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San José Mayor-elect Sam Liccardo Names Key Staff

SAN JOSE – Mayor-elect Sam Liccardo today announced the appointment of key positions to the Mayor’s office, including Chief of Staff and several Senior Policy Advisors.

“We’ve already assembled a talented team with decades of experience in public service,” Mayor-elect Liccardo said. “Several are well-known for their work in the District 3 Council office, while others have served for other elected officials, and two of my new colleagues have distinguished themselves as elected officials,” Liccardo noted. He added, “This team will hit the ground running, and we’ve got a range of perspectives—Democrats, Republicans, and Independents—and ethnicities reflective of our diverse community that we serve. We’re enthusiastic and ready to roll up our sleeves to make San José a safer, smarter city.”

The Mayor’s senior policy team will include Jim Reed, Chief of Staff; Ragan Henninger, Senior Policy Advisor; Ru Weerakoon, and Senior Policy Advisor for Land Use and Economic Development. Former Councilmember Pete Constant will also serve as a part-time Senior Policy Advisor.

Three long-time Policy Advisors—Fred Buzo, Ruth Cueto, and Paul Pereira—from Liccardo’s Council office will move over to the Mayor’s office, as will Policy Analysts Maggie Le and Dylan Simon. José Lujano will be joining the office as a Policy Analyst.

Barbara Howard, Executive Assistant to outgoing Mayor Chuck Reed, will continue to provide administrative and scheduling support to Mayor Liccardo. The Mayor’s Office Administrative team—Cindy Escobar, Norma Gutierrez, Celina Carrasco, and Marissa Coughlin—are dedicated civil servants whose combined experience includes service to three previous San José Mayors and bilingual capabilities. Reed’s Communications team—Michelle McGurk, Senior Policy Advisor/PIO; Ahmad Chapman, Policy Analyst/Agenda Services Manager; and Shelley Ha, Webmaster—will continue in their current roles through the transition. Additional staff will be brought on board in the near-term.

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Sam Liccardo Biography

Sam Liccardo was elected the 65th Mayor of San José on Nov. 4, 2014. From 2007-2014, he represented San José's Third District on the San José City Council, one of the most diverse communities in the city, where he focused on improving public safety, revitalizing the Downtown, expanding affordable housing, and making San José an environmental leader.

Prior to winning election to City Council, Sam served in the Santa Clara County District Attorney's Office as a prosecutor of sexual assault and child exploitation crimes and as a federal prosecutor. His work in the community includes teaching political science at San José State University, co-founding a program ("1,000 Hearts for 1,000 Minds") to expand tutoring for low-income elementary school students, supporting the launch of the innovative college preparatory school (Cristo Rey San José) to launch low-income students to a college-going path, serving on the boards of several affordable housing organizations, and advocating for two successful countywide transit ballot measures responsible for bringing BART to San José.

Sam and his wife, Jessica García-Kohl, live in Downtown's Northside, which boasts San José's oldest neighborhood association. Sam and Jessica live a block from where Jessica grew up, and a dozen blocks from the neighborhood grocery store that Sam's paternal grandparents operated in the 1940s and '50s. On his mother's side, Sam's ancestors were among the first Mexican settlers in the Bay Area, while his maternal grandmother emigrated from Ireland.

After graduating from Bellarmine College Prep in San José, Sam attended Georgetown University. Sam was captain of the Georgetown heavyweight crew, and graduated *magna cum laude* in 1991. Two years later, he enrolled at Harvard Law School and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and graduated with a law degree and a master's degree in public policy in 1996, when he returned to the Bay Area.

Sam has served in several regional leadership roles during his tenure as a councilmember, including as President of the Santa Clara County Cities Association, Chair of the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority, and on the executive boards of the Association of Bay Area Governments and Association and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission. He is a senior fellow of the American Leadership Forum, and of the Aspen Institute's Rodel Fellowship.

