

Verbatim Remarks

Santa Clara County Supervisor Joe Simitian

State of the County

February 6, 2018

A year ago, when my colleague Supervisor Cortese stood at this podium to deliver his State of the County, we really couldn't know what the future would look like. We had a new congress, a new administration. We couldn't help but wonder.

Whatever our hopes or our fears. Our aspirations or our anxieties. We could only wonder; but we really couldn't know.

Well, now we know.

We know that the 1.9 million people who call this county home, and the County government that is here to serve them, are too often at odds with the current administration and Congress.

The question now, the question we must all ask and answer is, how do we respond?

How do we respond when confronted with views and values we find abhorrent?

How do we respond when we are asked to acquiesce or feign agreement?

How do we respond when national “leaders” countenance conduct and comments that deserve our condemnation?

To use the language of the day, we have to resist. We have to stand up, speak out and push back.

As we have; and as we will.

We’ve spoken up with no false hope that decision makers in D.C. are waiting with baited breath to hear what we have to say.

Nevertheless, we’ve spoken up in the absolute conviction that if we add our voice to a chorus of others, then eventually we will be heard.

And we have done so, not just as individual elected officials, but as a County organization — united more often than not by a unanimous view that we are obliged to act on behalf of our residents when what we hear

from our nation's capital either impedes our ability to serve the public, or presents a direct threat to the well-being of our residents — or both. This is as it should be.

Now, if you say our first obligation is to effectively manage the \$6.5 billion dollar enterprise that is County government, well, I would agree.

If you argue that rhetoric and resolutions alone will not make a better nation, or even a better county, I'd say I think you're right.

And if you suggest that we have to get past the partisanship and personality politics that are hobbling us at the national level, I'd say "I'm with you."

But we find ourselves at a time unlike any other — and so, necessarily, we are obliged to respond in ways unlike other times.

Our County is determined to stand up, speak up and push back because we believe that it is in the interest of the 1.9 million people who call Santa Clara County home for us to do so.

That's why we push back.

That's why we push back on the Muslim ban.

We push back on efforts to gut the Clean Power Plan.

We push back on efforts to abandon our Dreamers.

We push back on efforts to undermine Net Neutrality.

We push back on partisan gerrymandering.

We push back on punitive efforts to withhold federal funding rightfully belonging to our county and its residents.

We push back on efforts to limit family planning and access to contraception.

We push back on these and a host of other actions — not to “make a statement,” but to serve a purpose.

We've pushed back and spoken up, fully realizing that neither the current administration nor the Congress is likely to provide much relief. And so, we've turned to the courts. Not as a matter of choice, but as a matter of necessity.

If regulatory comment is the proper course, we comment.

If litigation is required, we're on it.

If a friend of the court filing is called for, well, no one is friendlier than Santa Clara County.

Now let me be clear on this. It gives me no pleasure to use the resources of one level of government to bring suit against another. But in the current circumstances, the courts are often our last best hope.

We should be thankful for an independent judiciary; and, by the way, for a County Counsel's office that represents us so ably in that arena.

But resistance alone is not enough. Holding the line is not enough. Manning the barricades is not enough. Our work is too important. The need is too great. And our potential too vast to squander.

So yes, we will resist, because we are obliged to. But our constituents demand more than resistance. They want progress, and they deserve it. All of us do. We want progress on a dozen and one fronts.

We want progress on creating and sustaining economic opportunity — not just for some, but for all. Decent jobs, a livable wage, a middle class life, and a shot at something more.

We want progress on criminal justice — we want a system that deters crime, keeps us safe, delivers just punishment, and rehabilitates rather than recycles those who are incarcerated. And we expect that system of justice to respect the community it serves — with due process, privacy protections and use of force only as needed.

We want progress on the challenge of homelessness — and we rightfully wonder why, in one of the richest places on the planet, we still have 7,000 people on the streets every night.

We want progress on the environment— on every possible front. Development that is wise and well managed — complemented by parks and open spaces that provide opportunities for contemplation, recreation and inspiration. Places of solitude, and places of joyous laughter. Places that serve as habitat, that offer elbow room for all.

And energy sources that look to the future — clean and green and renewable — mindful of the obligation each and all of us have to address the issue of climate change here on our own little piece of the planet.

We want progress for our families, however defined, whatever their makeup. For the children who are this Valley's future, and the seniors who represent the accumulated work and wisdom of prior generations.

We want progress on health care, healthcare for all — a notion so basic we are constantly surprised to hear it described as anything other than a fundamental right — and constantly alarmed by the roller coaster ride we're on nationally with respect to health care.

We want progress on mental health — to push away the stigma — to confront mental health issues for what they are: health care issues — and to respond accordingly. Across all ages, all incomes and all populations — with a particular commitment to address the tragedy of young lives lost.

