

2022-2023 KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY



Maricopa Small Town Big Dreams

**Release Date
March 13, 2023**



Maricopa: Small Town Big Dreams

“The best way to predict the future is to create it yourself.” Abraham Lincoln



Temblor Range (www.summitpost.org/temblorrange/609403)

SUMMARY:

Is Maricopa a diamond in the rough? The City of Maricopa (City) has been a recurring subject of concern of past Grand Jury Reports (2013-2014, 2016-2017, and 2018-2019). Little has changed in this tiny, historical municipality over recent years. It still has problems: a limited, bare-bones economic base that keeps the survival of the City hanging by a thread, a lack of code enforcement to combat the accumulation of trash and the abandoned properties that blight the town.

Maricopa's situation is not unique; it is typical of many small towns and cities across California and the nation that are struggling to transition from the past to the future. The City has an inherent benefit of being very close to Temblor Range, Carrizo Plain, and numerous other attractive hiking areas. The Grand Jury ultimately concluded that Maricopa has the unrealized potential to be a thriving and lively addition to Kern County.

PURPOSE OF INQUIRY:

The 2022-2023 Kern County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) visited the City pursuant to California Penal Code §925(a). It inquired into the operations and management of the City seeking

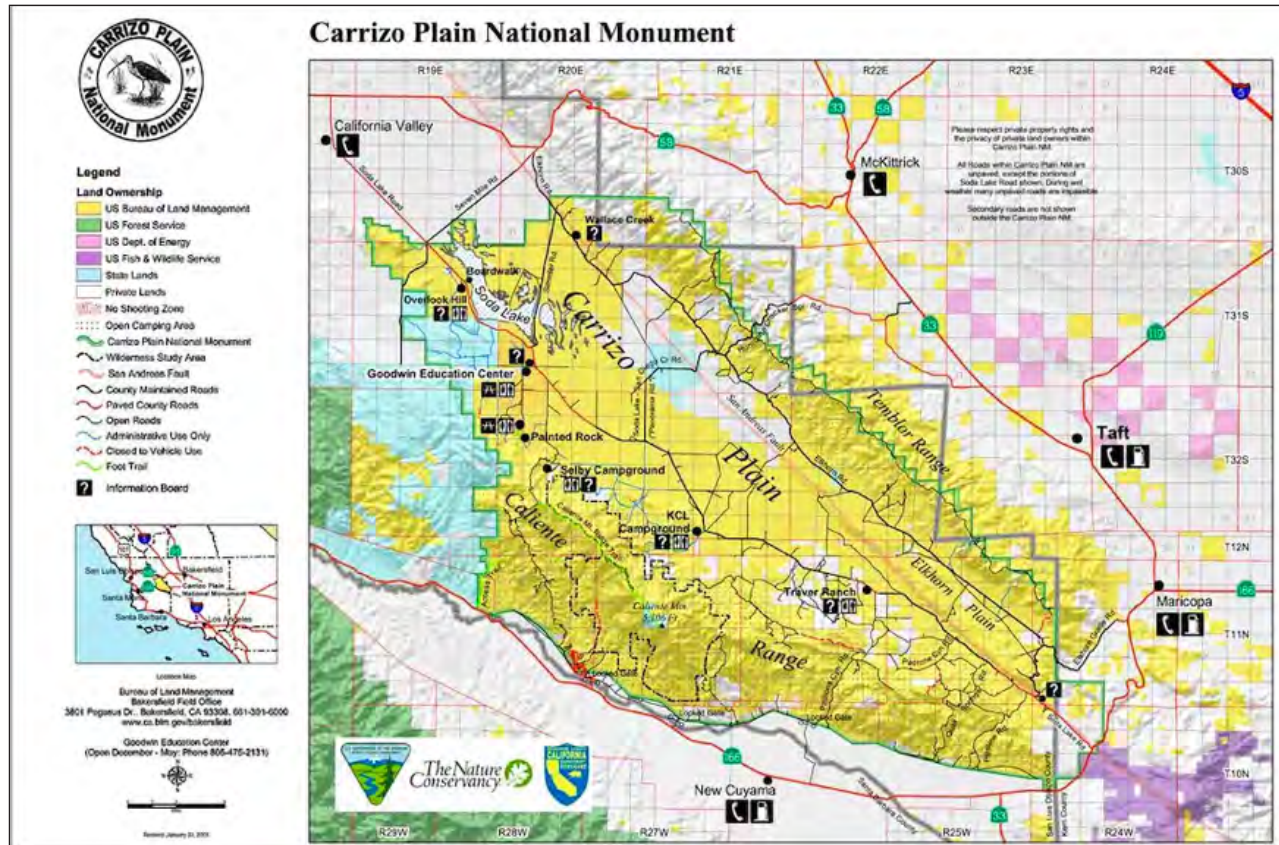
resolutions to problems brought forth in prior Grand Jury Reports. Also, the Grand Jury responded to complaints from concerned residents.

