

**2013 STATE OF COUNTY ADDRESS**  
**“IMPROVING LIFE IN TULARE COUNTY”**  
**BY PETE VANDER POEL, CHAIRMAN**  
**TULARE COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

Good morning and thank you for your attendance at today's meeting.

Before I begin I would like to publicly thank past Chairman Allen Ishida and fellow Board members, elected officials, our CAO and his staff, and County of Tulare department heads and employees for their efforts, dedication, and leadership last year.

With a team approach in 2012, Tulare County managed to deliver a number of important programs and projects in addition to critical day-to-day services for the public. For example: a Customer Service Program and Economic Development department were established, the General Plan was updated, funding was secured for a jail facility in Porterville, and participation in Public Safety Realignment continued with success. In addition, Tulare County remained fiscally sound and passed a balanced budget without having to reduce department budgets, deferring step and merit pay increases, implementing furloughs, or instituting a hiring freeze. This Board will remain dedicated to fiscal responsibility and living within our means, regardless of Federal and State budget impacts.

**STATE OF THE COUNTY**

As we begin 2013, I have never been more proud to serve the people of Tulare County. I also believe that the residents of Tulare County have a lot to be proud of. We have one of the most productive agriculture economies in the world, we are home to many natural and scenic attractions, and most of all, I believe our residents are proud to live in Tulare County. Because of this, I am confident that we will continue to see opportunities and growth.

However, Tulare County, like many Counties, faces challenges during these difficult times, our residents have shown their desire to improve life here and have voiced the priorities that need to be addressed: Low ranking health statistics. High crime in some neighborhoods. A growing marijuana problem. Nuisance properties. Inadequate recreational opportunities for youth. Aging infrastructure. High unemployment numbers.

Like the residents of Tulare County, I too see challenges, but I also see opportunity to improve and be proactive.

As your Chairman of the Board of Supervisors, I want to lead this organization in an effort, with the help of all residents, to Improve Life in Tulare County.

Today, I want to address four broad issues that I believe will help Improve Life in Tulare County. These issues are: Health & Wellness; Public Safety; Investing in Youth; and Building Communities. Under each issue, I offer solutions and some key strategies that the County can and will take to Improve Life in

Tulare County. Although each strategy will not solve all of our problems entirely, each one is a major step in the right direction.

### **Goal 1: Health & Wellness**

The first goal for a better life in Tulare County is to improve the Health & Wellness of our residents and employees. In 2012, Tulare County residents ranked 47<sup>th</sup> among California's 58 counties in the nationwide *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps* survey. Here, according to the survey, 31 percent are obese, 27 percent are in poor health, and 24 percent are physically inactive. Those are all alarming statistics.

As the largest employer in the region with more than 4,000 employees, the County of Tulare will lead the charge to improve these statistics through its own Health & Wellness Program and by implementing strategies under the California Community Transformation Initiative.

#### *Tulare County Health & Wellness Program*

Improving our physical health helps our fiscal health. Tulare County will strive to keep health care costs down by focusing on the Health & Wellness program. This effort focuses on employee health screenings, health coaching and education.

For example, in 2012, the Human Resources & Development department administered free health screenings to employees, conducted a countywide "Walking Works Challenge" versus Fresno County, held its fifth annual County Health & Wellness Fair, and initiated a breast cancer awareness day. All of these initiatives impacted our workforce in a positive manner. These initiatives will continue to be implemented this year along with additional events centered around Health & Wellness.

In addition, we will continue to challenge our employees, residents and neighbors to live a healthy lifestyle by encouraging them to stay fit and eat well. For example, this year, the Tulare County Health Advisory Committee will implement a Healthy Tulare County Week during the first week of April, with a different focus each day to help educate and bring awareness to a wide array of health issues.

One health issue that I have been particularly interested in supporting is that of Mental Health. Through the Tulare County Mental Health Board and the Health and Human Services Agency, we will strive to promote awareness of mental health issues that often are undiagnosed or heavily stigmatized. We will do this through the efforts and activities of the Mental Health Awareness Month, the newly formed Student Mental Health Network, the Festival of Hope, additional health fairs in unincorporated communities and the use of our Mental Health Mobile units.

