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Interest Groups: Diane Farrell



Photo by Lauren Carroll

At U.S.-India Business Council: Diane Farrell

Diane Farrell describes her first visit to India in March 2009 as a sensory overload.

“A visual explosion of color, vibrancy, of chaos—it’s all there,” she says. “What’s so striking is, you can feel the energy of the people, and it doesn’t end until you’ve gotten off the plane in America. There’s such a spirit of industriousness there.”

Farrell, 55, was further astounded by the paradoxes permeating Indian culture—day laborers sporting cell phones, handmade brooms sweeping streets bounded by high rises, and other scenes of the modern colliding with the ancient.

Farrell perceived, too, that India is a country of limitless possibilities, if only the energy of its 1.1 billion citizens can be effectively harnessed. “I was just so inspired both by the potential and the individual will to create a better life, to create a better community,” she said. “India is unlike any other country in the world in that regard.”

As new executive vice president of the U.S.-India Business Council, Farrell will be striving to strengthen commercial ties and advance two-way trade between the world’s oldest democracy and the world’s largest. “I always joke with people that whenever you’re working with a democratic government, wear comfortable shoes,” she says. “It’s a marathon, not a sprint.”

Farrell will be dealing with financial services, real-estate development, and especially infrastructure. She has ample experience with both global business transactions and local infrastructure projects, so the position seemed like a natural fit, she says.

Most recently, Farrell was on the board of the Export-Import Bank of the United States, which helps to finance the export of American goods and services to international markets. Before that, she was first selectwoman of Westport, Conn.—the town’s highest elected official.

Farrell, a native of Westport, began her career in advertising in Los Angeles before moving back to the East Coast with her husband.

While taking time off to stay at home with her two young daughters, Farrell became increasingly engaged in the community and interested in local politics. In 1997, she was elected first selectwoman and got her first taste of handling multimillion-dollar budgets and deals, helping to finance and jump-start municipal improvements.

After Farrell had eight years in city government under her belt, Washington called, and she jumped at the chance to move into the international arena. President Bush appointed her to the Export-Import Bank’s board in August 2007, and she has spent the past four years advocating for India as a market for U.S. goods and services. To be exact, Farrell helped to approve a total of \$5.8 billion for projects in India.

At the U.S.-India Business Council, she hopes to ensure that American companies can capitalize on India’s thirst for expanded infrastructure—a prerequisite if the Asian giant aims to sustain its double-digit growth.

“When I sit down with the private sector and government officials, I relate at a very granular level to what it takes to develop and fund and successfully complete the large-scale infrastructure projects that are necessary,” Farrell says. “I like bricks and mortar. I like to be able to help with the planning process and assure that the execution takes place.”

- *Naureen Khan*