

Juan Vargas, former Assembly Insurance Committee chairman, takes job with Safeco

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Juan Vargas, a San Diego-area Assembly member who served four years as chairman of the Assembly Insurance Committee, is a new vice president in California for Safeco, a Seattle-based company that handles auto, home and business coverage.

Vargas, a Democrat who unsuccessfully ran this year to unseat incumbent Rep. Bob Filner, D-San Diego, will head Safeco's public policy strategy in California and serve as Safeco's main liaison with state officials. He likely will be based in San Diego, where he lives with his wife and two daughters.

The Assembly Insurance Committee has long been a platform for lawmakers seeking insurance-related careers or higher office. Those include Republican David Knowles, who went on to head the California Earthquake Authority, and Tom Calderon, who unsuccessfully ran for insurance commissioner in 2002.

The Harvard-trained Vargas, who once studied to be a priest and is one of 10 children, is familiar with California's politics and market, and "California is a critical part of our overall plan," said Safeco spokesman Paul Hollie. Before coming to Sacramento, where he was a popular lawmaker, Vargas served eight years on the San Diego City Council.

But Vargas' job change drew a critical response from Doug Heller, the executive director of the Foundation for Taxpayer and Consumer Rights, who said Vargas appeared to favor the insurance industry during his stint as chairman of the Assembly Insurance Committee.

"This is exactly what we're saying is wrong in Sacramento," Heller said. "It casts a cloud over his entire chairmanship of that committee. It's as if he was interviewing for that job for four years, and presented his credentials by attacking consumer protections in order to defend the insurance industry." Heller noted that two of Vargas' committee consultants also took jobs in the industry.