

Rural Californians Fear Concern Unheard By Big-City Politicians

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John Wildermuth

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California's long-struggling rural communities are looking for less talk and more action from a state Legislature dominated by big-city Democrats with few connections to the very different problems of those living outside the state's coastal megalopolises.

"Rural California is still fighting for the basics, and that's unacceptable," said state Sen. Mike McGuire of Healdsburg, whose district stretches up the coast from the Golden Gate Bridge to the Oregon border and includes Lake and Trinity counties. Those areas "have a different way to live, and we haven't always been able to make that clear."

But politics is a numbers game, and that's a battle the lightly populated counties of the state's far north, as well as the Sierra and much of the Central Valley, are never going to win.

At the state Democratic convention in Sacramento this month, Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom was on stage, saying all the right things to the party's rural caucus.

"We have a challenge here in California, where we're both the richest and poorest state in the nation," he told a standing-room-only crowd. "We can't be a coastal economy and an inland economy."

Newsom was followed by a line of other Democrats running for statewide office next year, each taking a minute or two to express well-meaning sympathy for counties battered by economic and social woes.

Besides political ambitions, most of the speakers had one other thing in common: They didn't live anywhere near rural California, which the Rural County Representatives of

California, an advocacy group, says includes 35 of the state's 58 counties, half the land and less than 9 percent of the state's 39.1 million residents.

Democratic candidates for governor, for example, include Newsom, a former San Francisco mayor who now lives in Marin County; state Treasurer John Chiang from Torrance in Los Angeles County; former state schools chief Delaine Eastin from Davis, after years of representing Union City; and former Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.

"It's great that high-level people come to our caucus and talk about our problems," said Kevin Hendrick, head of the Del Norte County Democratic Party. "But we have to put a face to rural California," especially since so many California politicians — and the millions of people they represent — have few connections to areas where logging, fishing and agriculture are the economic drivers, and long, winding two-lane roads are often the only link between small towns.

That lack of rural clout is nothing new. Since Eureka Rep. James Gillette was elected in 1906, California hasn't had a governor who didn't hail from either the Bay Area or the metropolitan areas of Southern California.

It wasn't always that way, however. Until 1966, the state Senate was based on geography, not population. That meant that Humboldt, Butte, Sonoma and Kings counties each had one state senator, the same as San Francisco or San Diego. And Alpine, Mono and Inyo counties, with a combined 1960 population of about 15,000, shared a single state senator, the same as Los Angeles County and its 6 million residents.

For more than a century, that gave the state's small, rural counties political power well beyond their size. But when the U.S. Supreme Court's "one man, one vote" ruling came down, with Chief Justice — and former California governor — Earl Warren saying that "Legislators represent people, not trees or acres," that clout disappeared. Suddenly, Los Angeles had 15 state senators while the coastal counties above Marin shared one. "Sure, 50 years ago it used to be different," Hendrick said. "But now we have the system we have."

The problem, said Jamie Beutler of El Dorado County, outgoing chairwoman of the Democrats' rural caucus, is that too many legislators don't realize how different the concerns are outside California's urban centers.

Last year, for example, Assemblyman Evan Low, a San Jose Democrat, introduced AB2395, which would have made it easier for telecommunications companies like AT&T and Verizon to scrap their aging and expensive copper-wire landline system, arguing that most of their customers already use wireless cell service.

"The problem is that in some parts of rural California there are lots of mountains and no cell service," Beutler said. "We had to jump in with (The Utility Reform Network) to stop the bill." As a state senator, McGuire has seen plenty of other problems in his district. In 2014, for example, a hit-and-run accident in rural Mendocino County took out 400 feet of aerial fiber-optic cable that provided telephone and Internet service to much of the county. For nearly two days, communities across the county had no connection to the outside world, even as a wildfire roared through the area.

Until recently, there was a single fiber line between Healdsburg and Arcata in Humboldt County, McGuire said. When the cable is damaged, everything goes down, including 911 emergency calling, ATM and computer-linked banking services, and access to online medical records. And that's happened at least three times in recent years.

"If this had happened even once in San Francisco or San Jose, it would have been fixed in a heartbeat," said McGuire, who grew up on a family farm in the Alexander Valley. "It's fixed now, but it shouldn't take a catastrophe to get something done."

In 2013-14, that purported lack of concern from Sacramento and the state's urban areas convinced more than a half-dozen rural counties in the north to revive 70-year-old talk about seceding from California and joining some southern Oregon counties to form the new state of Jefferson.

But that effort has died down, victim of a reality check and the opposition of groups like “Keep It California,” which Hendrick chairs.

“We figured that going to Sacramento and calling the governor names wasn’t the way to get anything done,” Hendrick said. “Urban legislators often aren’t aware of how things are different in our counties, so we try to educate them.”

Last year, for example, Democratic state senators Ricardo Lara of Bell Gardens (Los Angeles County) and Connie Leyva of Chino (San Bernardino County) visited Humboldt County.

“We showed them the crabbing fleet and the rural roads,” McGuire said. “The sheriff and the district attorney talked about the lack of law-enforcement resources in rural counties, and we showed them forestry practices and talked about the timber industry.”

For a pair of urban legislators, “it was eye-opening,” McGuire added.

There’s no quick way to end the poverty that plagues counties like Tulare and Trinity, or solve the homelessness problem that is every bit as devastating — if often less visible — in rural California as it is in the state’s biggest cities. But it is possible to remind urban politicians that when it comes to solving the state’s woes, one size doesn’t fit all.

For rural counties, it’s a matter of selling themselves to the rest of the state, to remind urban politicians that they are all part of California.

“It’s not that they don’t want to help us, it’s that they don’t often think about us,” Hendrick said. “We need to convince them that if the rural counties are stronger economically, it’s better for California as a whole.”

John Wildermuth is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email:

jwildermuth@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@jfwildermuth](https://twitter.com/jfwildermuth)

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