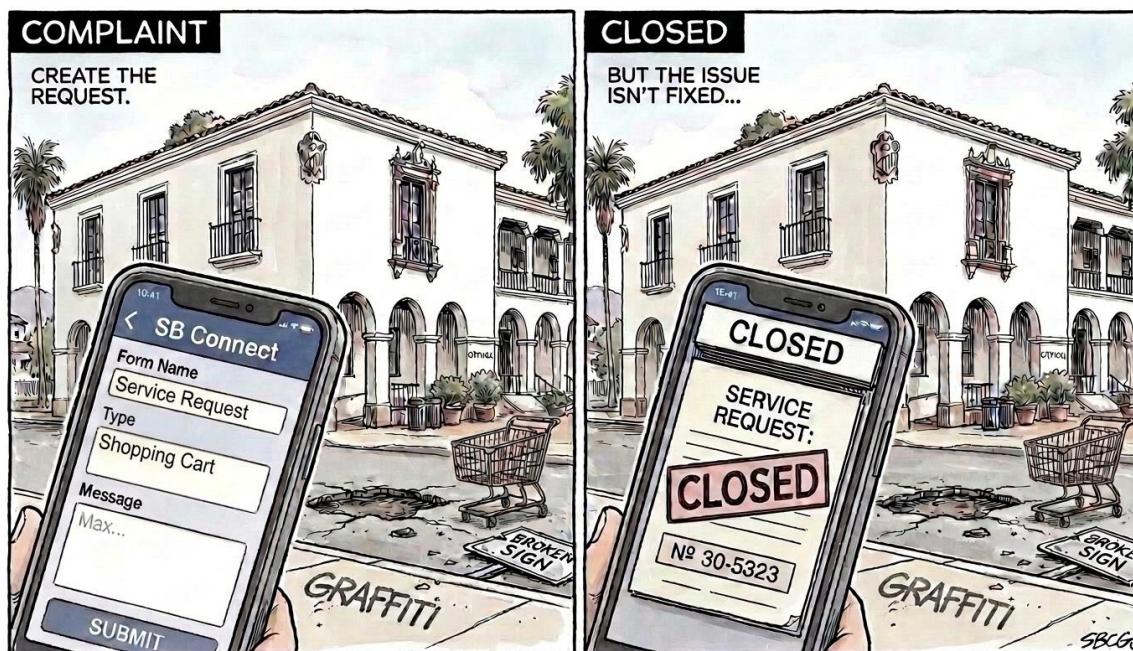


## FROM COMPLAINT TO CLOSURE: Gaps in the City of Santa Barbara's Service Request Process



### SUMMARY

Residents of the City of Santa Barbara (City) have reported difficulty getting complaints and non-emergency service requests addressed in a timely and efficient manner.

Residents have also reported a lack of transparency in the process from initial submission to final closure or resolution. In many cases, status updates are not provided, do not adequately explain what action has been taken, or do not allow the resident to determine whether the reported issue was actually resolved.

A core responsibility of any city government is to respond to day-to-day concerns and complaints. Examples include potholes, graffiti, illegal dumping, damaged signs, streetlight outages, code compliance concerns, and similar quality-of-life issues. Within this report, the term "Service Request" is used for all such requests.

When this process works well, residents can easily report a service request, understand where it has been routed, and receive meaningful information about its status. When it does not work well, residents might be left uncertain whether the City received the service request, whether any action was taken, or whether the matter was simply closed without resolution.

SB Connect is the City's primary system to report service requests. For simplicity, this report uses the term "resident" to refer to a person using SB Connect, even though City residency is not a requirement. The Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) performed a review of SB Connect and the City's complete service request process and found gaps in transparency, follow-up, and accountability. The Grand Jury examined whether SB Connect is reducing the frustration with service requests or, in some cases, increasing frustration.

These gaps include:

- Request routes are more complicated than residents would reasonably expect
- Closure practices do not clearly communicate whether a service request has actually been resolved
- Limited visibility into which department is responsible for follow-up
- Inconsistent routing for Spanish-language residents from City web pages

The Grand Jury found that SB Connect does not consistently deliver the level of transparency and follow-through that residents would reasonably expect from a modern service request system.

The absence of a single clearly accountable person for the overall service request program further limits the City's ability to improve resident experience across departments.

