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## **United Way report: State of county generally good**

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**By Kurtis Alexander**

SANTA CRUZ -- The United Way's annual report card for Santa Cruz County shows residents making solid gains in key areas of their lives including personal finance, health and education.

That's despite the region's high cost of living, a reality that often makes housing and health and social services hard to come by, as shown in the 324-page 2007 Community Assessment Project, released Monday.

The report, in its 13th year, is generally regarded as the foremost indicator of social conditions in Santa Cruz County.

Among this year's findings:

- 42 percent of county residents said they were better off economically this year over last, the highest number since the economic boom years at the turn of the century.
- More than 90 percent of county residents reported having health insurance this year, the highest level in a decade. More than 97 percent of children had health insurance in 2005, the last year reported.
- More than 90 percent of county schools showed improvements in standardized test score rankings between 2001 and 2006, while SAT test scores rose 5 percent between the 1996-97 and 2004-05 school years.

"A lot of good news," said Mary Lou Goeke, executive director of the United Way of Santa Cruz County.

Members of the county's social services community, who gathered for the release of the CAP report at Holy Cross parish hall on Monday, were in agreement that the successes can be attributed to the region's generally solid economy and housing market as well as many nonprofits and government agencies working together to solve major problems.

"There's a collaborative approach in this county that I haven't seen in my 18 years of health care," said Ron Galonsky, who moved to the county 15 months ago to work as chief executive officer of Watsonville Community Hospital, and a speaker at Monday's event.

Despite progress, however, issues related to the high cost of living locally continue to hamstring the area's quality of life, the report found.

For example, the number of first-time homebuying households that could afford the median home price continues to fall while the number of people who were homeless at any point this year rose, according to the report.

Virginia Johnson, executive director of Ecology Action and a speaker at Monday's event, said high costs here coupled with anti-development attitudes have hindered efforts to build affordable housing.

"What you've seen is a proliferation of larger homes," Johnson said after the event. "I know smart growth is not something we want to talk about, but it's how we'll have to grow if our work force is to have housing."

Traffic, which the report cited as the top complaint of residents, also would improve if denser, more centralized housing was built, particularly along major traffic corridors, Johnson said.

Some smart growth projects already have been built in the cities of Santa Cruz and Watsonville, she said. Several of those in attendance Monday echoed her sentiment that better planning and zoning would go a long way in improving quality of life in the region.

A low growth rate in the county, also largely due to the cost of living, has translated into declining enrollment in schools -- a 4.1 percent decrease between the 1997-98 and 2006-07 school years compared to a 9.8 percent increase statewide during the same time period, according to the report. The consequence is a severe drop in state funding for schools, said Santa Cruz City Schools Superintendent Alan Pagano, who also spoke Monday.

The region's high cost of living continues to hit South County particularly hard. A breakdown of the report by the Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust indicates that conditions are noticeably worse in the Watsonville, Freedom and Pajaro areas.

Only 69 percent have health insurance in these communities, compared to 92 percent in the rest of the county; 28 percent in these areas said gangs were the most serious problem in schools, compared to 4 percent elsewhere; and Watsonville's unemployment rate in 2006 was more than double the county average.

The CAP report is compiled by Watsonville-based Applied Survey Research, a nonprofit research firm that obtains the data through local surveys as well as from outside sources like state and federal censuses. The United Way of Santa Cruz County convenes a number of local groups to sponsor the project.

"There's a lot of positive things as a result of a lot of positive work by a lot of people," said County Supervisor Neal Coonerty, after listening to Monday's summary of the report. But there's still work to do, he said.