



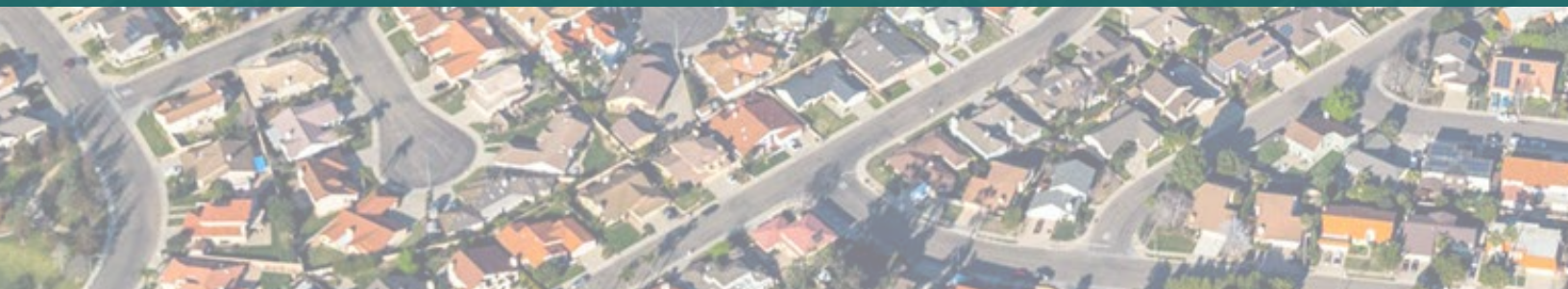
Santa Maria
General Plan

imagine



Economic Development Element

Final Draft | May 5, 2026



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Introduction

Though not a required Element, the Economic Development Element is included in the General Plan to reflect the City's dedication to providing economic opportunities for all residents, supporting local businesses, and improving the City's overall fiscal health. The Economic Development Element focuses on workforce development, local industry, education partnerships, regional partnerships, and tourism.

This Element consists of three main sections: Background, Issues and Opportunities, and Economic Development Policies. The *Background* section introduces existing conditions and trends related to priorities addressed in this Element. The *Issues and Opportunities* section describes the key issues and opportunities that shaped the Element. Finally, the *Economic Development Policies* section outlines the City's Economic Development goals, policies, and implementation actions.

The Economic Development Element provides a framework for fostering a diverse and resilient economy in Santa Maria. It supports high-quality jobs, educational and workforce development opportunities, and a business-friendly environment that encourages innovation and investment. The Element emphasizes the revitalization of commercial corridors and the Downtown area, support for key industries, and the enhancement of infrastructure and housing diversity to meet the needs of a growing community. Through regional collaboration, targeted industry support, and an expanded tourism sector, Santa Maria can bolster economic opportunities, strengthen its identity, and advance long-term prosperity for residents and businesses.



Enos Ranchos Shopping Center on Betteravia Road.



Santa Maria Town Center in Downtown Santa Maria. Credit: Spinoso Real Estate Group

