

Senior Legislature's Annual Session Starts in Sacramento

by Carol Harrison

Locals Jack Alderson and Mary Ella Anderson join community volunteers from around the state this week as the California Senior Legislature meets in Sacramento to model and prioritize legislation for consideration at the state and federal level.

Alderson, one of 40 members of the CSL Senate, and Anderson, one of 80 assembly members, represent the North Coast at the 34th annual session Oct. 28-30.

For the next three days, the CSL will sift through, debate and streamline 63 proposals with the goal of prioritizing 10 for consideration by the State Legislature and another four for consideration by Congress.

Since its creation in 1980, the CSL has seen 197 of its top proposals find sponsors and wind their way through the legislative process to become state or federal law.

One of those, the Silver Alert system managed by the California Highway Patrol, began in January 2013 with a two-year authorization. CSL Staff Services Manager Janice Bailey said she expects a proposal to reauthorize the Silver Alert system will emerge as one of the CSL priorities for 2014-15.

The program issues and coordinates alerts following the unexplained or suspicious disappearance of a person age 65 or older. Since its inception, the CHP reports 164 cases have been activated and 163 solved.

"Not to take away from CSL's other accomplishments, but Silver Alert has been one of the most impressive programs to come out of CSL," Bailey said.

Not every good idea makes it to the priority list. Alderson and Anderson wished the campaign to mandate bathroom stall doors to swing outside rather than inside had gained steam.

"That was a classic that came from some ladies using a Veterans Hall in Los Banos," Alderson recalled. "The booths are small, and when the doors open in, there is no room for anyone to get into the booths if someone inside passed out or whatever."

“We all have our favorites,” said Anderson, who is attending her fifth annual session. “I’ve learned to be open to the experience and not have a lot of expectations.”

Anderson and Alderson each submitted a proposal for debate this year.

Anderson’s proposal focuses on what she calls the “punitive” and “unjust” CalFire assessment and penalty fees that are assessed based on property ownership in June of a given year.

“I am not the only fixed income senior who sold a house shortly after June and discovered too late that that we were responsible for the entire fee rather than a pro rata share,” she said. “Even though I’ve arranged a payment plan, I’ve been assessed a monthly penalty that insures I will likely never pay this fee off as it is more than my payment.”

Alderson’s proposal requires the Department of Veterans Affairs to identify and acknowledge those who participated in weapons testing and special operations and to dedicate services specifically to assess and assist those veterans.

“It didn’t make the priority list in 2012, but it didn’t get a ‘no’ vote either,” he said. “I think it finished fifth.”

Health ailments forced the 81-year-old Alderson to skip the 2013 session. As for the proposal’s chances this year, Alderson expects to rewrite it and encourage CSL to support a pair of similar efforts that have acquired federal sponsors.

Three of last year’s CSL priority proposals became law at the state level and a fourth was vetoed by the governor Sept. 30. Two resolutions were also chaptered.

“The reality of legislation is that there are competing interests and they all need to be served,” Anderson said. “Our issues are largely confined to being rural, but the CSL is a large body of people with most of them in urban areas like Los Angeles, San Francisco, or Sacramento. They are the real power base.”

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Area 1 Agency on Aging paid Carol Harrison to write this article.