

Opinion: Time for Calif. to embrace dirty deals

By Joe Mathews

Raise a glass and bend your mind around this California New Year's resolution: in 2017, let's become more tolerant of political corruption.

While the idea of tolerating dirty deal-making may sound perverse or strange, so are the ways we make decisions in California. Over the last century, we've designed a highly complex government with the primary goal of preventing corruption, by limiting the power and discretion of elected and appointed officials. That is the channel connecting our state's rivers of regulations, oceans of laws, and tsunamis of formulas for budgets and taxes that defy human navigation.



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All these obstacles have worked to a point: we're a pretty clean state by American standards, with a relatively low rate of public corruption convictions. And most of these are small stakes—minor embezzlements, small-time cover-ups and violations of tricky campaign laws.

The perverse result: in keeping our government clean but hampered, we've opted to embrace large-scale, incapacitating societal wrongs. In California, among the richest places on earth, we tolerate America's highest poverty rate, we do

little in the face of a massive shortage of affordable housing, and we leave our roads and waterworks in dangerous disrepair. Our schools offer too little education, and our tax system, by bipartisan acknowledgment, doesn't tax us fairly.

And yet, attacking such big problems is considered wildly unrealistic. There are too many rules and regulations standing in the way of large-scale action. And if we got rid of those rules, we fear we would be abetting corruption.

Which is why we so desperately need to adopt a new attitude toward corruption.

Samuel Huntington, the great 20th century political scientist, famously observed: "the only thing worse than a society with a rigid, over centralized, dishonest bureaucracy is one with a rigid, over centralized, honest bureaucracy. A society which is relatively uncorrupt ... may find a certain amount of corruption a welcome lubricant easing the path to modernization."

California needs such lubrication to advance larger public goals. The Golden State must expedite the building of affordable housing, homeless housing, housing on lots already zoned for housing—even if it means paying off certain interests to prevent their opposition and handing out exemptions to planning requirements and zoning and environmental laws like party favors.

The poor state of California's roads also cries out for some big corrupt deals, damn the environmental reviews. For years, the state has failed to address a \$130-billion-plus backlog in state and local road repairs. But California's mix of limitations on infrastructure and taxes mean we'll keep falling behind—as long as we play by the rules. Raising taxes to cover repairs requires a two-thirds vote of both houses of the Legislature and getting to two-thirds in cases like this requires buying votes with spending. But our abstemious

governor hasn't been willing to do the buying. He should resolve to be less righteous and more road-friendly in 2017.

Roads and housing aren't the only contexts where we prioritize following the rules over meeting real needs. In education, state leaders make a fetish of meeting the very low requirement of the constitutional funding formula for schools—instead of finding ways, kosher or not, to lengthen our short school year (just 180 days) and offer students the math, science, arts and foreign language they need, but aren't getting.

Our aqueducts and water mains so badly need updates and repairs that politicians should be raiding other government accounts to secure the necessary funds. But moving money around brings lawsuits and scrutiny. So no one dares resolve the problem, not even in a time of drought.

The stakes of our anti-corruption fixation may get higher in 2017. California finds itself in a confrontation with President-elect Donald Trump. Politicians say they will fight Trump if he attacks California policies or threatens vulnerable people, like immigrants and Muslims. But California is at a disadvantage in a battle with a rich, powerful federal government. In Sacramento, some veteran political players are arguing that California should instead buy off Trump—either personally or in his presidential role—given the president-elect's love of negotiations and his lack of interest in legal niceties. Of course, such creative dealmaking runs up against Californian rules and sensibilities.

That's why the change we need is not legal—it's cultural. We must realize that big progress in governance usually involves actions that are not entirely forthright.

So as we greet 2017, let's raise a toast to dealmaking that brings real progress, even when it's dirty.

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