

Santa Clara County leader offers vision for 2012

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Taking the helm as board president for 2012, Santa Clara County Supervisor George Shirakawa Jr. called Tuesday for regional efforts to improve community health and public safety amid a struggling economy that has forced government cutbacks.

"There will be much to do in 2012 as we work our way toward prosperity and better days," Shirakawa told an overflow crowd at the board chambers in San Jose. "There is still a tough road ahead, but the economy is showing signs of a slow but steady recovery."

Shirakawa, a former San Jose councilman elected in 2008 to represent the county's District 2 residents in central, southern and eastern parts of San Jose, said that after more than \$2 billion in program cuts over the past decade, county government can expect "more of the same" for the next budget cycle.

But invoking his own family's struggles as his parents and grandparents worked in the fields of the Central Valley, Shirakawa said: "It's during these times of crisis when we have to come together, just like a family, to build for the future."

Among the initiatives Shirakawa said he would pursue is countywide anti-gang efforts. He noted that San Jose has a nationally recognized task force, which the county participates in, and there are strong programs in other county communities.

But he said that "as funding dwindles and the cities focus on delivering core services, it's becoming more difficult to maintain the current level of commitment," and added: "We know that gangs don't recognize city limit borders."

He said he'll call on the board to establish a "Santa Clara County Anti-Gang Alliance."

San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed, who was among several city leaders in attendance, said "I look forward to working with him" on the county alliance.

Shirakawa also said the county should continue looking into consolidating fire services.

"We now consolidate ambulance services, and it works," Shirakawa said.

Shirakawa also proposed several health initiatives. Shirakawa, who has Latino and Asian heritage, called for a Latino health assessment, noting that 27 percent of the county is Latino and saying disproportionate numbers lack health insurance and struggle with obesity.

He also said he'll ask the students at Cesar Chavez Elementary School, which he attended as a kid, to join in the "President Shirakawa Challenge" to exercise regularly by walking with him and sharing a healthy afternoon snack of fruit and water.

Shirakawa also proposed a "Healthy Corner Store" policy that will encourage availability of fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods in neighborhood stores that often serve low-income residents.

"We can design a program that promotes good health and increased shopping at local businesses -- a win-win for families and the economy," Shirakawa said.

The supervisor urged the county to secure funding to bring water fluoridation to the valley.

Shirakawa got emotional as he told the crowd that at one local clinic in his district last year, 9,300 babies needed root canals.

"This is unacceptable in the Silicon Valley," Shirakawa said.