#### *California Community Transformation Initiative*

Under the California Community Transformation Initiative, the County is developing partnerships to improve Health & Wellness for all residents. In collaboration with the Tulare County Health Advisory Committee, the County has developed plans for Tobacco Free Living, Healthy Eating and Active Living,

and Healthy and Safe Physical Environments. These plans will allow the County to bring stakeholders from the health care, public safety, public health, and planning communities to develop a comprehensive approach to creating a healthier living environment for all of us living in Tulare County.

Strides have already been made through these plans.

A local example under the action plan for Tobacco Free Living I would like to commend and highlight is that of Oscar Bernal, owner of Riviera Apartments in Visalia. Oscar put a plan in place earlier this month to create healthier spaces for families and their children by implementing a smoke-free environment in each of his 15 units. We all know that secondhand smoke, particularly among children, has a detrimental effect on health. Thanks to participating in the Initiative, Tulare County is working to Improving Life for our residents.

## **Goal 2: Public Safety**

The next goal I would like to address is Public Safety. Tulare County is a very large, diverse County; as a result we face a wide variety of threats to the safety of our residents. One of these problems is keeping our rural, unincorporated areas safe from crime.

The Board of Supervisors has always maintained that providing funding and support for our public safety departments is our number one priority. Members of the Sheriff's, District Attorney, Public Defender and Probation departments are doing their best with what Tulare County can afford.

There is no question that providing funding for our public safety departments helps Improve Life in Tulare County. With new grant funding, for example, the Community-Based Officer Program has allowed our public safety officers to build relationships in our communities, which, in turn, has helped keep criminals off our streets and create a safe environment for our residents. In addition, the funding that we have provided for Marijuana Eradication has helped us to continue our efforts in creating a safer County.

### *Community-Based Officer Program*

The CBO program was implemented in October 2009 after the County secured a \$3.1 million COPS Grant. The community-based officers funded by the grant work every day with town councils, nonprofit organizations, faith-based groups, school officials, business owners, other government agencies and community residents. The deputies also make crime prevention presentations to civic groups, schools and community groups.

As a part of the grant, the County committed to funding the positions for a minimum of one additional year after the grant expiration. However, because of the success of the program, we will allocate as much funding from the unwinding of redevelopment as we can in order to retain these positions beyond our existing one-year commitment. The CBO program is just one component of the Sheriff's Department's commitment to public safety.

### *Marijuana Eradication*

One of the largest problems in Tulare County and the San Joaquin Valley is the prevalence of illegal medical marijuana grow sites. Since 2011, there have been nine homicides connected to these grow sites in Tulare County. Specific impacts associated with medical marijuana activities also include an increase in crimes, such as robberies, burglaries, assault, battery, carrying of illegal weapons, and a negative quality of life for areas surrounding such operations.

With a one-time boost in funding, staff from the Sheriff's Department, Resource Management Agency, District Attorney, and County Counsel worked hard to identify illegal grow sites, with eradication as the end result. Nearly 100,000 pounds of marijuana was eradicated and disposed of. The Board of Supervisors appreciates the efforts of staff and will extend that funding for the Tulare County Marijuana Enforcement Team and look for innovative ways to control and curtail illegal medical marijuana grow sites in Tulare County.

Providing this funding will ensure that families and children are provided a safer environment in unincorporated Tulare County. For example, last year Allensworth School District Principal Rob Cardenas contacted my office during Red Ribbon Week and felt he was in a predicament. He told me he had a hard time encouraging his students to live drug free lifestyles when, as they walk to and from school, could see marijuana being grown in the backyards of Allensworth homes. These grow sites were reported and investigated. Within a matter of weeks, through the efforts of the Sheriff's Department and Resource Management Agency, illegal medical marijuana sites around Allensworth were eradicated.

### *Substandard Conditions in Unincorporated Communities*

In the County, the Sheriff's Department is responsible for all law enforcement activities within the unincorporated communities. They are often the first responder to calls for service of criminal, civil and medical requests by the public.

