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A Message from the Santa Cruz County Superintendent

"Wishing our educational communities a joyful, safe, and relaxing winter break."

Happy Holidays



Maya Donnelly
Santa Cruz County School Superintendent
&
Staff

21 Court St.
Nogales, AZ 85621
Phone: 520.375.7940

Border Eco Updates

Happy Holidays from Border Eco Magazine!

Dear Valued Readers and Community Partners,

As we reflect on the holidays, we want to express our deepest gratitude for your unwavering support. Your loyalty and engagement mean the world to us, and we're honored to have you as part of our community. Your enthusiasm and encouragement fuel our passion for producing valuable and engaging content that resonates with you.

You are the backbone of our success, and we are committed to providing high-quality content that appeals to your interests throughout the year.

We extend our sincere gratitude to our esteemed readers and customers for their unwavering support. It is through your continued support that we can provide you with vital information regarding the remarkable individuals, noteworthy events, and influential organizations that shape our community.

Border Eco Magazine aims to foster connections within Santa Cruz County. Our unique border town is rich in culture and has cherished traditions. Supporting our community is our mission. As an organization deeply rooted in Santa Cruz County, we recognize the importance of nurturing relationships and preserving the unique culture and customs that make this town special.

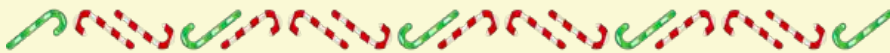
Our goal is to maintain a platform where ideas, events, and organizations that make our community unique can be shared and benefit the residents of our community. We aim to facilitate meaningful conversations and empower individuals by providing a platform for community highlights.

Join us on this journey and become part of Santa Cruz County's vibrant tapestry.

Thank you for being a valuable part of our community. We're excited to embark on this journey together and look forward to bringing you even more valuable content in the future.

With deepest appreciation,

The Border Eco Team



SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

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Please send us information on any upcoming events, meetings, or programs to share with our readers.

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Turning Pages of Possibility: The Nogales Rotary Club's 20-Year-Old Dictionary Tradition

As a fresh-bound dictionary landed on each desk in a third-grade classroom at Nogales Elementary Schools, a chorus of delighted gasps and wide-eyed curiosity echoed around the classroom. As the Nogales Rotary Club guided the 150 eager students through the world of words, the book was more than just a book. For more than two decades, the Rotary's 3rd Grade Dictionary Program has been a staple of the community, delivering a dictionary to every third-grader in the Nogales Unified School District.

What began as a simple donation has blossomed into an interactive celebration of language, thanks to the club's volunteer members who step into classrooms to show students how to wield their new tools. "Seeing a child go from 'I don't know how to use this' to 'I can find any word I need' is why we keep coming back," said longtime Rotarian and President-elect Sandra Davila. "It's a small investment that pays dividends in curiosity, confidence, and community connection."

Beyond the excitement of a new book, giving a child a dictionary plants a foundation for lifelong learning. When a student holds a dictionary in their hands, they are given a tangible map of language, one that allows them to explore spelling, pronunciation, and meaning at their own pace. That autonomy sparks curiosity; a question about a word on the playground can be answered instantly, and the answer is found without waiting for a teacher or a screen.

The act of flipping pages, locating guide words, and reading definitions strengthens visual-spatial skills and reinforces alphabetical order, a skill that underpins everything from library research to digital databases. Research shows that children who regularly use a dictionary develop richer vocabularies and better reading comprehension. Each new word they uncover becomes a building block for more complex sentences, enabling them to express ideas with precision.

Moreover, the ritual of looking up a word, thinking about its spelling, checking the guide words, and reading the definition cultivates patience and critical thinking. It teaches students that answers are often just a few pages away, encouraging them to persist when faced with unfamiliar text.

The Nogales Rotary Club's program also nurtures a sense of community and belonging. When Rotarians join students for fun activities such as trivia contests, word-hunt races, and friendly spelling bees, the lesson extends beyond the page.

The volunteers model a love of learning, showing that education is a shared journey. For many children, the dictionary becomes a symbol of support from adults who care enough to invest time and resources in their futures.

The 3rd Grade Dictionary Program may be a tradition, but each year it feels like the first time, pages turning, minds opening, and a community coming together, one word at a time.



