

# County of Marin Summary of Novato Community Forum November 9, 2009



## Forum Overview

As part of the County of Marin's long-term restructuring process, the County conducted a first-ever community forum on the County budget on November 9 in Novato. This forum was hosted by Supervisors Judy Arnold and Steve Kinsey and provided an opportunity for the public to learn more about County government and share constructive ideas and solutions to help the County adapt to these challenging times. The forum was primarily promoted through Novato civic organizations, Supervisor Arnold's newsletter distribution list and monthly column in the *Novato Advance*, an advertisement in the *Marin Independent Journal*, and information posted on the County's website. Novato Public Access Television filmed the forum and video of the forum is available for viewing on the Marin County Government Channel at [www.maringchannel.org](http://www.maringchannel.org).

The forum was held from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. at Homeward Bound of Marin's Next Key Room and was attended by 27 people, primarily from Novato. Homeward Bound is Marin County's chief provider of shelter and residential services for homeless families and individuals, serving approximately 1,400 people per year. Homeward Bound operates 12 programs for homeless men, women and children moving people out of homelessness and into housing.

## Purpose and Format

The overall purpose of the forum was to:

1. Inform community about County budget and role of County government
2. Gather community's ideas about potential options to address County budget shortfall
3. Get creative ideas about how to save the County money

To accomplish this purpose, the forum format was designed to create an environment for attendees to make connections with one another, learn more about County services and key budget challenges, and work together to identify and share creative ideas.

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The forum began by asking attendees about “what brought them to the forum” and what issues they wanted to hear more about. Attendees then had an opportunity to discuss in small groups what they valued most about Marin before hearing an overview presentation by County Administrator Matthew Hymel. The presentation slides are available as an attachment to this summary. Following the presentation, attendees remained in small groups to brainstorm creative ideas and solutions to help County government adapt to the challenging times.

## **Overview and Results of Small-Group Brainstorming**

One of the main goals of the community forum was to generate constructive ideas and solutions to help inform the County’s long-term restructuring and budget decisions. To gather this information, five groups of attendees (with approximately 5-6 people per group) worked together with County staff facilitators to brainstorm answers and then arrive at their top suggestions. To begin this brainstorming process, attendees in the small groups were asked a general question:

*“How can we adapt to the changing economic times while preserving Marin’s legacy?”*

Common themes from the small group discussions were:

- Consolidate services within the County and between the County and other agencies
- Look for public-private partnerships
- Find new revenue sources such as grant funding and new tax revenue
- Utilize “green” options such as telecommuting for employees and installation of solar panels
- Consider pension reform
- Reduce County costs in areas such as Civic Center Cafeteria subsidy, Board of Supervisors’ discretionary fund, and rent and equipment costs

Below is a more detailed reporting that identifies the brainstorming ideas and the top suggestions by each of the five groups.

### **Group 1**

#### Brainstorming

- County employees should telecommute/telework
- Eliminate off-site leases or sublets and consolidate personnel
- Emphasize self-sufficiency (stay local, sustainable lifestyle)
- Is it appropriate to subsidize the Civic Center Cafeteria?
- Hungry kids – schools & County government might work together
- School/County service consolidation (i.e. payroll etc.), could be very complex but might help
- Eliminate County Supervisors car allowance (and) replace with car-share pool at Civic Center
- Charge for parking at Civic Center, saves money, keeps cars off road and generates revenue
- Employee skills match level of skill for particular task
- Solar panels, recycling (on buildings and in parking lots)
- Pursue grants (Fed, etc.) for solar, social services, etc.

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Top Suggestions

- Revenue generators – charge for parking at Civic Center, go for grant funding, sublet or rent out County properties (combined with telecommuting)
- County efficiencies – telecommute, eliminate offsites, increase solar and recycling, County service consolidation (e.g. payroll), eliminate BOS car allowances and use car share, use online communication (opt-out of paper), eliminate cafeteria's subsidy, eliminate services to illegal immigrants

**Group 2**

Brainstorming

- Cost of SAP system – opportunities to reduce/recapture/to even costs? 18-25% of the total administrative cost
- Supervisors – discretionary fund
- Dept Task Forces – provide incentives to generate cost reductions
- Cost savings from telecommuting
- Performance accountability for County employees to raise productivity and performance
- Are there ways to work better with unions?
- Do we have a plan for County Morgue? Why not sub-contract morgue services instead of having our own?
- Maybe we can't afford to pay employees to car pool
- Where is the money coming from for stand-alone hospital? Silent partner for county hospital?
- All vote by mail elections
- Cafeteria subsidy
- Cut back on use of outside consultant
- Use incarcerated population for public projects – incentive to reduce time on sentences, huge resource that's underutilized
- Consolidate all of the school districts
- Consolidate school districts and sanitation districts
- Consolidate Fire Department

Top Suggestions

- Consolidate services – fire, school districts, sanitation districts, in house morgue services, vote by mail
- Reduce employee costs – increase performance accountability and performance, cafeteria subsidy, green commute subsidy, more telecommuting, work better with unions, recapture costs of SAP

