

Alumna Spotlight: Sunne Wright McPeak, M.P.H. '71



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As a master's student in health education at the School of Public Health, **Sunne Wright McPeak** learned how to collect information by going directly into communities. She credits this education—the knowledge of how to survey her constituency—with helping her win election to the Contra Costa County board of supervisors, where she served for from 1978 to 1993, including several terms as chairman.

"I was always interested in health," says McPeak, who grew up on a dairy farm in rural Livingston in the San Joaquin Valley and received her bachelor's degree in international medicine at UC Santa Barbara. "It seemed to me it would be tough to make the world well one patient at a time. I had studied public policy in college; I thought an M.P.H. degree would bring it all together."

As a Contra Costa County supervisor, she became known as a leader on state water policy and was one of the earliest advocates for promoting regional solutions to Bay Area policy challenges. "In 1979 I created the first HMO with licensure from the state," she says. "That was a direct result of my training at UC Berkeley." Under her leadership, the county was also ahead of its time in its efforts to curb tobacco use. "In 1985, the Tobacco Institute called Contra Costa County and me the 'lunatic fringe' for pushing tobacco-free efforts," she recalls.

Appointed secretary of the Business, Transportation and Housing Agency by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in November 2003, McPeak directs California's largest government agency. Her 16 departments include such complex organizations as Caltrans, the California Highway Patrol, Department of Motor Vehicles, and the Department of Corporations.

McPeak notes that her education at the School, which taught her to look at

inputs and outcomes and to consider environmental quality and economic status, has shaped her approach to her work. Also, she says, she is able to use health data to enlighten policy discussions.

"I am fully integrating and mobilizing to save lives," says McPeak about her current post, citing such successes as seat-belt compliance. "Last holiday season, there was a 26 percent reduction in deaths on the highways. In 2005 to date, there has been a reduction of 14 percent—35 percent in incorporated areas of cities."

Prior to leading the Business, Transportation and Housing Agency, McPeak was president and CEO of the Bay Area Council, where she established and led major regional initiatives that addressed policy challenges involving transportation, housing, sustainable economic development, water policy, telecommunications infrastructure, and education and workforce preparation. Before joining the Bay Area Council in November of 1996, she served for three years as president and CEO of the Bay Area Economic Forum, a partnership formed in 1988 by the Bay Area Council and the Association of Bay Area Governments to facilitate public-private collaboration for promoting the regional economy.

McPeak has been honored by more than 30 organizations and was named a "Women Who Could be President" honoree in 1997 by the League of Women Voters of San Francisco. The *San Francisco Business Times* has named her one of the 100 Most Influential Women in Business in 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2003. She is the recipient of the 2000 California Water Policy H2O Leadership Award. Recently, California State University, Hayward, and the board of trustees of California State University awarded her an honorary doctorate in humane letters. 🌀

—Michael S. Broder