

## CAC-Community Engagement Success Story

### Juan Hidalgo and Judi Lazenby



Juan and Judi worked together for 7 years when Juan was the Santa Cruz County Agricultural Commissioner (CAC). Judi was the President of the [Pajaro Village Homeowners Association](#) (HOA) in Watsonville, CA.

#### How did you begin developing a working relationship with each other?

**Judi:** When I was President of the Pajaro Village HOA, I reached out to the CAC office to see if we could sit and talk about the ag-urban interface problem. Instead of the typical 200 feet buffer (setback) between ag fields and where we live, many of our homes are only 30 feet from the farms. All of the bedrooms in our community face the fields, so we were really concerned about pesticides. There were no plans currently in place to reduce our exposure, and the growers were saying that the pesticides were harmless. However, some of us may have sensitivities, since we are a senior community, and many of us have gardens or pets that we don't want affected.

**Juan:** For several years, Judi's neighborhood had identified concerns about pesticide use on a farm adjacent to her neighborhood, and the CAC office had worked with the grower and neighbors to address issues. An increase in concerns one year led to our office meeting with her and other HOA members to share what we do and hear what their community was interested in. When there was a change in farm management, we let the new grower know about the community concerns and began to have conversations with them about potential solutions, such as a voluntary notification system.

**Judi:** Juan was very responsive to our request, and he helped set up a meeting with a few of our HOA Board Members, him and his staff, and a grower who operates ranches right above our properties. It was a really productive meeting, and everything grew from there.

#### What is an example of how you collaborated with each other?

**Judi:** After Juan introduced us, our neighbor grower sent us the pesticide name and when they were planning on using it. At first, they would provide the information 12 hours in advance and then they sent it to us 24 hours in advance. We started by emailing it out to our neighbors, but we didn't have many of their emails. One of our neighbors decided to take the notices, make copies, and walk around to share them with the 58 homes that were next to the ag operations. Juan was always helpful and receptive to our requests. When we asked him for help with printing copies of the notices because we couldn't afford it, he was willing to help us, even though he had a tight budget.

**Juan:** After working with the grower to recommend certain types of information to provide to Judi's HOA, we also suggested that the HOA gather their members' emails in order for them to ensure that the voluntary notifications would reach their neighbors in a sustainable way. They now have that process set up, and this neighborhood notification system is still ongoing after 4 years.

**Judi:** Another nearby HOA has also started their own voluntary notification system, because of the system and connections that we started.

### What community engagement advice would you give to CACs?

**Juan:** It's important to listen to the concerns that community members may have. It can be a good opportunity to share more about the protections in place related to pesticides and our other programs. It's also a good chance to explain what's going on with local ag practices (for example, what's being planted nearby, what do the hoop houses and plastic tarps mean), as many residents may not have lived next to ag operations before.

It's not always easy, since you might not know the types of questions they might have or how the interaction will go. However, put your best foot forward, explain what we do, and listen to what they have to say. It's an opportunity to take their concerns under consideration and see where you can support, based on the programs we have in place.

Community engagement is not a one-person effort; it requires the whole CAC office. I found it helpful to engage both my Pesticide Program Deputy as well as program staff. Not only can they share feedback on our community engagement approach, but they have a lot of experience working with the growers, so it's good exposure for them to engage with another key stakeholder of the CAC office. As our staff advance in their positions, they may have new ideas for how to build off of our community engagement approach. This is how we learn, grow, and improve future experiences.

**Judi:** The most important thing is for CACs to be visible and available. It might open you up to a lot of calls if there are many situations in the community, but we're all working towards the same goal of advancing the quality of life in our county. Invite community groups to have discussions with you and your team, as well as with local growers. Don't perpetuate the problems in the community, work on a solution together. Even reiterating that you are interested in the safety of the community will be appreciated.

Lastly, empower your community groups to access and understand information about their health, for example, through advance notice of pesticide applications. Just because something is on your website doesn't mean that everyone in the community will be able to access it automatically. Community and government can work together if we all know what's going on.

### What advice would you give to communities?

**Judi:** First, bring your most sympathetic people from your organization when meeting the CAC and growers in order to create a cooperative environment. Next, we couldn't have mobilized our community goals without the County Board of Supervisors. Bring them along to your community meetings. It's important for them to hear both "sides" of ag-urban concerns.

Many people don't know about it, but the public can also bring their (civil) concerns to their county's [grand jury](#) through a complaint form. If it's within their jurisdiction (for example, to investigate local government), the grand jury can choose to begin an independent investigation and write a report with their findings and recommendations. It's a great responsibility for the people serving on this board, as these grand jury reports help give citizens a voice in their community, keep local officials accountable, and bring about action. Anyone can access the reports at [cgja.org](#).

**Juan:** Don't hesitate to reach out to the CAC office, particularly if you have any questions or concerns about our programs. I make myself accessible to listen to any questions you may have. If you want to learn more about the ag activities going on near your home, the CAC office is also a good place to learn about that. We can share about the processes that are in place to keep our communities safe.