

Affordability    Prevention    Spirit

State of the County Address  
Supervisor James T. Beall, Jr.  
Chairman, Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors  
January 31, 2001

Good evening.

Tonight, I'm going to talk about what's happened in the past year.  
I'm also going to talk about what we should work on in the future.

Before I continue, I'd like to talk about my family.

*(acknowledge Pat, introduce family members in attendance)*

Tonight, I'm going to address an emerging issue that is affecting all of us.... the crisis of affordability in Santa Clara Valley.

I am going to describe four things that we can do to address this crisis. I'll talk about Housing and Energy. And I'll talk about Prevention and our County Workforce. I'm going to start by talking about how my own family experienced a housing crisis.

When I was fourteen, my family's house was damaged by fire. We couldn't find a place where the entire family could stay. For three months we lived apart with different friends and relatives. It was a difficult time. Although we had shelter, we were homeless. We were fortunate to be able to afford to rebuild our home. That was in 1966.

Today, as a family of 12, if our house burned down, I don't think we could afford to rebuild here.

Our community has changed a lot.

Santa Clara County has led the nation through a period of extraordinary economic growth. Prosperity has improved the lives of many in Santa Clara Valley, but not all.

A lot of people struggle every month to pay their rent or their mortgage. The median priced home in Santa Clara County is affordable to only 16% of our residents. Housing is a precious commodity.

We have a crisis of affordability here in the valley, and it is directly or indirectly affecting all of us. My nieces and nephews tell me how their favorite teachers have moved away. Every city in the area is struggling to recruit for their police and fire departments. At least one member of our Sheriff's department lives out of his RV, because he can only afford to drive home to the Central Valley on the weekends.

So tonight I am announcing that we're creating a Countywide Housing Action Plan. We must take the next 180 days and work together as partners to prepare a plan to address this crisis. We need to re-think the county's past role and make changes. We need to build more affordable homes. That is the bottom line. We need to build housing close to transit.

Many in the community are talking about the crisis of affordability and are doing their part to tackle it. But it's like our efforts are different voices in a song. We're not singing together. We need to bring together the Mayor Ron Gonzales' Housing Production Team with the Council of Churches, ACORN, and others. Together we must do what it takes to build more homes while preserving the quality of life we all want.

We need to look at ways that County surplus property could be used to build housing. We can look at establishing a revolving land trust. The County several years ago co-founded the Housing Trust Fund with the Silicon Valley Manufacturing Group and others. Today we can do more by helping our Housing Trust Fund reach our goals. I believe that my fellow board members will once again support a contribution during the budget.

Whether we are talking about the cost of housing, or just trying to pay our energy bill, we all have a story to tell.

How do our low-income seniors and families manage with the increasing cost of electricity and gas? They're being forced to choose between nutrition and paying their energy bills.

We can do something about this.

The Board of Supervisors should create an Energy Task Force charged with writing a County Energy Plan to lead us into the next decade.

Conservation should be one of the key elements in our plan. Our County has 157 buildings. We can figure out ways of conserving power in all our County facilities – at least ten percent. Implementation of some methods of conservation could start immediately. Honestly, we need to look at ways of providing energy over the long term for the whole county, including generating our own power and keeping it clean. If the Cities of Palo Alto and Santa Clara can do it, then so can we. We are preparing to step up to the challenge, together as a Board.

I'd like to tell you a story that Dr. Martin Luther King told about Lazarus. A beggar named Lazarus was passed by a rich man daily. Yet it was Lazarus who ended up in heaven and the rich man didn't. We should remember this story. Never turn our backs on those in our community who need us. With all the economic wealth in this county, we should be able to solve these kinds of problems, and not leave anybody out.

We need to revive our community spirit. We need to respect each other. We need to remove stigmas that create barriers to success.

We have a lot of people gathered in this room who are trying to help. You do it because you believe in the spirit of helping. You do it because you believe in the community and want to make yours a better place to live.

One of the ways that we help our community is through prevention.

The Board of Supervisors emphasizes prevention approaches to problems faced by seniors, children, and families in our community. Supervisors Alvarado, Gage, McHugh, Simitian and myself have all invested, I think wisely, in prevention programs.

I anticipate we will continue to do so with newly elected Supervisor Liz Kniss. Supervisor Kniss has a strong record of regional accomplishment, leadership, and energy. We welcome her to the Board and look forward to her vision.

This year one of our major goals will be to carry out the Children's Health Initiative. We as a Board will work with the Santa Clara Family Health Foundation, PACT, Working Partnerships, and others to provide every child in our County access to health insurance. By doing this we will prevent health problems from developing in our kids.

Another major goal this year will be implementing Proposition 36. With the help of District Attorney George Kennedy, Judge Steven Manley and the Department of Drug and Alcohol Services, we will provide drug treatment to those suffering from addiction. We can help prevent people from returning to crime and incarceration.

While investing in prevention, we have also achieved something unique in California. The Board's wise financial management and the stewardship of our County Executive Richard Wittenberg have enabled us to have the best bond rating in the State of California. At the same time, we have built up our financial reserves and we have continued to invest in our community. We will continue to make sure that the County spends your money wisely.

Now, for a personal commitment for this year, I would like to engage our community in a discussion on how to remove the stigmas placed on those

suffering from mental illnesses. We need to reconsider how we think of this group of people. I hope to hear from you.

So far, I've talked about Housing, Energy, and Prevention. The last thing I'll talk about tonight is our County workforce. Right now, out of sixteen thousand positions, we have over thirty-four hundred vacancies in our County. This is the same problem that many private businesses face here in Santa Clara Valley. We need to find creative ways of attracting and retaining employees. We have to ensure that all our employees who are so committed to public service are going to be rewarded with the special treatment they deserve. We must make a commitment to our employees for their lifelong personal and professional development. We should focus on addressing some of the special concerns created here by the high cost of living, with options like low interest home loans.

To make a career of public service attractive to young people in our community, we could expand internships and scholarships in all departments in the county. There is nothing I have found over my years in public service, nothing more rewarding than to mentor a young person toward a career in Public Service. And my commitment will always be to have interns in my office. I ask that all departments follow my example.

As I close, I would like issue a challenge to all of you.

We have all seen prosperity in our Valley. We now need to make sure everyone shares in our success.

Healthy children, a reliable power supply, and more affordable housing are the top goals this year. I challenge all of you to make those goals a reality.

Thank you.