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State of the East Bay forum focuses on growth

By Lou Fancher

Growth was the operative word Aug. 8 at the annual State of the East Bay forum presented by Alameda County Board of Supervisors President Wilma Chan and Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors Chair Karen Mitchoff. Offering condensed versions of key county initiatives involving housing affordability, economic competitiveness, health care and more, updates, along with the supervisors' "if-only" wish lists, were sent to approximately 150 people.

This year's discussion, held at the Lafayette Veterans Memorial Center, was a partnership with the East Bay Leadership Council, Innovation Tri-Valley Leadership Group, and East Bay Economic Development Alliance with sponsorship from Shell Martinez Refinery.

Along with highlighting the East Bay's robust economic strength, increasing needs for affordable housing, health care related to food availability and transition to online technologies were supervisors' primary topics of discussion.

Chan emphasized public-private partnerships. Alameda County's programs serve 1.7 million people with a \$3 billion budget. With rapidly developing technology influencing both the economy and politics, she said it is a critical time for the county to catch up, especially as it supports Millennials. "Right now, five banks control all the wealth in the country. This is a totally new world we're living in," said Chan.

To solve dichotomous problems resulting from advancing technology and traditional programs used to determine or improve economic growth - for example, transferring census programs to online applications; updating career centers to better match actual available jobs - introduces budget-draining updates. Further complicating the matter, people worried in the current political climate about their immigration status means that regardless of the method, collecting accurate information and forecasting budgetary needs is problematic.

With housing a major issue in the Bay Area, Alameda County added a one-time additional \$85 million to the regular \$82 million county housing allocation. Chan said working with cities to construct new residences for homeless and low-income people was vital. "One-third of the whole homeless population in the country lives in California," she said. Other innovations include two \$50 million housing bonds; one supporting short-term loans for repairs so homeowners can stay in their homes; a second providing first-time buyers with \$150K loans that do not need to be repaid until the residence is resold. "We have to be really conscious of what we want our cities to look like," Chan said.

A poverty initiative begun by Chan last year to create jobs, provide food and shelter and lift people out of poverty contains within it a Healthy Food, Healthy Family program. Through partnerships with local businesses, \$3 million was raised to establish it as a formal program. "I just purchased two trucks with allocated money," Chan said. "We hired two ex-offenders to be drivers. They're getting full training. We want to bring this program to full scale. It's a complex, integrated network serving employment and health. We welcome partnerships and are developing new growth based on local assets."

Chan said a national mood had voters upset about new tax proposals being added to the ballot. Striking a hard but not harsh line, she was realistic: "If you want good services, somebody has to pay for it." Later, she added, "We have to look out, not in. We can't keep doing business the old way. We have to have more businesses and private sectors partner with (us)."

Mitchoff confessed to having "Alameda County envy." A half-cent sales tax that pays for Alameda County employee health care frees up budgeted funds for programs. Contra Costa employees ask Mitchoff why they don't receive the same coverage. "Getting a sales tax passed would solve it, but that's not realistic because we're at the tipping point with people not feeling taxes are appropriately used or managed."

In her presentation and separate interview comments Mitchoff said the county's \$1.61 billion budget serves 1.2 million people. "But only 25 percent of that is controlled by us. The rest is prescribed before it comes to us. I always wish citizens could take government financing 101 so they understand the issues better."

Asked what they might better understand, Mitchoff included the pros and cons of Proposition 6 (a measure on the November ballot that would repeal Senate Bill 1 and require voter approval for fuel and vehicle taxes aimed at road repair); the ongoing impact of Prop 13 that she said suppresses property tax revenues; sunset clauses in tax bills that cause cities to continuously return to voters for more money; and improving news related to pension funding. "Citizens need to know that our OPEB (other post employment benefits) was \$2.6 billion in 2008. We've reduced that to \$764 million in 2018. Pension costs will be stable over the next five years."

Selling off disintegrating or underused buildings and addressing homelessness are Contra Costa's current focus, according to Mitchoff. Programs to provide health care and legal services for undocumented people are also on the agenda. Like Chan, Mitchoff's straight-talk message included a directive for unions, business owners, city and county officials and communities to work together realistically. "Those who have more will have to give more to those who have less," she said.

On an uplifting note, Mitchoff spotlighted programs that work to move homeless people to permanent housing. Allowing more flexibility, such as permitting pets in homeless shelters, offering paired mental health services or establishing temporary container homes, she suggested will lead to greater success.

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