The Grand Jury recommends improving closure practices, strengthening transparency and follow-up, assigning clear program ownership, establishing a resident-focused improvement process, and ensuring that English- and Spanish-language routing are aligned. These changes are necessary if the City is to build resident confidence from the moment a service request is submitted through the point of closure.

## **BACKGROUND**

Routine government services managed by cities may include street, sidewalk, and right-of-way maintenance; traffic control and signage; streetlight maintenance; solid waste and recycling; code compliance; parks and recreation; tree maintenance; water and wastewater services; homelessness response; and other neighborhood quality-of-life services.

Some jurisdictions employ a service request system for local residents to raise issues with government services. This typically includes a web-/app-based platform, and some larger jurisdictions provide a dedicated 311 phone number, although this can require an expensive dispatch-like call center.

In the past, the City of Santa Barbara used multiple phone numbers, email addresses, and web forms for different issue types. That decentralized structure allowed departments to tailor intake to their own workflows, but it also required residents to determine which office to contact and how to reach it. In practice, that arrangement could create confusion, increase the risk of misrouted complaints, and make it harder for the resident to know where responsibility lay once a report was submitted. The City later moved to consolidate many of these request routes.

The City launched SB Connect in September 2023 as its primary intake and tracking platform for many non-emergency service requests<sup>1</sup>. Most previously shared City phone numbers are no longer available on the City website, and there is no apparent way to report a request by phone anymore. The stated purpose was to bring reporting under one roof, provide an easier method for residents to submit concerns, improve status tracking, and allow residents to view service requests concerning nearby locations.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In developing this report, the Jury employed the following methods of investigation:

- Review of City press releases and SB Connect usage guidance on the City website:
- Hands-on review of SB Connect on the City website and using the iOS mobile application
- Review of Spanish-language website navigation paths relevant to reporting service requests
- Review of federal accessibility requirements for government web content and mobile applications

---

<sup>1</sup> City of Santa Barbara press release, published September 12, 2023: "Introducing SB Connect: The City is Just a Click Away with New App (ENG/SPA)" – <https://santabarbaraca.gov/press-releases/introducing-sb-connect-city-just-click-away-new-app-eng/spa>, accessed May 29, 2026.

- Review of full-year 2025 SB Connect ticket data
- Interviews with staff regularly working with SB Connect across many City departments
- Interviews with staff from City Administration and Information Technology

## **DISCUSSION**

The City promoted SB Connect as serving three main goals for residents:

- Make it easy to report issues and submit non-emergency service requests
- Provide accurate, real-time tracking of request status from submission through closure
- Allow residents to review nearby reports and see what the City has done to resolve them

The Grand Jury evaluated the City's service request process, with particular attention to SB Connect, against these goals. The third goal is dependent on the completion of the second.

The City promised SB Connect to be "as easy as 1-2-3." At a high level, SB Connect does allow a resident to identify a problem, add other optional data, including photos, and then submit the service request, but many steps are needed. City staff benefits from SB Connect as a structured intake platform to reduce the vague, incomplete, or misrouted requests that previously arrived through phone calls and emails.

In hands-on testing, the Grand Jury observed that submitting a service request commonly requires many more steps and decisions than residents would expect from the City's public descriptions. On first usage, several Grand Jurors struggled with creating a new service request without additional help.

After opening the app or navigating to SB Connect through the City website, a resident must first locate the service request function, which can be hard to find. They then choose whether to create an account or submit anonymously, select a report type, and then complete multiple required fields that vary by category. In one representative service request (a homeless encampment report), the City required the residents to provide a location type, a visibility selection, an indication of whether people were present, and a narrative description. Adding a photo was optional.

# SCREENSHOT OF SB CONNECT



For this homeless encampment example, the Grand Jury counted 15 required steps from first opening SB Connect to service request submission. This should be far simpler – today it results in a poor user experience and unnecessary complexity.

1. Of the fourteen labeled buttons presented on the SB Connect screen (see Screenshot), the resident must pick the twelfth button - *Requests*
2. Choose *Create Request* from the sub-menu
3. Choose *Submit anonymously* (or create an account)
4. Click *Report type*
5. Click *Homeless Issue*
6. Click *Homeless Encampment*
7. Click *Where is the Request* (Enter an address)
8. Click *Tell us more details (all fields required)*
9. Set *Location Type*: Freeway
10. Set *Visibility*: Under Bridge
11. Set *Are there people present*: Yes, people present
12. Set *When are people present?* Morning
13. Set *Description*: (Enter text describing the issue)
14. Click Done  
(Optionally add photos here)
15. Click Submit

The many added steps may help City staff, but they also increase the difficulty for residents in reporting the request and raise the likelihood that residents abandon the process or submit incomplete information.

