

Opinion: If you care about California, you should care about Salinas

By Joe Mathews

Do you worry about the future of California?

Then you should worry about Salinas. Because if this Monterey County town of 155,000 can't build itself a brighter future, it's hard to imagine other struggling places doing the same.



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"Rich in land. Rich in Values. Ripe With Opportunity," reads the slogan on a city website, and that's no exaggeration. Salinas might be the richest poor city in California.

So many poor California cities sit well inland, but Salinas is just eight miles from the Pacific. It's part of the prosperous Monterey Bay region, and close enough to Silicon Valley that rising apartment rents are a problem. The Salinas Valley is known as the Salad Bowl of the World, a center for producing leafy greens and berries at a time when healthy foods have never been more popular. It's rich in culture – from the dynamic Alisal neighborhood to the old downtown – and the newest California State University campus is a 10-minute drive away. Its citizens are deeply engaged in their neighborhoods.

But, by the numbers, Salinas borders on the nightmarish. Its

homicide rate remains stubbornly high – more than twice that of Los Angeles'; the year 2015 began with 10 shootings, including four deaths, in an 11-day period. It has some of the highest rates of child poverty in the state, and lags the rest of California in high school graduation rates, amount of park space per person, and measures of public health.

As a columnist traveling around California, this mismatch between its horrible statistics and its obvious strengths makes Salinas easily the most confounding city in the state. Why does Salinas add up to so much less than the sum of its parts?

Two of its handicaps are fundamental: it's a mid-sized city and it's in California. Salinas is one of 60 cities in this state of between 100,000 and 300,000 people, too many of which are dysfunctional; Salinas' municipal sisters include bankrupt Stockton and San Bernardino. Many Salinas-sized cities started as smaller towns and grew to have all the problems of any urban place, while retaining the weak local governments and public resources of small towns. And California's governing system famously limits the power of local officials to shape their communities' own destinies.

Salinas, to its credit, has more than its share of people who have tried to transform the community anyway. Many of its leading citizens were part of the 1970s farmworker movement – or are the children of those who were – and there is almost no constituency for the status quo in Salinas. People know the city needs to change.

But, perversely, the ambitions of Salinas have served mainly to create more frustration.

People in Salinas are very good at starting things – but finding the public resources to maintain them has been harder. Driving around town, you can see how Salinas is littered with public institutions it couldn't quite sustain so they had to

be taken over by private entities – a golf course, a public swimming pool, a performing arts center. The struggling National Steinbeck Center is about to be rescued by CSU Monterey Bay.

Of course, Salinas has problems that are peculiar to it. While residents like to tout the wealth of the city's agriculture industry, agriculture relies on low-wage workers and migrants, which is why agriculturally oriented cities are often poor and plantation-like in their social structure. And while Salinas boasts remarkable diversity, it's also been marked by segregation and racism. Monterey County (Salinas is the county seat) was one of three California counties that, until recently, had to get federal approval for changes in its election rules because of its history of voting discrimination. The divide between East Salinas and the rest of the city dates back across decades of discrimination.

In this age of inequality, Salinas's prosperous surroundings do it no favors. The economic successes of Monterey and the Bay Area can make the climb Salinas faces seem steeper than it really is.

It also makes people in Salinas feel isolated. Steinbeck called Salinas "a closed pot" cut off "from the sky and from all the rest of the world," a line that still gets quoted by residents even though their city is a California crossroads. It's right on Highway 101, linking north and south, the coast and the agricultural inland.

Salinas is an All-America City, too. That's not opinion – it's an official designation, issued just last month, by the National Civic League. And, suitably, it's a double-edged award. It recognizes all the efforts in Salinas to address community problems—of which there is an all-American abundance.

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