We want progress on traffic. Roads that work. Highways that move. Transit that takes us from where we are to where we want to go, and back

again. Quickly, safely, affordably and reliably. It's hard to enjoy our great quality of life in the parking lot we call 101.

We want progress on housing. In part to create more diverse and inclusive communities — but also because an adequate supply of affordable housing is indispensable to our economy, essential to solving our traffic woes, and, by the way, integral to our safety and security — because if the folks who actually make this Valley work on a daily basis aren't here for us in the event of a crisis or calamity — well then, the rest of us will quite literally have to fend for ourselves.

And because we cannot truly call ourselves a place of opportunity if there is no place, no space, for those who would be our neighbors.

We want a County government that gets the job done while making careful use of taxpayer dollars — with efficiency, effectiveness and accountability. A County government that's ahead of the curve, preparing and planning for a changing future.

And as ambitious as it may sound, we want progress in creating communities where ‘unity in diversity’ is real— where none of us — none of us — is disrespected, discriminated against, or marginalized by virtue of race or religion, age or ethnicity; gender, class, or sexual orientation. Where each of us is valued for the good we bring to our common endeavor, and the whole really is more than the sum of its parts.

Because we create community from the ground up. Because here in Santa Clara County we pull together, even as others would pull us apart.

Because we can forge a sense of shared purpose, a common understanding, even as we respect and reflect the diversity of this county’s residents.

We want all this, and it is within our reach; but it will take work. Lots and lots of work.

So resistance alone will not be enough. We can’t accept a year— or two— or four— or more— without progress on all these fronts. We have work to be done, and notwithstanding the unprecedented political and

institutional challenges we face, we must do it. Even as we resist, we must make progress.

And if we work together in partnership with one another—there really is no limit to the progress we can make. While there are certainly limits to the progress any one organization can achieve — even one as large as our County — when we partner, then the potential for progress is truly without limit.

Which is why I am so glad that Erika Escalante could be here today. To remind us of the power of partnerships.

As Erika noted a few minutes ago, there was a time — just a few years ago — when 400 residents at the Buena Vista thought there was no hope—when any objective observer would correctly conclude that none of us had it within our power to make progress on a seemingly intractable issue.

And then we here at the County began to work in partnership with others. Our role in the partnership to “Save the Buena Vista” began right here when Supervisor Cortese and I partnered in drafting a memo to our

Board, and our colleagues expressed their immediate willingness to take the lead in an effort to acquire and improve the Buena Vista.

And then, there were so many others who saw that in partnership we could do together what none of us could do alone:

- The City of Palo Alto, whose City Council unanimously agreed to match the County's funding commitment;
- Our indispensable third partner in the effort to acquire and improve the Buena Vista, the Housing Authority of the County of Santa Clara;
- Caritas, the California-based nonprofit, experienced and skilled at preserving affordable mobile home communities, who reached out to us in the early days of our effort, and who is now under contract to actively manage the new Buena Vista;
- Our Congresswoman Anna Eshoo, State Senator Jerry Hill and former State Assemblyman Rich Gordon, all of whom lent their support, and helped with the search for funding;

- Two dozen former Mayors and City Councilmembers from Palo Alto who spoke out in support of the effort to save the Buena Vista;
- Eighteen local school board members (past and present) who likewise expressed their support;
- More than 500 community members who rallied at Palo Alto City Hall to show their support for their Buena Vista neighbors;
- Our local news media, including the Mercury News, the Palo Alto Weekly, and the Daily Post, all of which lent their editorial support;
- The Palo Alto Council of PTAs, and the 6th District PTA — representing PTA councils throughout our county and beyond;
- The many non-profits who stepped forward to offer support, including the Asian Law Alliance, Neighborhood Housing Services, the Housing Trust Silicon Valley, Working Partnerships, TransForm, the League of Women Voters Palo Alto and the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, among others;

- The Law Foundation of Silicon Valley, who represented the residents throughout their ordeal;
- The aptly named Friends of Buena Vista; and, of course,
- The residents themselves, represented by the Buena Vista Residents Association.

So many good folks who came together and partnered with our County:

- Partnered to prevent the loss of 117 units of desperately needed affordable housing;
- Partnered to prevent the eviction of more than 400 of our neighbors; and,
- Partnered to make sure that the park's previous owner received full and fair market value upon sale of the property.

What happened at the Buena Vista happened only because of a remarkable and wide-ranging partnership.

Now, I highlight the Buena Vista today not as a history lesson — but as a lesson for the future — that partnerships are key to the progress we must make.

When Supervisor Chavez and I brought forward a proposal to provide partial funding for all-inclusive playgrounds throughout the County, serving children and families with and without disabilities, we were hoping to build — literally and figuratively — we were hoping to build on partnerships already begun by the Rotary PlayGarden in San Jose and the Magical Bridge in Palo Alto.

