



September 15, 2020

Jason T Britt, Tulare County Administrative Officer
Chairman Vander Poel
Supervisor Valero
Supervisor Crocker
Supervisor Shuklian
Supervisor Townsend

2800 W Burrel Ave
Visalia, CA 93291

Dear Mr. Britt and Board of Supervisors,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments for the Recommended Budget for FY 2020-2021. Our organization works with residents of Matheny Tract, Pixley, Tooleville, Ivanhoe and Soult's Tract. These unincorporated communities in Tulare County have consistently voiced what investments are needed within their communities in the short-term to address COVID-19 impacts and in the long-term to strengthen the quality of lives in their communities. Please consider the following recommendations regarding significant concerns within these communities such as infrastructural, public health, and service deficiencies that can be addressed by shifting investments to these priorities.

We look forward to continuing to work with the Board and County staff to implement solutions through grants but we also urge the Board to allocate general fund dollars to the priorities addressed below in order to create sustainable funding investments in communities.

1. Green spaces, recreational facilities and community centers

Communities have expressed a need for green spaces such as parks, walking trails, and community centers within their communities for years. However, with COVID-19, the impact of the absence of these resources have become more apparent. For example, in Matheny, Ivanhoe and Pixley, residents have expressed an urgent need for parks, walking paths and other green spaces due to kids staying home from school and residents wanting nearby green space where they can exercise and have access to recreational spaces while social distancing. Given shelter in place orders, residents from these communities expressed a strain on their



family's mental health and that a lack of access to parks and green spaces were an added barrier to relieving stress. Being able to access green space improves residents' quality of life by promoting physical activity and outdoor education.

Furthermore, residents call on the Board to develop community centers that can also serve as cooling centers, COVID-19 mobile testing sites and centers where COVID-19 resources can be distributed. Due to the extreme heat and poor air quality, residents who don't have adequate insulation, retrofitted homes or are without shelter should have access to a space with proper cooling systems to escape extreme heats and hazardous air quality. These investments are especially urgent now when health impacts due to heat and pollution can exacerbate the health impacts of COVID-19. In Ivanhoe, the Family Dollar was used as a cooling center during a heatwave, however, not all unincorporated communities in the County had that option. Residents in Pixley without proper AC or cooling or shelter had to withstand 100 plus degree days. These types of circumstances impact the health and safety of the most vulnerable Tulare County residents and the Board must take seriously the implications of foregoing these investments in rural communities.

In order for these investments to be sustainable, the County must invest dollars into an operations and maintenance fund for parks, green space and community centers. It is imperative to develop community resources like parks and cooling centers to improve the health, safety and livelihoods of residents in unincorporated communities while promoting equitable access to these resources and assets.

2. Transportation, roads and complete streets

Many of the unincorporated communities in the County experience gaps in the quality of roads and complete streets. Many are not within the assessment districts that will benefit from an increase in assessment funds for this fiscal year. We commend County staff for proactively applying to transportation grants, however, we urge the Board to invest general fund dollars in roadway improvements in communities and complete streets. Inadequate sidewalks, roads in dire need of reconstruction and re-pavements, and poorly managed storm drainage are concerns communities have been communicating to the County for years. We urge the Board to prioritize underinvested communities this fiscal year and pursue improvements that will fill these



infrastructure gaps. The Board has a responsibility to support and help unincorporated communities become structurally resilient.

In regard to TCAT, community residents have provided feedback that it is an indispensable service to access services and locations. We would like to suggest policy recommendations since the proposed budget includes an increase in funding for the service. Direct feedback from residents includes expanding the informational resources of the service in Spanish and making the experience more user-friendly, including making it monolingual speaker and ADA accessible. Furthermore, residents have also requested more general awareness information from TCAG and informational and culturally competent outreach direct to communities. Our work during the pandemic has included connecting residents to these resources as well as identifying barriers to different modes of transportation.

It is evident that the Board must hold these concerns of utmost importance in order to invest in the connectivity and resilience of these communities. Active transportation as well as increased connectivity through improved regional transportation are possible with the dedicated financial support from the County.

3. Ballot boxes and infrastructure to support voting and elections in unincorporated communities.

The residents we work alongside with were disappointed to find out that there will be no secure ballot boxes in unincorporated communities and only one polling site in an unincorporated community provided by the Tulare County Registrar of Voters for this upcoming election cycle. Residents urge the Board and the Registrar of Voters to dedicate ballot boxes in every unincorporated community to support increased voter turnout and relieve transportation barriers for residents in these communities. Access to ballot boxes within their communities makes it easier for communities that are already isolated from critical public services to conduct their civic duties and reduces the spread of COVID-19 from over-crowding in in-person voting centers within the incorporated cities. We urge the Board to take into consideration the seriousness of this issue as failing to provide this service in isolated communities only furthers the apparent inequalities faced by residents.



4. Increase in affordable housing and legal assistance for tenants

As the economic consequences of the pandemic continue well into next year, tenants and people experiencing homelessness are the most vulnerable. We urge the Board to increase their investments in affordable housing development and dive deeper into developing tenant protections within their authorities. Earlier this year, the Board failed to consider an evictions moratorium that is presently manifesting in evictions for tenants in Tulare County. With the remaining CARES funding leftover from the Small Business Grant program and general funds dollars, the Board should invest in right to counsel and legal assistance resources to tenants and increase the amount of funding for rental assistance. When tenants have legal assistance the likelihood of getting evicted decreases. The Board has a responsibility to address the disparities of legal protections between landlords and tenants and invest in these protections to avoid furthering the housing crisis.

Thank you for your consideration of the recommendations and we look forward to working with the Board, County staff, and community resources to make these priorities a reality. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Blanca Escobedo
Policy Advocate