**Group 3**

Brainstorming

- Stop State takes (\$10 million FY10)
- Maximize cost recovery on new services and existing services
- Pension reform – final compensation add-ons and eliminate employer contributions in calculation

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- HHS – are there ways to incentivize recipients to become more self-reliant and have specific time limits?
- Create partnerships
- Facility plan review to identify public private partnerships
- 4/10 work week
- Given Measure G failure, is there an opportunity to partner with San Rafael for a new safety building?
- Review Board's discretionary fund
- Consolidate Fire dispatch for Marin cities

Top Suggestions

- Stop State takes
- Pension reform

**Group 4**

Brainstorming

- Utilize volunteers more
- Consider consolidation of services programs
- Use social networking, outreach, look for public-private partnerships
- Remove apathy – getting people more involved
- People want services w/o necessarily paying the time cost. Explain the “why”
- Look at cooperative relationships with other counties (share resources/services)
- Consider livable community. Rely on green technologies.
- Convey need. Adapt to change in environment to community and look at best ways to adapt
- Focusing growth. Targeting certain types of development (e.g. infill)
- Anticipate and build for demographic change

Top Suggestions

- Land use legacy – focused growth strategies to reflect goals (and) increase density (increases tax dollars and keeps money locally)
- Personnel – consolidation of services/programs, targeting volunteers (i.e. youth services)
- Communication engagement – echo boomers, identify future needs, anticipate demographic shift

**Group 5**

Brainstorming

- Can we maintain current (flat) level of expectations & stay afloat? What would happen?
- Shift paradigm on pensions
- Lower pensions obligations for new hires
- County income or open space tax rather than more sales tax
- Use Marin Economic Forum to bring in and retain jobs (ag, media, arts & etc), studies will predict results
- Examine overhead expenses
- Examine staff reductions at all levels, not just lowest

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- Examine services for duplication can they be provided without overlap
- Equipment – make sure they are proximate to needs to save time and distractions
- Better efficiency with courts – do they pay their way?
- Ditto on airport – can it generate money?
- Are most County services in the Civic Center? Can we provide them more efficiently?
- What are building costs, maintenance, etc.?
- Can we save money when recruiting? We do not have to pay a premium to work in Marin. Pay ranges adjustments for job descriptions
- Find new revenues – grants, new (not sales) taxes, Marin Economic Forum, more money from courts and airport

Top Suggestions

- Reduce costs – across the board, liability for pensions, renegotiate rents, equipment contracts
- Find new revenues – grants, Marin Economic Forum, new taxes (open space, income), more from courts and airport
- Consolidate services where possible

## Summary of Attendee Evaluations

Attendees were asked to complete an evaluation at the conclusion of the forum to assess the usefulness of the forum and identify areas to improve. Below is a summary of the completed evaluations (the numbers in parentheses represent the number of times a topic was listed):

*Question 1. What did you like best about this evening's forum?*

- Group Session / Facilitation (10)
- Ability to provide input (8)
- Structure (6)
- Openness / Communication (4)
- Preparedness (2)
- Interaction with County Staff (3)
- Power Point Presentation (3)
- Enthusiasm (1)
- Casual atmosphere (1)

*Question 2. Is there anything you would add or change about future forums?*

- More time
- Invite non-profit agencies and foundations
- Somehow encourage potential attendees to look at materials/handouts prior to meeting. (I would have liked a chance to review more)
- Encourage younger residents to attend. Reach out to local college students for diverse ideas (i.e. public administration majors at Dominican University)
- Small groups at different neighborhoods
- Keep the enthusiasm up
- Soften the anticipation of a rowdy crowd, but always be prepared for it

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*Question 3. Is there anything else you want us to know?*

- How does city/town budget get affected by County budgets?
- Tell others about other forums and opportunities to the website.
- We would like to see our ideas on "summary response to countywide budget suggestions"
- Invite IJ and local papers to all these meetings.
- The handouts discuss the "vertical" per department costs, but I would like more info on "horizontal" costs—how much is spent on rent, utilities, labor, retirement? Also, wondering if there are organizational experts who work with County and local governments to reduce costs.
- Look at six sigma techniques and Kepner-Tregoe analysis to come to cost efficient solutions
- Use conservation corps and parolees to do fire suppression in the open space
- Room should have been standing room only as it was a great opportunity to be heard in an informal setting on a very important topic. Consider having follow-up meetings as part of continuing education of the public and staff. These meetings must be very helpful to staff as well to the public.

### **Next Steps After the Forum**

At the conclusion of the forum, County staff presented the following "next steps" after the forum:

- Record comments and notes from forum and draft report
- Distribute report to forum attendees, the Board of Supervisors, and others
- Use comments from the forum to inform development of the County's long-term restructuring plan and FY 2010-11 budget process
- Evaluate the forum to consider holding additional forums or other ways to engage the community in the budget process

Lastly, County staff encouraged attendees to visit the County's website at [www.co.marin.ca.us](http://www.co.marin.ca.us) to get more information about Marin County government, including County services and volunteer opportunities with County government. This summary and related information is located on the County's budget and restructuring website at [www.co.marin.ca.us/budgetinfo](http://www.co.marin.ca.us/budgetinfo).