

Looking back at 2017

BY ROBERT A. LOVINGOOD

As we prepare for the new year, it's the perfect chance to look back at 2017 and recap some of the highlights.

This past year we made headway on multiple fronts. We brought in new executive leadership with the Board of Supervisors' unanimous selection of Gary McBride as our new Chief Executive Officer. Gary brings a very strong financial background and a fresh approach that will serve residents well. The Board also unanimously elevated Michelle Blakemore as County Counsel for the Board of Supervisors, where I know she will provide excellent guidance. Reg Javier settled in as Deputy Executive Officer of the Economic Development Department and Interim Director for Workforce Development. And we continue to see positive change in processes within the Land Use Services Department.

From public safety and the economy to veterans' issues and homelessness, we continued to move San Bernardino County forward during the past year. Here are some highlights I'd like to share.

Public Safety

Since I was elected in 2012, public safety has been one of my top priorities. In years past, the Board has supported Sheriff McMahan's move to add 25 additional Deputy Sheriffs to unincorporated communities as well as supplemental funding for "Operation Desert Guardian" crime sweeps. This year "Desert Guardian" included 20 separate operations in the High Desert between June and September, resulting in 834 arrests, including 150 felony and 684 misdemeanor arrests. A separate 16-month investigation by the Sheriff, County Probation and the FBI resulted in 70 gang arrests in the High Desert.

In June, I successfully advocated for \$1 million in supplemental funding so the Sheriff can conduct "Desert Guardian" style operations around the County *all year long*. Then in August, the Board allocated supplemental funds to support District Attorney Mike Ramos' crackdown on human trafficking, animal abuse and other high-priority programs. The Sheriff's Department has also added a fifth Homicide Team to investigate and solve murder cases across the County.

The County also made progress in reducing recidivism and addressing the issue of mentally ill inmates in County jails. At the same time, the Board approved the use of body-worn cameras in a pilot program. We also streamlined welfare fraud investigations.

Many of the crime problems we have are the result of state policies. The good news is that the California Public Safety Partnership is working on a November 2018 ballot initiative to fix some of the most serious problems caused by early release programs and other Sacramento "reforms."

In terms of Fire Service, the Board restored funding to save the fire station that serves Interstate 40 from Barstow to the state line. The Board also restored funding for inmate fire crews that have been so valuable in fighting wildfires.

The economy & jobs

Big Lots announced plans for a 1.3 million-square-foot distribution center in north Apple Valley, with 400 to 500 jobs. Stirling Development completed construction on a distribution center for Newell Brands and Plastipak at Southern California Logistics Airport in Victorville. The project created approximately

200 direct jobs and 700 ancillary jobs. A string of new restaurants opened, including Cafe Rio, The Habit Burger, Pieology, Which Wich Superior Sandwiches, and Ono Hawaiian BBQ. California's first Cracker Barrel is slated to open in February along Victorville's Restaurant Row.

To promote job growth and highlight local career options, the second annual "Made in the High Desert" manufacturers' showcase and job fair was held. The event will occur again on Feb. 22 & 23, 2018. This event shines a light on the innovative and exciting manufacturers in the First District, the living wage jobs they create and ways local students and residents can receive training and certifications necessary to fill many available local jobs in manufacturing.

For the first time ever, the assessed value of all properties in San Bernardino County topped \$200 billion. Property values in the High Desert are on a gentle, gradual rise, underscoring both stability and economic opportunity. Existing home sales gained strength as the price differentials to the coastal counties started to play their normal role of powering demand in inland markets. In November, the average price of an existing home in the High Desert reached \$134 per square foot – a 10 percent increase from a year ago and 49 percent higher than 2013.

Veterans & Seniors

In June, the fourth annual Veterans Resource Fair, highlighting veterans' benefits and job openings occurred. We continued making progress in helping homeless veterans find stable housing. The County Veterans Affairs Department housed 197 homeless veterans this year, bringing the total number of homeless veterans housed since January 2015 to 1,085. The County Veterans Affairs Department served 28,101 veterans and family members this year. And County V.A. filed service-connected disability claims which resulted in veterans receiving over \$45 million this year -- *the highest amount received by any county in California*. The next highest amount was by Los Angeles County at \$34 million.

Under the leadership of Col. Frank Guevara, the County Veterans Affairs Department filed 1,192 California College Fee & Tuition Waivers totaling \$5.6 million. College fees and tuition are waived for children of disabled veterans or children of service members who died on active duty. This allows family members to attend college when they might not otherwise be able to afford the cost.

We partnered with the High Desert Association of Realtors in organizing a Senior Resource Event that offered local seniors information and advice about financial options, taxes and health care. We also assisted the High Desert Regional Council on Aging, working on health care, transportation and nutrition issues.

Homelessness

While homelessness continues to be a concern, the number of homeless persons in San Bernardino County has decreased steadily, from 2,876 in 2011 to 1,866 in 2017. The County has focused on the needs of specific populations – veterans, the chronic homeless, homeless young adults, and unaccompanied women. The Sheriff's HOPE Team has also done outstanding work in reaching out. The Board of Supervisors has allocated funds to convert the old Queens Motel in Victorville to house homeless people. We also broke ground on a 16-bed mental health crisis center in Victorville. Currently, deputies and ambulance crews must travel out of the High Desert to Colton to access inpatient care.

Over the summer, a building at the San Bernardino County Fairgrounds burned down, forcing the Victor Valley Rescue Mission to make other plans for their annual winter homeless shelter. In November, the mission was still looking to make arrangements. So the Marine Corps Logistics Base in Barstow was contacted about available military tents. The Marines came through by lending the County two tents that will provide a warm, dry place for homeless folks this winter.

Environment

County Code Enforcement and the inmate cleanup crews have continued to log impressive numbers. During the past fiscal year, County inmate crews cleared 329 parcels in the First District. They collected 79 tons of trash plus more than 8 tons of used tires.

Throughout the year, Land Use Services staff held meetings and received comments on a series of draft Community Plans to be released in 2018. The purpose of a Community Plan is to guide the future use, character and independent identity of a community. Community plans currently identify land use goals and policies unique to each community. They outline how the County of San Bernardino will manage and address growth issues while recognizing the special attributes unique to each unincorporated community.

As we begin a new year and my second year as chairman of the Board of Supervisors, I welcome your ideas and suggestions. If you have an issue or concern, please contact my office at (760) 995-8100 or email me at SupervisorLovingood@SBCounty.gov. May God bless you and your family throughout the coming year.

Robert Lovingood is chairman of the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors representing the First District.

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