

The Voice of Capital Region Chambers is Decidedly Female — Here's What They Have to Say

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It's hard to run a business.

The rules are always changing, the regulatory compliance is often overwhelming, and it can feel like no one has your back.

Enter the chambers of commerce. One of the oldest forms of business networks, these organizations work on the state and local level to support and advocate for businesses.

With a complicated landscape that includes a new governor who is openly at odds with much of the federal government, looming regulation, the risk of a new recession and pressing issues around workforce development, the role of local chambers in California may be more vital to the business community than ever.

There are roughly 50 chambers in the Capital Region, and we counted over 30 led by women. We asked a dozen of these leaders (doing our best to bring in a mix of voices) to tell us where they see the region headed.

**Interviews have been condensed and lightly edited for clarity.*

It's no secret that there are tensions between the state and federal governments. What issues are you or your members most paying attention to?

"Trade and immigration. ... Uncertainty around immigration policy creates uncertainty for businesses and the workforce. California is home to more than 10 million immigrants, of which almost 40 percent are small-business owners." — *Pat Fong Kushida, Sacramento Asian Pacific Chamber of Commerce*

"We're going to be paying attention and getting involved in the census 2020 outreach. We need to make sure everyone is counted, so that resources are allocated appropriately. There is potential for our state to lose out on funding if this doesn't happen." — *Cathy Rodriguez, Sacramento Hispanic Chamber of Commerce*

"Reducing the tax burden on businesses and removing regulatory barriers at all levels." — *Wendy Gerig, Roseville Area Chamber of Commerce*

"Truckee is not alone in being affected by the housing-affordability crisis. Anything this administration can do to assist in paving the way for developers, businesses and individuals to create new, achievable housing is crucial. And the new legislation that

establishes a new test for determining who is an employee could have significant implications on businesses in our area that utilize independent contractors.” — *Lynn Saunders, Truckee Chamber of Commerce*

“The legalization of cannabis. There are still so many conflicts and unknowns and lack of infrastructure in place for this new and rising industry, it’s still a difficult road to traverse. I think we’ll all be watching and working closely to smooth out some of the edges in this newly burgeoning industry.” — *Azizza Davis Goines, Sacramento Black Chamber of Commerce*

“To ensure a healthy and vibrant community, we’re always monitoring issues at the federal, state and local levels that impact affordability, foster a strong business climate and a ready workforce. That’s why our 49th annual Cap-to-Cap Program is set to bring together regional leaders to work with federal leaders, addressing regional priorities directly.” — *Amanda Blackwood, Sacramento Metro Chamber of Commerce*

Regulation is such a hot-button issue. If you could wave a magic wand, what would you change about the California regulatory environment?

“A greater percentage of cap-and-trade revenues be shared with the business community.” — *Deitra Kenoly, Greater Stockton Chamber of Commerce*

“[California Environmental Quality Act]. It’s so overwhelmingly restrictive and negative. Regulations are necessary and important, but CEQA is the biggest offender of over-regulations.” — *Laurel Brent-Bumb, El Dorado County Chamber of Commerce*

“The Dynamex decision [updating requirements for contract workers] is really worrisome for many. In some cases, sole proprietors are going to have to incorporate to avoid penalties if audited.” — *Angela Perry, Elk Grove Chamber of Commerce*

“Just one? That’s tough, as the businesses in California remain so overregulated at all levels that it creates a negative business climate for the entire state. This is where Gov. Gavin Newsom could be effective, if willing.” — *Wendy Gerig, Roseville Area Chamber of Commerce*

“Our regulations have a real domino effect, and one begets another. I’d continue to work on the state providing parity to all who wish to contract with our government. That parity will never exist without commitment, oversight and accountability. While Prop. 209 [California Constitutional amendment that bars public institutions from discriminating based on sex, race or ethnicity] is the scapegoat for all that shun accountability, the lack of it is — at the very least — morally reprehensible and a fight that continues for minorities, women and our vets.” — *Azizza Davis Goines, Sacramento Black Chamber of Commerce*

With new Gov. Gavin Newsom, what changes are you anticipating? How do you see them impacting your members?

“The biggest changes will be in health care. On the positive side, an individual mandate could stabilize rates and create a healthy workforce, as would subsidizing low-income families. Now having said that, our businesses would be responsible for insuring every employee, which could raise their cost of doing business.” — *Debi Tavey, Fairfield-Suisun Chamber of Commerce*

“Paid parental leave is going to impact employers, and also the regulations that will be placed on companies to address climate change. With Gov. Newsom only being in office a short while, it remains to be seen how his goals will be achieved without reckless spending and his desire to maintain or increase state reserves.” — *Kristy Wright, Woodland Chamber of Commerce*

“We hope that Gov. Newsom keeps rural counties in mind when serving for the State of California. The worry is that state politicians focus on policies for big cities — not rural communities that make up Northern California. We are currently attending [Rural County Representatives of California] events to make sure Amador’s concerns are heard on a larger state level.” — *Jamie Armstrong, Amador County Chamber of Commerce*

What makes your region unique for doing business, compared to surrounding cities?