Youthful Brilliance: Celebrating Emerging Creative Talents

To close out Arts Month, Celebrating Young Artists was held at the 1904 Historic Courthouse on November 1, 2025. The event, sponsored by Santa Cruz County School Superintendent Maya M. Donnelly and RAISE Young Audiences, welcomed the community to an open-house celebration of student creativity.

The first portion of the event featured an arts exhibition showcasing outstanding work from middle and high school students across the county. Attendees also participated in hands-on activities, including drumming circles, painting sessions, and writing workshops.

The evening concluded with an awards ceremony honoring student artists and arts advocates. The award recipients were:

Arts Awards Ceremony

1st Place: Alanroberto Castro – Rio Rico High School

2nd Place: Andrea Guzman – Coativundi Middle School

3rd Place: Isabella Lopez – Coativundi Middle School

Educator Ambassador of the Arts Award: Gustavo Lozano – Borderbeatz

Student Ambassador of the Arts Award: Aysel Sofía García – Nogales High School

Rising Voice Award: Miguel Albarran for the poem “Animals Behind a Border” – Patagonia Union High School

Nils Urman Mural of the Year Award: Presented by Sharon Urman – “Let’s Grow Together” by Miguel Grijalva

Superintendent Maya M. Donnelly extends her sincere appreciation to all participants, attendees, and to RAISE for making this event possible. RAISE (Responsive Arts In School Education) is a grant-funded initiative that supports arts-based learning. The program currently hosts two teaching artists-in-residence, one at Mexicayotl Academy and another at Rio Rico High School, focused on promoting arts integration across all subject areas.

The student art exhibit will remain open to the public at the 1904 Historic Courthouse throughout the month of December.



Justice Close to Home: Miguel Lopez's Lifelong Quest to Make the Law Speak

Miguel Lopez has spent a quarter-century turning the cold corridors of the courtroom into a place where ordinary people can find their way. After 25 years as a trial attorney in the towering skyscrapers of New York City, he returned to his roots in Santa Cruz County, swapping high-rise briefcases for a modest Justice-of-the-Peace office. "The law is a language," Miguel says, "and if you don't speak it, the system can feel like a maze." His career has been a steady march toward making that language clearer for anyone who steps into a courtroom without a lawyer.

He has worked tirelessly to bridge the gap between complex legal jargon and everyday understanding, ensuring that justice is accessible to all. By simplifying legal processes and advocating for those without legal representation, Miguel has transformed the courtroom into a space where fairness and clarity prevail. That mission now takes shape in a new nonprofit he founded: the Santa Cruz County Justice Project. Set to open its doors in early 2026, the project will be a bilingual hub where residents can pick up process maps, attend legal education workshops, and receive one-on-one help from trained community advocates. "We're not a law firm," Miguel explains, "we're a bridge connecting people to the resources they need to navigate limited-jurisdiction courts with confidence." The vision is simple but powerful: a place where the court system feels less intimidating and more like a community resource. The nonprofit will also offer workshops on common legal issues, enabling individuals to understand their rights and responsibilities. By fostering a supportive and inclusive environment, the Santa Cruz County Justice Project aims to empower residents, ensuring they feel equipped to navigate the legal system with confidence and dignity.

Community involvement is the cornerstone of the initiative. Miguel and his small team are reaching out to schools, health clinics, and local nonprofits to ensure that the services they provide reflect the needs of the people they aim to serve. "We can't build this in a vacuum," he says. "We need teachers, health workers, and neighbors to tell us what barriers they face, so we can tear them down together." The project will launch with a lean staff and a cadre of volunteers, all committed to opening the doors once construction is finished and funding goals are met.

Miguel works to ensure justice is accessible to all. His dedication to helping people navigate the legal system has earned him a reputation as a compassionate advocate for those who might otherwise feel voiceless in the face of complex legal challenges.

Looking ahead, Miguel envisions a future where the Justice Project expands its clinic hours, introduces an educational mobile app, and trains a network of Community Legal Advocates who can travel to remote areas of the county. "If funding allows, we hope to become a regional resource," he says, eyes bright with possibility.

