

Turnover continues on First 5 Yolo Commission

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

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The composition of the First 5 Yolo Commission continues to undergo change as the agency prepares to deal with difficult funding decisions in the coming year.

Last month, the Yolo County Board of Supervisors — in a contentious vote that divided the board — installed Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis as the commission’s chair, replacing Supervisor Don Saylor, who had served as chair for four years. On Friday, Provenza nominated Davis resident Heidy Kellison as his District 4 community representative on the board, replacing Dr. Rick Baker.

Kellison’s appointment follows changes by two other county supervisors, each of whom appoints one community representative to the nine-member commission. In October, Supervisor Matt Rexroad appointed his wife, Jenn Rexroad, to replace 10-year commission member Suzanne Anderson in District 3, and more recently Supervisor Oscar Villegas named West Sacramento Mayor Christopher Cabaldon to replace longtime commission member Karen Ziebron as District 1’s community representative

With the retirement of Yolo County Superintendent of Schools Jorge Ayala, new Superintendent Jesse Ortiz will take over that office’s permanent seat on the commission Feb. 1.

All of the recent personnel changes come amid concerns — including those expressed by some county supervisors — about the funding framework First 5 commissioners put together in the fall. That framework considered closing a 50-percent reduction in First 5 Yolo’s budget by cutting funding for, among other things, the county’s family resource centers and foster parent recruitment and retention.

With new commissioners in place, Provenza said Friday that there will be some “re-evaluating” at First 5 in the coming months with a focus on how to support core services.

“We’re going to sit down with the Yolo County Children’s Alliance, First 5 and county administration and look at the whole big picture to see how we can protect these services and expand them,” Provenza said.

Fiscal cliff

First 5 Yolo has been facing a 2015 fiscal cliff ever since commissioners voted to begin spending down reserves several years ago. During fiscal year 2013-14, First 5 Yolo allocated more than \$4 million in funds for everything from health and dental services to food distribution, literacy programs, child care, child abuse prevention, preschool and foster care recruitment and support.

But with reserves depleted and revenue from tobacco taxes declining, the commission faces a 50-percent budget reduction in the next fiscal year.

As commissioners drew up a three-year funding plan in the fall, they voted on a set of priorities that didn't sit well with everyone in the community. In particular, deprioritizing funds for the county's successful foster parent recruitment and retention program raised concerns among many foster parents who turned out for a First 5 commission meeting as well as Board of Supervisors meetings to protest the plan.

Supporters of the county's family resource centers also have spoken out against possible cuts that could shutter centers in West Sacramento and elsewhere, reducing or eliminating food distribution, health insurance enrollment, tax assistance and preschool programs in some locations.

Provenza said Friday that the commission and all of its new members will be taking another look at the proposed three-year strategic plan.

Among those who will be participating in that evaluation is his new appointee, Kellison, who led the successful effort to save the Yolo Crisis Nursery last year. She is president and founder of the Friends of the Yolo Crisis Nursery.

Kellison's background also includes serving on the State Advisory Committee on Sexual Assault Victim Services; on the Davis High School PTA; as chair of the Davis Joint Unified Homework Policy Review Committee; as a member of the Women Escaping a Violent Environment board; and as a member of the Yolo County Health Council.

"Heidy recently galvanized the greater Davis and Yolo County community in a skillfully organized effort to rescue the crisis nursery, a unique resource for our youngest and most vulnerable children," Provenza said. "The result is a stronger crisis nursery and a new network of collaboration. Heidy will be a great asset to First 5 Yolo."

Kellison said Friday, "I'm deeply honored by Supervisor Provenza's confidence in me and will continue to work hard for the optimal development of our youngest citizens."

'Fresh perspective'

In addition to Kellison's appointment to First 5 Yolo, Provenza announced two other appointments on Friday.

Sarah Smernes Edson, a teacher and parent of two young children from District 4, was appointed to the Yolo County Children's Alliance executive board for the term beginning Feb. 1. The alliance, which receives significant funding from First 5 Yolo, coordinates county efforts to strengthen families, prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect, and fills gaps in existing services for Yolo County's children and their families.

Edson's work both as a teacher and in the private sector, including fundraising experience, will bring valuable experience to the alliance board, Provenza said.

"Sarah brings a fresh perspective, valuable skills and recognizable energy, as well as a unique touch with younger families in our area," he said. "I look forward to the work she will do with YCCA."

Edson said she is excited to join the Yolo County Children's Alliance and Child Abuse Prevention Council, "to endeavor with the board to sustain and develop programs that will support the children of our county."

Provenza also appointed Martha Noble, a retired UC Davis employee, to the Community Services Action Board, which advises the Board of Supervisors on allocations for low-income populations. Noble has many years of experience advocating for low-income residents, including faith-based service that helped people with food, housing, transportation, medical and employment needs, and work in veteran services at Yolo County, Provenza said.

"We're fortunate to have Martha's expertise, as well as her many contacts in the local community," he added.

Noble's appointment was confirmed by the Board of Supervisors last month while both Kellison and Edson will be on the board's agenda for final approval on Jan. 27.

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