Staff Biographies

Jim Reed, Chief of Staff – Jim comes to the Mayor's office from the San José Silicon Valley Chamber of Commerce where he served as Vice President of Public Policy overseeing the Chamber's policy research, public advocacy, and political action. He previously spent 12 years with publicly traded technology companies at the Director and Senior Manager level, the last six with Nokia in Mountain View. He has served on the Scotts Valley City Council since 2007, including as Mayor in 2009-2010 and 2013-2014. Immediately prior to joining the City Council, Jim was the Editor/General Manager of the Scotts Valley Press-Banner newspaper in 2006-07 after years of covering Scotts Valley as a part-time reporter for that paper. He has also been a contributing reporter on Scotts Valley issues for the Santa Cruz Sentinel, Scotts Valley Times, and Mid-County Post. Reed holds a B.A. from George Mason University as a double major in history/government and politics. He lives in Scotts Valley with his wife and four children.

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Ragan Henninger, Senior Policy Advisor – Ragan joined Sam’s Council Office in 2007, first as a Council Assistant, then spent five years as Chief of Staff. Her policy expertise includes environment, housing, budget and economic development, including work on the citywide inclusionary housing policy, plastic bag ban, and downtown high-rise incentive. She later left service with the City to manage Sam’s successful Mayoral campaign in 2014. She previously worked for HomeFirst (formerly EHC LifeBuilders) as the Director of Development and Communications where she was responsible for raising over \$12 million annually. Ragan currently serves on the Board of Legacy Alviso San José Youth Foundation and is responsible for the foundation’s charitable distributions. She is a graduate of Santa Clara University where she studied political science and communications. Ragan and her husband live in the Cambrian neighborhood of San José, where they are raising their daughter.

Ru Weerakoon, Senior Policy Advisor for Land Use and Economic Development – Ru is guiding economic development and land use policy as she has for the past eight years for Mayor Reed. Ru was born and raised in Sri Lanka and moved to San José in 1983. She joined the San José Redevelopment Agency in 1989, where she rose to the position of Director of Industrial Development, managing economic development programs and redevelopment projects in five technology parks that house over 2,500 multinational companies employing over 80,000 people and a \$100-million capital improvement program, as well as the City’s incubator program. Ru received both her B.S. and Master’s degrees in Economics from San José State University. Ru and her husband live in New Almaden in South San José, where they are raising their son.

Pete Constant, Senior Policy Advisor – Pete recently completed his second term representing San José’s Council District 1 (West San José). After taking office in January 2007, he focused on fiscal reform, public safety, economic development, and open government. Prior to serving as a San José Councilmember, Pete served for 14 years as a San José Police Officer. After suffering a career-ending injury during an undercover operation, he continued his public service on the San José Appeals Hearing Board and as a neighborhood association leader. He worked full-time as a professional photographer and built a number of small businesses in West San José. Pete is an adjunct Professor of Leadership at St. Mary’s College, his Alma Mater, where he earned his Bachelor of Arts Degree in Management and his Master of Arts Degree in Leadership. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership at the University of La Verne. He lives in West San Jose with his wife and five children.

Michelle McGurk, Senior Policy Advisor/PIO – Michelle has more than twenty years of experience in media relations, journalism, and public policy, and has served as the Mayor’s Public Information Officer since 2007. Early in her career, Michelle worked as a reporter and editor for Gannett and McClatchy newspapers, at *Inside Sports* magazine in Chicago, and as a managing editor for NurseWeek magazine. She served as a Legislative Analyst, then Chief of Staff for former San José Vice Mayor Frank Fiscalini, then as Senior Director for Media and Community Relations for the Silicon Valley Community Foundation and its San José-based predecessor. She holds a bachelor’s in journalism from Northwestern University and an MFA in creative writing from Lesley University. She and her husband have lived in San José’s Shasta-Hanchett Park neighborhood since 1994.