The Grand Jury recognizes the operational value of structured intake, especially for service requests that require precise locations, categorization, or interdepartmental routing. However, SB Connect's public entry points and public descriptions need to accurately reflect the actual resident experience, and the "Create a Request" navigation path needs to be easy to find on both web and mobile. This is particularly important where the City has reduced or removed prior phone and email intake channels for some service request types. For example, the City's Code Compliance page<sup>2</sup> now directs

---

<sup>2</sup> City of Santa Barbara: Code Compliance page - <https://santabarbaraca.gov/CodeCompliance>, accessed May 29, 2026.

residents to SB Connect for reporting and no longer advertises the email and phone routes that many residents previously relied upon.

Accurate, timely status tracking is the second and most consequential promise of SB Connect. If residents cannot tell whether the City received, routed, and acted on a service request, the system’s value as a single point of contact is substantially reduced. Clear status information also reduces follow-up calls and repeat submissions, which otherwise recreate the same workload SB Connect was meant to avoid.

SB Connect functions as an intake and tracking system that routes requests into City departments, departmental work order systems, or contractor workflows. As is common in city governments, different departments use different software systems and practices. SB Connect should show all city activity with status updates that residents can understand.

An analysis of the City’s 2025 service request data provided a useful cross-check on how residents use SB Connect in practice. Table 1 summarizes how service requests were handled in calendar year 2025 after excluding internal City submissions.

**TABLE 1  
SB CONNECT SERVICE REQUESTS BY HANDLING PROCESS  
FOR CALENDAR YEAR 2025**

<b>Service Request - Handling Process</b>	<b>Number of Requests</b>	<b>Share of Total</b>
Automatically closed with an email to the residents, but with no City staff interaction	997	18 %
Handled by City staff within SB Connect	2,362	42 %
Routed to other City departments which do not use SB Connect	2,247	40 %
<b>Total service requests<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>5,606</b>	<b>100 %</b>

---

<sup>3</sup> The City’s full-year 2025 dataset does not contain a direct flag identifying whether a service request came from the public or from internal City users. To focus on public-initiated web and app use, the Jury excluded service requests submitted from [santabarbaraca.gov](http://santabarbaraca.gov) and [sbpd.com](http://sbpd.com) email domains. This filter removed 3,468 internal submissions from the 2025 export.

*This breakdown indicates that fewer than half of service requests in the 2025 dataset were managed natively within SB Connect.*

Table 2 displays the 10 most frequent request types of the 5,606 service requests in 2025, representing 66 % of the total.

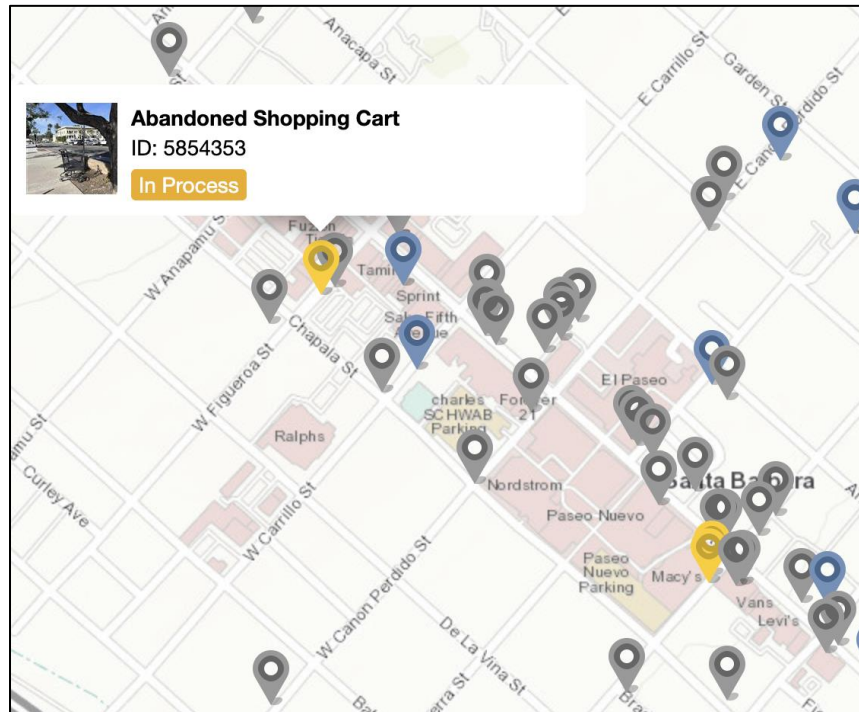
**TABLE 2  
TOP 10 OF RESIDENT-INITIATED SERVICE REQUEST TYPES  
FOR CALENDAR YEAR 2025**