The momentum behind the project owes much to the University of Arizona's Innovation for Justice program, the enthusiastic volunteers who have already signed up, supportive local judges, and a host of community partners who have helped shape the foundation.

When asked what keeps him going, Miguel points to his mother, a steadfast example of service and perseverance. "She taught me that true justice isn't just a legal concept, it's a shared responsibility," he says. That lesson, learned at his mother's kitchen table in Nogales, Arizona, guides every step of his work.

Born and raised in that border town, Miguel was educated at George Washington University and Arizona State University. He returned to Santa Cruz County after his years in New York because he believes the community that shaped him deserves a modern, culturally grounded approach to legal access.

For anyone feeling called to community work, Miguel offers a simple piece of advice: "Start where you are. Choose one issue that matters and take the first step. Community work grows from consistency, humility, and a willingness to listen." With that philosophy, Miguel Lopez is transforming a lifelong passion for justice into a living, breathing resource for Santa Cruz County, one bilingual guide, one process map, and one community advocate at a time.

Instead, we need to actively engage with the community, listen to their concerns, and incorporate their feedback into our work. This collaborative approach ensures that our solutions are not only effective but also meaningful and relevant to those they are designed to help.

Judge Lopez being sworn in as Patagonia Municipal Court Judge Pro Tempore in January of this year by Honorable Connie Bracamonte.



Amplifying Voices: The Impact of Santa Cruz County Justice Project

The Santa Cruz Justice Project began with a simple observation: too many people walk into a courtroom alone, unsure of the language that will decide their fate. What started as a personal desire to make the law feel less intimidating has blossomed into a community-driven vision of a place where legal help is as approachable as a neighborhood coffee shop. The founders imagined a hub where the law is demystified, where dignity, clarity, and equity are not slogans but the foundation of every interaction.

Although the doors are not yet open, the project's mission has already expanded. It now envisions a blend of education, technology, and community-trained advocates working side by side to widen access to justice. Those core values, dignity, clarity, and equity, remain the compass guiding every decision, from the design of the physical space to the wording of a bilingual flyer.

When the doors finally swing open, the Santa Cruz Justice Project will roll out a suite of programs that have been carefully crafted to meet the community's most pressing needs. Bilingual self-help clinics will offer walk-in assistance for everything from landlord-tenant disputes to simple probate questions.

In partnership with the University of Arizona, a Community Legal Advocate training program will equip local residents with the skills to guide their neighbors through the legal maze. Technology will also play a starring role: interactive process maps will break down complex procedures into step-by-step guides, and a mobile app will put those resources in the palm of a user's hand.

The anticipated cornerstone services, eviction-prevention assistance, and support for survivors of domestic violence are not just programs on paper; they are lifelines for families on the brink. By providing immediate, culturally grounded support, the project aims to become a trusted anchor for those facing some of the most challenging legal issues of their lives.

Measuring success will be a data-driven, story-centered effort. Once operational, the team will track case outcomes, monitor usage statistics, and collect personal narratives that illustrate how a single conversation can change a family's trajectory. Feedback loops and ongoing partnerships with Mariposa Health, local courts, schools, public agencies, and a network of nonprofits will inform continuous improvement, ensuring the project remains responsive to the community it serves.

The project's priorities are clear: to focus on issues that most affect family stability and economic security, and to target services where a little guidance can create a significant impact. Language barriers, legal illiteracy, fear of the court system, and the shortage of affordable representation are all issues that need to be addressed through education, clear communication, and robust community support.

Funding remains the biggest hurdle. Construction costs, operational expenses, and the need for long-term sustainability are being addressed through a combination of fundraising events, grant applications, and strategic partnerships. The team is also looking ahead to financial health, cultivating donor relationships, pursuing grant opportunities, and building a reserve that will allow the project to weather uncertain times.

Leading the effort is Miguel Lopez and Executive Director Martha L. Barron, whose commitment to justice and community empowerment has been the driving force behind the project's vision and progress. Under her guidance, the Santa Cruz Justice Project is poised to turn its ambitious plans into tangible services for the region.

Looking five years out, the vision expands: a polished mobile app that guides users through every stage of a legal issue, extended clinic hours that meet the needs of working families, multiple cohorts of Community Legal Advocates graduating and spreading their expertise throughout the county, and a reputation as the go-to resource for justice in the rural border region.

