AI Agents Are Invading Our Rural Counties
by Steve Monaghan

AI agents are showing up in rural California counties. There's no need to panic, but county leaders should know how this trend affects their organizations. In earlier articles, we explained what AI is, how traditional AI differs from generative AI, and what steps supervisors should consider. Now, agentic AI—AI that can act on its own within set boundaries—is the next step, and it's already finding its way into county operations.

Agentic AI systems can work independently to achieve specific goals, make decisions, and handle tasks with little human input. Unlike older AI, which follows strict rules or only responds to direct prompts, agentic AI can reason, adapt, and take action on its own—like a digital assistant with some autonomy.

What AI Agents Can Do

Agentic AI can handle tasks like processing paperwork, answering common resident questions, or analyzing data—without someone guiding every step. These systems can assess situations, weigh options, and make decisions to meet specific goals, such as routing a call to the right department or flagging urgent issues for review. The more agentic AI interacts with people and data, the better it gets at serving the community. Counties set the rules, and agentic AI follows them, always leaving humans in charge for oversight.

A clear example is autonomous taxis in cities like San Francisco. These AI-powered cars follow traffic laws and make split-second decisions as they drive. In rural areas, similar technology is used for autonomous farm tractors and drones that monitor crops and irrigation.

Why It Matters

Agentic AI is changing how county employees use information systems. With natural language processing—the tech behind Siri, Gemini, and Alexa—people can now ask AI agents to handle complex tasks. These agents can work with existing county software, external applications like payment processors, other AI agents, and people.

This shift means more employees can do specialized tasks that used to require experts. For example, creating detailed reports or maps often took an IT specialist. Now, an employee can describe what they need, and the AI agent does the rest. This isn't just a vision—it's happening in real life.

Examples of What Agentic AI Can Do

- Computer Vision: AI agents can monitor hundreds of video feeds at once, 24/7, without getting tired. If they spot something suspicious, they can turn on lights, sound alarms, send alerts, or call 911. Sonoma County and Alert Wildfire leverage an AI solution to monitor wildfire cameras, reducing active alert times for confirmed fire starts from an hour down to 5-7 minutes.

- Resident Assistance: AI agents can answer FAQs, create service tickets, route requests, and transfer calls to the right staff. Residents get quicker, more accurate responses, whether online, by phone, or in person. Nevada County recently updated their website chatbot that assists residents in finding services and information. The same AI Agent will soon start assisting residents over the phone after business hours, extending phone assistance to 24/7/365 availability.

- Fraud Detection: AI agents can scan benefits data in real time. If they spot unusual patterns, like many claims from one address, they flag it for investigation and can even suggest policy changes. County employees still need to make final decisions as we are seeing more regulations in this area as with the recent SB 1120 "Physicians Make Decisions Act" in the insurance industry. Expect more regulations like this in the future that can impact counties.

Practical Benefits for Counties

- Automate repetitive tasks like permit processing, tax assessments, and answering common questions. This cuts down on delays and lets staff focus on more important work.

- Proactively identify and solve problems, such as spotting infrastructure needs or predicting community trends.

- Improve efficiency and reduce costs by automating workflows and making better use of resources.

What Agentic AI Is Not

- It doesn't replace people. Agentic AI is for repetitive or data-heavy work, not jobs that need human judgment or empathy.

- It doesn't act on its own. The county decides what AI can and can't do, with safeguards to ensure responsible use.

Simple Example

If a resident wants to renew a business license, instead of searching confusing websites or waiting on hold, they can ask an AI system. The AI finds the right information, helps fill out forms, and, if needed, sends the request to the right department. Staff only step in if something unusual happens.

Will Residents Use AI Agents?

A recent Salesforce survey found that 90% of people worldwide would use an AI agent to interact with their government. Companies like Salesforce and Workday are already adding AI agents to their software, and counties are using these tools today. Most AI agents will show up inside existing systems for property tax, permitting, websites, case management, benefits, and finance. There are also standalone AI products that counties can use to automate almost any task.

Tests show that AI agents can process requests much faster and more accurately than humans. But there are limits—when tasks get too complex, accuracy can drop, so humans still need to make the final decisions. With AI improving quickly, expect agentic AI to become even more capable and common in our rural county organizations.

AUTHOR

Serving in the County of Nevada (California) for 25 years as the Director of the Information and General Services Agency (IGS), Steve retired in December 2024. He was responsible for planning, organizing, and directing nine county departments/business lines which included Information Systems, Public Library System, Airport, Facility Management, Office of Emergency Services, Central Services, Energy Services, Broadband, Animal Shelter, and Centralized Purchasing.

Steve currently serves as Vice President of AI & Public Safety at Ladris, where he focuses on advancing community safety through innovative, AI-driven emergency management solutions.

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Steve writes a monthly Local Government Technology focused newsletter on LinkedIn.