
News Release

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Palm Desert's Jan Harnik sworn in as SCAG President as nation's largest metropolitan planning organization faces critical year ahead

Palm Desert, CA – Newly installed President Jan Harnik is taking the long view on what the next 12 months will mean for the six-county Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) region as it confronts critical issues such as broadband access, transportation, air quality and the housing crisis.

"It isn't about this moment in time, but how the decisions we make today will impact tomorrow. It is absolutely imperative that we understand why we're doing this work and who we're doing it for," said Harnik, Mayor of Palm Desert who was sworn in on Thursday as President of the nation's largest metropolitan planning organization during its 2022 Regional Conference & General Assembly.

More than 500 elected officials, stakeholders and leaders in business, education and economic development are gathering in Palm Desert for the two-day annual conference, which has returned to the Coachella Valley after a two-year absence caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It comes at a pivotal time for SCAG, which represents 191 cities, six counties and more than 19 million people in one of the most vital and robust economic centers in the United States. Heavy lifting will begin this year on *Connect SoCal*, SCAG's quadrennial Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy and the first to be fully developed during the pandemic/post-pandemic era. In addition, SCAG has elevated its role as a leadership voice on the housing crisis, equity and the environment.

"We need to focus on our similarities – on what we have in common," said Harnik, who sees broadband access as both a defining issue and a unique opportunity to build regional collaboration.

As many as 650,000 households across Southern California do not have access to adequate internet speeds or have no internet access whatsoever. These households are disproportionately located in low-income or rural areas, where the population is predominantly Black, Latino or over 65 years old – a problem that, left untended, will perpetuate racial, social and economy disparities for generations to come.

A Broadband Action Plan being developed by SCAG is designed to help local jurisdictions address the digital divide, pursue grant funding opportunities and develop ways to facilitate rapid deployment of broadband technology.

"The expression 'digital divide' has been around for a while, but COVID has magnified and accelerated the need to build greater connectivity," Harnik said. "It starts with a plan, and there's already been significant progress. All over Southern California, a broad group of stakeholders is working together – all recognizing what it is we're dealing with and how important it is to address it."

Another priority over the next 12 months is helping jurisdictions better understand how to use SCAG's Regional Data Platform, which provides tools, resources and best practices to plan smarter locally.

"We have so much information, and every community within the SCAG region has access to it," Harnik said, adding that she will work with staff and the Regional Council to promote the Regional Data Platform as a local planning tool.

Harnik has served on the Palm Desert City Council since December 2010 and has lived in the community since 1977. She sought public office as a way to make a difference.

"We have a wonderful community, but we can always do better," she said.

In addition to her work with SCAG, Harnik serves on the Coachella Valley Association of Governments (CVAG) Transportation Committee and on the Coachella Valley Conservation Commission, and is a current member of the Riverside County Transportation Commission.

Harnik and husband Brian have raised five children in Palm Desert.

She succeeds Eastvale Mayor Clint Lorimore as SCAG President.

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About SCAG

SCAG is the nation's largest metropolitan planning organization, representing six counties, 191 cities and nearly 19 million residents. SCAG undertakes a variety of planning and policy initiatives to plan for a livable and sustainable Southern California now and in the future. For more information about SCAG's regional efforts, please visit www.scag.ca.gov.