One common call the Sheriff's Department often responds to is chronic nuisance properties throughout the County. These nuisance properties regularly present an excessive amount of calls for service and/or criminal activity which are negatively impacting our communities.

In collaboration with the Sheriff's Department, our desire is to work in cooperation with other Departments and initiate a program that addresses nuisance properties. The goal of this program will be to compel property owners and landlords to help mitigate the negative impact that nuisance properties have on the community.

The Board hopes to see this program come to fruition in 2013 and I know it will help Improve Life in Tulare County.

### **Goal 3: Investing in Youth**

The next goal I would like to address is Investing in our Youth.

Troublesome youth behaviors, such as truancy, violence, and substance abuse, are top concerns to parents, community members and youth alike. These behaviors impact communities and can lead to serious social and economic problems. As youth grow with our communities, they need positive settings that offer the opportunity to succeed. There are countless organizations in this County that make great efforts to provide positive environments for our youth. Tulare County will continue to support those organizations and our youth by providing positive experiences through the Step Up Program and seeking to build more youth centers in the unincorporated areas.

### *Step Up Program*

For several years, the Board of Supervisors has set aside \$250,000 for the Step Up Anti-Gang Initiative. This funding is used towards supporting organizations, community-based events, and programs geared towards youth. The Board will continue to maintain this level of funding.

Since 2007, the Board of Supervisors has been proactive to address the issue of gangs within the communities of Tulare County through the Step Up initiative. Through Step Up, we are investing in our youth and improving the quality of life for youth, their families and their communities.

Annual programs such as the Step Up Youth Challenge have connected more than 290 students at 15 Junior High and 9 high schools countywide to address a serious concern. Participating students are empowered to address an issue on their school campuses and communities, such as bullying, poverty, or suicide prevention.

For example, students at Mulcahy Middle School in Tulare addressed violence at their school last year by educating their peers during lunchtime events about steps they could take to alleviate bullying. The result, reported Assistant Principal Mark Thompson: not a single gang fight all year on campus. This year, similar efforts are being carried out by schools in Earlimart and Pixley. It's these types of projects that Improve Life in Tulare County.

That is why Step Up will continue to work with partners to expand the Summer Night Lights program to include additional communities to provide safe and fun activities for youth and their families in the evenings during the summer months. The LOOP bus will increase its service to at-risk youth throughout the county and will provide opportunities and experiences that would otherwise not be possible.

### *Youth Centers*

Tulare County will also seek funding and partners to open more youth centers in the unincorporated areas. In the past few years, Tulare County has been successful in finding funding and partners and opened youth centers in Cutler-Orosi and Ivanhoe.

What does opening a youth center mean for a community?

In Ivanhoe, Tulare County partnered with the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Sequoias to repair and renovate the community's only youth center. The new building for the Ivanhoe Boys & Girls Club has been open since March 2012. Attendance at the Club has steadily grown since then. The new building is already at capacity.

The new Club features daily education and homework help, computer classes, sports, cheerleading, dance and choir, drug, alcohol and teen pregnancy prevention, and fitness classes.

A strong program at the Ivanhoe Club is the Torch (leadership) Club. The youth are learning that it is their responsibility and privilege to turn their community around and make it into a place where people are proud to live. Towards that end, the teens have been planning and implementing holiday events that include Club members, parents and neighbors of the Club. The youth are on track to develop traditions for Ivanhoe that are bringing people together and are strengthening the sense of pride they have in their community.

#### **Goal 4: Build Communities**

My last goal is Building Communities.

In 2013, Tulare County will help build communities from the ground up through infrastructure projects.

Investing in infrastructure goes well beyond just construction jobs. Good infrastructure impacts the County's competitiveness. It attracts business, which brings in more jobs and increased tax revenue. Especially in this economic environment, attracting – or losing – major businesses can have a huge impact on a community. To see the ripple effect it has, just take a look at our communities devastated by the loss of jobs. Improving infrastructure boosts a community's overall economy and standard of living.

