

Ed Goldman: Barbara Hayes 'Goes Country' For Rural Counties Association

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Ed Goldman

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Barbara Hayes has just gone a little bit country on us. And that could mean very good news for rural counties throughout California that may feel ignored to death by things urban counties, and especially cities, see as inarguable necessities — such as infrastructure improvement and broadband access, including telehealth services — and things urbanites don't need to think about much, such as forest resilience.

Hayes was the longtime CEO of the late Sacramento Area Commerce & Trade Organization. She left during the massive recasting of the group (it's now called the Greater Sacramento Economic Council), and for a couple of years worked as an economic consultant both hither (Folsom) and yon (Minneapolis-St. Paul, Phoenix and Appalachia). The latter may have given her a hint of what her job will entail: on June 4, she became chief economic development officer of Rural County Representatives of California, an association whose board consists of one supervisor each from 36 of the state's pastoral communities.

"It's very similar in design to the League of California Cities," she says over lunch earlier this week, "and CSAC." (Pronounced see-sack, that's the California State Association of Counties.) She says she already loves the job "because it's a whole other side of economic development, which, as you know isn't only my specialty. It's my passion."

Given the more than two decades Hayes spent climbing in and out of planes on international and stateside sorties to bring companies to SACTO, I ask if she's about to turn from being a globe trotter into a road warrior. She smiles — and I have to tell you, that having known and admired her for years, it's nice to report that she still emanates youthful enthusiasm; she even looks more relaxed, which, given the fracas that accompanied the breakup of SACTO, isn't surprising. "Well, I've kind of jumped on a moving train," she says. "The three core initiatives I've been hired to handle were already moving forward." Greg Norton, RCRC's CEO, "just realized the work was too important and too large to add to his plate, which is already amazingly full." That's why Norton and his board created Hayes's position.

Those initiatives — infrastructure, broadband and forest — proved to be not only eye-openers for Hayes but things she also feels could be game-changers, if addressed, for residents of what are frequently (and demeaningly) called the exurbs.

"We take for granted having broadband access in cities," she says, "but it amazes me how primitive or non-existent it is in rural areas." She makes it clear she's not just referring to stereotypical backwater towns. "Even in the part of Tahoe where my parents

own a home, internet access can be kind of a joke.” This in turn can affect the delivery of health care since, as mentioned earlier, the advent of telehealth and other medical outreach services are impeded by the lack of cyber services.

Hayes and her husband, Kurt Vandenbrink, who works in quality assurance at Genentech’s Vacaville campus, have two grown children: Andrew, an engineer who also works at Genentech; and Ashleigh, who’s about to begin work on a master’s degree in health care administration. The family home is in Davis, where Hayes and her husband first met as university students — not exactly in the country — but, as her new job will be, just a road trip away.

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