“With remote work becoming more prevalent, young creatives and rising tech startups looking for a better work-life balance (not to mention better real estate prices) make Truckee an attractive option.” — *Lynn Saunders, Truckee Chamber of Commerce*

“Recently there has been a steady flow of young adults returning to or moving to Amador County. Most are drawn to Amador County for the weather, more affordable housing, the rich history, natural resources and recreation, as well as the rich sense of community. Not only are they moving back, a lot of them are starting their own businesses or taking over family businesses.” — *Jamie Armstrong, Amador County Chamber of Commerce*

“We have a population of over 171,000 and are located in close proximity to very underserved communities, such as Galt and Lodi, and combine the best of suburban and agricultural lifestyles. Our growing workforce comes from one of the best school districts in the state, and opportunities for further education are plentiful.” — *Angela Perry, Elk Grove Chamber of Commerce*

“Woodland is located right on I-5, only minutes from Sacramento International Airport. The port of Sacramento and our State Capitol are an easy drive, and our neighbor to the south is home to UC Davis. Our business owners like Woodland’s strong sense of community and friendly customers and clients, as it gives them a small-town feel with all the innovative and cutting-edge professional services you would find in a larger metropolitan city.” — *Kristy Wright, Woodland Chamber of Commerce*

“Rocklin is larger in population than most other surrounding cities but has a manageable and fiscally sound operating budget. Its tax base, from sales and property taxes, is supported by a number of large and unique retailers within its city limits.”— *Robin Trimble, Rocklin Area Chamber of Commerce*

“Stockton is ... located within 1-5 hours of the most populous California regions including Sacramento, the Bay Area and Los Angeles. It offers numerous points of access including highway, rail, water (through the Port of Stockton), and Stockton Metropolitan Airport, which is adding daily flights to LAX.” — *Deitra Kenoly, Greater Stockton Chamber of Commerce*

What accomplishment are you most proud of?

“Being a five-star accredited chamber — the only chamber in Northern California.” — *Wendy Gerig, Roseville Area Chamber of Commerce*

“The workforce development programs we started with our local school district, which have now grown to every chamber and school district in Solano County.” — *Debi Tavey, Fairfield-Suisun Chamber of Commerce*

“Four years ago, I started the Latina Estrella Awards to celebrate and recognize the Latina leadership in our region.”— *Cathy Rodriguez, Sacramento Hispanic Chamber of Commerce*

“I started at the chamber 10 years ago as a bookkeeper and took the CEO position after two years. ... And our leadership program is exceptional; it's a 10-month academy where participants learn not only about leadership, but the community as a whole. They meet and build relationships with stakeholders and create and present a community project each year.” — *Angela Perry, Elk Grove Chamber of Commerce*

What would surprise people about your chamber?

“We have both a local and a statewide chamber. This means we're well-equipped to help our local members, because we have statewide influence. And we operate two federal centers: one that helps small, disadvantaged minority-owned businesses get access to contracts in the transportation sector, and the other is focused on helping minority-owned businesses export to Asia.” — *Pat Fong Kushida, Sacramento Asian Pacific Chamber of Commerce*

“For the past five years the Rocklin Chamber has returned 10 percent of our event profits to our nonprofit members, including the Placer SPCA; KidsFirst; the Matt Redding Foundation; and various student groups at Sierra College, Whitney High and Rocklin High.” — *Robin Trimble, Rocklin Area Chamber of Commerce*

“We are one of a few chambers that have a Water Committee. It works with the City of Woodland to seek viable solutions to flood protection. Our chamber representatives

worked with regional agencies, elected officials and other partners for the successful completion of a surface water project for Woodland and Davis.” — *Kristy Wright, Woodland Chamber of Commerce*

What’s the greatest obstacle you’ve had to overcome at the chamber?

“Being taken seriously when you are invited to have a seat at the table. You have to be that much smarter and work that much harder, because typically you are only one of a handful of women and a minority that is in the room.” — *Pat Fong Kushida, Sacramento Asian Pacific Chamber of Commerce*

“When the 2008 financial crisis began, we saw that members were making budget choices. Chamber investments — and tickets to our fundraising events — were at the bottom of the list. This crisis was a huge hit to our local economy and, in turn, a massive hit to our organization.” — *Kristy Wright, Woodland Chamber of Commerce*

“The Great Recession of 2008-2011 and the long, slow and often sad climb to recovery.” — *Denice Seals, West Sacramento Chamber of Commerce*

“We have fielded more than our share of calls and requests for quotes regarding immigration. The current climate has brought out some great allies and some not-so-great social media comments and voicemails. Fear, bias and racism, unfortunately, have always been a part of our world, but have been getting louder and uglier. I am exceptionally proud to be one of the voices sharing the good stories — the amazing successes of our Latino-owned businesses and their contributions to the betterment of our community.” — *Cathy Rodriguez, Sacramento Hispanic Chamber of Commerce*

“Having one of the smallest populations [of the ethnic chambers] in our city meant that we had to work harder to show that we were a worthy and viable organization, and that the entrepreneurs in the African-American community deserved all of the attention and support that other chambers were receiving for their respective members. We were contributing to the economic welfare of our city and region just like all of the others. We were providing technical assistance and training and networking opportunities and hiring just like all of the others. It took years, but we have finally been acknowledged.” — *Azizza Davis Goines, Sacramento Black Chamber of Commerce*

What role do you play in local workforce development?

