

New Alliance

ECONOMY: With a new chair and chief executive, the Valley Economic Alliance looks forward to helping in the region's recovery.

By **MARK R. MADLER** Staff Reporter

New leaders will guide the Valley Economic Alliance in the post-pandemic economy.

Sonya Blake started on April 30 as the new chief executive of the Sherman Oaks business attraction and retention organization. She replaced **Kenn Phillips**, who had been its head for more than five years and retired at the end of March.

Less than a week later, **Randy Witt** announced he would step down as chairman of the alliance board. His replacement is **Fred Gaines**, a longtime alliance member, former Calabasas mayor and attorney.

As the new chief executive, Blake has big plans for the organization that represents the business community in the portion of Los Angeles that she calls home.

"I have been living in the Valley for more than 20 years with my husband and we have three small kids that



Gaines

were born and raised here," Blake said in an interview with the Business Journal.

Prior to taking the head position at the alliance, Blake had been for two years director of community business in Los Angeles Mayor **Eric Garcetti's** office of economic development.

She sees her role at the alliance as creating a vibrant business environment by fostering economic development through new business attraction.

"Maybe it's looking at areas of the Valley that are particularly ripe for technology hub activity, looking at how we can attract tech companies with great paying jobs to the Valley and creating that vibrant and attractive and thriving business atmosphere," Blake said.

A native of Connecticut whose parents came from Jamaica, Blake came to Los Angeles on vacation after graduating from **Yale University** and ended up staying. After getting an MBA from **UCLA**, she went to work at rival **USC** as an assistant dean in the School of Fine Arts followed by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

She also served as chief executive of the Los Angeles chapter of the **National Association of Woman Business Owners**, as director of alumni relations at **The Master's University** in Santa Clarita and as a small business advocate in the administration of Gov. **Gray Davis**.

"Sonya's experience in the public and private sectors, in business, in state and local government, in higher education, and nonprofits will be a tremendous asset to the alliance as the organization implements its plans for the



Thumbs Up: Valley Economic Alliance's Sonya Blake, center, at Small Business Summit in 2018.

future," Witt said in a statement when Blake's new role was announced April 24.

Staff recommended

It was the staff at the Economic Alliance who suggested that she be considered for the open chief executive position, Blake said.

"It is very gratifying that the staff would think I would be a good candidate," she added. "It turns out the board and I agreed."

The alliance was formed in 1994 in part as the result of that year's Northridge Earthquake that devastated the Valley. It serves the cities of Los Angeles, Burbank, Glendale, Calabasas and San Fernando.

Blake was interested in taking the position because of her respect for the alliance and what it does to bring success to Valley businesses. Blake called the alliance a "lightning rod" to help businesses recover from disasters and emergencies.

"Especially in light of what is happening today (with the COVID-19 outbreak), it is an important place to be at the hub of solutions for our business community," Blake continued. "I consider it an honor and a blessing to work for an organization I really respect and whose mission I feel called to fulfill."

That mission is to facilitate the economic

prosperity of its five member cities. Achieving that is accomplished by creating an atmosphere to foster good jobs, improve workforce development and education; sustain a thriving small business and large business segments; promote mobility to move people and goods throughout the area and bring cultural and recreational amenities and overall just a good quality of life.

"This organization is a catalyst for bringing that vision to reality," Blake said.

She added that continuing to further that mission will involve two phases.

In the near term as the business community recovers from the COVID-19 outbreak and the closures of retail stores, bars, restaurants and other businesses, she wants to stimulate consumer spending and get residents patronizing those local business that survive.

"Also, I will be promoting ways for our public agencies to establish infrastructure projects and private development to create jobs and get people working," Blake said.

In the long-term, Blake said she wants to see new cultural and recreational amenities established in the Valley – places where people will want to gather. She also wants to create new ways for the private sector to interact with area high schools and community colleges to establish a pipeline of good jobs for young peo-

ple who are graduating, she added.

"It's providing companies with the talent they need to grow their businesses," Blake explained.

Access to capital

At the board meeting on April 30 where Gaines was named the new chairman, Blake gave a presentation of where the alliance needed to put its attention for the recovery of the economy.

There was agreement among board members that they would get their ideas and comments to Blake within a week so the organization could get it out to the public as to what it thinks are most important things to do for the recovery, Gaines said in an interview with the Business Journal.

"We wanted to do this before the economy opens up, so we know where we are headed and we know what we are looking for," he added.

The three top things in Blake's presentation were job creation and getting people back to work; getting people spending at local businesses; and having access to capital, be it government assistance, bank money or private equity, Gaines continued.

"We need to be out there marketing the Valley and showing we are ready to put the money to use with shovel-ready projects," Gaines said.

With the small business lender the Valley Economic Development Center, which was in the same building as the alliance on Van Nuys Boulevard, filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy and no longer making new loans will there be an opportunity for the alliance to step in and fill that void?

Becoming a community development financial institution, or CDFI, is something the group will look into if and when it feels it could add value, Blake said.

In the past, the organization participated by not reinventing the wheel and instead referring clients to the organizations in small business financial development, she added.

"We will do that in the short term while looking at the feasibility and possible benefit of other ways of helping, such as becoming a CDFI," Blake said.



Front & Center: Blake next to Mayor Eric Garcetti with L.A.'s economic and workforce development team.