

Patrick picks 2 for team, Mayor, prof tapped

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Two Hampshire County representatives have been named to Gov.-elect Deval Patrick's transition team, and will help run community meetings in the coming weeks aimed at shaping the new administration's agenda.

Northampton Mayor Clare Higgins will help lead the local government working group, and **Dr. M. Idali Torres, an associate professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, will serve as a member of the health care working group.**

Higgins, who endorsed Patrick's election bid, said she was asked by Lt. Gov.-elect Tim Murray to help chair the local government panel. She will co-chair the working group with Somerville Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone, with whom she has worked in the Massachusetts Mayors Association, and Boston Mayor Thomas Menino.

Although the community meetings have not yet been scheduled, the findings from each working group are to be filed as a report to the new administration by Dec. 15. Residents can also submit their comments online at www.patrickmurraytransition.org.

"As you can see, it's an aggressive timetable," Higgins said.

Richard Chacon, a spokesman for the Patrick transition team, said Higgins will bring to the discussions a much-needed perspective on the issues facing municipalities in western Massachusetts.

One of Patrick's goals, Chacon said, is to repair the relationship between the state and its cities and towns. That could involve reconsideration of "local aid" funding from the state as well as new initiatives for regional planning and transportation.

"I think there is a desire to really examine the whole paradigm between cities and the state," Chacon said.

Torres, who lives in Springfield, has been with UMass since 1992, and specializes in matters of sexual health, HIV prevention and Latino health issues. Before joining the faculty, she spent many years working on community health projects focused on the Latino communities of Holyoke and Springfield.

"I welcome the opportunity to craft a new agenda for public health in the state of Massachusetts," Torres said.

Another task facing the new administration is overseeing health care reforms Chacon described as more ambitious than in any other state in the union. To help implement those reforms, he said, Patrick is looking to people like Torres who have an intimate understanding of the needs of different communities around the state.

"Her support has helped strengthen the governor-elect's understanding of those issues," Chacon said of Torres.

Other working groups will focus on topics of state finance, economic development, education, energy and the environment, housing, technology, public safety, transportation and the workforce.

More than 200 people make up the 15 working groups, and only a handful come from the western part of the state.

Aside from Higgins and Torres, other western Massachusetts working group members include North Adams Mayor John Bartlett III and Westfield Mayor Richard K. Sullivan, Allan W. Blair, CEO of the Economic Development Council of Western Massachusetts, Henry M. Thomas III, president and CEO of the Urban League of Springfield and Joe Thompson, CEO of MassMOCA.

Chacon said Patrick feels the contingent will provide good representation for the region.

In a prepared statement, Patrick said, "During the campaign, Tim Murray and I made it very clear that we will be seeking good ideas from Democrats, Republicans, independents and anyone else, and we will listen to those ideas and pick the best ones to help move our commonwealth forward. These community meetings are the first step in the process.

"This series of community meetings is just the beginning of our effort to bring people back into civic life, to re-engage their interest and to get some fresh, new ideas about how we tackle challenges and take advantage of opportunities."

The Transition Committee on Wednesday also announced the appointments of two new deputy chiefs of staff, David M. Simas and Brendan Ryan. Simas and Ryan will report directly to Chief of Staff Joan Wallace-Benjamin.

Simas, a lifelong resident of Taunton, is a 1992 graduate of Stonehill College and a 1995 graduate of Boston College Law School. Previous to taking the post as deputy chief of staff, he served on the Taunton School Committee and the Taunton City Council, worked as deputy general counsel to the Massachusetts House of Representatives Post Audit and Oversight Bureau and aided the mayor of Taunton as a special policy adviser.

"I am honored to have this opportunity to serve," Simas in a prepared statement. "I believe that my experience at the local, county and state levels will assist the Governor and the Lieutenant Governor to view the operations of state government from varied perspectives."

Brendan Ryan, a native of Foxborough, worked for the Patrick campaign as deputy finance director and later as trip director and chief aide. He is a graduate of St. Sebastian's School and Vanderbilt University and worked previously as a reporter for the Gardner News.

"I am honored and excited to be a part of the Governor-elect's office," Ryan said in a prepared statement. "With the leadership of the governor and lieutenant governor, we have an incredible opportunity to deliver real change."