<b>Request Type</b>	<b>Number of Requests</b>	<b>Share of Total</b>
On-street illegally parked vehicles	1,083	19 %
Building or zoning code violation	705	13 %
Homeless encampment	410	7 %
Graffiti	385	7 %
Illegal dumping	357	6 %
Abandoned shopping cart	193	3 %
Other neighborhood nuisances	181	3 %
Pavement / pothole repair	175	3 %
Police noise complaints	152	3 %
Code enforcement noise complaints	140	2 %

The City’s third goal for SB Connect (allowing residents to review closed service requests and see what the City has done) can strengthen transparency and reduce duplicate reporting. However, achieving this goal depends on the City’s ability to present accurate and meaningful status information.

SB Connect includes a neighborhood view called *Nearby Requests* that displays local service requests in a list or map format. This can help residents understand open issues and longer-term patterns (for example, recurring graffiti locations or repeated pothole reports). To fully realize this benefit, the City must ensure that status labels and closure reasons communicate actual outcomes in a consistent manner across departments. If the system routinely shows service requests as “closed” without a clear explanation of what was done, residents cannot interpret *Nearby Requests* as a reliable record of City actions.

## SCREENSHOT OF "NEARBY REQUESTS" IN SB CONNECT



For service requests that are expected to remain open for an extended period, meaningful status tracking also includes informing the residents how long the issue is expected to take to resolve or when the next scheduled action will occur. A resident reporting a pothole tied to a larger paving schedule, for example, should be told that the issue is expected to remain open until the planned repaving project in the next fiscal year rather than being left with an unexplained closure.

Other cities publish service-type expectations to help residents understand likely timelines. For example, San José 311 public FAQs lists typical response times for certain request types, including vehicle abatement requests that typically receive a response within seven business days when stated conditions are met. Santa Barbara does not appear to offer estimations of when work will actually be completed for open or auto-closed work items. For example, an auto-closed service request about a pothole may be closed, indicating it is in a work queue for pothole repair, but the City has no timeline for actual completion. Spanish-language navigation paths on the City website must provide the same practical access to SB Connect that is provided on English-language pages. For many residents, the logical starting point for reporting a service request is

the City’s “Contact Us” page. The English-language Contact Us page<sup>4</sup> provides a navigation path to SB Connect for reporting issues and requests. By contrast, the Spanish-language Contáctenos page<sup>5</sup> provides a default email address instead of the Spanish-language SB Connect navigation path presented on the English page. In addition, the Spanish “How do I?” navigation path for Reporte/Queja routes to the Contacto page and does not provide the same Spanish-language SB Connect entry point available in English. This inconsistency can prevent Spanish-speaking residents from reaching the City’s intended service request intake platform and undermines SB Connect’s goal of consolidating service requests into a single system.

Federal accessibility requirements for government web content and mobile applications are evolving. In April 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice published a rule establishing specific requirements for accessibility of state and local government web content and mobile applications by April 24, 2026. This deadline was recently moved out one year to April 26, 2027<sup>6</sup>. These requirements necessitate additional updates to the City’s web and mobile content, including SB Connect and the City web pages that route residents into SB Connect. This report does not assess SB Connect’s compliance with the new federal rule, but the City needs to incorporate accessibility work into SB Connect governance and roadmap planning.

Based on interviews conducted across numerous City departments, the Grand Jury found that accountability for SB Connect is poorly defined. Multiple individuals were identified as primary contacts or managers for the system, yet none possessed clear authority to direct policy changes across departments. This lack of a clearly accountable person limits

---

<sup>4</sup> City of Santa Barbara: Contact Us (English) – <https://santabarbaraca.gov/contact-us>, accessed May 29, 2026.