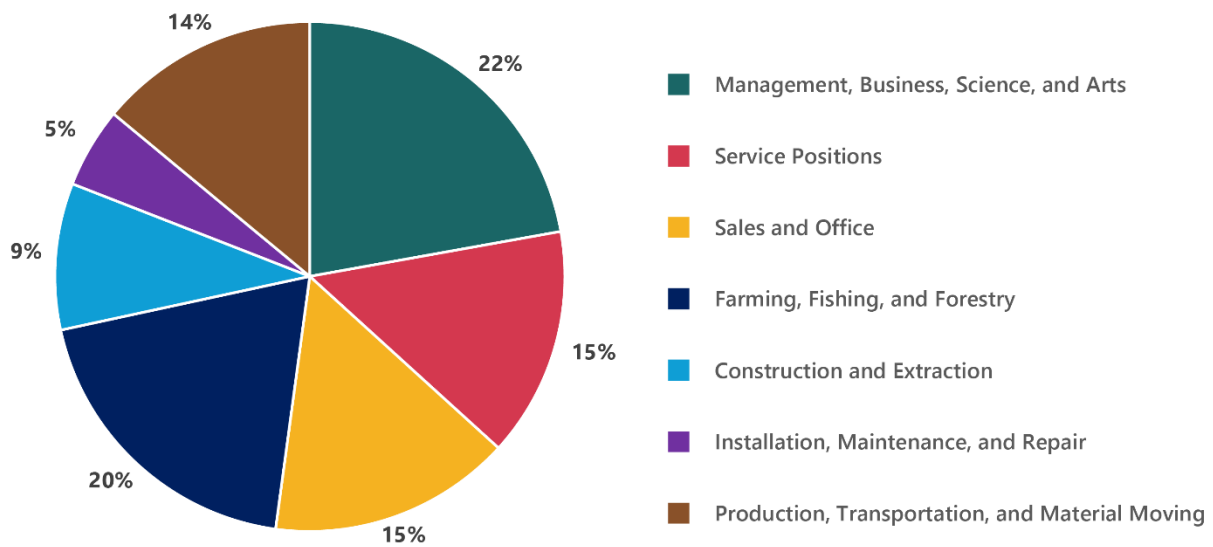
Background

This section introduces existing conditions and trends related to priorities addressed in the Economic Development Policies. Additional background information can be found in Appendix A: Existing Conditions Reports.

Local Industry

Santa Maria’s agriculture and manufacturing sectors contribute significantly to local employment and economic activity (see occupationsFigure ECON-1). The city’s location near Vandenberg Space Force Base has also strengthened local aerospace and defense-related industries. Roughly 40 percent of employed Santa Maria residents work within the city, while the remainder commute to surrounding areas such as Orcutt, Nipomo, Arroyo Grande, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Vandenberg Space Force Base, highlighting Santa Maria’s role within the broader regional labor market.

occupationsFigure ECON-1: Primary Industries and Occupations in Santa Maria



Source: American Communities Survey, 5-Year Estimate (2023)

Agriculture

Agriculture is an important part of the economy in Santa Barbara County. In 2023, the total gross value of agricultural crops and products was \$1,875,978,000 (County of Santa Barbara 2024). More specifically, agriculture has been a substantial part of Santa Maria’s economy since the early 20th century, with the region’s fertile soils and favorable climate supporting a variety of crops. The Santa Maria Valley is particularly known for its strawberries, which are a major contributor to the local economy. Other important crops include wine grapes, broccoli, and cauliflower, which benefit from the region’s temperate climate and productive soils.

Partnerships and Regional Collaboration

The City works closely with several local and regional economic development organizations, including the Santa Maria Valley Chamber of Commerce, REACH Central Coast, and EconAlliance. These organizations support various initiatives related to business development, workforce alignment, and regional planning. Santa Maria also partners with local educational institutions, namely Allan Hancock College and the Santa Maria Joint Union High School District, to support job training and workforce development.



Credit: Santa Maria Valley Chamber of Commerce



Ideas + Action for a Thriving Central Coast

Credit: Reach Central Coast



Credit: EconAlliance



Credit: Allan Hancock College

Tourism

Santa Maria is known for its Santa Maria-style barbecue, agricultural heritage, and proximity to natural attractions like the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes. Farmers' markets, farm-to-table restaurants, annual festivals such as the Strawberry Festival and Santa Barbara County Fair, the Elks Rodeo, and vintners' events support agricultural tourism. The city also benefits from its location near Vandenberg Space Force Base, where aerospace launches have the potential to attract visitors from across the state.



Credit: Santa Barbara County Fair.



Santa Maria Elks Rodeo Parade. Credit: Elks Lodge #1538.



Agricultural fields in the Santa Maria Valley.



Santa Maria Strawberry Festival. Credit: KSBY News

Issues and Opportunities

This section describes the issues and opportunities that informed the Economic Development Policies.

