

Article published - May 21, 2007

GOVERNMENT: New council will address innovation, economic stability

BY [Loralee Stevens](#)
STAFF REPORTER

SANTA ROSA – Sonoma County supervisors approved funding for a first-of-its-kind Innovation Council to formulate a far-reaching economic strategic plan.

The plan encompasses all of the issues that challenge the county's economic viability during the coming decade, including work force demographics, worldwide competition and resource allocation.

Proposed by the county economic development board and the water and human services agencies, the 30-member council will deploy \$165,200 in funds to conduct resource analyses and public surveys and to compile a 10-year forecast.

"Our first task is to identify the extent to which the community will be impacted by expected change and to gauge the willingness and financial and technical support we can expect from the private sector," said Ben Stone, executive director of the Sonoma County Economic Development Board.

"Right now we're strong economically, so this is the time to plan for a future when our human and natural resources will be strained to the limit," he said.

"In 10 to 15 years, 70 million baby boomers will be retired and only 38 million workers will be available to replace them. We need to be planning now to attract a younger work force and to encourage the new industries that can support it," said Mr. Stone.

Sonoma County is also facing increasing competition for the wine tourist, who has a choice of hundreds of new growing areas to visit.

Among the environmental challenges facing the county during the next decade are limiting greenhouse emissions, conserving and maintaining the quality of water and reducing the use of electrical energy, he said.

"Ten years ago our biggest worry was Y2K. Things were simpler then," said Mr. Stone.

The plan has already come to the attention of U.S. congressional advisers as a possible national model for finding solutions to climate and demographical change, according to water agency General Manager Randy Poole.

"Whether it becomes a standard depends on its success," he said.

On the upside, Sonoma residents are environmentally savvy and its public agencies forward-looking. The water agency is already using solar cells to power its water treatment facilities and even planning an experimental biodiesel operation at one of them, utilizing the algae in holding ponds to produce enough fuel to run the pumps.

"That's the kind of project we hope the Innovation Council can find support for," said Mr. Poole.

"We're willing to beta test any technology that has the potential to lower energy costs."

The council will also be looking at ways to implement a resolution made by the county and nine Sonoma cities to outdo Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's ambitious mandate to reduce state greenhouse emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2020.

Sonoma County has sworn to reduce them to 1990 levels by 2015.

"We're using a plug-in hybrid vehicle in our fleet now, getting 100 to 200 miles per gallon," said Mr. Poole. "We'd like to survey fleet operators county-wide about the possibility of switching to hybrids."

Innovative technologies are only as good as their affordability and ease of use, he said.

"We hope the council's research will point to solutions that are cost-effective and doable and rouse the enthusiasm of the public. Sonoma County already has an edge. I think we have the potential, along with Silicon Valley, to lead the country in innovation."

That kind of leadership is what the county is looking for as it selects its 30 council members.

"Our work force is aging, and that's a resource problem," said Mr. Stone.

"But we still have an incredible amount of talent and creativity in the community, retired or not. We need to harness that talent to take us into the future."

For information on becoming a member of the council, visit www.sonoma-county.org/edb/innovation.htm.

Accessed 5/31/07 at:

<http://www.northbaybusinessjournal.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070521/BUSINESSJOURNAL/70518017&SearchID=73282735006874>