



California Counties – Challenges and How We’re Helping

Wildfires

The challenge: The fires raging across the West not only incur direct costs for counties for fire suppression and emergency shelters, but also result in decreased housing supply and tax losses and poor air quality. The fires are not only larger and hotter than they have been historically, they’re also increasingly likely to encroach on suburban and urban areas. Recent fires have forced evacuations and destroyed thousands of homes in large cities such as Santa Rosa (pop. 175,000) and Redding (pop. 90,000). Fifteen of the 20 largest fires in state history have burned since 2000; three of those are burning right now. Due to questionable forest management techniques and hotter summers, wildfires burn faster, hotter, and closer to densely populated areas than ever before.

What we’re doing: During times of disaster, CSAC’s social media accounts become a sought-after source of information for the media, local residents, and others. We recently created a new communications position that, among other duties, travels to active disaster counties to assist in any way that is helpful for the over-worked communications staff. Over the last two years, we have successfully advocated for more funding to deal with the 130 million dead trees in our forests, emergency responses costs, improved emergency communication systems, debris removal, and reimbursement for wildfire-related property tax losses. We continue to work with counties and federal and state agencies to improve forest management practices and protect infrastructure. The utilities, led by investor-owned utilities, made a late legislative play for immunity from liability for wildfires caused by their equipment. CSAC led the fight against that immunity and are now working with legislators, the Governor, and others to ensure utility solvency.

Homelessness

The challenge: What used to be an problem in urban cores has become a crisis in large cities and a problem in suburban and rural areas. Well over 130,000 people are without homes on any given night. The number of sheltered homeless has fallen over recent years, while the number of unsheltered has risen dramatically. The causes of homelessness include domestic violence, behavioral health, and, especially, housing supply (including short-term rentals) and housing cost. With 2.2 million low- and very low-income households and only 664,000 affordable rental units, California has a capacity problem.

What we’re doing: CSAC proposed a \$1.3 billion funding and policy package during state budget negotiations this year to create more than 13,500 affordable units and provide a range of services. The final budget package included about \$700 million, almost all for counties and cities, to be used for homeless emergency aid. The money must be spent within two or three years. Most of the funding is very flexible, though some is earmarked for specific programs related to homelessness for victims of elder and dependent adult abuse, domestic violence shelters, and homeless and exploited youth. The Legislature also placed a measure on the November ballot that would authorize \$2 billion of bonds for permanent supportive housing units.

Last year, CSAC and the League of California Cities convened a joint task force on homelessness. Their report was issued in the spring of 2018 and provides many examples of best practices and emerging practices that local agencies can adopt.

Transportation Funding

The challenge: As in many other states, California' existing transportation revenues have not kept up with needs or costs. One recent analysis found that, without new funds, 25 percent of roads and bridges in the state will be in failed condition within a decade.

What we're doing: After years of effort, last year the Legislature passed a \$5 billion per year revenue package for transportation. CSAC was the lead partner in the coalition that advocated for that funding. Unfortunately, a citizen initiative on the November ballot would not only repeal the funding, but also make it more difficult to pass future tax increases for transportation purposes. We are now campaigning (with non-public funds) against the initiative.

For years, CSAC and the League of Cities have partnered on an academically rigorous analysis of the condition of local streets and roads. This document, produced every two years, helped give specificity to our claims of deteriorating conditions. CSAC has also used social media extensively to highlight the condition of local streets and roads and the inadequacy of existing funding.

Other Issues

Housing

The lack of sufficient housing supply has led to a number of legislative solutions that range widely in their helpfulness and in the effect on local land use. Some proposals have included allowing any housing development by right, without planning commission review, permit streamlining, circumventing local rules on accessory dwelling units (granny flats), and changing planning guidelines into housing quotas for local agencies.

Pensions

Even after recent reforms, pensions continue to claim significant and growing portions of county budgets. However, the politics in California make it a difficult problem to address. Cities are more threatened by rising pension costs than counties, partly because their workforce is heavy on public safety employees with generous pensions, so they are much more out in front on this issue than counties are.

Public Safety Reforms

The last decade has seen a string of public safety reforms that would have been unthinkable as recently as the 1990s. The cumulative effect has been to send people to prison in smaller numbers and for shorter sentences, as well as to put more responsibilities on counties (along with some funding). This year, one of the major legislative efforts will reform the cash bail system, instead relying on risk assessments. Counties views on the reforms overall vary widely, so CSAC does not advocate strongly for or against them. Our efforts have been to help make sure counties receive funding and education to implement the reforms as effectively as possible. We've used webinars, multi-day classes, and a partnership with the PEW and MacArthur foundations to those ends.