

From supervisor to assemblymember: Gregg Hart reflects on one year in California Assembly seat

Gregg Hart represents the 37th District on the California State Assembly.

By Evelyn Spence

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Assemblymember Gregg Hart

Before California redrew its assembly districts – placing all of Santa Barbara County’s approximately 446,000 residents and 47,000 southern San Luis Obispo County residents in one newly-minted 37th Assembly District – now Assemblymember Gregg Hart said he had been content working for the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors.

“I wasn’t looking for change,” he told CVN.

But then, now 38th District Assemblymember Steve Bennett rang him up in late 2021 and said California districts were being changed – a new assembly district, representing all of Santa Barbara County, was emerging.

“California is a leader for the whole country – it’s the fourth largest economy in the world,” Hart told CVN. “And having a say in that venue is important, in particular, to represent our community (...) People are not (in Santa Barbara County) by accident. They’re invested in the community. They want it to be preserved.

“It’s a great place to work and represent.”

One year after the election, Hart sat down with CVN to reflect on his first year in office. One of the biggest challenges of his new job compared to the supervisor position? Getting a majority to pass a bill.

“The biggest challenge on the board of supervisors was that I just had to count to three to get to a majority,” Hart told CVN. “In assembly, it takes 41 votes to get a bill passed, and the governor has to approve.”

Born and raised in Santa Barbara County, UC Santa Barbara alumni Hart served on the Santa Barbara Board of Supervisors for four years before making the jump to assemblymember and assembly assistant majority leader. He has spent more than 30 years serving the county publicly: on the planning commission, as a city council member, a member of the California Coastal Commission and as a supervisor.

Hart said he spent a good portion of his first year as an assemblyman getting to know his colleagues, but he cited three bills he's particularly proud of authoring: Assembly Bills 590, 631 and 1345.

Nonprofits that receive California state grants and contracts must spend their money, then be reimbursed by the state, often facing long wait times to be reimbursed. Assembly Bill 590 allows state agencies to dole out 25% of up-front payments, easing the burden on nonprofits.

"(Santa Barbara County) has more nonprofits per capita than just about any other place in the country," Hart told CVN. "(The bill) was the number one priority of the California Nonprofits Organization (...) I'm very proud."

Assembly Bill 631 harshened penalties and fines for oil and gas companies that harm local communities, including those in Santa Barbara County. The old pay structure, Hart said, was ancient, and introduced at a time when oil companies had more influence.

"For some operators, (those old penalties) just became the cost of doing business. (AB631) will now bring these penalties and fines into the 21st century and create the positive incentives we want them to be," he said.

Hart cited the oil company then known as Greka as an example of a company that the new penalties may have stopped; the oil company "invested as little as possible," Hart said, and walked away from the environmental disaster in north Santa Barbara County.

Assembly Bill 1345 helps protect homeowners from predatory real estate practices; in California and across the county, Hart said, a new unscrupulous business practice preys on seniors, where companies offer seniors long-term real estate listing contracts that can be enforced by liens on their homes.

"If they want to get out of their contract, the equity on their home is at risk," Hart said. "We got a bill (by) working very close with the real estate industry, which was initially concerned about the bill. But we found a compromise that (...) prohibits these practices that prey on people."

All three of these bills, alongside five of Hart's assembly bills, were signed into law by California Governor Gavin Newsom.

Beyond the direct assembly bills, Hart said he worked with the county government earlier this year when the early winter storms hit Santa Barbara County, encouraging the governor to declare a disaster.

He also emphasized that working with 19th Senate District Senator Monique Limón – calling her a “great ally and tremendous mentor” – has been a high priority. The pair worked together on the state budget, where, among other requests – with Limón in the lead, he said – they allotted funding for Heal the Ocean to cap the leaking oil wells off the coast of Summerland.

The pair also banded together with other legislators from Ventura to Santa Cruz, to create the Central Coast Legislative Caucus – a caucus that addresses the needs of the entire central coast, raising the visibility of the area and helping put the Central Coast on a more even level with Los Angeles and San Francisco.

The jump to assembly has been an adjustment – in particular, the commute between Santa Barbara and Sacramento each week – but Hart said he is proud of what he’s accomplished in the past year. Beyond the approved bills and other disaster relief work, Hart cited bringing back Sidewalk Hours, where constituents can come and talk directly with the assemblymember, and allotting \$2.5 million for a historic 1927 Lompoc theater as noted accomplishments.

Over the next year, Hart said he will work to further address affordable housing issues – an issue he noted acutely affects Santa Barbara – and homelessness, expanding the “tiny cabin” format many local governments have used to get homeless community members off the streets. He would also like to see the commuter rail line between Ventura and Santa Barbara County return, an effort that is currently underway.

“I had a great track record with eight of the bills I got to the governor’s desk, and I hope to be successful again,” he said. “(This job) is a lot, and yet it’s very gratifying. I have a big responsibility, and I take it seriously.”

https://www.coastalview.com/news/from-supervisor-to-assemblymember-gregg-hart-reflects-on-one-year-in-california-assembly-seat/article_d4df6ac8-8421-11ee-b14c-2f917ee0dc27.html