Ultimately, the Santa Cruz Justice Project aims to shape policy conversations about non-lawyer advocacy, innovative equity solutions, and the role of technology in making justice truly accessible. The Santa Cruz Justice Project is proof that when a community's voice drives the work, the law can become a source of empowerment rather than a barrier.



Santa Cruz Training Program



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"Lourdes Vasquez Receives Prestigious 2025 AZALAS Board Recognition"

The Arizona Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (AZALAS) has awarded its highest honor to a lifelong educator whose career exemplifies a commitment to equity in the Southwest. Lourdes Vasquez, President of the Governing Board for Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District No. 35, has been named the 2025 Outstanding Board Member of the Year. This recognition celebrates her 44 years of dedicated service and unwavering effort to expand opportunities for Latino students and families throughout Santa Cruz County.

Vasquez's story begins in the dusty hallways of Nogales, where she first stepped into a classroom as a teacher's aide. It was there, among the bright-eyed youngsters who spoke both English and Spanish at home, that she learned the power of compassion rooted in cultural understanding. Over the next 26 years at Calabasas High School, she transformed the district's approach to discipline. Instead of the traditional method of "in-school suspension," which simply removed students from learning, Vasquez introduced restorative circles, moments spent mentoring, rebuilding trust, and guiding students back into the academic fold. Former pupils still recall how her persistence helped them earn their high school diplomas and, for many, paved the way for their first steps toward college.

When the 21st Century After-School Program launched, Vasquez was already a familiar face on campus. As its coordinator, she created a daily haven for 40 to 50 children, blending homework help with enrichment activities and social-emotional growth. For working families, the program became more than a safe space; it was a community anchor that allowed parents to work without worrying about their children's after-school hours. The success of that model cemented her reputation as a bridge-builder between schools and the families they serve.

Now, as Governing Board President, Vasquez is turning that bridge into a highway. She has championed the expansion of career-technical education, ROTC, skilled trades, and business pathways. She recognizes that a one-size-fits-all diploma no longer suffices in a rapidly changing economy. Her advocacy for competitive teacher salaries is equally strategic; she knows that attracting and retaining educators who resonate with Latino students is the linchpin of lasting change.

What sets Vasquez apart, colleagues say, is her blend of visionary thinking and down-to-earth pragmatism. She invites parents, teachers, and community members into the decision-making room, listening as much as she speaks. She always backs a bold idea with a concrete plan. "I want our kids to have the opportunity to pick and choose wherever they want to go, whatever they want to do," she told a crowd of supporters. "What I do... I do it for the love that I have for my community; for my teachers, for my students, and for everybody."

The AZALAS award isn't just a plaque; it's a recognition of a generational investment in Santa Cruz County's future. By honoring Vasquez, the association shines a spotlight on a leader whose work has transformed the lives of countless individuals. His influence will ripple for decades to come.

Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District No. 35 joins the chorus of congratulations, thanking President Vasquez for her steadfast leadership, boundless heart, and her unshakeable belief that every student, regardless of background, deserves an excellent, equitable education. Her story reminds us that true leadership is measured not by titles, but by the doors it opens for the next generation.



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When David Verdugo arrived at Santa Cruz Valley Unified (SCV35) a decade ago, the district was already a close-knit community of mostly Latino families, teachers, and students. What he found was a system still chained to traditional grading and limited resources. What he left behind, after a career that began as a physical education teacher and coach, was a district that now boasts a state-of-the-art performing arts center, a modern aquatic complex, and a culture of personalized, competency-based learning that allows every student to progress at their own pace.

On Nov. 5, 2025, the Arizona Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (AZALAS) named Verdugo its Superintendent of the Year an honor that felt like validation of the equity-focused vision that has guided SCV35's evolution. "It's not just about buildings or test scores," Verdugo said. "It's about creating pathways for students and staff alike to grow, lead, and succeed."

Under his leadership, the district secured more than \$25 million in bond and override funding, transforming blueprint dreams into concrete facilities. The new Performing Arts Center attracts regional audiences, while the Aquatic Center offers swim lessons, lifeguard training, and community water safety workshops.

