

Opinion: Welcome to the Bay Area, Tahoe City!

By Joe Mathews

Welcome to the Bay Area, Merced!

And welcome as well to Modesto, Sacramento, and Yuba City. Looking south, you're invited, too, Santa Cruz, Monterey, and Salinas. And while you're almost in another state, don't worry, Tahoe City. The bay waters are warm.



Joe Mathews

This expanded notion of the Bay Area's reach isn't a joke. It reflects the biggest thinking about California's future. If you're in a smaller Northern California region that can't quite compete with the advanced grandeur of the Bay Area, why not join forces with the Bay Area instead?

The Bay Area would benefit too. It is one of four connected Northern California regions—along with the greater Sacramento area, the Northern San Joaquin Valley, and the Central Coast triumvirate of Monterey, Santa Cruz and San Benito counties—that struggle with severe challenges in housing, land use, jobs, transportation, education, and the environment. Since such problems cross regional boundaries, shouldn't the regions address them together as one giant region?

The Northern California Megaregion—a concept developed by a

think tank, the Bay Area Council Economic Institute—includes 12 million people and 21 counties, extending from the Wine Country to the lettuce fields of the Salinas Valley, and from the Pacific to the Nevada border.

The places of the Megaregion are integrating as people search a wider geography for jobs, housing, and places to expand their businesses. The trouble is that this growth is imbalanced. The Megaregion is home to the mega-rich in San Francisco and poor cities like Salinas, Stockton and Vallejo. As high housing prices push people out of the Bay Area, they flee deep into the Megaregion, only to find they are too far away from their jobs and schools. The results: brutal traffic that produces more greenhouse gases and longer commutes.

Figuring out how to rebalance the Megaregion and solve such problems is a high-stakes challenge, and not just for Northern Californians. The entire state relies heavily on the growth and tax revenues generated by the Bay Area, which represents about one-third of California's economy. And the Megaregion concept offers a vision for how the Golden State might spread out its prosperity, creating a better distributed version of the California dream.

This doesn't mean allowing the Bay Area to colonize its neighbors. Rather, it's a mega-rethinking so that planning and development is widened to enable the Megaregion's pieces—Bay Area technology, Sacramento government, San Joaquin Valley logistics and Monterey area farming—to magnify each other.

To pick one example: If new state research-and-development tax credits from Sacramento were to target inland companies, an infusion of technology could allow the Northern San Joaquin to make its logistics industry more efficient and less polluting as it moves green vegetables from Salinas to expanded ports in Stockton or Oakland.

A Bay Area Council Economic Institute report and its co-author, Jeff Bellisario, a man whose colleagues call him "Mr. Megaregion," suggest that Megaregional planning could create more high-tech jobs and companies outside of the Bay Area, by better connecting universities, laboratories, and research institutions with local entrepreneurs.

Such planning should be performed by new economic development entities that extend across the Megaregion; companies that now leave the Bay Area for Austin might be redirected to Sacramento or Santa Cruz. Such an effort would be strengthened if Bay Area entities jointly lobbied Sacramento to boost lower education levels in the Northern San Joaquin.

Of course, making such a shift would require a well-integrated set of transportation connections from one end of the Megaregion to the other. Suggested changes include more service on Amtrak's Capitol Corridor between San Jose and Placer County east of Sacramento, an extension of rail service to Salinas, and support of planned expansions of the ACE (Altamont Corridor Express) train to Merced and Sacramento. (A political note—the controversial gas tax increase produces \$900 million for these ACE expansions.) These changes would make the actual completion of high-speed rail more urgent, since the first segment, from Bakersfield to San Jose, would connect with this expanded Megaregional transit system.

It is easy to mock such mega-visions. For years real estate interests have done silly things, like touting a major housing development in San Joaquin County as being in the "Far East Bay." (One local joke: Is that nearer Singapore or Hong Kong?)

But if the Megaregion could harness its joint economic and lobbying power, much of this seems possible. It could even inspire imitators. Could Los Angeles, San Diego, and Las Vegas further integrate into their own Megaregional triangle? Might Tijuana and Mexicali join their planning mix?

If it built a record of success, the Northern California Megaregion could even expand, extending down the San Joaquin Valley to California's fifth-largest city.

Welcome to the Bay Area, Fresno.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.