



PHOTOS BY ELSA CAVAZOS

*Calistoga community leaders and residents gathered last Thursday for a town hall-style discussion where attendees expressed a variety of ideas and concerns. Gregory Leupp dons his "I voted" sticker while exiting Calistoga's Vote Center on Election Day.*

# Calistogans break bread at town hall

**By Elsa Cavazos**

Napa Valley News Group

Locals who attended the sixth annual Community Conversation meeting last Thursday discussed community needs and areas for improvement in town. This year, the conversation focused on health care access, youth recreation and pedestrian safety.

The town hall-style bilingual conversation was hosted at Calistoga Junior-Senior High School where community members and leaders brainstormed new ideas and enjoyed a fajita-style dinner and aguas fr-

escas. Childcare was provided for children over the age of 2.

The open discussion was organized by partners of Calistoga Community Schools Initiative, a program initiated by UpValley Family Centers to address the many issues that families face in Calistoga by aligning efforts in key areas affecting education, health and wellness.

Leading the conversation was Indira López-Jones, program director of UpValley Family Centers and Audra Pittman, superintendent of Calistoga Joint Unified School District, who invited participants to write down their ideas and to list skills and

resources students need to succeed. They could write in English, Spanish or any other language.

"When students graduate from the Calistoga School District, what knowledge do you hope they possess to succeed in life both personally and professionally?" Pittman asked. "What qualities do you hope that they possess?"

This event inspired a cohort of local parents to form the group Adelante in 2016, which has advocated successfully

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Representatives from CommuniCare+Ole, Napa County Behavioral Health, Calistoga Fairgrounds, Brannan Center, Active Transportation Advisory Council and Napa County Bicycle Coalition attended the public event.

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for renovations at Logvy Park. In attendance this year were representatives from CommuniCare+Ole, Napa County Behavioral Health, Calistoga Fairgrounds, Brannan Center, Active Transportation Advisory Council, and Napa County Bicycle Coalition. Each of these groups made a presentation about their work and upcoming developments.

One of the speakers was Kyle Clausen, executive director at the under-construction Brannan Center, a non-profit cultural hub and venue for performing arts in Calistoga, is expected to open in fall of 2025.

Clausen requested input from locals about the types of programs and performances that would best serve the community.

“We will also be creating new programming for the community including a variety of live performances as well as education and enrichment programs for youth and adults,” Clausen told the group. “What do you feel is missing from Calistoga? What activities or events do you currently

have to drive somewhere else for that you’d like to see here? How can the Brannan Center best serve the community?”

Laura Snideman, Calistoga’s city manager, and Sheli Wright, the city’s new fairgrounds revitalization director also spoke at the meeting.

Snideman explained that after many years, last July Calistoga became the owner of 70 acres of land formerly owned by the county. She asked what people wanted to see happen with the newly acquired land.

A high school senior at the meeting said in response that she would like to see a rodeo come to the fairgrounds, something she experienced as a child.

Kara Vernor, executive director of Napa County Bicycle Coalition, spoke about pedestrian safety. This was a topic of interest; one of the crowd attendees described the need for more visibility and light around the neighborhood where she bikes.

Vernor said she felt she learned from what people asked her. At the same time, people learned from her too.

“I think people learned a few things about traffic safety that weren’t necessarily intuitive,”

Vernor said at the end of the meeting. “I think people didn’t know how much bike and traffic safety education we do in the schools.”

Angelica Barron Villafan, who has been living in Calistoga for two years, learned about the meeting at a local basketball game. Although her children do not attend the local schools, she is a volunteer at the elementary school. She said she wanted to attend to see what she can provide to her new community.

“I really like serving as a volunteer in any of the areas that require it, because it comes from the heart, because you do it for pleasure, to help, and you don’t necessarily have to receive payment,” she said in Spanish.

Barron Villafan had never attended a meeting like this one and said she left pleased.

“I see a very good organization. I see that all of this is with the goal of improving, of having good communication between parents, between teachers, and all with the goal of creating growth for the children and for the families and for the institutions,” she said.

Yolanda Lopez has worked at UpValley Family Centers for two years providing culturally-sensitive health education and outreach in the community. She said that having meetings like this once a year is great but suggested holding them even more frequently.

“Because that way you see if there is really follow-up of what is being done, what is being learned from all this with these meetings,” she said in Spanish.

Lopez believes changes are happening through these conversations, although not for every topic or at a fast pace.

“There was a year when the group presented its project to remodel the park and we really saw that it was being done,” Lopez said in reference to the Logvy Park improvements currently underway. “Now, the project took a while, but it is being done.”

In general, she said she believes these community meetings are necessary and beneficial to give suggestions and express points of view.

“We should not remain silent, because our voice is very important,” Lopez said. “Our voice can reach many ears to the right people who can do things. If we don’t speak, if we don’t express what we see, what we feel, then no, people won’t know.”



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Last week’s Community Conversation was organized by partners of Calistoga Community Schools Initiative.