The real transformation, however, is academic. Verdugo led the shift to a personalized, competency-based learning model, replacing a one-size-fits-all grading system with standards-based reporting that allows students to learn at their own pace. The change has been especially impactful for the district's 90% Latino student body, which has historically been underrepresented in advanced programs.

SCV35's success is reflected in accolades such as the College Board's AP District of the Year and the Cambridge District of the Year, as well as national recognition for its academic rigor. Verdugo's own honors include Arizona School Administrators Superintendent of the Year (2018-19) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals Middle School Principal of the Year (2012).

"David's leadership is rooted in service, integrity, and opportunity," says Rio Rico High School principal Dagoberto Lopez, who nominated Verdugo for the AZALAS award. "He's transformed our schools and inspired countless educators, parents and students to believe in their potential."

Verdugo's journey began in the gym, teaching physical education and coaching sports a far cry from the boardrooms of WestEd, the Arizona Interscholastic Association Executive Board and the AZALAS Executive Board where he now serves. That early experience taught him the value of teamwork, discipline and community, lessons he carries into every decision for SCV35.

Looking ahead, Verdugo envisions expanded clinic hours, a mobile app to guide families through enrollment and academic planning, and a growing corps of Community Legal Advocates to help families navigate the educational system. "Our goal has always been simple: make SCV35 the best district in Arizona," he says. "Every decision starts with what's best for our students."

His advice for anyone hoping to make a difference? "Start where you are. Choose one issue that matters and take the first step. Community work grows from consistency, humility, and a willingness to listen."



Follow us on YouTube for the latest community videos.

NOGALES POLICE Monthly Roll Call

Introducing the NPD Monthly Roll Call: A Closer Look at Service, Partnership, and Community Pride

We are thrilled to introduce our readers to this month's community feature, which will highlight the efforts of individuals and groups working to make Nogales a safer, more connected, and more informed place. Introducing the NPD Monthly Roll Call, a monthly page dedicated to highlighting ongoing projects, community partnerships, and the many ways the Nogales Police Department (NPD) works to build relationships across the city. Nogales residents will gain a deeper understanding of the officers, staff, and programs that support and uplift our community behind the scenes through this new section.

Recently, the Nogales Police Department hosted a heartfelt and energetic community presentation honoring the people behind the badge, which perfectly captured the spirit of this new initiative. It was a visual journey celebrating the department's dedication, teamwork, and compassion from the moment the lights dimmed.

Spotlights on the D.A.R.E. program at Challenger Elementary brought warmth and hope into the room. Officers led students in lively lessons on drug-free living, while kids covered classroom doors in bright, creative Red Ribbon Week posters. These photos captured the purest form of community policing education, trust, and mentorship. Parking Control Officers M. Adcock, A. Garcia, and Y. Velez were shown standing in solidarity during the National Day of Remembrance for Murdered Victims, a quiet but powerful reminder that NPD stands with families who carry unimaginable loss.

The Nogales Police Department is more than just a law enforcement agency. It is a tapestry of dedicated individuals committed to service, partnership, education, and compassion. Through the NPD Monthly Roll Call, our community will now have the opportunity to see that dedication up close every month. **For those who want to learn more or connect with the department, the Nogales Police Department is located at 777 N. Grand Ave., Nogales, AZ 85621, and can be reached at 520-285-5805.**



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LET'S TALK HEALTH

Make Smart Choices as You Celebrate the Season!

Take time to eat well and move your body to help you feel your best.

Here are a few tips to consider:

1. **Be active:** Take a walk with family and friends before and after the meal, weather permitting.
2. **Prioritize vegetables:** As recommended by MyPlate.gov, fill $\frac{1}{2}$ your plate with veggies, $\frac{1}{4}$ with lean protein, and $\frac{1}{4}$ with starchy sides.
3. **Don't skip meals:** Start the day with a healthy breakfast. Eating your meals throughout the day helps prevent overeating later.
4. **Modify recipes:** Lighten up traditional dishes by using leaner meats and reducing butter, cream, and sugar.
5. **Portion control:** When in doubt, your hand can serve as a guide for portion sizes.
6. **Stay hydrated:** Drink plenty of water throughout the day.
7. **Go easy on sugary drinks and alcohol:** They add up quickly and can increase hunger.
8. **Savor your meal:** Eat slowly and mindfully to enjoy the flavors and feel satisfied.
9. **Try the "80% full" method:** Hara Hachi Bu is a Japanese practice that means "eat until you're 80% full." It originates from Okinawa, one of the world's Blue Zones known for longevity.