METHODOLOGY:

The Grand Jury interviewed City staff and City Council Members, toured neighborhoods and spoke with business and property owners, as well as with past and present residents. The Grand Jury examined the City's Independent Auditor's Report of Fiscal Year 2021-2022, as well as the 2022 City General Plan. Also researched were possible grant opportunities and solutions that would help to revitalize the City.

DISCUSSION OF FACTS:

Maricopa has long been the subject of criticism for its lack of services and code compliance, but the Grand Jury has recognized the inherent potential of this community. The City has unrealized opportunities that could be developed into a means of building a stable economic foundation. Located at the intersection of State Highways 33 and 166, the City has yet to capitalize on its accessibility to travelers. There is a lack of basic services such as grocery stores, restaurants, medical facilities, and other retail stores. There is a lack of low-income housing that has been cited by many members of the community. Residents must travel to the nearby City of Taft for commercial or medical services; bus service is limited to two daily round trips.



The Grand Jury noted a strong sense of commitment of the residents to improve the maintenance of the community and to ensure the well-being of its younger members. For example, a grant has been secured for the building of a bicycle pump track¹ adjacent to a local park. Also, State and Federal grants are currently in place to engineer the overhaul of the City's outdated sewage system. Citizens have volunteered to take on projects to better their environment, such as cleaning up trash in public thoroughfares.

The City operates on an annual budget of about \$300,000 and must rely on grants to support capital improvement projects. The City's staff is minimal: two part-time employees and a part-time contracted City Manager see to the day-to-day business. The current tax base is inadequate to increase operating expenses.

Every city in California is required by law² to have a Code Compliance Officer. Maricopa does not, though they did have one in the past. An officer was hired in July 2017, but the Code Compliance Department was defunded in June 2019. While driving through the City, the Grand Jury observed many properties that are not code compliant. There are great accumulations of trash, abandoned homes, or buildings in serious disrepair. Citizens have expressed conflicting dissatisfaction and frustration with City Council and City staff regarding code compliance. A few residents insist they have the right to maintain their property as they wish, regardless of code.



Accumulations of trash on residents' properties (Grand Jury photo)

¹ A pump track is a paved **small mountain bike trail** that consists of rolling mounds and berms in a loop format.

² California Code of Regulations, Title 25, Sect. 1004



Abandoned building within City's limits (Grand Jury photo)

Within the past year, there have been complaints about unprofessional conduct by City Council Members: reports of unruly Council meetings; members arguing to the point of challenging each other to fight; and a confrontation with a resident regarding the use of a City park.

Due to large deposits of oil, Maricopa's historical relevance to the State of California is significant, yet many of the landmarks and buildings are neglected to the point of dilapidation. The City does have a small history museum, but it does not showcase its rich history which includes the influences of Indigenous Peoples and the Chinese immigrant labor force.



The historic Maricopa jailhouse is now an adjacent to the Maricopa Museum (Grand Jury photo)

FINDINGS:

- F1. The City lacks Code Compliance. There are many cluttered properties that attract vermin and detract from the overall aesthetics of the City. Additionally, there is a significant number of verified unpermitted buildings and trailers used for housing. Disregard for community appearances does not entice investment in the City.
- F2. There is a deficit of knowledge of the roles and responsibilities by elected officials.
- F3. The tax base is not adequate to retain a full-time Code Compliance Officer, and projects and staff that would improve the economic health of the City and transform it into a thriving community.
- F4. Economic development and incentives for entrepreneurship would benefit both residents and travelers to generate additional revenue for the City.



Historic buildings on California Avenue in downtown Maricopa (Grand Jury photo)

- F5. An appropriate branding of the City would define an identity that reflects the uniqueness and potential of this enduring community. The restoration of historic buildings could spawn cottage industries. Furthermore, amenities such as campgrounds and RV facilities could lure adventurers to access the geological appeal, hiking trails and climbing routes in the nearby Wind Wolves Preserve, Temblor Range, San Emigdio Mountains, and Carrizo Plain.
- F6. New affordable and low-income housing could accommodate the current need while inspiring a new wave of economic growth and vice versa.
- F7. Maricopa's past includes the influence of the Chinese immigrant labor force and Indigenous Peoples, which has not been sufficiently brought to light. Embracing the cultures of former residents, as well as that of the current community, could ignite a sense of pride that would contribute to the re-imagining of Maricopa as a dynamic community.

