

Fresno County 'poised for prosperity,' Supervisor Andreas Borgeas says

By Tim Sheehan



Anne Speake, left, congratulates Berj Apkarian, newly named as the Republic of Armenia's first honorary consul in the U.S. following the Fresno Chamber of Commerce's annual State of the County breakfast on Wednesday, Sept. 24. Apkarian is director of physician relations for Fresno-based Community Medical Centers.

TIM SHEEHAN — THE FRESNO BEE

Fresno County continues to rebound from the depths of the recession and "is poised for greater prosperity," county Board of Supervisors Chairman Andreas Borgeas told business leaders in the annual State of the County address Wednesday.

Borgeas, who joined the board about a year and a half ago, described how a series of controversial decisions by supervisors to rein in spending are starting to pay off. "We have reached a true turning point," he said. "We are responsibly restoring core services, reinstating important positions, working to resolve labor-management challenges and making investments in the future, all while heeding the hard lessons learned from our recession."

Borgeas said that for the first time in the county's history, the board adopted an annual budget that exceeds \$2 billion, including provisions for 77 new positions and contributions to the county's emergency reserve. Among the new positions, he added, are 10 sheriff's deputies and 17 new staff in the Public Defender's Office.

"While we cannot afford to consider ourselves completely in the clear, fiscal prudence has paid off and Fresno County

is coming out of the roughest waters ever experienced," Borgeas declared. "While we are not back to the good old days, Fresno County has come a long way in the last six years."

Borgeas said that after years of painful budget cuts, county supervisors are looking forward to rebuilding staff morale through restoring wages that have been sliced and reinstating lost jobs. But, he warned that the expectations of the county's employee labor unions "must be realistic."

Recovering lost wages and positions, he said, "must take place over a period of years and done in a financially responsible manner."

In addition to highlighting county accomplishments, Borgeas introduced Berj Apkarian — executive director of physician relations at Community Medical Centers — as the newly appointed honorary consul for the Republic of Armenia.

"The Armenians bring so much richness to our community. Having an honorary consul here in Fresno would represent the ultimate expression of friendship and respect between our two great countries," Borgeas said.

The post "is a tremendous honor for Fresno County because it is the first one to be established in the United States," Borgeas said, adding that the position was the result of several years of behind-the-scenes work with the Armenian embassy in Washington, Armenia's foreign ministry in Yerevan and the U.S. State Department.

Apkarian, who immigrated to Fresno from Syria in 1979, said the appointment "is an honor and a privilege."

"This position will be the hub to create close communication — on economic, cultural, commerce, political (issues), every platform you can think of — to bring the diaspora in the central San Joaquin Valley closer to the Republic of Armenia," Apkarian said. "We look forward to strengthening the cooperation and collaboration, and making Armenia stronger through the economic and cultural ties."

Borgeas also presented the "key to the county" award to Fresno's Assemi family, owners of Granville Homes and founders of the Waterford Foundation and other local charities.

"They have built hospitals, supported charitable groups, donated homes and have contributed extraordinary amounts to our schools and other community assets," Borgeas said. "This organization and its related entities over the last 10 years have made contributions valued at \$20 million. ... Our community wouldn't be the same community or the same place to call home without the organization we are honoring today."

Darius Assemi, president of Granville Homes, accepted the award on behalf of the family, who emigrated from Iran in the late 1970s.

"This county and this community have been very good to our family," Assemi said. "We're very grateful to this county, to the citizens, to the residents who have made our company successful."

Assemi encouraged the audience and elected officials "to work together, to put aside our differences and address the ills of our community." He cited challenges like almost 7,000 homeless children in the county and a lack of reading proficiency for 60% of children by the time they enter third grade, and advocated for greater investment in early childhood education.

"We know that education is transformative, so we can spend money in early childhood education ... and early childhood care, or we can spend a lot more money locking people up."

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