Opinion: Should California become Florida?

By Joe Mathews

Florida Gov. Rick Scott travels to California this weekend to steal away some of our state's businesses. So why don't we return the favor by developing plans to steal away some of Florida's greatest assets – old people?

Californians like to think of this state as a place of endless youth and growing diversity. But the biggest transformation in California is the breathtaking speed with which our population is aging. Instead of measuring ourselves against oil-rich Texas or Wall Street-dependent New York, we should focus on Florida as our competitor.



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While Californians 65 years or older represent just 12 percent of the state's population today (a figure slightly below the national average and well below Florida's rate of 19 percent), the number of 65-plus seniors is projected to nearly double, representing 20 percent of the population by 2030. That rate of growth is roughly the equivalent of adding one new Rossmoor – the massive senior community in Walnut Creek – twice a month for the next 15 years.

And even that may not be enough geezers to meet our needs. Other sources of new Californians are drying up – immigration

is flat, the birth rate has dropped, and high costs of living are pushing young families out of state. Our state's budget system relentlessly forces cuts at our universities and older voters dominate our politics – both preclude big investments to attract more young people. So if California wants to grow, and find new buyers for our homes and new shoppers for our retail, our best option may be to convince more people to spend their golden years in the Golden State.

U.S. economic surveys show that the fastest-growing American regions are the most successful in attracting retirees. Yet California has built very little of the senior-oriented infrastructure that makes Florida a magnet for the old. Instead, we've treated seniors like cost centers (because of their high health costs) and spent the last generation cutting back services they need – from health and housing to culture and transportation. Too many California communities are chasing the same young, creative people with the same bike paths and downtown lofts – even though the young are declining as a share of the state's population. It's telling of our myopia about the old that the biggest California debate involving seniors right now is about how to make it easier for them to end their lives when they're terminally ill.

State Sen. Carol Liu, one of the few state leaders focused on aging in California, contrasts the avalanche of attention she received for a bill requiring helmets for adult bicycle riders to the silence that greeted a recent comprehensive report from her select legislative committee on aging. But that report is worth reading. In more than 200 pages, it recounts California's collective failure to plan properly for old age – long-term care programs scattered across six departments, an alarming lack of data and standards – and makes 30 recommendations, including the appointment of an aging czar.

California may never be able to compete with Florida on income taxes (ours are high, theirs are non-existent), but our climate is more comfortable, and, as anyone who has visited

the Coachella Valley knows, we have lots of things to offer seniors. (Maybe some Californian could pitch Gov. Scott, who will be termed out of office in Florida shortly after his 66 birthday in 2018, on buying in La Quinta.)

Given the expense of living in coastal California, it would make sense to focus senior recruiting efforts on lower-cost communities inland. UCLA Anderson School economist Jerry Nickelsburg has argued that the Central Valley would have much to gain by focusing on seniors. That would require governments and private companies to build improved health care facilities and train more people to work in professions serving seniors. The good news is that those are low-risk investments that would raise education levels and produce badly needed jobs.

Liu's report notes that California's seniors will be highly diverse. And therein lies more opportunity. According to the United Nations, the worldwide population of older persons – age 60 or over – is expected to more than double to 2 billion by 2050. If California can develop senior infrastructure that can serve people of many cultures and languages, California could pitch itself as a global destination for retirees.

Go West, old man.

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