COMMENTS:

The Grand Jury thanks City officials and community members who have so generously given their time for this report. The following recommendations comport with the General Plan, while some emphasize combining historic preservation with economic growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- R1. By June 1, 2023, the City Council should coordinate with Kern County Planning and Natural Resources Department to encourage the location of the proposed “Carbon Management Business Park³” for a positive economic impact of Maricopa. (Findings 4 and 5)
- R2. Beginning June 1, 2023, the City Council should require elected officials to attend professional and educational seminars annually. This would strengthen leadership and planning skills and address the issues of local government. Newly elected officials should attend such a seminar within 90 days following election. (Finding 2)
- R3. By June 3, 2023, the City should apply for grants for affordable and low-income housing through entities such as Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and subsidies from Federal, State, and local governments. (Finding 6)
- R4. By July 1, 2023, the City Council should reinstate the Code Compliance Department. (Findings 1 and 3)
- R5. By October 6, 2023, the City Council should produce a timeline to broaden the City’s economic base by various means: applying for grants to provide free rural Wi-Fi, supporting the renovation of the historic buildings on California Street and dedicating them as businesses, such as a tasting room for coastal wineries or as a micro-brewery in conjunction with restaurants. The encouragement of businesses would attract visitors and provide goods and services for residents and travelers. (Findings 3, 4 and 5)
- R6. By November 1, 2023, the City Council should research and apply for grants that provide for historic restoration. i.e., National Trust for Historic Preservation. (Finding 7)

³ A Carbon Management Business Park is designed to capture 8 to 10 million tons of CO₂ per year.

NOTES:

- The City of Maricopa should post a copy of this report where it will be available for public review.
- Persons wishing to receive an email notification of newly released reports may sign up at: www.kerncounty.com/grandjury
- Present and past Kern County Grand Jury Final Reports and Responses can be accessed on the Kern County Grand Jury website: www.kerncounty.com/grandjury

RESPONSE DEADLINES:

- **REQUIRED WITHIN 90 DAYS FROM:
MARICOPA CITY COUNCIL**
- **RESPONSES ARE REQUESTED:
KERN COUNTY PLANNING AND NATURAL RESOURCES
DEPARTMENT**
- **PURSUANT TO PENAL CODE §§933(C) AND 933.05 WITHIN THE
ABOVE STATED TIME FRAME TO:**
- **PRESIDING JUDGE
KERN COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 212
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**
- **FOREMAN
KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 600
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Cal. Penal Code §929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.



City of Maricopa, California

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City Administrator
Eric G. Ziegler

June 13, 2023

Presiding Judge
Kern County Superior Court
1415 Truxtun Avenue, Suite 212
Bakersfield, CA 93301

Foreperson
Kern County Grand Jury
1415 Truxtun Avenue
Suite 600
Bakersfield, CA 93301

Pursuant to Section 933.05 CPC, the City of Maricopa hereby submits the following response to the 2022 – 2023 Grand Jury Report released March 13, 2023 re Maricopa -- Small Town, Big Dreams.

FINDING F-1

The City lacks Code Compliance. There are many cluttered properties that attract vermin and detract from the overall aesthetics of the City. Additionally, there is a significant number of verified unpermitted buildings and trailers used for housing. Disregard for community appearances does not entice investment in the City.

RESPONSE

Respondent City does not dispute Finding F-1.

FINDING F-2

There is a deficit of knowledge of the roles and responsibilities by elected officials.

RESPONSE

Respondent City does not dispute Finding F-2.

FINDING F-3

The tax base is not adequate to retain a full-time Code Compliance Officer, and projects and staff that would improve the economic health of the City and transform it into a thriving community.

RESPONSE

Respondent City does not dispute Finding F-3.

FINDING F-4

Economic development and incentives for entrepreneurship would benefit both residents and travelers to generate additional revenue for the City.

RESPONSE

Respondent City does not dispute Finding F-4.

FINDING F-5

An appropriate branding of the City would define an identity that reflects the uniqueness and potential of this enduring community. The restoration of historic buildings could spawn cottage industries. Furthermore, amenities such as campgrounds and RV facilities could lure adventurers to access the geological appeal, hiking trails and climbing routes in the nearby Wind Wolves Preserve, Temblor Range, San Emigdio Mountains, and Carrizo Plain.