And now we have.

With the grants approved just two weeks ago, our County will be partnering in a half dozen neighborhoods, up and down the County, partnering with four cities, a school district, a non-profit, generous donors (including our local businesses), and community volunteers — all to the benefit of kids and their families — in numbers beyond count, for decades to come.

And we'll be pursuing these initial partnerships in the hope that the number of such partnerships will grow—not just here in our County, but across the region, the state and the nation.

Similarly, when Supervisor Wasserman and I approached our colleagues about the challenges of senior transportation in the West Valley—we knew that partnerships were the essential ingredient.

Funding from five different cities — cutting across three supervisorial districts — along with financial support from our County and the Valley Transportation Authority was the necessary precondition for RYDE (Reach Your Destination Easily).

A senior mobility program serving older adults in Campbell, Cupertino, Los Gatos, Monte Sereno and Saratoga. With two established and well regarded non-profits — the Saratoga Senior Center and West Valley Community Services — providing the local know-how, leadership and volunteers necessary to actually deliver the service.

And when Supervisor Yeager and I pushed for funding for a public health nurse assigned to oversee the provision of psychotropic medication for our foster youth, we were partnering with a separate and independent branch of government—our local judiciary—because we knew that we needed to partner if we were going to stop the over reliance on drugs for “managing” the kids in our system.

The press reported the problem. Supervisor Yeager scheduled the hearing. The Courts expressed their need. And our Board stepped in to do its part. That’s how partnerships are formed.

Such partnerships, of course, require all of us, each of us, to reject the divisiveness of what currently passes for political dialogue in the nation— and to work in partnership with any and all who share our commitment to find common ground in the name of progress. And so we will.

Our County will partner with business and labor, who too often forget that they need each other.

We'll partner with other levels of government — including the 15 cities and towns in this county whose residents are our own.

We'll partner with this county's rich panoply of non-profits — too often overlooked and underappreciated.

They're our secret weapon. Close to the ground, and often more nimble than government in seeing and responding to changed conditions.

We'll partner with our schools and our colleges and our universities.

We'll partner with all the good people of this county, whoever they are, whatever they look like, and wherever they came from. All will be included in the partnerships we forge and the progress we make.

We will include them as a matter of fundamental fairness.

We will include them because our decision making will be better when we have the benefit of their diverse views, values, backgrounds and experience.

And we will include them, quite frankly, as a matter of self-interest. Because given the challenges we face, we can't afford to waste the talent that our more recent arrivals represent.

While the divisiveness over immigration rages on in D.C., let me offer a pair of observations:

My first observation is economic. Ours is a region rightly renowned as a center of innovation and entrepreneurship. Here in the center of Silicon Valley our County boasts an economy that is the envy of the nation.

The second observation is demographic: Almost 40 percent of the population in Santa Clara County is foreign born. They're immigrants.

Now, let me connect the dots. Santa Clara County is a county of immigrants and a county of prosperity. This is not a matter of coincidence.

And yet, on a daily basis we are subjected to the suggestion that a foreign born friend or neighbor, a classmate or a colleague, is somehow not one of us. They're different. They're scary. They're "the other."

I have to tell you, I look out in our chambers today and I see no “other.” I see only partners — past, present, and most importantly, partners for the future, partners in progress for the coming year, and in all the years ahead.

A week ago the President of the United States firmly declared that, “... the state of our union is strong because our people are strong.” I agree.

And at the local level, the state of our county is strong because our people are strong. All of our people.

Now, I have purposefully eschewed the opportunity today to offer a personal agenda for the coming year.

It’s not because I don’t have individual plans or ambitions for the year ahead. Of course I do.

I have a “to do list” as long as your arm — longer, in fact. So do my colleagues. So do the community leaders and advocates who have joined us here today. So do we all.

But I want the conversation we begin today to be about something more than any individual Supervisor's individual ambitions.

I want it to be about the work we can do together as partners.

The work any one of us does on our Board can only be done in partnership with our colleagues — and with our staff. To actually deliver results we rely on the very capable people seated behind me, our Board appointed officials; and another 20,000 or so capable and caring County employees who do the hard work that is county government.

We'll need their help to foster these partnerships — within our own organization and out in the community. In a large organization partnership doesn't always come naturally.

And of course, I want to partner with all of you.

As the year unfolds you'll hear me return again and again to these two themes: partnership and progress. Because I'm confident that however tumultuous the scene may be at the state or national level, progress can be

made — will be made — by good people partnering with one another to make progress for us all.

So let's make 2018 a year of partnership and progress. In fact, let's make partnership and progress the hallmark of all the years to come.

We have so much to do. So let's get to it.