

Lobbyist, ex-Valley lawmaker Rick Lehman retiring, but politics stays in his blood | Politics

By John
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Rick Lehman, 66, a former Valley lawmaker who spent two decades as a lobbyist in Sacramento for a number of Valley interests, is retiring from politics.

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

After 45 years in the political world -- from legislative staffer to elected official to lobbyist -- central San Joaquin Valley native Richard Lehman is retiring.

Just don't expect him to totally give up politics.

"Once you're a political junkie, you never get it out of your system," he said.

That said, Lehman -- who grew up on a farm near Sanger -- said there's a lot more to life than toiling daily in the state's political world advocating for his lobbying clients. He wants to discover what's out there.

A little more than a month after turning 66, he's already learning Spanish. He plans to catch up on the novels he was too busy to read. He's taking voice lessons and trying his hand at carpentry, though he admits to no skill at all in that area. And he and his wife Virginia plan to travel "while we're healthy and have our wits about us."

Even more important, Lehman said, is spending time with his three grandchildren and the fourth that is on the way.

One thing that likely won't change: When he's not traveling, he'll continue to split time between homes in North Fork, Mexico and Sacramento.

Lehman will officially "deregister" as a lobbyist on Monday, though the firm where he is a partner -- Lehman Levi Pappas & Sadler -- will continue to operate.

But with his name still on the masthead?

"They can do what they want," Lehman said of his partners. "I'm not going to see it again."

Former Assembly Member Juan Arambula of Fresno said Lehman was a good lobbyist -- and also helpful as a fellow moderate Democrat.

"He was a good adviser to many freshmen, especially those from the Valley like myself who had moderate leanings like himself," Arambula said. "We got along well. I thought the world of him, and he did a very good job."

Lehman got his start in politics when then-Assembly Member George Zenovich hired him when he was attending the University of California at Santa Cruz.

At that time, Lehman already had whetted his political appetite. He served as Fresno City College's student body president and was Fresno County co-chair of Robert F. Kennedy's California presidential campaign. He also was an alternate delegate to the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago where he felt the sting of tear gas as he rode in a bus past protesters clashing with police.

In 1976, Lehman was elected to the state Assembly, and served 12 years in Congress before losing a re-election bid to Mariposa Republican George Radanovich in 1994.

After that, Lehman headed to Sacramento and into the lobbying world.

Lehman's firm lobbies for a host of businesses, governments and associations. Over the years, Lehman lobbied for the Fresno County Office of Education, the North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians and, at different times, Community Medical Centers and Saint Agnes Medical Center.

Another company Lehman lobbied for was Ed Kashian's Lance-Kashian & Company.

"I can tell you honestly there are not too many people like him left," Kashian said. Lehman, Kashian said, was from an era of politicians who were adversaries, but were also gentlemen.

"I count Rick as one of those people," Kashian said.

Lehman still serves on the National Park Trust, the National Council for the Traditional Arts and the Mono Lake Committee. He also sits on a bank board in Fresno. He'll continue all of those duties.

"He's been talking about it for awhile," said Rep. Jim Costa, who has known Lehman for decades and like him was mentored by Zenovich. "I think he finds this is an opportunity to spend time with his family and pursue other goals that he's had interest in for years -- whether it's traveling or songwriting or being with his grandchildren. So good for him."

Asked if he will miss lobbying in Sacramento, Lehman said "not really. Not at all. It gets disillusioning to see what has happened to the political process."

Lehman said he "had the honor to serve with the World War II generation."

Those legislators, he said, would engage in political fights all day, but in the end "they'd make things work, knew schools had to open, knew colleges had to be funded, knew roads had to be repaired."

And despite their ideological differences, after work they'd drink and dine together, and their wives would all socialize.

"Now both sides just play to the base and there's no problem-solving," he said.

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