

Katherine Douglas

Public Comment - SBCTAC

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**From:** mikestoker@aol.com  
**Sent:** Friday, May 2, 2025 10:08 AM  
**To:** sbcob  
**Subject:** The SBCTAC Opposes the EHD proposal to increase their fees...

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**Santa Barbara County Taxpayer Advocacy Center**  
2151 S. College Dr., Suite 101  
Santa Maria, CA 93455  
(805) 708-9100  
[www.sbctac.org](http://www.sbctac.org)  
[MikeStoker@aol.com](mailto:MikeStoker@aol.com)

***"The SBCTAC...Fighting for the Taxpayer and Helping our Business Members Succeed!"***

Dear Chairwoman Capps & Honorable Board Members,

On behalf of the Santa Barbara County Taxpayer Advocacy Center (SBCTAC) and our 300-plus members, the SBCTAC is opposed to the proposed fee increases for the Environmental Health Department. We are opposed to the policy the County has adopted, pursuing 100% fee recovery in departments that do business with the public. This approach results in the public not only paying for the cost of the service they are obtaining directly from the county department, like a restaurant owner paying for the inspector's time to do a restaurant inspection, under this policy the restaurant owner also ends up paying for all other costs incurred by the department, like the employees overtime, sick pay and vacation pay.

While the SBCTAC acknowledges that the county MAY be able to utilize this policy under Citizens for Fair REU Rates vs. Redding, the SBCTAC believes, as a matter of public policy, this is a bad policy to utilize for the reasons listed below.

First, most of ALL the fees charged not only relate directly to the individual being charged, like the restaurant owner, but also benefit the general public who rely on the restaurant inspections to know the restaurant is a safe place to eat. This analogy can be made for almost every fee the county charges, whether it is the Environmental Health Department, P&D, the County Fire Department, etc.

Secondly, the fees disproportionately cost 'good players' more money to pay for the time involved in dealing with 'bad players.' For instance, Environmental Health charges a proposed flat fee of \$2016 to inspect a new septic system and \$1451 to inspect a modification. Environmental Health will acknowledge that every inspection, for various reasons, varies in the amount of time that it takes to make an inspection. Accordingly, a retired couple living on a fixed income with a small septic system needing a modification inspection that is simple and quick ends up footing the bill for potentially a well-off couple living on a large property in a wealthy neighborhood, like Lake Marie Estates, with a large septic system whose inspection is more complicated and time consuming. And then there is the issue of unlicensed food trucks

working throughout the county. While the legitimate restaurants pay these unfair and inequitable fees, the food trucks pay nothing unless there is a rare inspection, in which case they get fined. Back in my days on the Board of Supervisors, when we had a system where the users paid part of the fees and the general fund the remainder, the focus was not only on the mission of serving the individual party but the general public as well. With that focus, these food trucks were taken seriously, and there was substantial enforcement as part of the understanding that EHD served a greater public good. As we've moved from the system of public funds funding the EHD to '100% cost recovery,' the department has lost its focus on the overall public the department is here to serve and protect, with the focus being only on the applicant who is paying the fees. These examples underscore how the proposed fee increases are unfair, inequitable, and not good public policy..

The SBCTAC points out that the county budget is approaching 2 billion dollars. The County has more money than ever, but has chosen to put that money into hiring more employees and paying greater salaries and benefits. The SBCTAC intends in the next year to do an assessment of the percentage of the county budget that is going exclusively toward paying for employees and benefits, and compare that percentage to past years. I can GUARANTEE that percentage continues to grow every year and is substantially greater than it has been in past years. (It will be very interesting to compare that percentage to when I served on the Board of Supervisors from 1986-1994.) It is the SBCTAC's position that the County is pursuing this '100% cost recovery' policy because as the percentage of the budget continued to grow to pay for funding county employees and benefits the County no longer had the funds from the general fund (generated from the public) to pay for services that benefit the public (all the departments that charge these fees). Consequently, the County has implemented this '100% cost recovery' approach to offset all the lost general funds that proportionately shifted from paying for county departments that serve the public to paying instead for more employees and substantially higher salaries and benefits. The SBCTAC also points out that the total percentage of the budget paying for the administrative costs of government has grown substantially more than the growth of the population of Santa Barbara County. The SBCTAC will also be pointing this factor out in the County funding assessment we intend to conduct.

The SBCTAC acknowledges this is a policy call by your Board. The SBCTAC believes the policy call is easy to make. The general fund should be paying a portion of all the costs for all these departments that do work that benefits the general public. In the future, the SBCTAC Political Action Committee (PAC) will take this subject matter very seriously in determining which candidates we support for local office.

For these reasons, we urge the Board to reconsider the '100% cost recovery' policy and consider returning to the County's former policy of contributing a portion of General Fund money to pay for all these departments. The SBCTAC believes it is significant that **NEITHER SLO nor Ventura County has this policy.** Consequently, this policy, being implemented in only Santa Barbara County region, will continue to make Santa Barbara County one of the most expensive places to do business in the Central Coast and will enhance the reputation of Santa Barbara County as a bad place to do business, i.e. Santa Barbara County is NOT business friendly.

Sincerely,  
Mike Stoker  
President & CEO, SBCTAC