

Marin Economic Forum hires new CEO



Robin Sternberg, of Kentfield, has been hired as the chief executive officer of Marin Economic Forum. (Courtesy of Marin Economic Forum)

By **Adrian Rodriguez**, *Marin Independent Journal*

A local expert on economic development and job growth strategies has been selected to lead the Marin Economic Forum as its fourth chief executive officer since 2011.

Robin Sternberg, a 54-year-old Kentfield resident, has been named CEO of the San Rafael nonprofit, a public-private partnership created in 2010 to foster economic growth in the county while also enhancing social equity and protecting the environment.

Sternberg replaces Michael Kadel, who has served as interim CEO since May after Jim Cordeiro, the forum's third chief executive, resigned in January after serving less than a year in the position. Sternberg will earn \$125,000 annually.

Picked from four candidates, Sternberg stood out because "she had such a terrific background in government, politics and fundraising," said Haden Ongaro, chairman of the 36-member board governing the forum.

Her resume includes a stint as executive director of the Governor's Job Creation Initiative for the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, and another as a member of the finance committee for the Obama campaign in 2007-08. She was also elected as a state delegate for the Democratic National Convention in 2008 in Denver.

"And it was important for us that she lived in Marin," Ongaro said. Although living outside of the county wasn't necessarily a disqualifier for consideration, "We felt that Marin is a unique place: it's dynamic, it's expensive to live here, it's not easy to break into the Marin market. We wanted someone who was familiar with the community."

The forum is an outgrowth of the Marin Economic Commission. It operates on a \$454,000 annual budget supported by \$150,000 matching grants from the county of Marin.

Professor Robert Eyster, head of the economics department at Sonoma State University, is the forum's chief economist and has filled in as CEO for long stretches of time.

Ongaro, who is executive vice president for Newmark Knight Frank overseeing the commercial real estate firm's North Bay offices in Marin and Sonoma counties, said the forum is refocused on "delivering a clear message to the community, our mission," working to build partnerships and fundraising.

He said, "everyone thought that (Sternberg) was going to work well not with just the board but with the community as well."

It's a challenge that Sternberg said she has been waiting for.

A Minnesota native, Sternberg moved to Marin in 2015 with her husband and three teenage sons. She most recently worked as the senior economic development adviser on the American Jobs Project at the University of California at Berkeley. There she was lead adviser and author of a report focused on job creation in the clean energy efficiency sector.

"It was interesting work, but I really wanted to be working in the community where I lived," she said. "I'm excited for the opportunity to work with so many community leaders and to make a contribution in a role where I can apply the knowledge and skills I've learned from previous roles."

From 2012 to 2015, Sternberg was deputy commissioner of the Department of Employment and Economic Development for the state of Minnesota where she managed \$180 million in programs. Previously she served as the national director of business development and marketing for Minnesota Public Radio, based in St. Paul.

Sternberg also served as board member and chairwoman of community groups such as the Minnesota Children's Museum, YMCA-Minneapolis and the Women Winning Annual Fundraiser.

As CEO, Sternberg will manage committees and volunteer working groups organized by the forum that focus on economic issues in Marin. Her duties include fundraising, administration and event planning for the organization.

Sternberg said while the life sciences and tech industries have a part in the fabric of Marin's economy, those won't necessarily be an immediate centerpiece of the forum's mission.

"The Marin Economic Forum has been through a lot of change, and the first step is to reintroduce the organization to make sure everybody knows what we are here to do," she said. And that is "to help businesses succeed here."

There are many facets to making a strong economy, such as solving social and environmental issues, she said.

She said she wants to work with business and community leaders to "arrive at a unified voice of how we want to shape our economic future" and that with the creative talent in Marin, "we can highlight, showcase that to build a brand for Marin as a place where innovative companies could thrive."