“The chamber is currently in the process of colocating with Mother Lode Job Training and Amador College Connect to create the Amador [County] Economic Prosperity Center ... a colocation of resources and agencies [to] provide a one-stop area for businesses, community members, students, employees and visitors. Oftentimes in rural counties, you will find multiple agencies working on the same mission, but they are working on them individually, which makes it hard to get leverage and resources. This center will house a conference room, classrooms, learning area, computer lab, a drop-in office and visitor center.” — *Jamie Armstrong, Amador County Chamber of Commerce*

“The West Sacramento Chamber of Commerce has a board seat and is an active participant on the Yolo County Workforce Investment Board. We are also active partners with the City, Washington Unified School District and Sac City College. We work with West Sacramento Campus with externships and career pathway development for WUSD students through the City of West Sacramento’s award-winning Home Run program.” — *Denice Seals, West Sacramento Chamber of Commerce*

“We are the lead organization in Truckee Tomorrow, a public/private economic development initiative. ... One of the programs under this initiative is to work closely with the Tahoe Truckee Unified School District and the Sierra College Tahoe-Truckee Campus in enhancing the awareness, access and engagement of the business community with their Career [and] Technical Education and training programs. We will be doing some benchmarking of best practices for current internship/apprenticeship programs around the United States.” — *Lynn Saunders, Truckee Chamber of Commerce*

“The chamber offers programs like the Business Education Alliance and the Stockton Chamber Apprenticeship Program. Both programs are designed to improve on our local workforce through a partnership with our schools and business community.” — *Deitra Kenoly, Greater Stockton Chamber of Commerce*

Upcoming plans for 2019 that most people don’t know?

“Driving and implementing [our] 4-Point Business Promise for an inclusive and resilient economy is what excites me most for 2019.” — *Amanda Blackwood, Sacramento Metro Chamber of Commerce*

“We’re excited to be going into our second year of our newly formed organization called UCAN — United Chamber Advocacy Network. It’s a regional voice [covering El Dorado, Placer and Sacramento counties] dedicated to small and medium-size chambers of commerce, and is comprised of mostly women.” — *Laurel Brent-Bumb, El Dorado County Chamber of Commerce*

“Our committee focused on young professionals, Ignite, will be focusing their efforts and recruitment on a more regional approach, attracting young professionals through networking opportunities, professional development and community service.” — *Wendy Gerig, Roseville Area Chamber of Commerce*

“We are conducting a feasibility study and planning for an entrepreneurial and leadership program for our Latino small businesses. We have some fantastic rising stars in our community, and we are excited to be developing a program that will impact their businesses and our region. ” — *Cathy Rodriguez, Sacramento Hispanic Chamber of Commerce*

And finally, a more fundamental question: Why are chambers important?

“We are the voice of business. We are the advocates to promote and protect business, and we’re very active in supporting good legislation and opposing bad legislation.” — *Laurel Brent-Bumb, El Dorado County Chamber of Commerce*

“I’m hearing from businesses, ‘I have projects I can’t do because I don’t have enough bodies to do the work.’ I’ve got communities that are falling further behind, that are being priced out of their neighborhoods, that are saying we really need access to careers and not just jobs. Having a gap is unacceptable. The beauty of what a chamber gets to do is you sit in the middle, and I hear both sides, so we’re able to convene those conversations and make real change.” — *Amanda Blackwood, Sacramento Metro Chamber of Commerce*

“We can help with regulatory problems, provide education for business owners and their staff, advocate for them at city council or even state and federal levels, and so many other services.” — *Angela Perry, Elk Grove Chamber of Commerce*

“Chambers are like an insurance policy. You never know you are going to need them until you do. Example: A member construction company never thought they needed to be certificated as a minority-owned business. And then came the downturn in the economy, when suddenly their private company business was drying up — and they needed to get public contracts to replace their private company business. We helped them get certified and connected them to all of our member companies that had supplier diversity programs. Because of our help, they grew from \$300K-\$400K per contract to \$2 million to \$3 million per contract.” — *Pat Fong Kushida, Sacramento Asian Pacific Chamber of Commerce*

“We are supporting families. The businesses that we work with — whether established by immigrants, or started as a second act, or by someone fulfilling a lifelong dream to be their own boss — the main reason they are in business is to provide better opportunities for their families.” — *Cathy Rodriguez, Sacramento Hispanic Chamber of Commerce*

“We don’t just host mixers and ribbon cuttings! We are a full-service chamber — regional advocacy and influence with our own PAC with an eye on workforce development and housing. We aren’t your grandparents’ chamber.” — *Robin Trimble, Rocklin Area Chamber of Commerce*

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