<sup>5</sup> City of Santa Barbara: Contáctenos (Spanish) – <https://santabarbaraca.gov/es/contacto>, accessed May 29, 2026.

<sup>6</sup> Federal Register :: Extension of Compliance Dates for Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability; Accessibility of Web Information and Services of State and Local Government Entities <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/04/20/2026-07663/extension-of-compliance-dates-for-nondiscrimination-on-the-basis-of-disability-accessibility-of-web>, accessed May 29, 2026.

the City's ability to maintain a consistent, effective, and user-focused service request process.

## **CONCLUSION**

SB Connect was introduced to simplify how residents report non-emergency issues, improve transparency, and to allow residents to follow service requests from submission through closure. The Grand Jury found that, although SB Connect provides a centralized intake platform, the current resident experience often falls short of those goals.

Residents face unnecessary complexity when submitting requests, limited visibility into how requests are handled across departments, and inconsistent information regarding whether issues were actually resolved. In addition, Spanish-language routing on the City website does not consistently direct residents to the same service request pathways available in English. The Grand Jury also found that no single individual within City staff currently has clear authority and accountability to oversee the overall effectiveness and consistency of the service request process across departments.

A modern service request system should make it easy for residents to report concerns and understand what action the City has taken. This would maintain confidence that requests are not closed without meaningful follow-through. SB Connect has the potential to serve this role, but doing so will require improvements to usability, transparency, accountability, and public engagement.

The Grand Jury believes the recommendations in this report will help the City improve resident trust and create a more consistent, effective, and user-focused service request process from initial submission through final resolution.

## **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Finding 1:** It is too difficult to find SB Connect on the City of Santa Barbara (City) website to create and complete a request.

**Recommendation 1a:** The Grand Jury recommends that the City add a direct link to the "Create a Request" page on SB Connect on the City website home page. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

**Recommendation 1b:** The Grand Jury recommends that the City reduce the number of required fields in SB Connect service request submissions. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

**Recommendation 1c:**

The Grand Jury recommends that the City provide a clearly visible phone number for residents who need assistance submitting a request, obtaining status, or resolving problems that cannot be handled through SB Connect alone. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

**Finding 2:** Although the City promised to provide accurate, real-time tracking of service requests from submission through closure, the City has not done so.

**Recommendation 2a:** The Grand Jury recommends that the City provide accurate status from submission through closure of all service requests, with an update by City staff within two business days of being opened. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

**Recommendation 2b:** The Grand Jury recommends that the City not close service requests before they are actually resolved. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

**Finding 3:** Although SB Connect has a Spanish language version, the City website does not consistently send Spanish-speaking residents to SB Connect for service requests.

**Recommendation 3:** The Grand Jury recommends that the City add links to SB Connect (Spanish version) from the Spanish-language *Contacto* page and from Spanish-language *Reporte/Queja* navigation paths so that Spanish-language navigation matches English-language navigation. To be implemented by September 30, 2026.

**Finding 4:** There is no single, clearly accountable person within City staff with authority to drive workflow and policy changes for SB Connect across departments.

**Recommendation 4:** The Grand Jury recommends that the City Council assign a single person who is responsible for SB Connect and empowered to drive process and protocol changes across departments for a better and consistent user experience. To be implemented by September 30, 2026.

**Finding 5:** There is no recurring, public process for the community to help understand and prioritize planned SB Connect improvements.

**Recommendation 5a:** The Grand Jury recommends that the City host a public meeting, at least annually, at which the City presents a roadmap of planned updates and receives public input. These meetings are to continue for at least two years. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

**Recommendation 5b:** The Grand Jury recommends that the City send a follow-up user experience survey to each resident that submits a service request. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

### **REQUIREMENTS FOR RESPONSES**

Pursuant to California Penal Code §933 and §933.05, the Grand Jury requests that each entity or individual named below respond to the findings and recommendations within the specified statutory time limit.

#### **Responses to Findings shall be either:**

- Agree
- Disagree wholly
- Disagree partially with an explanation

#### **Responses to Recommendations shall be one of the following:**

- Has been implemented, with a summary of implementation actions taken
- Will be implemented, with an implementation schedule
- Requires further analysis, with an analysis completion date of no more than six months after the issuance of the report
- Will not be implemented, with an explanation of why

**City Council, City of Santa Barbara – 90 Days**

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Recommendations 1a, 1b, 1c, 2a, 2b, 3, 4, 5a, 5b