

John Navarrette, Fresno County chief administrator, to retire

By Marc Benjamin



John Navarrette, Fresno County chief administrative officer, in a 2009 file photo.

ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE

- *Navarrette led Fresno County through some of its most difficult times.*
- *Navarrette was a lightning rod for displeasure from county labor unions.*
- *Search will begin soon for Navarrette's successor.*

Fresno County's top administrator is retiring after 31 years working for the county.

John Navarrette, 62, who spent the last six and a half years as county administrative officer, said it is "time to start checking off" his personal bucket list. His last day will be Oct. 23.

He started at Fresno County in 1985 as an entry level staff analyst and has been county administrative officer since September 2008, when he took over for Bart Bohn.

“This goes to show anyone starting at the bottom, willing to work hard, can succeed and make it to the top job,” he wrote in a short letter Monday to department heads.

“I’m grateful for the opportunities afforded to me as I pursued my career with Fresno County. I leave knowing the county is in good hands with the many dedicated employees it has.”

Before becoming county administrative officer, he ran the county’s general services department from 2004 to 2008.

As the county’s top administrator, Navarrette has been a lightning rod for labor groups. He is viewed as responsible for the 9% pay cuts county workers took in 2011. Last year, supervisors gave Navarrette a \$35,000 annual pay increase, raising the ire of the county unions again. A dozen other department heads also got raises.

Several unions continue to battle the county for raises and have filed unfair labor practices with the state Public Employment Relations Board.

“This is an opportunity to press ‘reset’ for Fresno County, which has been slipping in basic quality-of-life measures in recent years,” said Riley Talford, a senior shop steward with the Fresno County unit of the Service Employees International Union. “Our 5,000 Fresno County workers look forward to working with the board of supervisors in helping select a new county leader committed to investing in public services and putting our community first.”

But Board Chairwoman Debbie Poochigian credits Navarrette with stewardship of the county during some of its most difficult times and carrying out the will of the board of supervisors.

“He’s been our CAO in the most challenging times and I believe that he was the driving force in keeping Fresno County afloat in the past six years,” she said. “He has been an outstanding leader for Fresno County and it will not be easy to fill his shoes.”

Poochigian also spoke highly of Navarrette’s leadership qualities and the team of leaders that surrounded him.

“He put together a great team, a very competent hard-working team of leaders,” she said.

Henry R. Perea said Navarrette “served the county well through challenging times.”

He said the county will begin recruitment soon and hire a search firm in a few weeks to find Navarrette’s successor.

Bob Waterston, a retired Fresno County supervisor and longtime friend, said Navarrette had a difficult job.

“I think he had the county’s best interests at heart with what he was doing,” Waterston said. “He’s done a good job considering the pressure he was under.”

He said battles Navarrette and his administrative staff had with employees were part of being the leader.

“Naturally, employees will be the maddest with him,” Waterston said. “When you’re the captain of the ship, nobody’s going to like you.”

Susan Anderson, who served with Waterston, was not always a Navarrette supporter.

“He’s a survivor and he’s a bureaucrat, he knows how the system works and he knows how to play the game,” Anderson said. “He survived longer than most CAOs.”

The selection of a new county administrator is “probably the most important job the board does,” Anderson said.

The CAO position is a difficult job and requires the holder to be part administrator and part politician, she said.

“It’s a leadership job because you’re leading all these department heads and staff,” she said. “It’s a political job

because you work for elected officials who don't always agree.”

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