

North Bay Chamber Policy Platform

Chambers from the North Bay met this spring to discuss their concerns about state-wide public policy issues and to determine which of those issues are most important to their members. The list of policy priorities that emerged follows.

COVID Response/Economic Recovery

Safe Reopening/Consumer Confidence

Economic recovery will be dependent not only on safe business practices, but equally dependent on community wide education and personal responsibility. We need a statewide effort and funding for a public information campaign, educating consumers on personal responsibility for safe practices and on what businesses are doing to stay safe.

PPE/Screening Equipment

Supply chain, PPE and other screening equipment needs to be available. We need purchasing power to make supplies available to business. If the State is unable to coordinate purchasing, County governments should be empowered and subsidized to make bulk purchases to provide at cost to businesses and residents.

Funding/support for Chambers

Chambers of commerce are providing critical information, guidance, and resources to help their communities through the COVID-19 crisis. Chambers are serving as the voice of business and providing important messaging to the business community, as well as supporting the distribution of health information to residents. Chambers have served a crucial role of convener at a time when impacts have needed to be quickly understood and policy decisions quickly implemented.

Chambers will play an equally important role in economic recovery, yet without the kind of Federal support that has been available to other organizations, Chambers are experiencing their own extreme financial challenges. We know that the State will need to maximize economic development opportunities and that Chambers of Commerce are the best positioned to fill this role. Engaging Chambers in this effort and funding, for example, their work to distribute information to business and to engage in crucial workforce development efforts, would maximize return on state resources while helping to stabilize the important work of Chambers of Commerce.

Housing

The housing shortage is at a crisis level in the North Bay. Our housing challenges were magnified by COVID-19, emphasizing the need to stabilize the housing industry and increase certainty throughout the system. Rents and home prices continue to increase and grow out of reach of many of our residents. The housing shortage is impeding business growth and causing economic and environmental damage, as our

residents are forced to commute long distances to find housing. These extra-long commutes result in increased air pollution, traffic congestion, growing inequity, and stressed employees resulting in reduced workforce productivity.

While proposals for rent control and just cause eviction laws are meant to provide affordable housing for renters, the consensus among experts is that these policies exacerbate housing shortages. Moreover, economic and housing experts have demonstrated that the most effective way to ease the cost of housing is new home development; the State needs to act to stimulate the construction of new housing for all income levels.

Support is needed at the state level to encourage, mandate, or facilitate local streamlining of permitting and to create certainty in the process for developers. Community resistance to new housing construction adds to the housing shortage, as pressure on local officials results in inconsistent approvals of projects. Most critically, CEQA amendments must finally be addressed to ensure it is not an obstacle for high density development, particularly for infill urban development. The abuse of CEQA, for purposes unrelated to environmental protection, to slow or block projects adds significant costs and time to the housing development process. This results in increased housing prices with litigation costs being passed on to home buyers, the stopping of planned new housing projects, and by discouraging development altogether. Greater financial benefits, including increased tax incentives for infill and affordable housing would also support increased housing supply and affordability. Such State level policies can spur development, create opportunities to reduce homelessness, and reduce environmental impact while supporting a resilient, diverse workforce and economic growth.

PSPS Events

Large scale Public Safety Power Shutoff (PSPS) events have come at an enormous economic cost to our region. Even when areas are not impacted with the loss of power, during last year's wide-spread PSPS events, the community at large was unable to continue with normal routines and patterns, making small business in particular, endure extreme depressions in activity. After the major economic disruption of COVID-19 SIP orders, the business community cannot sustain a repeat of last year's PSPS events, with losses in the millions of dollars per event, and a lack of communication and process certainty from PG&E. We need:

- Immediate interim solutions to minimize the impact of PSPS events in low-risk fire zones
- Requirements for a more refined/sophisticated shutdown
- Timeframe requirement for shut down notice from PG&E
- Requirement for restoration time frames

Minimizing Risk of Fires

Much of California has seen an increase in risk of wildland fires. To help mitigate the risk locally, we support: Initiatives to reduce the volume of combustible materials in the forests and rangelands; smart management practices for property and forests that minimize the likelihood and spread of fires; and improvements to the electric distribution system that would serve to minimize fire risk.

Workforce

With double digit unemployment, a strong workforce development system will be critical to quickly retrain or upskill job seekers and connect them with employment opportunities. Continued funding of workforce development programs, and investment in workforce development efforts will be crucial to ensure that employees have the skills and knowledge to contribute in an adapting and recovering economy, and to fuel economic recovery.

In order to support our current workforce while building our future workforce, we need to ensure access to quality early education and care. Pre-COVID-19 crisis, 62% of Californians lived in areas where daycare was nearly impossible to find. This shortage reduces the size of our current labor force, makes our state less attractive in retaining and recruiting a young workforce and misses a key opportunity to invest in our future workforce when it is most cost effective, from age 0-5. This is the best investment we can make to improve outcomes for children with cost savings in education, health, economic productivity, and crime reduction. Any cuts to child care funding will irreparably damage California's already fragile child-care system, immediately hindering our current workforce and creating long-term negative effects for our future workforce, while stifling California's economic recovery.

Cuts to education funding jeopardize California's economic prosperity and threaten our recovery. We need an education system in California that is responsive to employers' needs through alignment of the full education pipeline from early childhood to K-12 to post-secondary and the workforce. Ongoing support for career technical education (CTE), STEM programs, internships and on the job training at both the state and local level are key elements in ensuring the availability of the workforce of the future.

Transportation

While we understand that major projects endorsed by our group, such as reconstruction of Highway 37 will be partially delayed by COVID-19, we emphasize the importance of transportation infrastructure as a top priority among delayed plans. The ongoing deterioration of our transportation infrastructure is hurting our member businesses whether they depend upon shipping their goods out of the area or on tourism and in-person business. We support transportation policies and funding that increase mobility, relieve congestion and expand alternative commute options, including connectors between different modes of public transportation. Funding should ensure long-term stability of our roads, bridges, and infrastructure, all necessary to support a vibrant economy.

We support the allocation of the needed SB1 funds to complete the widening of US Highway 101 in Marin County. The Sonoma Marin Narrows on 101 are the only continuous north-south route through Marin and Sonoma counties, yet offer an insufficient number of lanes resulting in an economic toll on our region from lost productivity, fuel burned and environmental impact, all of which are dramatically increased by severe traffic congestion.

Due to safety concerns for proximity, our communities have seen a reduction in use of public transportation leading to extra cars. We need a public information campaign, along with practices for safety of use of public transportation.