#### *Broadband Initiative*

The first community building initiative I would like to highlight is boosting Broadband infrastructure through the Central Valley Next Generation Broadband Infrastructure Project.

Whether people live in rural or urban areas, residents and businesses today require access to high-speed Internet services in order to be successful and competitive. Internet service is often just as essential to employers as electrical power – availability is a must for economic development and to build strong, vibrant communities. This multi-million dollar project will install infrastructure capable of delivering broadband and high speed Internet in an 18 county area within Central California. Approximately \$15 million is being spent making broadband infrastructure improvements within Tulare County and its communities.

For example, Monson-Sultana School was the first user to receive services from this project, and is already experiencing an increase in its high-speed Internet services. As the new broadband system continues to come online, the Monson-Sultana School expects to see another tenfold speed increase.

Dinuba area schools also went online this month. Construction countywide will be finishing shortly.

System operators plan to begin delivering high speed broadband services in February to many anchor institutions within Tulare County, including libraries in Visalia, Tulare, and Porterville, the Tulare County Office of Education, College of the Sequoias and Porterville College.

### *Transportation*

While broadband is key to ensuring competitiveness in a digital age, building better roads and bridges builds better communities and improves the quality of life for residents and visitors. Good roads can drive economic development and business expansion, which in turn makes our communities more sustainable. Tulare County currently has the most aggressive bridge improvement program in the state, with 21 improvement projects currently programmed or under construction, including a one million dollar, 60 foot bridge across the South Fork of the Kaweah River.

I'm pleased to mention the progress of several roads projects in Tulare County. The last stage in a multi-year \$55.5 million dollar effort to widen Road 80 to four lanes from Visalia to Dinuba should be under construction by March. The final portion of a \$12.9 million effort to widen and improve Road 108 from Visalia to Tulare should be completed in the Spring of this year. And, the construction of a \$12.5 million dollar project widening Avenue 416 from Highway 99 to the County Line will begin in early this year as well.

### *Flood control*

In addition to roads, perhaps one of the greatest infrastructure needs for our rural communities is flood control. As proven by storms in the last few years, a torrential rainstorm can flood and damage a community much faster than it takes to build. In 2013, RMA will begin construction on three major flood control projects designed to reduce flood impacts and improve the safety and quality of life in rural communities. These three projects are Juvenile Detention Facility near Cottonwood Creek, Seville-Sontag Ditch, and the Yетtem-Button Ditch. All projects will begin in Fall 2013. I would like to credit the Tulare County Flood Commission and RMA staff for their leadership and hard work to these projects to fruition.

### *Water*

While the County will bring forth projects to reduce the impacts of flooding, we will also continue to work with various stakeholders to ensure disadvantaged communities have safe, clean reliable drinking water. The momentum continues to build through the dynamic stakeholder process that was established in the Tulare Lake Basin Disadvantaged Community Water Study. Last year experienced landmark success when Alpaugh established a Community Services District and we look forward to many success stories this year.

### *CONCLUSION*

In conclusion, I hope that I have conveyed the Board's desire to spend this year Improving Life in Tulare

County. I would like to close with one more example of empowerment and how you as an individual resident can help achieve that goal.

Last year a group of Tulare residents made an attempt to revive the city's literacy program, which was cut in June 2012 due to budget constraints.

Staff with the Manuel Torrez Family Resource Center in Tulare petitioned the State last year to provide funding to their organization so they could revive the literacy program. The State responded, but would only provide the \$22,000 dollars in funding if the Tulare County Library Literacy Program would administer the funds. Tulare County Library staff agreed, and the program is currently operating successfully in Tulare.

This example illustrates the fact that, regardless of who provides the service, Tulare residents win and gain a valuable resource. And, this shows how you, whether an individual, a group, or an organization, can have an impact, and you can improve life in Tulare County.

Looking forward, this Board is dedicated to partnering with residents and organizations to preserve and create new programs and initiatives in order to confront our challenges and take advantage of opportunities to Improve life in Tulare County.

Thank you for your attendance at today's 2013 State of the County Address.