Wishing you a Happy Holidays!

Badria Bedri, MS

Nutritionist, Mariposa Community Health Center



6 Ways to Avoid Stressful Situations During the Holidays

1. Set Clear Boundaries

Say no when needed. Protect your time, energy, and peace by being honest about your limits.

2. Prioritize What Matters Most

Let go of perfection. Focus on the people, traditions, and moments that bring you true joy.

3. Maintain a Calming Routine

Simple daily practices—like deep breathing, stretching, a walk, or quiet time—help keep stress low.

4. Plan Ahead & Stay Organized

Use lists, calendars, and budgets to stay ahead of holiday tasks and avoid last-minute overwhelm.

5. Limit Stress Triggers

Be mindful of environments or conversations that drain you. Step away or shorten visits when needed.

6. Ask for Help

Share responsibilities with family or friends. Open communication lightens the load and strengthens connections.

Wishing You a Calm, Healthy, and Joyful Holiday Season!

—Your Health & Wellness Team

Happy Holidays

May your Christmas be filled with all the things that bring you happiness



www.santacruzsheriff.org
Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office
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Sheriff's Round-Up



Over the past month, members of the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office have proudly participated in several training sessions and community events, including:

- Hosting a 24-hour (HGN) Horizontal Gaze Nystagmus (DUI) course
- All certified personnel attending a Basic Investigations class
- Law Enforcement Report Writing refresher course
- 16 hours ATV certification courses for Deputies, Law Enforcement Assist Team's and Search & Rescue volunteers
- Surveillance training for our Criminal Investigations members
- Taser certification training to all Taser-carrying personnel
- 40-hour training course for New Detectives
- A-RIDE certification (Advanced Roadside Impaired Driving Enforcement)

We are also proud to announce the graduation of Deputy Sheriff Joanna Pillado and Andres Jimenez after completing a 20-week training at the Southeastern Law Enforcement Training Academy.

We also congratulate Deputy Sheriff Erika Rinza after completing our 12-week Field Training Officer Program. Deputy Rinza graduated from the Southern Arizona Law Enforcement Training Academy on May 2025.

Sheriff Hathaway and Undersheriff Castillo presented to a delegation of press officers from 15 European Union member states, as well as individuals from the European Union and the European Parliament offices in Washington, D.C., on a study tour to learn more about U.S. media and political dynamics as they begin their diplomatic posts in Washington.

The Sheriff's Office also welcomed members of Kiki Camarena's family to participate in a community luncheon on drug abuse prevention. Myrna Camarena and Sheriff Hathaway spoke to the luncheon participants about the sacrifice her brother Kiki made when he lost his life working in drug enforcement operations in Mexico.

Join Our Team

If you're interested in a rewarding career in law enforcement, we are currently accepting applications for the following positions:

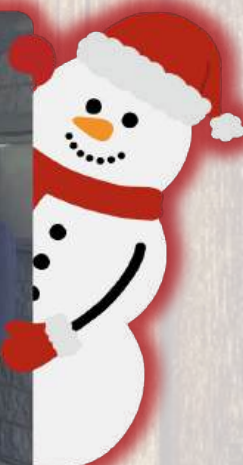
- Deputy Sheriff
- Detention Officer
- Dispatcher



We are also actively recruiting Lateral Officers for Peace Officer, Detention Officer, and Dispatcher roles. Applications can be downloaded from the Santa Cruz County website and submitted to the Human Resources Office.

On behalf of myself and the entire administration, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to the residents of all our communities for their assistance in maintaining public safety in the county.

Sincerely,
Sheriff David Hathaway



The Santa Cruz County Attorney reminds you to stay safe this holiday season

Happy Holidays

The best present one can hope for this year is to spend time together

You have the power!

**2150 N. Congress Dr.
Nogales, Arizona 85621
(520) 375-7780**

