

Our Endorsement: Gregg Hart

Gregg Hart, the pragmatic progressive — or progressive pragmatist — who helped keep the county Board of Supervisors centered these past four years, is now running for State Assembly against perennial Republican candidate Mike Stoker.

Even when more conservative-leaning North County voters are factored into the mix, it's unfathomable that Santa Barbara County could elect anyone to the statehouse whose claim to fame is having led the "Lock 'er up" chant against Hillary Clinton at the 2016 Republican convention that gave birth to the presidency of Donald Trump. Stoker is a more complex creature than that moment suggests and not nearly as bad. But actions have consequences.

And even if Hart is, in fact, the career politician Stoker has accused him of being, Hart has proved uncommonly effective in office, even elevating the role. With a big, beaming grin — sometimes cheesy, but always winning — Hart understands the mechanics of how government works like few others. He's not a chest thumper. But he gets stuff done.

More than that, the chemistry between him and the four other supervisors — north and south alike — was exceptionally productive. Watching the county supervisors at this fractured and fractious time in American history has been a tonic. Politicians with clearly different beliefs showed they could work together as a democratically elected body effectively functioning to serve the county. And Hart was at the center of making that happen.

Hart also distinguished himself by his service during the height of the COVID pandemic, hosting weekly half-hour press briefings involving public health and medical experts from Cottage Hospital. As such, Hart had to surf an unenviable wave. On one side were people demanding stronger enforcement. On the other, there were those who accused the county of oppressive overreach. For Hart, there was no safe middle ground. Through it all, Hart kept grinning. He never sought to play the role of inspirational unifier, but these briefings offered the media a rare opportunity to ask questions of those who were often too harried to otherwise respond, and get that information out to the public. Sadly, when Hart's term as board chair expired, these sessions stopped.

As supervisor, Hart — who cut his teeth as an aid for former State Assemblymember Jack O'Connell — also worked effectively on criminal justice reform and mental health care issues. He pushed and prodded the Sheriff, the DA, and County Probation to keep people facing criminal charges who did not pose a threat to their communities out of jail and into diversion programs. Hart was hardly alone in this endeavor, but his approach, demeanor, and resolve helped embolden those who might otherwise have shied away from the fray and helped create a broader coalition in favor of reform.

We have not always seen eye-to-eye with Hart on everything. We always questioned his aversion to the imposition of affordability requirements on new housing units and found his belief in the free market solutions misplaced and unjustified by the facts. Even more so, we wondered, what was the urgency with which he pursued a Project Labor Agreement ordinance at the county? And why was he so impatient about the legitimate questions county officials were asking about the additional construction costs such an agreement might trigger?

We certainly doubted Hart's wisdom in voting to hire the cannabis industry's chief lobbyist as his administrative assistant upon first taking office. Given the inflammatory nature of the issue at the time, we thought the selection — born of personal loyalty — seemed a gratuitous provocation.

Also, once Hart adopts his talking points, his skilled discipline can become rigid. We certainly saw that when Hart was all but running SBCAG. His response to the City of Santa Barbara concerns that the freeway-widening project would cause disruptions that had not been adequately mitigated, was abrupt, even dismissive.

But whatever our reservations about such details, there's no doubt Hart will do an infinitely better job representing the district's interests in Sacramento than his brash and amiable opponent, Mike Stoker, will.

When Stoker served on the board of supervisors, his chief accomplishment was the consolidation of several high-profile and politically charged county departments that had no business ever being consolidated. The grand jury would later denounce the endeavor as political flimflammy designed to reward politically supportive law-and-order department heads while punishing those who worked well with what had been the board's slow-growth majority. None of these consolidations — touted at the time for their cost-saving potentials — stayed joined at the hip for long; they were functionally unworkable. Putting the sheriff and the fire department together under one unified command roof, for example, sounded good only on paper and in Stoker's political payback fantasy.

Our biggest concern with Hart's all-but-inevitable victory this November is which of his fellow supervisors will step up and embrace the exhaustingly complex challenges inherent in expanding mental health choices and treatment in Santa Barbara. Who will have the patience, stamina, and attention to mind-numbing detail required to be effective when it comes to criminal justice reform?

But Hart has long harbored serious ambitions about running for state office. This is clearly his time now. We're confident Hart will quickly find his footing in Sacramento, work well with the party leadership — which controls a super majority of both houses — and advocate effectively on behalf of the interests of his constituents. We can ask no more.

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