Workforce development and educational alignment. Santa Maria has a strong foundation in education and workforce services, supported by institutions such as Allan Hancock College and Santa Maria Joint Union High School District’s Mark Richardson Career Technical Education Center, as well as programs like Build Your Workforce and the America’s Job Center of California. Santa Maria Joint Union High School District and Allan Hancock College also offer college and career readiness programs for students, such as the College Readiness and Career Technical Education (CTE) Pathway, to strengthen the connection between education and workforce development. While the City has expanded opportunities for higher-paying jobs in manufacturing, the medical field, and agriculture, the limited availability of higher-wage jobs and more advanced training remains a challenge. Strengthening local partnerships can help Santa Maria grow a more skilled, locally employed workforce.

Support for target industries. Agriculture and manufacturing remain the backbone of Santa Maria’s economy, and the city is well-positioned to attract high-growth sectors like aerospace, health care, renewable energy, and agricultural technology (ag-tech). The city’s relatively affordable cost of living, development-friendly environment, and proximity to Vandenberg Space Force Base enhance its competitiveness in these sectors. However, limited land availability may limit the city’s economic potential.



Credit: EconAlliance



Marian Regional Medical Center. Credit: Dignity Health

Downtown and corridor revitalization. Renewed investment can help transform Santa Maria’s commercial corridors and Downtown area into vibrant economic hubs. Revitalizing these areas through mixed-use development, infill housing, and coworking-office space supports local businesses and creates lively destinations for residents and visitors.

Tourism and visitor economy. Santa Maria is uniquely positioned to grow its tourism sector by celebrating its regional identity and natural surroundings. The area’s renowned barbecue, arts and cultural events, and proximity to destinations like the Santa Maria Valley Wine Country and Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes offer a foundation for expanding tourism. Partnerships between the City, local businesses, and tourism organizations can promote events, improve visitor-serving infrastructure, and amplify agricultural tourism.

Regional collaboration. The City participates in several collaborative economic efforts that offer important opportunities to support business development, workforce alignment, and regional competitiveness. Continued coordination with Vandenberg Space Force Base, the Santa Maria Airport District, and educational institutions can advance the growth of target sectors.



Gateway Mixed-Use Project located on the northwest corner of Main Street and Broadway. This building was constructed in 2024 and is an example of recent revitalization efforts in the Downtown area.

Economic Development Policies

The Economic Development Policies address the key issues and opportunities identified above and establish a comprehensive roadmap for expanding economic and educational opportunities, strengthening local industry, and bolstering partnerships in the greater Santa Maria area.

The *Policy Framework* section outlines Economic Development goals, policies, and implementation actions. A goal describes the community's desired future. A policy is a specific statement of intent that guides decision-making. An action is an activity, procedure, program, or project that carries out a policy.

Policy Summary

The goals, policies, and implementation actions of the Economic Development Element foster a dynamic and resilient local economy by advancing educational and workforce opportunities, supporting existing businesses, and attracting new investment. The Framework is organized under four goal areas.

The first goal area aligns workforce development and educational opportunities with target industries through local partnerships, post-secondary program expansion, and career-readiness initiatives (Goal ECON-1). Through coordination with higher education institutions and regional programs, the aim is to ensure that residents are equipped with the skills needed for technically advanced jobs.

The second goal area fosters a supportive environment for business retention, expansion, and attraction by streamlining regulations, investing in infrastructure, and creating opportunities for infill and mixed-use development in key areas, especially Downtown (Goal ECON-2). Infrastructure investments and land use strategies are designed to support a diverse economy while maintaining affordability for both residents and employers.

Recognizing that economic success depends on collaboration, the third goal area focuses on public-private partnerships and regional cooperation to support innovation and entrepreneurship (Goal ECON-3).

The fourth goal area advances a targeted approach to tourism, placemaking, and branding that leverages Santa Maria's unique cultural identity, agricultural roots, and natural attractions to position the city as a vibrant destination for visitors and businesses (Goal ECON-4).