Fred Buzo, Policy Advisor – Fred has served as Policy and Legislative Director for Sam’s Council Office since 2008. Fred was raised in the San Joaquin Valley, spent his undergraduate years in Los Angeles, taught school for a year, then came to the South Bay for law school at Santa Clara University. He worked as a judicial law clerk for the District Court in Las Vegas, Nevada, then returned to San José to begin his law practice. Over the last 13 years, he has worked as an attorney handling primarily juvenile dependency, family law, and employment matters. Fred holds a degree in Theology from Loyola Marymount and a Juris Doctor from Santa Clara University School of Law. A Spanish speaker, Fred is married with three children and resides in the Cambrian neighborhood of San José.

Ruth Cueto, Policy Advisor – Ruth joined Sam’s Council Office as a Policy Analyst and Community Liaison in 2008 after handling administrative duties at San José State University. Ruth received her B.A. in Political Economy of Industrial Societies from UC-Berkeley and is currently finishing a Master’s degree in Planning at San José State University. Ruth speaks Spanish fluently. As an undergraduate she tutored and mentored at neighborhood schools, interned for a local union, and traveled to Rajgarh, India as a service volunteer. Originally from Los Angeles, Ruth moved to the Bay Area in 1998 and resides in San José.

Paul Pereira, Policy Advisor – Paul came to Sam’s Council Office in 2012 from the City of San José’s former Strong Neighborhoods Initiative, a program he had been a part of from its earliest planning efforts in 2000. During that time, he was one of the initial partners in the award-winning CommUniverCity collaboration between the City of San José, San José State University, and the neighborhoods in the Five Wounds/ Brookwood Terrace area. Previously, Paul had worked for various start-up efforts based in San Jose that focused on data and mobile applications during the dot-com boom of the 1990s. Born in Massachusetts, Paul moved to San José at age 4, grew up in the neighborhoods east of Downtown, and lived in the downtown core while studying Political Science and Sociology at San Jose State University. Paul served on the City’s Youth Commission in high school and grew up volunteering with numerous San José community-based organizations, including History Park San José, the Portuguese Community Center, and Five Wounds Portuguese National Church. Paul speaks fluent Portuguese and conversational Spanish. He lives with his wife and two sons in San José’s Evergreen neighborhood.

Ahmad Chapman, Policy Analyst/Agenda Services Manager – Ahmad joined the Mayor’s Office in 2013 after more than a decade of public policy. His advocacy work has spanned issues ranging from transportation access to climate change. He has worked for numerous elected officials including then-Senator Barack Obama, state Senator Elaine Alquist, and Rep. Pete Stark. Ahmad holds a Master’s in Political Management from The George Washington University and a B.A. in Political Science from San José State University. Ahmad resides in Fremont.

Shelley Ha, Webmaster – Shelley joined the Mayor’s Office in 2013 after stints in both the City of San José’s Environmental Services and Library departments. She was on the team recognized at the 2013 State of the City for their work launching the City’s new website. Shelley is a graduate of San José State University with a B.A. in Design Studies. She speaks some Cantonese. She and her husband live in the Berryessa neighborhood of San José.

Margaret Le, Policy Analyst – A graduate of UC Davis with a B.A. in Religious Studies, Maggie joined Sam’s team in 2012 as his executive assistant and scheduler and now moves into a policy-focused role. She is currently pursuing an MBA at Santa Clara University. A San José native, she got her start in community service volunteering with the Bill Wilson Center. A fluent Vietnamese speaker, Maggie and her fiancée live in San José.

José Lujano, Policy Analyst – José’s passion for public service started at an early age, after meeting the Mayor of San José when he was in the fourth grade. Since then, José has been focused on learning the ins and outs of government, working in different capacities at the City, County, State, and Federal government. Educated in East Side Schools, José graduated from W. C. Overfelt High School in 2010, and recently became the first in his family to graduate from college, receiving a Bachelor’s of Science in both Political Science and Sociology from Santa Clara University. A fluent Spanish speaker, José is a lifelong resident of East San José.

Dylan Simon, Policy Analyst – A native of Brentwood in the East Bay, Dylan moved to San José to attend San José State, where he graduated with honors in Political Science. He joined Sam’s Council office staff in 2013. Dylan resides in the South University Neighborhood in Downtown San José and, in his spare time, volunteers at a senior center.