

**GOVERNMENT**

# Sign of the Times: Progressive Gomez Takes Over at Stodgy MTS

MTS selected a new board chair Thursday: San Diego City Councilwoman Georgette Gomez. She made her way in San Diego politics as an outsider and environmental advocate who was positioned against the city's pro-business establishment, and now she'll head one of the region's most powerful agencies.

Andrew Keatts  
January 18, 2018



Georgette Gomez. / Photo by Jamie Scott Lytle

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The Metropolitan Transit System's board of directors selected San Diego City Councilwoman Georgette Gomez as its new chair Thursday, marking a new direction for the county's largest transit operator.

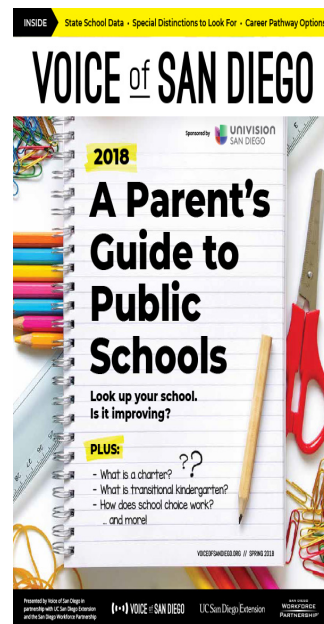
Gomez is perhaps the most progressive member of the City Council and was elected just 14 months ago on a promise to remake the traditional power structures in City Hall as a voice for low-income residents.

Now, she can set the agenda for MTS, an agency with a \$256 million operating budget and the responsibility for moving residents on buses and trolleys. Both the city and the region have committed to increase transit usage to become more environmentally friendly and to reduce the cost burden on residents who rely on cars to get around.

But Gomez's election was revealing. She is a woman, an LGBTQ leader, a Latina and she represents City Heights, which has historically been underserved. She also made her name in local politics as an environmental activist in a tense standoff with the city's business interests.

It is a sign of some changing dynamics in San Diego's political culture. Former Councilman Harry Mathis, a Republican, had been MTS chair since 2006.

**Newfound embrace of the former outsider:** The region's moderate, pro-business establishment swarmed against Gomez's council bid not so long ago. It treated her pro-environment and progressive campaign as a threat, throwing significant financial support to her opponent, Ricardo Flores, who was also a Democrat but was seen as less upsetting to the city's status quo. Yet Thursday, Falconer showed up specifically to vote for Gomez as MTS's chair.



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**The rise of Gomez:** In her second year in office, Gomez now has two seats from which she can shape the city's most pressing policies. In addition to chairing MTS — which can now collect its own taxes and may pull together a ballot measure for increased transit funding in an upcoming election — she's also in charge of the city committee on housing issues. Housing and transportation policy go hand-in-hand, and Gomez can steer both of them.

**A new friend in the mayor's office:** Something seems to have changed with Mayor Faulconer. He is supporting a ballot measure to raise hotel taxes that is backed by a joint group of business leaders and labor forces. And Thursday, he did something he never does: He went to an MTS meeting. Once there, he voiced strong support for Gomez. He said she'll be a positive advocate for continued changes underway at MTS and for expanding the region's transit services. "She is the right person at the right time, and you have my full confidence and I'd urge a unanimous vote of support," he said.

**More on that:** Going into the meeting, Gomez had received the endorsement of a committee set up to handle chair nominations, but she wasn't the only candidate. County Supervisor Ron Roberts had also submitted a letter indicating he was interested in the position. With Faulconer in attendance, it raised the possibility that the mayor would have to choose between voting for Gomez, a fellow city official, or voting for Roberts, a fellow Republican. It ended up a moot point. Poway Mayor Jim Cunningham started the meeting by nominating Roberts, but Roberts quickly removed his name from consideration, noting it was the last year in his term. "I'm trying to cut back," Roberts said.

**South Bay uprising:** The board didn't just elect Gomez. It also chose the agency's vice chair and chair pro tem, together the

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succession of leadership for the agency. All three of those positions went to South Bay representatives. National City Councilwoman Mona Rios is vice chair, and Imperial Beach Councilwoman Lorie Bragg is next in line.

**The first Change from the SANDAG revamp:** Most of the attention for Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez Fletcher's AB 805 last year went to its voting structure changes at SANDAG and how it would put an audit committee in place at the agency following its forecasting scandal. But Thursday's chair election was the first major effect of the bill. AB 805 made it so MTS would elect a chair from those already serving on its board, which ended up being Gomez. It also gave MTS the authority to raise its own taxes, which is sure to be a major decision facing the agency under Gomez's guidance.

**Back to the Barrio:** Gomez's biggest role in city politics before her election was as a staffer at the Environmental Health Coalition, where she was a front-and-center advocate for a plan to change zoning restrictions in Barrio Logan. Councilman David Alvarez represented the area and was allies with Gomez, along with many residents of the area.

The shipbuilding industry and eventually the full business community strongly opposed it. Ultimately, the shipbuilders won, and voters in 2014 struck down the plan at the ballot. Alvarez voted for Gomez on Thursday and referred to their work together on the plan. "She truly believes this organization could do a lot better," he said. "She isn't going to go out and cut a deal to make something happen, as we've seen too often at SANDAG and here at MTS."

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