Policy Framework

Goal ECON-1: High-quality educational and economic opportunities. Santa Maria enjoys a growing economy that provides high-quality educational and expanded workforce opportunities for all residents.¹

Policy ECON-1.1: Workforce development. Continue to support local workforce development programs (e.g., Build Your Workforce Program) and career services (e.g., America’s Job Center of California) to connect businesses and individuals with funding, job training, and work experience, ensuring that residents are prepared for high-quality jobs.

Policy ECON-1.2: Coordinate support for job training. Coordinate with local higher education institutions and other partners in the regional workforce system to support job training and workforce development programs.

Action ECON-1.2.1: Lead or partner to prepare a local economic development strategic plan (EDSP). An EDSP would identify key target industries, detailed strategies, and an action matrix outlining roles and responsibilities, potential partnerships, funding sources, and near-term implementation timeframes (typically over a five-year period). The EDSP should align with and support existing regional plans.

Policy ECON-1.3: Post-secondary program expansion. Encourage expanding post-secondary education and training programs that support the workforce needs of Santa Maria’s target industries, including expanded offerings through Allan Hancock College.

Policy ECON-1.4: Local job connections. Support local events and programs that connect job seekers with high-growth and target industries.

Goal ECON-2: Business growth support. Santa Maria supports the growth and prosperity of existing businesses and attracts new business and investment.²

Policy ECON-2.1: Business-friendly regulation. Maintain a regulatory environment that is business-friendly and appropriately aligned with attracting and/or supporting target industries.

Action ECON-2.1.1: Regularly review and update City permit procedures and fee schedules to improve efficiency and enhance clarity, thereby streamlining the permitting process. Identify opportunities to engage stakeholders in the review and recommendation process.

¹ Please see the Public Facilities and Services Element for policies focused on collaboration with educational institutions.

² Please see the Land Use Element for policies and actions related to downtown, infill, housing stock, corridors, and annexation.

Action ECON-2.1.2: Evaluate establishing regulatory or other incentives for target businesses that may provide significant household supportive employment, reinvestment in desired areas, and/or revenues to the City (e.g., retail, health care, aerospace, precision manufacturing, education, agricultural technology, clean technology, and renewable energy, etc.).

Policy ECON-2.2: Downtown and corridors vitality. Strengthen the vitality and development of Downtown, as well as mixed-use and commercial corridors and centers throughout Santa Maria, by allowing a range of uses, amenities, and spaces to accommodate retail, housing, coworking spaces, and offices.

Policy ECON-2.3: Infill development. Prioritize infill development opportunities to revitalize Downtown and bolster the unique identities of other neighborhoods throughout Santa Maria.

Policy ECON-2.4: Diverse housing products. Encourage the development of a full spectrum of housing products at all affordability levels to ensure a diverse and talented workforce can remain and grow locally.

Policy ECON-2.5: Sustainable infrastructure investment. Invest in resilient and sustainable infrastructure systems that serve the existing and future businesses and residents in Santa Maria.

Policy ECON-2.6: Business assistance efforts. Support efforts and organizations that assist with business planning and modernization assistance (e.g., scaling, technology adoption, site selection and development, continuity planning, etc.), especially support for marginalized entrepreneurs.

Policy ECON-2.7: Santa Maria Airport Business Park development and partnership. Support and promote the development of the Santa Maria Public Airport by working closely with the Airport District on updating the Airport Business Park Specific Plan, with a renewed focus on attracting light industrial, high-tech, and other target businesses.

Action ECON-2.7.1: Support the Airport District in the implementation of a targeted plan to attract and grow commercial air service, providing opportunities for local businesses and residents to initiate and complete travel locally.

Policy ECON-2.8: Annexation lands. Support efforts for the annexation of land into the city to promote business expansion and residential growth. Leverage annexation as a tool to accommodate economic development, enhance infrastructure, and create opportunities for sustainable urban growth.

Policy ECON-2.9: Local strategic planning. Plan for and participate in local strategic economic development efforts.

