in 1997 increased 13.2 percent from the previous year; retail sales rose 6.5 percent between 1995 and 1996, and hotel and motel tax revenues increased 12.7 percent during the same time.

"Basically there's good news," concluded Bruce Woolpert, president and

cussed the county's economic status.

"But we as county citizens need to notice that some fine-tuning needs to be done."

The same also could be said of other categories of the assessment project. Although it generally shows improved standards of living, the report is not all good news.

For example, the relatively upbeat economic diagnosis is darkened by a decrease in affordable housing. Ac-

families could afford only 34.3 of all homes sold in the county in the first quarter of 1998. Nationally this figure is 67.6 percent.

In Watsonville, the unemployment rate in 1997 was 15.8 percent, more than three times the national average for that year.

John Janzen, director of plant services at Texas Instruments Storage Products Group, said factory closings

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and a "relatively flat" manufacturing job market in Watsonville were at least partly responsible for the high unemployment.

"One of the things for (improved) health of the county will be to bring in high-tech jobs," he said.

And even though local unemployment rates dropped 8.4 percent between 1996 and 1997, one-third of survey respondents said they could not find the jobs they wanted within county boundaries. More than one-fifth said they had to commute to work.

Since 1995, the United Way's Community Assessment Project has surveyed residents and examined data to develop a comprehensive annual report, which shows the county's progress based on more than 75 quality-of-life indicators.

There are 68 community assessment programs in the United States, a half-dozen in California, said Mary Lou Goeke, executive director of United Way of Santa Cruz County.

In public health, "the (1998) results show us good news," said Dr. George Wolfe, health officer with the county Health Services Agency. He said low birth weights, a standard measurement of poor health, were seen in only 5 percent of county births. The state average is 6.1 percent.

But there are exceptions to the county's relative good health, Wolfe said. He pointed to the high rate of



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Sycamore Street Commons is Santa Cruz's most recent low-income housing project. The lack of affordable housing needs to be addressed, according to the United Way report.

student substance abuse, which he said is far above the national average.

In 1996-'97 for instance, the most recent statistics available, 51 percent of the county's eighth graders reported they had used alcohol in the previous year, and 19 percent said they'd been drunk. Twenty-seven percent said they had used marijuana, and 13 percent said they'd used inhalants.

The county's crime rate dropped 13.2 percent in 1997, but juvenile crime increased 6.9 percent in the county. Capitola police department recorded an increase of 46.4 percent in felony juvenile arrests between

1996 and 1997. However, the actual number of these arrests — 41 — is relatively small compared to those made by the Santa Cruz Police Department — 131 — and the Watsonville Police Department — 167.

Lt. Manny Solano of the Watsonville Police Department attributed the young age of the offenders to the youthful population. Maria Roman, of the Community for Violence Reduction Committee, said 32 percent of the population is under 18.

Free copies of the summary report can be picked up at United Way of Santa Cruz County, 1220 41st Ave., Capitola. The comprehensive report costs \$15.

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