

Senate Listening

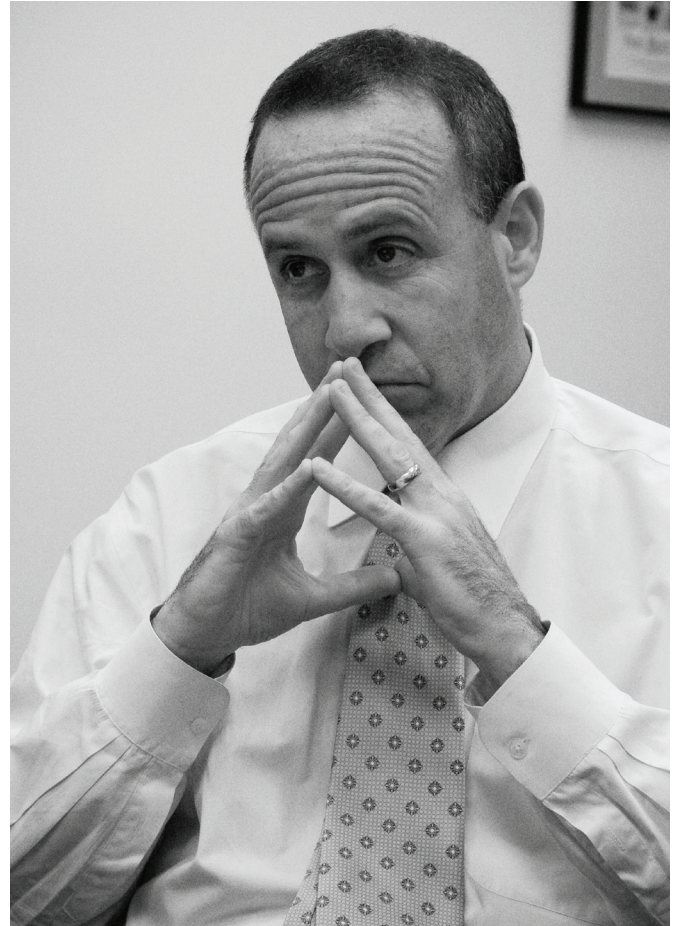
DARRELL STEINBERG ON BRINGING LOCAL ISSUES TO THE STATE AGENDA

by Rich Ehsen

State Sen. Darrell Steinberg is one of the most recognizable political figures in the Capital Region. A six-year member of the Sacramento City Council, Steinberg, a Democrat, later spent three terms representing the city in the state Assembly before moving on to the Senate in 2006. During his time in office, Steinberg has been one of the Legislature's leading voices on mental health, environmental and land-use policies. The latter includes this year's Senate Bill 375, which pushes California cities and counties to create master development plans that help reduce greenhouse gasses. We sat down with him recently to discuss these issues and his future in politics.

Comstock's: You introduced SB 375 this year, legislation to prod regional planning agencies to adopt growth models similar to the [Sacramento Area Council of Governments'] Blueprint we have here in the Capital Region. Many local governments have resisted. What is the benefit of making Sacramento's Blueprint statewide?

Steinberg: First of all, I think it's important to note that I come from local government and respect and believe in local control. But I have also increasingly come to believe that our problems are regional in nature, that the traffic congestion and the air quality do not go from good to bad or bad to good when you cross any particular jurisdictional boundary. And yet, state government often creates obstacles for local governments to work together as a region. Now that we have enacted historic greenhouse gas emissions standards, the question is: Are we going to put in place the policies that will translate into meeting those aggressive



standards? There's no dispute that land-use and growth patterns comprise about 40 percent of the greenhouse gas challenge. In that regard, SB 375 is getting attention because it seeks to integrate our aggressive greenhouse gas benchmark with land use in a way that is purely incentive-based. What it says is that if you're a city or county that has adopted a regional growth plan that demonstrates a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, then you can qualify for significant exemptions to the California Environmental Quality Act. Not to downgrade the importance of CEQA because I'm a huge believer in it, but if you're a city that has adopted the broader regional framework, then we ought not to require you to go through what often are duplicative processes in order to get project approval.

Comstock's: As long as we're talking about land use, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger recently signed SB 5, a package of bills aimed at slowing development in flood plains, which has been a contentious issue throughout this region. What can and should we be doing from here?

Steinberg: SB 5 is imperfect, yet it is actually a major step forward. Once the state finishes its flood control plan — which will lay out a vision and finance plan for how to achieve a minimum of 200-year flood protection in deep flood plains — local governments will then be obligated

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under the law not to approve development unless they are making what we call adequate progress toward the attainment of that goal. That said, there is no political support for a building moratorium in flood plains, although SB 5 certainly provides all the tools to stop development if local government is not meeting the standards. But it is also true that if we're going to put together a credible finance plan in order to provide the flood protection necessary — not only for new residents but for people already living in the deep flood plain — then builders are going to have to be a big part of that solution because it's a \$20 billion problem. Don't forget, we're living in an era now where we cannot depend on the federal government to take the lead on funding flood control. We've got a \$5 trillion deficit and an ongoing war. There's not a lot of money to be had. So the work product is imperfect, but it's mitigated in part by AB 70 [a part of SB 5 that requires local governments to share some of the liability for damages caused by levee breaks], which says to cities, 'OK, you want to approve this development?' Recognize that you're taking some risk in doing so, that no decision is risk-free.

Comstock's: Healthcare has also been a major issue all year. The biggest question always revolves around who pays for it. Why, in your view, is an employer-based system the best option?

Steinberg: I agree totally with critics who say funding healthcare should not all fall on employers, and yet AB 8 [the Democrat-sponsored measure that would have required employers to commit 8 percent of their payroll costs to funding employee healthcare or pay into a state medical fund] was the only majority vote option under this dysfunctional system we are living under in California. Actually, the most interesting part of the whole process was the California Restaurant Association coming out publicly to support the big-T word here: tax. For a major business association at the state level to come out directly and say we ought to do a broad-based tax was amazing.

We need more of that kind of thinking if we're ever going to break this logjam because the system does not allow us to have a real debate about how we pay for what we want and need. For instance, you have to give the governor a lot of credit for coming out and wanting to cover all kids, including undocumented kids, which I'm a strong believer in. He even puts out an array of revenue sources to pay for it. Now he may be a Republican governor, but he didn't have a single Republican vote for any of that. You can talk about whose fault that is, but the fact of the matter is there is no political will under this system because of the two-thirds majority requirement to fund what everyone says we want and need. You're going to find the same thing across the board. So I think what the restaurant folks did is interesting and ought to be noted. Whether that's the exact right solution in terms of the sales tax, the concept itself — in my opinion — ought to be capitalized upon.

Comstock's: You have authored some significant mental health legislation over the years and have said you believe better mental healthcare is good for California business. How so?

Steinberg: Two ways. One, when you look at the leading cause of absenteeism in the workplace, it's depression. Also, the single-biggest impediment to economic development in the urban core of cities is homelessness. Ending homelessness ought to be a priority for communities and every chamber of commerce.

Comstock's: A common lament we hear in this region is that Sacramento lacks the kind of strong, aggressive and visionary leadership we see in some other major communities. Would you ever consider running for mayor when your time in the Capitol is up? If not, what do you see yourself doing?

Steinberg: There are outstanding leaders in the Sacramento community. I love being a state Senator. Whether it's future public service or continued community activism, I will always stay involved.

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