

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Regional leaders discuss education, industry, energy and housing

As regional leaders from a diversity of public offices and private sectors gathered at UC Santa Barbara for the [REACH Ideas + Action Summit 2026](#), Chancellor Dennis Assanis welcomed them with an invitation. “Our doors are open,” he said.

The university’s role in regional prosperity was one of several topics discussed at the daylong event, spearheaded by REACH Central Coast, a nonprofit focused on economic development and quality of life across Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties.

By way of introduction, REACH President and CEO Melissa James stressed the importance of cross-pollination between public, private and civic institutions to turn good ideas into real projects. Looking ahead to 2030, James laid out REACH’s goals of helping create good-paying jobs, empowering people with accessible career paths and enabling more housing for local workforces.

Building on the momentum of [Nobel Prizes](#) awarded to a pair of UCSB physicists last year, Assanis talked about expanding the university’s presence in downtown Santa Barbara and deepening its connection to new economies emerging from nearby Vandenberg Space Force Base.

A university education, he added, is about teaching students how to be agile, flexible and creative while learning the importance of getting involved in the community.

“We want everybody to partner with us,” Assanis said. “Trust us . . . believe in us. We want to work with you.”

Following opening remarks, a full afternoon of in-person speakers included Congressman Salud Carbajal, former U.S. Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granhold, California Governor’s Office Cabinet Secretary Nani Coloretti and Santa Barbara City College (SBCC) Superintendent/President Erika Endrijonas, among many others.

EDUCATION

Across Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties, 64% of K-12 public school students are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged. In that respect, a four-year university education may be financially out of reach for many. However, Endrijonas said, it’s inaccurate to view community college as “a consolation prize.”

For example, she added, in partnership with UCSB, the city of Santa Barbara and local commercial fishermen, SBCC students are exposed to “blue economy” ocean-based career paths, from fisheries and desalination management to aquaculture and prep courses for those seeking a U.S. Coast Guard captain’s license.

This sort of “exposure and experience,” said panelist Christine Robertson, executive director of the San Luis Coastal Education Foundation, bodes well for younger students who simply don’t know what kind of jobs are out there. “The opportunity pipeline,” she added, provides “meaningful awareness” and the sort of hands-on learning experiences that can spark a career.

Panelists agreed that people born in the region or who arrived at a young age ought to be able to live and work in their hometown. But those potential talent pools become much shallower as the region’s cost of living goes up.

AEROSPACE

The global market for drone or uncrewed aerial systems (UAS) is projected to be \$157 billion by 2030, up steeply from \$37 billion in 2024, according to REACH. At the same time, Vandenberg Space Force Base is on pace to become the busiest spaceport on Earth.

But can the region keep pace? asked Marek Gootman, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a nonprofit public policy thinktank based in Washington D.C. Gootman pointed out that, at the moment, the greater Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo region lacks critical keys to the realm, namely infrastructure (including affordable housing) and the champions of dealmaking who can bring forces together as “innovation accelerants.”

However, these big puzzle pieces may fall into place with the help of partnerships curated by groups like REACH and the recent federal injection of \$1.1 billion to UAS technology.

CLEAN ENERGY

By 2030, energy demand in California – which has the second-highest utility rates in the country – is expected to increase by 15%, according to REACH. At the same time, according to former U.S. Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm, reliable green energy is becoming a defining factor in economic competitiveness.

She detailed emerging technologies in solar, wind and wave energy in the dynamics of state policy and the potential of AI to evaluate energy load and expedite government permitting.

California, she said, will drive the clean-energy future of the country, and it will include nuclear power. Located in San Luis Obispo county, Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant is the state’s single-largest energy source.

HOUSING

The region’s lack of affordable housing became a recurring theme among many of the panelists throughout the event’s discussions. To retain local talent and intellect, they stressed the importance of aligning K-12 public schools with the job training and the creative and critical thinking skills instilled by community colleges and four-year universities. “But if people can’t afford to live here, that pipeline breaks,” James said.

While speaker Charles Marohn with Strong Towns described community-level solutions grassrooted in homeowners opening extra bedrooms and granny flats to

long-term renters, Jim Wunderman of California Forever presented an Silicon Valley-funded plan to build from scratch a sustainable and mostly affordable Bay Area port city with a projected population of 400,000.

Either way, speakers noted, regional planning and development departments ought to streamline permitting processes.

MOVING FORWARD

Heading into the summit's final presentations, Congressman Carbajal praised his alma mater's "innovative spirit," citing UCSB's 2025 Nobel Laureates and the university's cutting-edge [quantum research](#).

"While the noise in Washington is loud and chaotic, my focus remains steady on ensuring that our Central Coast priorities aren't just heard but funded," he said.

Carbajal cited the Degrees Not Debt Act (H.R.7880) and the American Dream for All Act (H.R.4023) among his efforts, respectively, to help with higher education costs and make first-time homeownership more affordable. H.R.7880 would double the maximum Pell Grant award; H.R. 4023 would provide down payment assistance. Both bills remain in the legislative process.

"Federal support can provide the soil and the water," he said, "but the leaders in this room (are) planting the seeds for the Central Coast's future."

At the state level, Cabinet Secretary Coloretti explained that Governor Newsom wants to leave the budget balanced and the economy in good shape before he leaves office in 2028. For example, she said, Newsom's expansion of high-quality early education, including free transitional kindergarten for all four-year-olds, regardless of family income, was "money well spent."

"The narrative that California is not doing well or that we're recovering from something is overblown," she said. "We are a diverse place that is growing."

"We covered a lot of ground," James said. "From the industries shaping the next economy to the opportunity pipeline preparing people for those careers to the housing challenge that will determine whether communities like ours can continue to grow and thrive. One thing has been clear: None of this happens in isolation."

Regional leadership matters, but so do state and federal partnerships in policy, investment and . . . longterm vision.”

A recording of the summit’s livestream is viewable on [REACH Central Coast’s YouTube channel](#).

Tags

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