Goal ECON-3: Partnership-driven economic development. Economic development goals are advanced through collaboration and partnerships.

Policy ECON-3.1: Public-private partnerships. Develop public-private partnerships with high-growth and target industry partners to support existing businesses, educational and workforce training opportunities, and to expand into emerging industries.

Action ECON-3.1.1: Participate in regularly convening local leaders in the private sector, philanthropic organizations, and higher education institutions to ensure there is support for the development of new industries in the city and region.

Action ECON-3.1.2: Coordinate with partners to identify companies in target industries and engage target industry representatives to identify actions the City could take to support them in establishing or expanding their presence.

Policy ECON-3.2: Startup partnerships. Explore partnerships with higher education institutions and organizations to support the creation of incubators and business accelerator programs.

Policy ECON-3.3: Regional efforts. Actively participate in a coordinated, joint regional economic development program (with partners such as the Santa Maria Valley Chamber of Commerce, Regional Economic Action Coalition (REACH) Central Coast, EconAlliance, etc.).

Action ECON-3.3.1: Support strengthening of the regional workforce development system through partnerships aiming to align workforce training initiatives with industry needs, ensuring a well-prepared and competitive workforce.

Policy ECON-3.4: Aerospace and aviation regional collaboration. Develop strategic public-private partnerships with Vandenberg Space Force Base, the Santa Maria Airport District, private aerospace companies, and regional partners to advance economic development and to support educational and workforce initiatives in high-tech, aerospace, and defense industries.

Goal ECON-4: Strengthening tourism. Santa Maria is a unique destination that celebrates location, history, and community.

Policy ECON-4.1: Santa Maria as a destination. Support efforts to promote Santa Maria as a destination for tourism. Celebrate Santa Maria's unique, authentic identity, including attributes such as being the birthplace of Santa Maria-style barbeque as well as over 150 years of agricultural history. Leverage Santa Maria's distinctive location as the epicenter of the Central Coast, with access to a wide range of experiences including natural amenities (e.g., the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes), aerospace launches (Vandenberg Space Force Base), revitalization of the Downtown, agricultural tourism, wineries, and farm-to-table restaurants.

Action ECON-4.1.1: Continue and expand the offering of community events and opportunities that enable community members, businesses, and visitors to engage with local businesses.

Action ECON-4.1.2: Amplify Santa Maria's agricultural tourism industry through continued support of community events (e.g., farmers' markets, barbeque festivals, vintners' events, etc.) and partnerships.

Action ECON-4.1.3: Support public and private efforts to develop and/or enhance visitor-serving infrastructure in and around Santa Maria to help attract visitors, such as relocation of the fairgrounds, expansion/establishment of the performing arts and/or conference center, utilization of sports facilities for tournaments, and similar initiatives.

Policy ECON-4.2: High-quality amenities. Encourage the development of quality lodging, restaurants, and meeting facilities to meet the needs of businesses, residents, and their guests, and to bring visitors to the community.

Action ECON-4.2.1: Amend the Zoning Code to ensure that lodging and similar uses that serve short-term visitors (e.g., hotels, motels, bed and breakfasts) are appropriately allowed.

Policy ECON-4.3: Placemaking. Support a variety of revitalization and improvement programs focused on placemaking and beautification, such as façade improvements, public gathering places, public art, enhanced streetscapes and redesign of streets into pedestrian-friendly environments, and community events.³

Action ECON-4.3.1: Continue to pursue and secure grants and other funding to develop, improve, and invest in cultural amenities and public spaces.

Action ECON-4.3.2: Continue to implement and update, as needed, the City's Public Art Master Plan, Recreation and Parks Plan, Urban Forest Management Plan, and similar investment programs designed to enhance the attractiveness of Santa Maria as a place to live, work, play, and visit.

Policy ECON-4.4: Tourism-economic partnerships. Support and enhance the synergy between tourism promotion and economic development.

³ Please see the Land Use and Health and Environmental Justice Elements for additional policies and actions focused on public and pedestrian-friendly community spaces.