RESPONSE

Respondent City does not dispute Finding F-5.

FINDING F-6

New affordable and low-income housing could accommodate the current need while inspiring a new wave of economic growth and vice versa.

RESPONSE

Respondent City does not dispute Finding F-6.

FINDING F-7

Maricopa's past includes the influence of the Chinese immigrant labor force and Indigenous Peoples, which has not been sufficiently brought to light. Embracing the cultures of former residents, as well as that of the current community, could ignite a sense of pride that would contribute to the re-imagining of Maricopa as a dynamic community.

RESPONSE

Respondent City lacks sufficient information to either concur with or dispute Finding F-7.

RECOMMENDATION R-1

By June 1, 2023, the City Council should coordinate with Kern County Planning and Natural Resources Department to encourage the location of the proposed "Carbon Management Business Park³" for a positive economic impact of Maricopa.
(Findings 4 and 5)

RESPONSE

Recommendation not adopted. Respondent City lacks resources to aggressively pursue economic development and marketing efforts. In considering this recommendation, it is important to note that Maricopa's entire office staff consists of a part-time city manager and two administrative workers, none of which possess the expertise nor political acumen to adequately pursue this recommendation nor does the city have sufficient funds to retain the services of a qualified economic development/marketing consultant. Moreover, the time frame is overly ambitious even for a larger, well resourced city.

RECOMMENDATION R-2.

Beginning June 1, 2023, the City Council should require elected officials to attend professional and educational seminars annually. This would strengthen leadership and planning skills and address the issues of local government. Newly elected officials should attend such a seminar within 90 days following election. (Finding 2)

RESPONSE

Recommendation not yet accepted. Respondent City makes various educational and training opportunities (usually through the League of California Cities) available to Council members as it is received by the city. City also budgets a modest amount for Council members wishing to attend such events if they desire to do so. However, each Council member is free to attend such events upon approval of the City Council or to decline such attendance at the member's discretion.

RECOMMENDATION R-3

By June 3, 2023, the City should apply for grants for affordable and low-income housing through entities such as Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and subsidies from Federal, State, and local governments. (Finding 6)

RESPONSE

Recommendation not accepted. Respondent City again notes that it lacks resources to pursue this recommendation at the time. Grant applications are accepted only at certain times. Generally, grant applications are submitted in response to a NOFA (Notice of Funding Available) for a particular. In-house staff has limited grant writing expertise and the city lacks funding for outside consultants. Further, administrative requirements (grant record keeping, endless reporting etc) of the grants already awarded to the city limit staff ability to administer additional grants. City considers this recommendation aspirational and will consider pursuit of such a grant when able to do so. Moreover, the time frame is overly ambitious even for a larger, well resourced city.

RECOMMENDATION R-4

By July 1, 2023, the City Council should reinstate the Code Compliance Department, (Findings 1 and 3)

RESPONSE

Recommendation not yet accepted. Respondent City may elect to pursue this recommendation during City Council's 2023-2024 Budget Study Sessions

RECOMMENDATION R-5

By October 6, 2023, the City Council should produce a timeline to broaden the City's economic base by various means: applying for grants to provide free rural Wi-Fi, supporting the renovation of the historic buildings on California Street and dedicating them as businesses, such as a tasting room for coastal wineries or as a micro-brewery in conjunction with restaurants. The encouragement of businesses would attract visitors and provide goods and services for residents and travelers. (Findings 3, 4 and 5)

RESPONSE

Recommendation not accepted. As previously noted, respondent City lacks resources to aggressively pursue economic development and marketing efforts. Neither the City Council nor its limited staff possess the expertise to adequately pursue this recommendation nor does the city have sufficient funds to retain the services of a qualified economic development/marketing consultant.

Moreover, all of the buildings referenced in this recommendation are in private ownership. A visual review of these buildings suggests that a structural evaluation may be necessary before restoration/reconstruction is considered. The city believes that the value of these buildings vs the current cost of restoration/reconstruction make this recommendation impractical even if grant funds become available. Many such grants require owner participation which is impractical for the reasons stated herein.

Finally, the time frame is overly ambitious even for a larger, well resourced city.

RECOMMENDATION R-6.

By November 1, 2023, the City Council should research and apply for grants that provide for historic restoration. i.e., National Trust for Historic Preservation. (Finding 7)

RESPONSE

See Response R-5 above



Cory Morse, Mayor

06-13-2023

Date

ATTEST:



Wendy Harrison, City Clerk

6/13/23

Date