

California's state capital is a fast-growing city on the banks of the Sacramento and American rivers.

#13 Sacramento: Capital Ideas



Sacramento has a lot going for it. Locals enjoy its proximity to two rivers, the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and the San Francisco Bay Area. These geographic blessings are also a curse: high pollutant counts and 100-degree temperatures in the summer can make easy breathing a challenge and outdoor exercise dangerous, and its neglected levees mean some parts of the city are vulnerable to flooding. But the city has a number of initiatives to address these challenges, including a light rail system, many new urban infill projects, and an impressive array of solar energy installations.

Healthy Living

Sacramento has poor air, ranking #43. Before exercising and spending time outdoors, check [Spare the Air](#) for local pollutant forecasts (you might also sign up for the “Air Alert” e-mail forecast). Sacramento’s water ranks considerably better, at #15.

As befits a city that celebrates its NBA basketball team by ringing cowbells, local produce can be found throughout town at a variety of farmers markets. There are, however, fewer organic stalls than in Sacramento’s neighbors to the west, Oakland and San Francisco. The conventional produce reinforces regional agricultural practices that pollute the city’s tap water with pesticides.

Six percent of city land is set aside for parks, ranking #33. The city’s [Discovery Trail](#), popular with joggers and bicyclists, follows the American River for 54 miles from downtown Sacramento. The city also has an impressive urban forest that the [Sacramento Tree Foundation](#) aspires to double in size in order to help improve air and water quality and reduce overall energy use.

Getting Around

Despite its successful light rail project—including new extensions to Folsom that opened in 2005—public transit remains an issue in Sacramento. About 3% of residents use public transit to commute, while 1.4% commute by bicycle and 2.9% walk to work. Carpooling is slightly above average for US cities at about 11%. Still, almost 78% of residents drive alone to work, contributing to the region's air pollution.

Economic Factors

A government town with a growing high-tech presence, Sacramento is home to numerous projects in both solar energy and green building that predate statewide mandates. The city ranks #5 in LEED buildings per capita, including the 25-story LEED Gold Certified [California EPA headquarters](#).

Sacramento also has what might be the largest base of residential and business solar industry systems in the nation, with more than 1,000 installations. The [Sacramento Municipal Utility District](#) (SMUD) offers incentives not only for photovoltaic solar, but also for concentrating solar, wind energy, biomass, and other renewables. In fact, SMUD takes one of the most complete sustainability systems approaches of any American city utility by offering local home buyers options to buy Zero Energy Homes and by providing free shade trees. A [tree benefit calculator](#) will even estimate the energy savings and carbon sequestration of your mature shade trees.

With such attention paid to sustainable economic development, it's no surprise that Sacramento ranks #2 (tied with Seattle) for overall green economy indicators.

Sacramento ranks #38 for natural disaster risk. Folsom Dam, perched above Sacramento, sits atop the federal Bureau of Reclamation's safety priority list.

Summary/Next Steps

Sacramento has a number of strengths to build on. It's doing an excellent job diverting waste, has a strong rating in green building, and is a leader in solar energy.

Both of the city's biggest weaknesses, air pollution and congestion, are related to sprawl. The pollution is compounded by nearby agricultural production that relies heavily on pesticides, as well as geographic features that cause air pollution to stick around rather than blow away. Finding alternatives to car use and reckoning with the pollution caused by industrial agriculture would help create a healthier city. Several downtown mixed-use development projects in various stages of planning should take some cars off the road while creating a more vital urban center. Additional mixed-use development as well as continued investment in light rail should help the city deal with its challenges.

Sacramento Rankings by Category:

City Commute: 25

Metro Public Transit: 33

Metro Congestion: 24

Air Quality: 43

Tap Water Quality: 15

Waste Diversion: 5

Planning/Land Use: 31

City Innovation: 1

Affordability: 39

Natural Disasters: 38

Energy/Climate: 12

Local Food/Ag: 14

Green Economy: 2

Knowledge Base: 11

LEED Buildings: 5