Study Shows Lack of Diversity Among San Diego Leaders

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By Alexandra Mendoza
Chief of Police David Nisleit and San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer.

A study released this week by a coalition of over 20 local community organizations says the vast majority of decisions on issues affecting San Diego communities are made by white, economically-advantaged men.

The report focused on five public entities: The City of San Diego Planning Commission, the Port Commission, the Escondido Union High School District Board, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors and the San Diego Metropolitan Transit District Board of Directors.

The study by the Center on Policy Initiatives – a member of San Diego Leaders – shows that these boards not only lack diversity but are also not representative of the communities they are supposed to serve. “On too many of the boards” said CPI Executive Director Kyra Green, “folks just don’t look like the community at all.”

As an example, she pointed to the County Board of Supervisors, made up of three men and two women, all of them white and among the best paid public servants in San Diego.
The Board of Supervisors represents a population of 3 million residents, 34 percent of whom are of Latino descent, 12 percent Asian, 5 percent African-American and 4 percent others. It controls the budget for all county programs and operations, including public safety, health and human services, housing, and land use, among others.

Another example is the Escondido Union High School District Board, made up entirely of white men and women, and whose decisions affect the lives of a student body that is 63 percent Latino.

“When those in charge of making decisions don’t look like us or don’t understand our challenges, they cannot make the best decisions on our behalf,” shared Paola Martínez-Montes, Director of the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE). “It is time for our system to evolve so that more of our historically-underrepresented communities can have a seat at the table.”

“[In order to] really see changes in our communities, we have to be the ones making the decisions, our voice has to be at these boards,” stated Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) advocate Leticia Ayala.

To that end, EHC looks to empower leaders to run for these positions, as well as mobilize people to vote. “We have to get out to vote and truly support our people so that our values are represented on these boards,” added Ayala.

The Community Representation Report further suggests that restructuring the boards and commissions is necessary in order make them more representative of the community.
The study does note that other entities, such as the MTS Board and the Port Commission – chaired by Georgette Gomez and Rafael Castellanos, respectively – have become more diverse in recent years.

San Diego Leaders plans a series of free town halls to get community input on this issue. The first town hall is scheduled for Wednesday, August 15 from 5:30 – 8 p.m. at the East African Cultural Center, at 4061 Fairmount Avenue in City Heights.

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