

Gonzales Thinks and Acts Big

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City of Gonzales, small town thinks and acts big on green economic development

By [Irwin Speizer](#)

A strong breeze blows through the Salinas Valley, past vineyards and vegetable rows and small towns along busy Highway 101 until it reaches Gonzales, where it pauses to spin a commercial-size wind turbine that produces energy for one of the city's main employers. The wind turbine stands as a symbol of achievement for a place that prides itself on a progressive can-do attitude that marries distinctly green policies with aggressive business expansion and development.

Those two aims are often at odds, particularly in California. But Gonzales, a city of about 9,000 people, has figured out a way to bolster economic development while simultaneously advancing a commitment to sustainable and green principles. The results are in the numbers: Gonzales saw its property tax base grow by 16.65 percent from 2014 to 2015; double that of the next closest municipality in Monterey County. It has done that while simultaneously reducing the city's carbon footprint thanks to the addition of solar and wind power, creative recycling programs and other efforts organized under a city initiative called [Gonzales Grows Green \(G3\)](#). The G3 initiative is built around three

principles: economic vitality through diversity in growth, environmental responsibility and social equity.

“We are about sustainability, using the environment better, saving energy,” says Gonzales City Manager René Mendez. “It provides additional value to companies besides breaks on fees. This is something else we bring to the table.”

At the heart of what makes Gonzales work is a user-friendly approach to development that seeks solutions over confrontations. It is an attitude reflected in the 350-foot wind turbine, which Gonzales wanted to build as a sustainable power source. At first the turbine seemed doomed by concerns about its potentially lethal impact on the endangered California condor, which has been reintroduced to the mountainous Pinnacles National Park to the east to Big Sur on the west.

Rather than give up or mount a legal challenge, Gonzales dug deeper, working together with the Ventana Wildlife Society to try to discover the best way to protect the condor while also generating wind energy. Ventana’s research disclosed that the condors soar higher and stay far away from the valley floor near Gonzales, which meant a tall wind turbine should not pose a threat. That evidence helped Gonzales win the right to erect one of the first two wind turbines in the valley. The electricity became a clean energy source for the new Taylor Farms fresh vegetable processing plant, the largest recent industrial development project in the city. Win-win.

Taylor Farms says the wind turbine not only provided the company a clean energy source but also offered a savings on its utility costs. Taylor gives the city high marks for its approach to reviewing and approving the company’s project.

“The City of Gonzales worked closely with us and helped us fast track our processing facility from permitting and through construction,” says Nicholas DaCosta, Chief Operating Officer of Taylor Farms Retail, Inc. “We are very appreciative of the business friendly atmosphere that the City of Gonzales promotes.”

Taylor Farms is one of a number of companies that have not only brought new jobs and taxes to the city but also advanced the sustainability cause. Among others: HealthySoil, a company that develops products to improve soil health; Converted Organics, a natural fertilizer company; a Growers Express vegetable cooler and shipping facility; Ramsey Highlander, a maker of harvesting equipment; and a large biodiesel fueling station. Gonzales promotes its location at the heart of the Monterey County wine industry, and is the home of a major Constellation Brands winery.

The city is now working to attract new business to the second phase of its industrial business park, and is also looking for restaurants, stores and a hotel. Its location beside Highway 101 provides easy access north and south. Because it is conveniently situated on top of an underground water source, the city’s development ambitions are not as hampered by water issues as other parts of Monterey County or California. Gonzales expects to more than double its population to 24,000 by 2035.

The sustainable growth philosophy is bolstered by a sense of community in Gonzales that is reflected in the close relationship between the city government and its schools. City government officials hold periodic joint meetings with school officials to share information and keep both sides working in unison. The city recycling program has enlisted schools and students to the cause.

City officials are fond of saying that Gonzales is the kind of place where people take pride in the community and the town. It is a characteristic that has helped deter crime and the gang activity that has plagued some other Salinas Valley communities. Gonzales remains a peaceful oasis with one of the lowest crime rates in Monterey County.

“Gonzales is a city where neighbors look after neighbors,” says Mayor Maria Orozco. “People are united and care about their community. People really want to live here and raise their families here.”

Because of its small size and out-of-the-way location, Gonzales has so far received little notice for its accomplishments. But that may be starting to change. When Forbes magazine brought its Reinventing America AgTech Summit to the Salinas Valley in August, it held the kickoff event in Gonzales at the Constellation winery.

That is the kind of attention Gonzales hopes can help spur its continued expansion. The city is now moving forward with plans for a second wind turbine. It is actively marketing its industrial and business sites to developers. And its sustainability and green initiatives are keeping pace with its economic expansion.

As Mendez says, the city strives to be a thriving example of expansion with a green hue. “We are determined to grow responsibly,” he says. “We will be a model of sustainability and provide a good quality of life, beginning with our children who will become our most valuable resource in the future.”

Photo courtesy of Blue Sky Cinematography



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