

County supervisors lobby in D.C.

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Three Humboldt County supervisors were in Washington, D.C., last week to lobby on various issues on both the national and county platform including the potential repeal of the Affordable Care Act, immigration reform, infrastructure funding, banking in the marijuana industry and the ongoing pilot shortage.

Board Chairwoman and 4th District Supervisor Virginia Bass went in her capacity as the California State Association of Counties' 2nd vice president and said that their main focus when speaking with legislators was on the future of the Affordable Care Act.

"Nobody really knows what the plan is right now and it seems to be shifting," Bass said. "First it was repeal, now it's repeal and replace. We went back to say that we need to think this through carefully."

If the Affordable Care Act's Medicaid expansion is repealed without an adequate replacement, [about 18,400 county residents could lose their Medicaid coverage](#) — known as Medi-Cal in California — on top of the 6,200 residents who would lose their government subsidized health insurance. A [UC Berkeley Labor Center study](#) released in December estimates more than 209,000 jobs will be eliminated in California if the act is repealed. Bass said Humboldt County would lose about 1,000 jobs. Having met with North Coast Congressman Jared Huffman (D-San Rafael), the staff from Sens. Kamala Harris and Dianne Feinstein, and other state legislators, Bass said that most understood what the impacts would be. But whether legislators on the other side of the aisle will be as understanding is questionable, Bass said.

"You get the meetings people will accept and you think you will make a difference in," she said. "I think there is a real challenge in trying to find out how they can work with others. Our representatives understand that this will be devastating to our county. We don't have to convince them of anything. But what can we, as someone who lives in one community, help communicate in an effective way to a representative in another district who may not agree that this is a good approach?"

The issue of sanctuary cities and counties for undocumented immigrants was also addressed during the meetings. Bass said one of the main issues brought up by the counties is there is no set definition of what defines a sanctuary city or county. Currently, Bass said there is no policy establishing Humboldt County as a sanctuary county, but said that the county does not currently honor Immigration and Customs Enforcements detainer requests for county inmates who may be an illegal immigrant.

“A lot of what cities and counties are doing is more of a statement of support of community members and providing the knowledge that we don’t condone people coming in and sending people away for no reason,” Bass said.

Other topics discussed included homelessness, opioid abuse rates and payment in lieu of taxes funding still owed to counties by the federal government.

BANKING, TAXES, ROADS

With California and Humboldt County now working to accommodate a regulated marijuana industry, federal banking restrictions for marijuana businesses were a hot topic for Bass and 1st District Supervisor Rex Bohn. Bohn was in Washington, D.C., in his role as the 1st vice chairman of the Rural County Representatives of California, which represents 35 rural California counties.

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Along with speaking with congressional representatives from Washington, Oregon and California, Bohn said that they also were able to attend a cannabis banking panel discussion at the Capitol hosted by Colorado’s 7th District Rep. Ed Perlmutter.

“However you feel on the subject, we do have to take the large amounts of cash out of it, because once we get them in the system it will be easier to tax and we’ll know who is in the industry,” Bohn said Monday.

Infrastructure funding was another topic of discussion, with Bohn stating that there is hope President Donald Trump will follow through on his promise to push a \$1 trillion infrastructure package. Humboldt County has an over \$200 million backlog in road and bridge repairs, which has increased with recent storms.

“The last transportation reauthorization we had was Fix America’s Surface Transportation in 2015 and that was only for \$305 billion,” Bohn said. “With a trillion dollars, we should see some of that trickle down to rural counties. We need to have it trickle down.”

Another topic on the Rural County Representatives platform included treating forest fires like other natural disasters in order to free up more money for the U.S. Forest Service to conduct forest management operations. Bohn said that more than 50 percent of the service’s budget last year was spent fighting fires and is projected to increase to more than 60 percent by 2025.

AIR TRAVEL, PILOTS

In meetings with Huffman and Feinstein’s staff, 5th District Supervisor Ryan Sundberg said they worked to address issues relating to attracting airline services and addressing the ongoing pilot shortage.

Sundberg said the county currently cannot use grant money from the U.S. Department of Transportation to obtain airline service to Los Angeles because it had already received a grant in the past for this to bring in Horizon Air. Horizon Air ended service out of the Humboldt County airport in McKinleyville in 2011. In 2014, the county received a \$750,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation for service to eastern locations, but it could not be used for flights to LAX.

“We can’t use (the grant funding) for the same location twice, so we want to be able to use it for Los Angeles again,” Sundberg said. “We’re asking them to change their legislation to allow for that.”

Sundberg said he also urged legislators to address the pilot shortage caused by the federal government now requiring pilots to obtain 1,500 hours of flying experience — up from 250 hours — to become certified. Sundberg and Bass said that PenAir is now 18 pilots short due to this, which has resulted in the [airliner reducing the number of flights out of the county from three to two](#).

“I still want them to be as safe as they can, but maybe some transition time can be built into it so there isn’t a huge shortage of pilots,” Sundberg said.

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